



“Click”: Affect and Mediated Gestures in *Carol*

Jennifer Barker

“Nearly every morning when she came to work on the seventh floor, Therese would stop for a moment to watch a certain toy train. The train... was always running when she stepped out of the elevator in the morning, and when she finished work in the evening. She felt it cursed the hand that threw its switch each day. In the jerk of its nose around the curves, in its wild dashes down the straight lengths of track, she could see a frenzied and futile pursuit of a tyrannical master.... It was like something gone mad in imprisonment, something already dead that would never wear out.”

— Patricia Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*¹

Todd Haynes’ *Carol* (2015) unveils a romance between the title character, a suburban socialite, wife, and mother, and Therese, an aspiring artist and temporary department store clerk in mid-century New York.² In the film, the young heroine is no longer an apprentice theatrical set designer, as she had been in Patricia Highsmith’s 1952 source novel, but an aspiring photographer. She takes pictures of “birds, trees, windows, anything really,” but not people, though her friend Dannie encourages her to “be more interested in humans.” Dannie likewise sees a career change in the adaptation, from graduate study in physics to a printing job at *The Times*, though he yearns to be a writer and, to that end, spends his evenings studying Hollywood films and charting the difference between “what the character says and what they feel.” With this change in *métier*, Therese’s focus shifts from objects to humans, and Dannie’s from impersonal scientific laws to the intimate drama of human interaction, but both characters retain a loose attachment to “things” they left behind in the novel—toy trains and pinballs, to name but two.

Like the characters, the film bears traces of its source novel’s keen sensitivity to affective relations between humans and objects. Highsmith’s language sparks with the energy created by friction between objects and their owners, and between spaces and their inhabitants, like the estranged husband’s overcoat slung over a loveseat, “sprawled open with its black arms spread as if it were fighting and should take possession of the house,” or the wind that “flung itself around the tall cement corner of Frankenberg’s [department store] as if it were furious at finding no human figure there

to oppose.”³ Highsmith dwells on material details of texture, color, and heft, and she often entertains an object’s implicit capacity to affect or be affected by other bodies, as when Therese nervously drops a child’s doll onto the glass countertop while showing it to Carol. “Sounds unbreakable,” Carol quips.⁴ Not surprisingly, given the hard-edged tone and penchant for subtle cruelty in Highsmith’s crime fiction, there’s an implied violence in many of these instances.

There’s a brittleness, too, to the lovers’ relationship which, in Highsmith’s novel, is fraught with tension, not all of it sexual, though there is certainly that. Their encounters are often tinged with impatience and irritation on Carol’s part, and she can be quick with a carelessly cutting remark, “her voice soft and even, and yet merciless.”⁵ Even Therese’s adoration of Carol takes on a violent edge, though only once, when on a drive through the Lincoln Tunnel “she wished the tunnel might cave in and kill them both, that their bodies might be dragged out together.”⁶ More than the film, Highsmith’s novel evokes a sort of conflict between Carol and Therese that resonates with her descriptive emphasis on the brute force and aggressive energy of material objects and nonhuman elements.

In adapting the novel to film, Haynes replaces the vigorous materiality of Highsmith’s descriptive language with materiality itself. The film’s production design, costuming, and soundtrack are stunning in their attentiveness to the tones and textures of fur coats, vintage décor, and tinny mid-century radio broadcasts, for example. At the same time, Haynes and screenwriter Phyllis Nagy may appear to have smoothed over some of the contentiousness between the two women that crackles through Highsmith’s novel. (Haynes admits the couple needed to be made more “compatible” in their transition to the screen.)⁷ Indeed, some have critiqued the film for exactly this pair of adaptive moves, calling the film merely “handsome, respectable, predictable,”⁸ overly concerned with surface and style, “a far more conventional venture”⁹ than its source novel.

However, it is precisely in the convergence of humans and objects—specifically of human emotion and anonymous material affect—that the film renders the emotional and historical complexity of the women’s relationship. Critic A. O. Scott calls *Carol* “a study in human magnetism, in the physics and optics of eros.... The current of feeling passing between Carol and Therese as they chat over their teacups is so strong that the air around them seems to vibrate.”¹⁰ Indeed, in both novel and film, Dannie explains the laws of attraction by suggesting that we’re all “like pinballs, bouncing off one another.” Therese protests that it’s not that simple, but he insists: “Not everything reacts. But everything is alive.”

