

Heterotopia of Desire: Negotiating Female Same-Sex Intimacy in 1950s America

—A Case Study of Carol

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Abstract

This article examines Todd Haynes (2015)'s *Carol* through Michel Foucault's concept of Heterotopia, focusing on how cinematic space visualizes the tension between individual desire and social regulation in 1950s America. Set against the conservative moral climate of the Cold War, *Carol* portrays female same-sex desire as both a deviation from and a challenge to dominant gender norms. The article argues that Haynes constructs heterotopias of deviation—spaces that momentarily allow forbidden desires to appear while remaining under threat of erasure. By analyzing the film's visual and spatial design, particularly the car interiors, mirrors, and photographic framing, this study shows how the film transforms repression into aesthetic form. Through this heterotopic framework, *Carol* reimagines cinematic space as a site of resistance, where intimacy becomes political and desire finds a fleeting yet transformative place within mid-century American culture.

Keywords

Heterotopia, Same-Sex Desire, Cinematic Space, *Carol*

1. Introduction

In a society where space itself was saturated with moral regulation, how could forbidden desires find a place to appear? Todd Haynes (2015)'s *Carol*, adapted from Patricia Highsmith's 1952 novel *The Price of Salt*, revisits this question through the lens of 1950s America—a period when homosexuality was treated as taboo. Rather than relying on explicit narration, Haynes constructs a visual language of displacement: through windows and mirrors, desire emerges only in spaces that are simultaneously real and hidden.

This article argues that *Carol* constructs what Michel Foucault calls heterotopia, a contestation of our living space that is simultaneously real and mythic (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986). In the Cold War era, when domesticity and moral purity were national imperatives, same-sex desire and female self-exploration were rendered forms of deviation. Foucault's notion of the heterotopia of deviation, which includes individuals whose behaviors depart from social norms, offers a powerful way to read these cinematic spaces of secrecy and intimacy. According to Sittichane (2025), queer heterotopias operate dually: they open provisional spaces for identity and desire yet are simultaneously entangled with the hegemonic forces that may reinscribe normative constraints. In *Carol*, the car and the hotel room function as heterotopias where desire can temporarily appear yet, remains under constant threat of erasure. The heterotopic framework reveals how cinematic space itself becomes a site of both concealment and resistance.

As Foucault suggests, the study of spatial arrangements is inseparable from the study of the forms of life that inhabit them (Zhi, 2023: p. 8). Through close analysis of *Carol*'s spatial and visual strategies, this article aims to show how the film transforms mid-century repression into aesthetic form—producing spaces where personal desire and societal norms are in constant negotiation. Specifically, this study selects scenes of automobiles and mirrors for close analysis, as they most representatively align with the characteristics of heterotopic spaces. Furthermore, by situating the heterotopia within the broader socio-political context of 1950s America, the article argues that Haynes not only reconstructs a forbidden love story but also reimagines the possibilities of cinematic space as a site of deviant freedom.

2. Tension between Individual Desire and Societal Norms

The United States of America in the 1950s was in a particular period of the Cold War, a period when the culture and situation of the lesbian community in the US came under scrutiny. It cannot be ignored that these women faced a great deal of challenges and social pressures in coping with the conservative socio-political climate of the Cold War. According to Corber (2011: p. 2), Jess Stearn in the publication *The Grapevine* views lesbianism as a potential threat to the social order, which not only fuelled the public's stereotypes and fears of lesbians but also reflected the uneasiness and rejection of non-traditional sexual orientations in 1950s American society. This view, widely disseminated through the media, further fuelled the stigmatisation of lesbian identity. It also reflected broader societal anxieties about women's subjectivity and autonomy during a period when feminism had not yet reached a certain level of development.

As a result, some influential figures emphasised women's roles as housewives and mothers, such as Adlai Stevenson, the governor of Illinois, who in a speech to the graduating class of 1955 stated that the role of the housewife was crucial to the survival of American democracy (Stevenson, 1955: 30-31, cited in Corber, 2011). Lundberg and Farnham placed particular emphasis on the relationship between

women and their daughters; women were called upon to provide a guide to femininity for their daughters, and they argued that only those women who felt completely fulfilled and free of conflict or anxiety in fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers would be able to transmit ideal femininity to their daughters (Lundberg et al., 1947, cited in Corber, 2011). These views represented the social expectations of women's roles at the time, and female homosexuality was seen as a threat to the traditional family structure and even to the stability of the nation. Not to mention some of the more exaggerated discussions of homosexuality, in which lesbianism was seen as a subversive element within society.

For the two female characters, within this social context, not only is same-sex desire strictly repressed, but the exploration of one's own identity as a woman is also discouraged.