This paper traces affect through two of the liveliest objects in the film—a child's toy train set and a camera—each of which becomes the site of a mediated gesture on the part of one or both of the lovers. This mediated gesture—described in detail below—enables a reading of the film's affective patterns that bridges the gap between theoretical accounts of affect as currents of personalized, human emotion experienced and expressed by characters toward narrative ends, and accounts of affect as a collection of amorphous, anonymous forces circulating between all manner of bodies, and within which any human emotion is only one possible, momentary iteration. This gesture also opens what Gilles Deleuze would call a “line of flight,” arcing outward from the linear tracks laid by the genre conventions of the romantic drama.

Strangers and a train

Haynes tips his hat to a number of romantic film conventions and classics, not least of which is David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (1945).¹¹ As many critics have duly noted, he borrows from it a neat narrative trick, opening the film with an interrupted conversation, whose emotional impact we learn only by returning to it after a feature-length flashback. He also borrows a central motif: a train that runs through the lovers' relationship from the start. Whereas Lean's train screams into the station in the opening shot, spewing a phallic plume of white steam as it passes the camera, Haynes' trains appear only at a remove. The first train rumbles onto the soundtrack before the first image fades in. The first shot is a close-up of an elegant steel-gray decorative pattern, which only becomes recognizable when the camera pulls away from it, to reveal crowds rushing out of a subway station and into the street. Several minutes later, as Therese sits in the back of a taxicab, the sound of an approaching train mingles with traffic noise to form a subtle sonic background, as Therese recalls her first meeting with Carol. This reminiscence initiates the flashback: the next scene sees Therese some months earlier, working a morning shift at Frankenberg's, during which we see the meeting between Therese and Carol unfold in real time.

In *The Washington Post's* description of that first meeting in the toy department, Carol and Therese “have a perfectly unimportant interaction about dolls and toy trains, ending in a sale, when something cataclysmic happens: Carol turns on her way out, smiles slyly and, pointing to the Santa cap Therese wears with obvious discomfort, says, ‘I like the hat.’ It's an electrifying moment.”¹² Far from being unimportant, it is the toy train that *causes* the initial eye contact, not simply or solely the characters' desire. The train is literally electrified and “electrifying”: its own lively affective force, to which Highsmith and Therese herself both devote considerable attention in the novel, leaps across the gap between object and character to be taken up in the encounter between Therese and Carol, and this happens well before any flirtation on Carol's part.



Affect, Objects, and Performance (*Carol*, Todd Haynes, 2015) via criticalcommons.org

That first encounter begins when Frankenberg's department store opens for business on a day just before Christmas 1952. The elevator chimes and the door opens to unleash a stream of excited holiday shoppers. The crowd spills onto the sales floor and scatters in every direction, its collective energy registered by a quick succession of shots in which customers pass in front of the camera at close range or impel it to follow with a fluid pan, as does the girl who eagerly leads her mother by the hand to point out the doll of her dreams.

Against this relentless agitation, Carol's first appearance is strikingly placid, her only movements a casual tug to loosen her scarf and a slight settling of her hips. In fact, it is the movement of *another* woman, one of the many indistinguishable shoppers walking briskly through the frame, that initially leads the camera to Carol. As the anonymous woman exits the frame, the panning camera stops and refocuses on Carol in the background.

Carol's presence captivates Therese, but Carol does not notice her at first. Seconds before their eyes meet, the toy train speeding around the track on display in front of Carol comes to a complete and sudden stop. Nothing interferes with the train, and no one has accidentally bumped the switch. It just stops, as if acting out of its "wrath and frustration on the closed oval track."¹³ This is the cataclysmic event that sets the romance into motion.

Carol turns to look for the switch that powers the train, and the film obliges, cutting to a rapid downward tilt that reveals the switchboard at her hips. Then, in a closer shot than her previous one, she looks up, glances around with an expression of bored imperiousness, and catches Therese's mesmerized stare. They hold each other's gaze, their intense focus exaggerated by shoppers passing by, intermittently blocking our view of them and their views of each other.

Further accentuating Carol's stillness among the chaos, Therese's transfixed gaze at Carol in this point-of-view shot suddenly gives way to a whip-pan toward a mother and child, inquiring as to the location of the ladies' room. Therese replies dutifully, if distractedly. Another whip-pan follows, again from her point of view, as her gaze races back to the spot where Carol had stood, only to find she has disappeared. That empty frame is quickly filled by three small boys who rush into the frame for a look at the train set in front of which Carol had been standing. The camera reframes slightly downward to center them in the frame, highlighting her absence. The train has not moved.

She reappears out of nowhere a moment later, announced only by the slap of her long leather gloves onto the counter, followed by a perfectly manicured hand that settles on top of them. The gauntlet thrown down, Therese responds, timidly. The rest of the scene unfolds as a private encounter between the two of them, the hum of the crowd diminishing behind them in the background.

Full stop

The train's sudden stop prompts Carol's movement, which sets in motion a chain reaction. In this sense, the train is an example of what Anne Rutherford describes as a film's "material elements—landscape, decor, etc. [acting] as energetic units, as potential units or sparks of experiential energy."¹⁴ The energy of the train—expressed, paradoxically, by the defiant act of stopping—carries over into both Carol's and the camera's movement as they turn and tilt, looking for the switch, and then to Therese's response, which is to look back, and look back yet again when her gaze is momentarily pulled away.

In its "frenzied and futile pursuit of a tyrannical master," Highsmith wrote of the little train, "it was like something gone mad in imprisonment... like the dainty, springy footed foxes in the Central Park Zoo, whose complex footwork repeated and repeated as they circled their cages." In coming to a full stop, the train seems to resist the general frenzy of the city, the department store, and the shoppers who descend on the toy department every day. In doing so, Haynes's train initiates an affective pattern that Carol and Therese take up, though not consciously. The meeting of their gazes is not

only an instantaneous mutual attraction, then, but also an affective response to the train's own agitation and, in turn, a resistance to a general pattern of busy, repetitive, collective movement on the part of crowds surging through train stations, streets, the hotel, and the department store in the film's first ten minutes. That is to say, they "click," not in the sense of making an immediate, easy connection, but in the sense of coming to a halt, like a switch has been tripped.

"Desire is erotic in an open-ended, exploratory sense," writes Adrian Martin. "It is more the *buzz of ever-present energy* than the grim, goal-directed emanation of an individual Will."¹⁵ The eroticism of Carol and Therese's first meeting is not "individual will" in the sense of being driven (solely) by one or the other character's desire, but neither is it a "*buzz of ever-present energy*," which the film associates with the crowd. Instead, desire in this scene resists the frenetic movement of crowds going through the motions demanded by mid-century American consumer culture. The train halts its endless, futile race around the track and brings Carol up short, forcing a reaction; in turn, her direct gaze stops Therese in her tracks and demands a response.

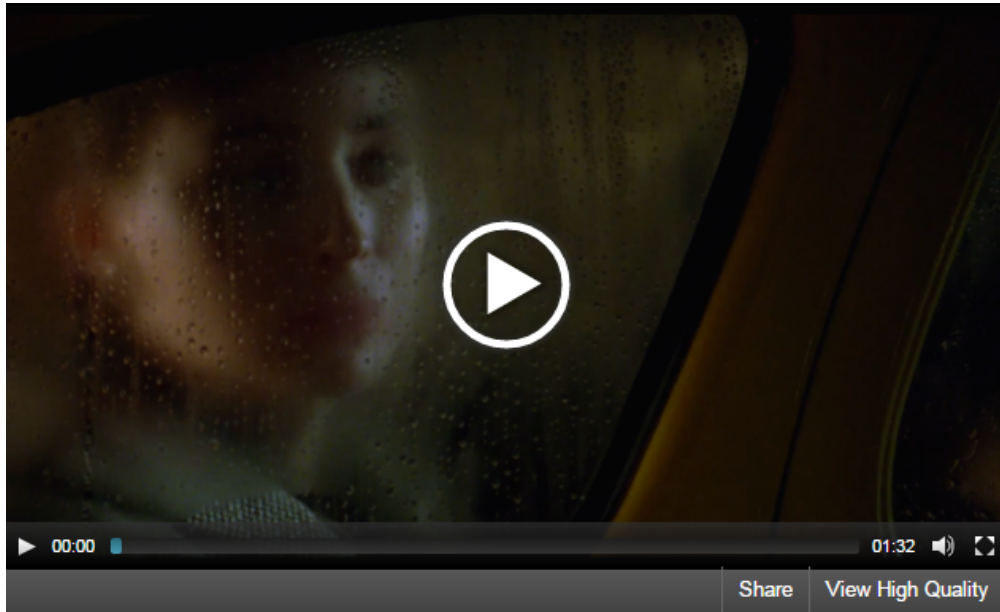
More than a mutual desire for intimate encounters and quiet moments, though, the "click" and ensuing stillness of their first meeting is only one part of a more elaborate pattern that permeates the narrative of their romance, but both complicates it and exceeds it. The pattern is predicated on collision, shock, suspension, stillness, and dynamic action. The full stop not only creates space and time for a reaction; it demands one. In this respect, the train's gesture is the model for the women's relationship more broadly, giving eros its particular "experiential shape."¹⁶