Many historians have shown that even women who eventually claimed their queer identities in the 1950s struggled to break free from the expectations of traditional marriage and motherhood (Corber, 2011). Carol's characterization captures this mindset as she clings to the custody of her daughter, despite often displaying dissatisfaction with the existing social order. This struggle is ultimately resolved through her decision to voluntarily relinquish custody of her daughter, a turnaround that is not only a quest for personal freedom but also a profound exploration of this mature woman's self-identity. The film repeatedly depicts a conversation between Carol and her lawyer, in which the lawyer mentions that Carol's husband has asked the judge to consider the morality clause. This detail also highlights the discriminatory moral judgment of homosexuality in society at the time, and how this judgment permeated legal decisions. This legal context echoes real historical regulations. In 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed Executive Order 10,450, declaring "sexual perversion," a euphemism for homosexuality, a national security risk (Zapata, 2024). Then the U.S. federal government and state authorities engaged in what is now called the "Lavender Scare"—a campaign in which gay and lesbian individuals were targeted as security risks and subjected to surveillance, interrogations, and job losses. These materials show that the "morality clause" faced by Carol in the film is not purely a fictional invention, but resonates with Cold War-era legal and cultural systems of regulation of lesbian intimacy.

In this historical context, lesbians need to find a balance between strict social norms and personal identity. By adapting Therese from the fictional set designer to a budding photographer, the film deeply explores her desires. White (2015: 11) suggests that, by gifting Therese the expensive camera, Carol is recognizing that Therese is a young woman awakening to self-identity and self-perspective. A large part of Therese's exploration of herself is achieved with the help of the camera. Haynes' emphasis on the intricate nature of the gazes and sightings helps the film express lesbian desire (Smith, 2018). Therese's camera, on the other hand, conveys this gaze more explicitly. While following Carol on her way to her home in the suburbs, Therese puts Carol into the frame for the first time, framing her in time,

space, and desire. Before this, Therese “always feels funny taking pictures of people” (Haynes, 2015), but as Therese’s friend says, “The only thing you know is—you either are attracted or you’re not attracted” (Haynes, 2015). Later, with Carol’s gaze, the audience is able to see the photo in its entirety—Carol in her mink coat looking sideways and back at the camera. Therese’s gaze is never one-sided; Carol desires this young woman she wants to possess.

Figlerowicz (2022) believes that compared to the moving image film camera, the act of taking pictures by the lesbian photographer character in the film provides these characters with an artificial sense of identity that serves to conceal rather than resolve the issues continually raised by their persistent bodily expression. However, Therese’s constant use of the camera to capture Carol’s figure in the film is not only to capture the very essence of the woman she loves but also to confirm her love for Carol through visual art and to seek self-identification through it. As the director states, it is via this process that she begins to see herself in the world when she begins photographing people, photographing Carol. After their separation, Therese puts away her camera and is responsible for typing rather than taking photographs in the newspaper office, seemingly returning to a traditional female role while also concealing the same-sex desire between them.

By depicting the characters’ pursuit of self-identity under social norms, both are portrayed as heterogeneous individuals excluded from the dominant social order. Consequently, they—and the intimate spaces they inhabit—are naturally constructed as what Foucault terms heterotopias of deviation.

3. Heterotopia of Desire

The centrality of the need to conceal same-sex desires makes the focus on space key to understanding the film. Compared to self-identification, Carol and Therese’s desire for each other is a deviation from the social norms of the time and cannot be assimilated or accommodated by society; there is no space for desire. So, the director uses his camera language to build an Other Place, in which the two people seem to be free from the outside world, but which also conveys that they are oppressed by the power of the outside world at all times. Foucault defines this other place as Heterotopia. Foucault wrote that heterotopia is a contestation of our living space that is simultaneously real and mythic (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986). The introduction of the theory of heterotopia provides a theoretical framework for understanding the spatial settings in the film and allows for a deeper analysis of how space in *Carol* becomes a site for the expression of hidden desires.

Foucault conducted a six-point functional analysis of heterotopias: First, he argued that heterotopias exist across diverse cultures but manifest in varying forms; second, the same heterotopia functions differently across different periods; third, heterotopias can co-locate spaces that would otherwise be incompatible; fourth, heterotopias connect to temporal fragments, creating heterogeneous time. Fifth, heterotopias are both isolated from their surroundings and permeable. Sixth, they generate interactive effects with the surrounding space. *Carol* employs cinematic

techniques to transform abstract philosophical concepts into concrete filmic experiences. For instance, the hotel room serves as both the space where the two protagonists' socially unacceptable intimate relationship reaches its climax and—as subsequent plot developments reveal—a place fraught with danger. Adjacent to the hotel room resides a detective symbolizing societal norms, observing them. As points five and six illustrate, the hotel room functions both as a safe heterotopia and as a space permeated by the dangers of the surrounding reality.