Despite critics' emphasis on its "slow burn," "magnetism," and "chemistry," the relationship unfolds as a series of propulsive moments in which anything might happen. For every action, a pause, then an unexpected reaction. Carol leaves the gloves behind; Therese picks them up and drops them in the mail. Carol invites her to lunch, then to her home, then on a cross-country road trip; to each invitation, Therese surprises Carol with a frank, unwavering "Yes." Therese sneaks a photograph of Carol; Carol calls her on it, not unkindly, and then buys her a new camera. At a roadside motel, Carol orders two rooms; Therese counters quietly, "Why not take the presidential suite? If the rate's attractive." Carol's double-take reveals stunned delight at Therese's having upped the ante, a bold move all the more enjoyable for the hotel clerk's inability to see it for what it is.

Haynes' film easily lends itself to discussion of the particularities of a "female gaze,"¹⁷ but Highsmith's novel emphasizes the degree to which this gaze is marked not only by desire but confrontation; it is not merely flirtatious but *literally* provocative. Across the table on their first lunch date, Highsmith's Therese sees in Carol's eyes "curiosity and

a challenge, too.” Later she refers to “the eyes that could be tender and hard at once, as they tested her.”¹⁸ Therese’s gaze, too, has the power to bring Carol up short. Recalling her own nervousness during their first outing, for example, “Therese glanced at her. ‘I was so excited about you,’ she said.... Then she looked at Carol again and saw a sudden stillness, like a shock, in Carol’s face. Therese had seen it two or three times before when she had said something like that to Carol....”¹⁹ Late in the novel, Therese presses Carol on the truth of something she says, and the tension is unmistakable: “‘That’s what I said.’ Carol replied with a smile in her eyes, but Therese heard the same hardness in it as in her own question, as if they exchanged challenges.”²⁰

The train’s stop/start gesture, which sets in motion this affective pattern between the lovers, is subtly anticipated very early in the film by the soundtrack that accompanies Therese’s recollection of their first meeting at Frankenberg’s. As she stares out the window of the taxicab that whisks her away from the hotel where their recent, emotionally charged meeting over tea had been interrupted in the opening scene, we hear the sound not only of a train, but of impending danger: the warning bells of a nearby railroad-crossing “clang” loudly and the approaching train’s whistle screams, before it roars past at top volume. The sound coincides with and continues over the film’s cut to the first image of the flashback, in which the tiny toy train rushes past the camera in extreme close-up. After a few shots of the toy train racing through its miniature village, the dreamy flashback cuts to Therese behind the doll counter. She looks up and her gaze is arrested by Carol’s presence. At that moment in the flashback, the real, present-day train screams past on the soundtrack, and the film cuts back to Therese in the taxicab, looking pensive and sad. The editing here makes the sound poignantly ambiguous: it is both the sound of the actual train and the affective, if imaginary, sound of the tiny toy replica. Sliding between present-day reality and the romantic fantasy of the past, the sound of the train simultaneously underscores the violent effect of Carol’s presence in the past scene and jolts Therese out of her reverie in the present one.



Flashback, (*Carol*, Todd Haynes, 2015) via criticalcommons.org

In this flashback and the first meeting itself, Therese would appear to be the passive recipient of the affective charge that passes from the train to Carol to herself, were it not for one of Haynes' subtlest changes to Highsmith's story. In the latter, Therese seems merely to sympathize with the train: "she felt it cursed the hand that threw its switch each day." In the film, however, she is the one who sets it in motion. As part of her early morning routine at Frankenberg's, she flips the train set's switch, pushes the little crossing flag into place, and leans on the display case to watch the train in pensive silence for a long moment before the lights come up and crowds rush in. Thus, the conflict Highsmith emphasizes between the two lovers (absent from a screenplay designed to be palatable to financiers) and the hostility of the train (aimed, in the novel, at an anonymous "tyrannical master") are condensed into the single stop/start gesture of the train, which starts up at Therese's touch and stops cold with Carol's arrival.