According to Foucault's fourth point, the concept of heterotopia encompasses the dimension of time, and in heterotopic space, heterotopias are fragments of time that are different from, and heterogeneous with, real linear time (Leng et al., 2025: p. 60). The duration of the story in *Carol* is ambiguous, with the main plot set during the calendar fixation that is the Christmas holidays; as White suggests, this love story is located in history but suspended in time (White, 2015: p. 11). One of Haynes's creative strategies is the paraphrasing of time and place. In *Carol*, the particular time of the Christmas holidays helps to construct the heterotopia of the two individuals. Traditionally, the Christmas holidays are joyous for families, but they can also be a depressing moment when “religion, state, capital, ideology, domesticity, the discourse of power and legitimacy” (Sedgwick, 2013, cited in Smith, 2018) all line up and speak with one voice. Carol and Therese's road trip is heterogeneous to the reunion tradition of the Christmas holiday. In the scene of lovemaking, Carol strokes Therese's hair and says she has never spent New Year's Eve with her husband; then Therese responds, “I've always spent New Year's Eve alone. In crowds” (Haynes, 2015). Each of them is a lonely individual to their respective families and friends, but with each other, they constitute a group of people who make a difference. Together, they constitute a sync space that satisfies them.

In addition to its temporal dimension, the notion of heterotopia is also reflected in the film's spatial design—most notably in the recurring car scenes that construct a form of intimate but precarious space. The car in *Carol* functions like the ship that Foucault describes as “a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself” (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986). As a vessel of mobility and privacy, the car becomes a transient heterotopia—a moving capsule in which desire can momentarily escape social surveillance, even as it remains bounded by it. Most of the shots of Carol and Therese in the car are filmed not inside the car but through the windows, positioning the audience as onlookers excluded from their dialogue and intimacy. As Griffith (2023) argues, heterotopic spaces often blur the boundaries between interior and exterior, creating a liminal zone in which the subject's visibility is both protected and exposed. The car glass surface, often covered by dappled light (Figure 1), simultaneously conceals and reveals, transforming the car into a liminal site between visibility and invisibility. Within this heterotopic vessel, the two women exist in a fragile suspension between public exposure and private revelation: their intimacy is both enabled and delimited by the very spatial boundaries that shelter it.



Figure 1. The windows are covered by dappled light.

For the climactic scene in which the two have sex, Haynes takes the form of a reflection in a mirror to photograph the characters. Therese sits at a dressing table, with Carol standing behind her, her hands on her shoulders, occasionally stroking the ends of her hair (**Figure 2**). For Foucault, mirrors are key to heterotopia. “It (mirror) makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there” (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986). The point of view is folded back between the real and the fictional, and the subject is reconstructed in the folding back of the gaze. The appearance of the mirror here also seems to form the climax of the heterotopia. In a space that is both real and imaginary, their love is left undisturbed but also stored nowhere. Smith (2018) argues that the reflection in the mirror also suggests a distance or distortion, a kind of slight removal from reality, as their love may or may not be located in the world of the 1950s in which they lived. However, compared to the social intolerance of the outside world, same-sex love cannot be accommodated in the outside world, but is already most real in the mirror.



Figure 2. Therese and Carol in the mirror.

In Carol, Haynes constructs this heterotopia to both convey the deeper emotions of the characters beneath the surface and to reflect the disapproval and unacceptance of these emotions by the inherent norms of the outside society. These spaces/places of deviation from norms are both places of refuge and resistance. Inside the car, or in the mirror, they can express their emotions, yet the use of these spaces as places of emotional repository highlights the prevalence of societal norms and emphasises the constant confrontation between visibility and invis-

bility, freedom and constraint.

4. Conclusion

In 1950s America, the effects of the Cold War made for an extraordinarily conservative social climate, where homosexuals, especially lesbians, were seen as a threat to traditional values. The relationship between Carol and Therese in *Carol* exemplifies the challenges women faced during this period between pursuing their desires and fulfilling societal expectations of the ideal female role. By analyzing Carol's character, it is clear that she struggles between maintaining her self-identity and societal expectations. The sacrifices she makes to maintain custody of her daughter and the ultimate twist of choosing freedom in the film profoundly reflect the dilemma and struggle of women in the socio-political environment of the time. Therese, as a young photographer, finds that her perspective and camera become the tools for her to explore herself and express her desires, and the film expresses the exploration of hidden desires through the language of her camera.

In addition, through the use of space, particularly within the framework of heterotopia theory, the film explores how non-traditional spaces become sites for the expression and experience of taboo desires. From the private conversations in the car to the intimate scenes shown through the reflection of mirrors, these other spaces are not only a refuge from social norms but also a place where subjectivity and desire can be expressed. These scenes reinforce the film's exploration of the tension between the individual and social norms, highlighting the individual's search for space for self-expression under social pressure.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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