The ceaseless motion of the anonymous crowd and the train's feisty stop serve the narrative by bringing together the couple, but at the same time they create a suspended space-time in which affect gathers and transforms, to be released in an unforeseen direction. The encounter of crowd, train, and characters coalesces into a series of gestures that read as "romance" but cannot be understood apart from the affective charge of the mediating machinery that shaped it. In this way, as Elena del Río writes, "in the gestures and movements of the performing body, incorporeal forces or affects become concrete expression-events that attest to the body's powers of action and transformation."²¹

Don't blink

Therese's work at Frankenberg's, which includes not only setting the tiny train in motion around the miniature village but also arranging dolls for display, perhaps suggests a trace of her character's work as a theatrical set designer in the source novel. However, it is in her role as a photographer, in Haynes's adaptation, that the affective pattern initiated by the train gets taken up, in ways that frustrate the romantic narrative's relentless drive toward resolution. Nagy made Therese a photographer in the screenplay, well before Haynes' involvement, but his own passion for the aesthetics and, more important, the politics of photography is well established.²² This film in particular emphasizes the mediated nature of interpersonal relations in 1950s urban life in part by way of its distinctly photographic look, borrowed from street photographer Saul Leiter, whom art critic Roberta Smith describes as "a photographer less of people than of perception itself."²³ Additionally, Haynes looked to female photographers of the day—Ruth Orkin, Esther Bubley, and Helen Levitt in particular—for visual inspiration, gesturing toward a specifically female gaze at urban life.²⁴ Here, however, I'll focus not on the look of photography, but the act itself: the photographic gesture.

Vilém Flusser calls the gesture of taking a photograph a quintessentially intersubjective act, in the sense that the photographer takes up a position *inside* the situation and is, at the same time, reflectively aware of the possibility of seeing that situation from *outside* it, from many points of view, though one can never physically occupy a point of view other than one's own at a given moment. This, Flusser says, "is the basis for a consensus, for intersubjective recognition."²⁵

For Flusser, the shutter-click is part of the apparatus, purely mechanical, therefore not part of the human gesture of taking a photograph. For Jean-Luc Nancy, however, the press of the shutter button brings into relief the defining tension in the photographic gesture between distance and contact, which co-exist in that split-second. In that tiny "click,"

The thing that or the one who "takes" the photo and the thing that or the one who "is taken" in the photo are suspended together.... Both are taken by each other and by surprising or coming upon each other. They are there, intimate and intrusive, strange and familiar to each other, at the same moment, as the same image. The sameness of this image is permeated with the alterity of its two concomitant subjects.²⁶

Of course, the photographic gesture is an important part of Carol and Therese's relationship. (Twice Therese points a camera at someone else—once at her boyfriend,

Richard, and once at her friend and hopeful suitor, Dannie—but both are empty gestures, as there is no film in either camera.) Carol is the first and only subject we see Therese shoot, and we see many of the resulting photographs as well.

Therese's printed photographs of Carol are lovely, but rarer and more interesting are the moments in which we witness Therese actually taking a photograph. If the romantic (and romanticizing) portraits we see in printed form support a reading of the film as a conventional love story, the shutter-click itself serves to counteract it, as did the ornery train and the complex exchange of gazes it sparked. The pressing of the shutter-button opens a sliver of space-time that Nancy calls "a *grasping*: this thing, that thing, this man here, that woman there was grasped, there, at that time, by a click," prior to those relations being fixed in a printed photograph.²⁷

Therese's photographic gesture, then, is a set of movements and decisions that culminates precisely in the pressing of the shutter button—the moment of "grasping" in which this woman "here" and that woman "there" are caught up in a "sovereign hesitation."²⁸ When Therese photographs Carol for the first time, we see this gesture play out in detail.

The scene takes place in a Christmas tree lot, where Carol and Therese have stopped on their way to Carol's suburban home, the day of Therese's first visit. Carol is watching a boy tie up the Christmas tree she's chosen, and we see this transaction unfold at first in a medium long shot, bright and clear. Therese, who's opted to stay warm and dry in the car some distance away, peers at Carol through the melting snowflakes on the misted windshield, loads a film roll into her camera, and steps out of the car to position the camera for a clear shot, above the window of the open car door. She takes two shots, both of which we see through her viewfinder as she focuses and composes them. Later in the film, after the lovers have separated, we will see the printed photograph Therese made of this moment, when Therese looks at the photograph and tosses it away. Thus, one of the two shots she takes in this scene must be the shutter-click that results in that printed photograph.



Affect, Performance, Editing, and the Photographic Gesture, (*Carol*, Todd Haynes, 2015) via criticalcommons.org

For the first shot she takes, the shutter-click occurs off screen: we hear the “click” but only cut to a shot of Therese and her camera a split-second *after* the sound. By the time we get to this image, she’s already lowering the camera to advance the film. For the second image she shoots, the press of the shutter button and the resulting “click” occur on screen: we see and hear them. Thus, one would think, in *this* shot Therese snaps the image we later see in printed form. But this can’t be.



Fig. 1: Tree Lot Print, *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015)

The printed photograph Therese produces from this scene is a medium close shot of Carol's direct gaze, looking over her shoulder as she turns away from the camera, but neither of those can be true of the two shots Therese actually takes here. Firstly, only Haynes' camera gets close enough to produce that image. Therese is too far away to do so, as is made clear by the point-of-view shot through the windshield. In stepping out of the car, she doesn't move any closer, and her camera (which she tells Carol is "not even decent") certainly does not have a zoom lens. Secondly, Carol's turn and direct gaze toward Therese happen *neither* in conjunction with the shutter-click we hear, nor within a split-second of the press of the shutter button we see.

Thus, the printed photograph that results from the scene, over which Therese lingers much later in the film, is impossible.²⁹ Whether the slippage is a minor cinematic gaffe, or an insightful point by a filmmaker well known for his media savvy and predilection toward critical reflexivity, is less important than its effect, which is to illustrate precisely the difference between the *photographic gesture* (including the shutter-click) and the *photograph*.

The day after this trip to the tree lot, Carol visits Therese's apartment, where she examines a number of photos haphazardly taped to the kitchen wall. The tree lot photograph is among them, and after a long look, she declares it "perfect." Indeed, it is perfect, impossibly so. The printed photograph from this dreamy interlude is, in this sense, much like the "happy ending" of a conventional romantic drama.

However, I would argue that the "perfect image" is the one that doesn't exist. It can't exist: the temporality of cinema makes it impossible. Therese's press of the shutter button, never shown from her point of view, is thus a perfect gesture of pure potential. It contains within it the "hesitations" among and between subject (and object) positions in the photographic encounter, the "grasping" of each by the other. It stages in a single instant, and in a way a printed photograph cannot replicate, the tumultuousness of the dynamic between Therese, Carol, and the camera, just as the train's abrupt stop had provoked a collision of gazes, a challenge, and a suspended moment of shock and stillness in which anything can happen. The press of the shutter button is the instant just *prior* to the event settling into a fixed state, transforming from an "encounter"—full of potential and nothing but—to an "image," just one of many caught up in a narrative moving relentlessly forward to its conclusion.

Flung out of space

The affective power of the train and the camera, then, is taken up by the characters and carried forward in photographic gestures and those of the film itself. It is worth noting, though space does not permit an extended discussion, that this same affective gesture—the sudden stop, the pause, the potential, and the propulsion into movement—is also produced by Carol's car and the telephone, and it gets caught up and expressed, too, in specific mediated gestures Carol makes as she engages with these things. When she pulls the car over to deal with Therese's sudden outpouring of despair, for example, she brings the car to a full stop, for no reason that makes narrative sense. In one of many telephone calls Carol makes or receives, Therese calls her at home after their separation, and although Carol picks up the phone, she cannot bring herself to speak. She caresses the phone's switch hook tentatively for a long moment, listening to Therese's voice, before she finally presses the button and ends the call.

The affective energies expressed in these particular gestures, which circulating between humans and objects throughout the film, are disruptive, but only to a degree. As Elena del Río points out, the power of affective performance in moving images, as conceived within a Deleuzian and Spinozan framework, "is hardly a question of performance restoring agency to an individual character or a particular social group; instead, it is a question of the film's mobilization of performance as the catalyst for the dissolution of (narrative, ideological, and generic) meaning in a more abstract, less personalized way."³⁰

The affective gestures I've traced here are not radically asubjective in the way some cinematic affects are. They operate within a classical narrative structure but occasionally stray from it, leaving open a space for movement in an unforeseen direction. This, Nancy says, is the nature of the photograph itself:

The secret of the photograph, the very clear mystery of its being lost and straying, is its flight into the strange in the very midst of the familiar. The photo captures the familiar, and immediately, instantaneously, it strays into strangeness. By capturing its own straying, it leads what it captures astray. The photograph estranges, it estranges us.³¹

These affects constitute a line of flight of sorts, against what Michele Schreiber calls the "intoxicating allure of the traditional 'happy ever after' resolution," and away from the conventional notion of the couple that often accompanies it.

Though some have called the film Haynes's most conventional work to date, the case for the film's critical perspective on the romance conventions it simultaneously embraces becomes stronger when we shift our attention away from Therese's photographic gestures and those of the film itself. The film twice performs a photographic gesture of its own, separate from the two photographs Therese takes in the tree lot.³² The first comes just before that scene, as Carol and Therese drive out of the city. The scene unfolds like a dream, a gauzy blend of sidelong glances and captivating details—a blond mink coat sleeve, a vividly seductive smile—brought into and out of focus with the dizziness of lustful fascination. At the end of the tunnel, the car exits into a blinding sunlight that whites out the screen for a long moment, before the clear image of Carol in the tree lot slowly fades in. The momentary white-out is a promise, an image of pure potential, an affective echo of Therese's hopeful optimism.

The second of the film's photographic gestures not attributed to Therese constitutes the very last image of the film, or rather, the lack thereof. In the final scene, Therese has refused Carol's invitation to start again and live together in the city, but now she seeks out Carol in the crowded restaurant where she'd told her she could be found, if Therese were to change her mind. The stunning sequence is breathtaking in its attention to every quiver of emotion across her face as she makes the long walk in slow motion through the restaurant. Finally, she catches sight of Carol and pauses, her gaze riveted but impeded (again, as in the first scene) by people passing between them. Their eyes meet. The faintest of smiles surfaces tremulously on Therese's face, and Carol's look of surprise gives way to a broad smile of her own. The camera zooms slowly away from Therese in her shot, and toward Carol in hers, as if to draw them together, and the romantic score swells dramatically. At the peak of the score's musical crescendo, the film cuts suddenly to a black screen and utter silence.

In place of a happy ending, then, the film offers an *un*-ending, like a shutter-click without the printed photograph that would result. The abrupt finale repeats the affective gesture of the tiny train and the shutter-click: a shocking full stop, replete with restless energy and potential that contains as much negative charge as positive. As Patricia White writes of the ending's delicious ambiguity, "the lovers remain in their exclusive, eternally present tense, while the viewer is given both a tantalizing taste of the past and glimpse of a queer future," which "promises further cycles of desire and loss."³³

In this light (rather, in this darkness), one of the film's most remarked-upon lines begs a second glance. Therese seems "flung out of space," Carol tells her during their first lunch date and later, in bed. Coming from Carol, it's a bemused description of this "strange girl," at first, then a sentimental line. Highsmith's description of their first tryst, however, encourages us to take it a bit more literally:

And now it was pale-blue distance and space, an expanding space in which she took flight suddenly like a long arrow. The arrow seemed to cross an impossibly wide abyss with ease, seemed to arc on and on in space, and not quite to stop. Then she realized that she still clung to Carol, that she trembled violently, and the arrow was herself.³⁴

Given the context of the novel, in which Highsmith describes passion (in that scene and many others) in terms that seem as much inspired by physics as by poetry, “flung out of space” can be read audaciously and broadly. “Flung out of space” is what the angry little train wants to be, freed from the track that holds it hostage. “Flung out of space” is what happens to Therese’s first photographs of Carol, rendered in the fleeting instant of the shutter-click, and never to be seen in printed form. And, finally, “flung out of space” is where the film leaves us, arcing on and on in space and time, away from the long, straight tracks laid down by genre, classical narrative, and conventional romance.

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Notes

¹ Patricia Highsmith and Joan Schenkar, *Patricia Highsmith: Selected Novels and Short Stories*

² *Carol*, directed by Todd Haynes, 2015.

³ Highsmith and Schenkar, *Patricia Highsmith*, 392 and 380-381.

⁴ Highsmith and Schenkar, *Patricia Highsmith*, 366.

⁵ Highsmith and Schenkar, *Patricia Highsmith*, 481.

⁶ Highsmith and Schenkar, *Patricia Highsmith*, 381.

⁷ “What you try to do is make it more congenial to a financier,” said Haynes. “And so everything felt a little more kind of... compatible... with the two women right away. And I loved the tensions in the book.” Ray Pride, “Trains, Perfume and Allure: Talking to Todd Haynes about the Swoon of ‘Carol.’” *Newcity Film*, December 24, 2015.

<http://newcityfilm.com/2015/12/24/trains-perfume-and-allure-talking-to-todd-haynes-about-the-swoon-of-carol/>.

⁸ Naomi Fry, "The Beautiful Surfaces of 'Carol,'" *New Republic*, November 13, 2015, <https://newrepublic.com/article/123221/todd-haynes-carol-mistakes-aesthetics-meaning>.

⁹ Lisa Rosman, "The Courage of Intimacy: Todd Haynes's 'Carol' Review," *Signature Reads*, November 16, 2015. <http://www.signature-reads.com/2015/11/the-courage-intimacy-todd-haynes-carol-review/>.

¹⁰ A. O. Scott, "Review: 'Carol' Explores the Sweet Science of Magnetism - NYTimes.com," November 19, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/20/movies/review-carol-explores-the-sweet-science-of-magnetism.html?nytmobile=0>.

¹¹ *Brief Encounter*, directed by David Lean, 1945.

¹² Ann Hornaday, "Movie Review: Todd Haynes's 'Carol' Casts a Beguiling Spell," *The Washington Post*, December 23, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/movie-review-todd-haynes-carol-casts-a-beguiling-spell/2015/12/23/5eedbf9c-a5cf-11e5-b53d-972e2751f433_story.html?tid=kp_google.

¹³ Highsmith and Schenkar, *Patricia Highsmith*, 343.

¹⁴ Anne Rutherford, "Precarious Boundaries: Affect, Mise en scène, and the Senses," *Senses of Cinema* 13 (April 2004): n.p. http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/embodied_affect/

¹⁵ Adrian Martin, "A Theory of Agitation, or: Getting Off in the Cinema," *Continuum* 26: 4 (2012): 526. doi:10.1080/10304312.2012.698032.

¹⁶ Martin, "A Theory," 552.

¹⁷ See Kristin Cochrane, "Todd Haynes' 'Carol' Is the Story of a Flâneuse Who Gazes Back," *Slutever*, January 2, 2016. <http://slutever.com/todd-haynes-carol-queer-gaze/>.

¹⁸ Highsmith and Schenkar, *Patricia Highsmith*, 528.

¹⁹ Highsmith and Schenkar, *Patricia Highsmith*, 479-480.

²⁰ Highsmith and Schenkar, *Patricia Highsmith*, 531-532.

²¹ Elena del Río, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 3-4.

²² See Ian Stasukevich, "Carol." *American Cinematographer*, December 2015. http://www.theasc.com/ac_magazine/December2015/Carol/page1.php. Also see Pam Cook, "Beyond Adaptation: Mirrors, Memory and Melodrama in Todd Haynes's *Mildred Pierce*." *Screen* 54: 3 (September 1, 2013): 378-87.

²³ Roberta Smith, "Art in Review; Saul Leiter," *The New York Times*, December 30, 2005, sec. Arts, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html>.

²⁴ Todd Haynes interview with *Rolling Stone* Senior Culture Editor David Fear, *Carol*, blu-ray (StudioCanal, 2016)

²⁵ Vilém Flusser, *Gestures* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 75.

²⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 104.

²⁷ Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, 105.

²⁸ Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, 105.

²⁹ In what seems a fascinating coincidence, this photographic conundrum ensues from a scene set in a Christmas tree lot that closely resembles the one in which Sarah Jane confronts Annie in *Imitation of Life* (Sirk, 1959). More to the point, this conundrum is identical to one that occurs in Sirk's film, in which photographer Steve Archer's camera cannot possibly have taken the photograph of the girls at the beach that the film attributes to him. The slippage, as in Haynes' film, is provocatively problematic. See Jennifer M. Barker, "Be-Hold: Touch, Temporality, and the Cinematic Thumbnail Image," *Discourse* 35: 2 (2014): 194-211.

³⁰ del Río, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance*, 17.

³¹ Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, 106.

³² Michele Schreiber, *American Postfeminist Cinema: Women, Romance and Contemporary Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 4.

³³ Patricia White, "Sketchy Lesbians: *Carol* as History and Fantasy," *Film Quarterly* 69: 2 (2015): 17.

³⁴ Highsmith and Schenkar, *Patricia Highsmith*, 491-492.