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On Popular Culture

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Letter from the Editors

Vol 1 Issue 2

June 15th, 2017

Welcome back to returning readers and a warm welcome to those who are visiting the e.g. journal site for the first time. After our winter special issue: On Violence, we decided to delve into an frequently misrepresented field of interdisciplinary research: popular culture. Historically, scholars who study popular culture have often been pigeon-holed as doing fringe research which, though entertaining, is outside the heavy-hitting work of most academic departments. The study of popular culture has sought to resist the division of cultural forms into “high” and “low,” arguing that there is as much value to be found in comic books as there is in opera. Our hope, by offering this special issue on the topic, is to create space for students who study popular culture from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives to show how popular culture shapes the ways we engage with the world and helps codify timely discussions of race, economics, politics, social movements, etc. in the global imagination. We were not disappointed. This issue marked a sharp uptick in submissions from a wide range of disciplines: film studies, gender and women’s studies, and media studies. We have selected two essays that speak to the current scholarly moment in the study of popular culture.

In our first essay, “Die Antwoord: The Face of a Homologous Subculture, or a Purposeless Façade of Zef?”, Julia Engel makes use of Dick Hebdige’s theories of subculture formation to analyze the cultural context, artistic contributions, and political significance of the South African rap-rave performance group Die Antwoord. Engel argues that the Zef movement in South Africa, emerging from ideological and material challenges that working-class white Afrikaners experienced post-apartheid, does not conform to the aesthetic or political frameworks of most subculture movements. Engel’s work decenters the scholarly conversation on subculture and punk movements and challenges the reader to grapple with cultural appropriation as a tool to generate apolitical art in post-apartheid South Africa. In our second essay, “The Histories of Todd Haynes’s *Carol*”, Camille E.B. Boechler explores three distinct critical perspectives on the film (production history, critical reception, and popular reception). Boechler argues that by engaging the film from these three distinct critical perspectives readers can carve out new ways of interpreting representations of queerness, femininity, and mid-century white womanhood in Haynes’s *Carol*. Taken together, these essays help shape our understanding of how diverse and rich the interdisciplinary study of popular culture can be.

We hope you enjoy the work of our talented contributors in the e.g. special issue: On Popular Culture, and can use it to help frame conversations at your institutions, in your classrooms, and in your communities. Please also note the link to the CFP for our upcoming summer special issue, which will focus on the environment. We look forward to reading new student work and continuing the project of cultivating engaging, scholarly discussions for our readers and generating new opportunities for students to showcase their writing!

Sincerely,

AJ Burgin & Steph Hankinson

Editors-in-Chief

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Current CFP

The summer special issue of e.g. will focus broadly on questions and issues related to the environment. This special issue, much like the interdisciplinary field of environmental studies, seeks to explore the relationship between human beings and the natural world from a wide range of scholarly perspectives. Projects should employ a distinct disciplinary lens (or clearly articulated interdisciplinary perspective) to engage and/or critique any issue related to the environment. For this issue, e.g. invites contributions that push the boundaries of how we think about our relationship to the environment in the precarious present: a moment when debates about the Paris Climate Agreement, rising sea levels, Standing Rock and Flint, MI, and the rise of GMOs to feed the world dominate the global media news. This special issue is especially interested in projects related to questions of new environmentalism, protecting or preserving nature, ecofeminism, and environmental justice.

Though a broad range of work addressing the environment will be considered for the special issue, contributors might begin by considering the following topics:

- How rhetorics of sustainability come into conflict with global economic development
- How philosophy and literature can help contextualize and theorize climate change
- The racial, cultural, and ethical dimensions of environmental catastrophe
- The ecological impact of large-scale human or animal migration
- How the legacy of Transcendentalism gave rise to environmentalist movements

The focus of this summer's special issue is the environment, but we welcome submissions on any topic. Be aware that general submissions, if accepted, will not be published until a future issue at the discretion of the editorial board.

We accept two general types of submissions: critical essays and non-traditional (or multimodal) compositions, such as poems, short stories, or digital artifacts. All traditional essay submissions should be 2500-5000 words, be in .doc or .docx format, follow MLA guidelines, and include a 250-word abstract outlining project goals and how the contribution meaningfully engages ongoing scholarly conversations. For non-traditional submissions, please expand your abstract to 500 words and include an explanation of the author's design choices and how these choices engage the theme of the environment. All submissions should also include the contributor's full name, academic affiliation and email address.

Direct all submissions and questions to: egonline@uw.edu

SUBMISSION DEADLINE: August 1, 2017

Die Antwoord: The Face of a Homologous Subculture, or a Purposeless Façade of Zef?

– Julia Engel

Abstract:

This paper utilizes Dick Hebdige's "Subculture: The Meaning of Style" to create a working definition of the concept of subculture. Against this framework, I discuss whether the South African techno-rave band Die Antwoord can be defined as the spearhead of the subculture of Zef, or if the group's representation of Zef is more superficial than an authentic identifier of the Zef movement. I use Hebdige's example of punk culture to first illustrate the tendencies of an authentic subculture to create boundaries around itself with the use of daring fashion, pervasive art, and highly identifiable musical sound, through which it digs its niche place outside of mass popular culture. With this example and Hebdige's definition of subculture, I analyze a multitude of songs and music videos by Die Antwoord, as well as multiple interviews with band members Yo-landi Vi\$\$er and Ninja to discern whether Die Antwoord can be accepted as a participant in subculture under the Hebdige definition.

I find through this extensive research that while Die Antwoord exemplifies particular aspects of Hebdige's subculture definition—in its particular style of dress, in its political message in one exclusive music video, in its attempt to create discomfort within its viewers with its strange sexual displays—the group also creates a wide variety of problematic dynamics for itself which ultimately outweigh these subcultural details. Its use of blackface as well as its submission to product placement in its music videos are both key indicators that Die Antwoord faces some contradictory aspects to its attempt to be the 'face of Zef music.' Thus, the group presents a highly troubling dynamic—while it thinks of itself as subcultural and verbalizes such in its music, Die Antwoord's actions indicate more so that it is a troubling façade of subculture who is in reality a participant in mass cultural tendencies.

Biography:

Julia Engel is a participant in Tulane University's 4+1 MA Program. They just finished their senior year of undergraduate studies cum laude at Tulane, and wrote this essay for a Fundamentals of Literary Theory graduate course. In this class, Julia analyzed and debated different schools of literary theory and their significance in today's literary landscape. Julia focused on Dick Hebdige's "Subculture: The Meaning of Style" for their final paper, as it succinctly highlighted a personal debate Julia was having with the ethics of one of their favorite bands, Die Antwoord. Julia will be going into my "+1" year of the MA program this fall.

Die Antwoord: The Face of a Homologous Subculture, or a Purposeless Façade of Zef?

In his work “Subculture: The Meaning of Style,” Dick Hebdige creates a working definition of the highly debated term ‘subculture,’ which he uses to analyze the British punk movement of the 1970s. In his highly logical, evidence-based classification of subculture, Hebdige requires that, in creating its rebellious “forms and rituals,” that clash so harshly with mass culture, a subcultural group must attempt to create an identity with the following: “the status and meaning of revolt, the idea of style as a form of Refusal, [and] the elevation of crime into art” (Hebdige 1259, 1258). In this essay, I will analyze whether the South African rap-rave musical group Die Antwoord, which claims to be a part of the Zef subcultural music movement, fits within Hebdige’s definition of subculture—or, if Die Antwoord’s Zef style is simply meaningless “graffiti” strewn across the walls of South African history (Hebdige 1259). While the band does in many ways mirror the tendencies of 1970s punk, I argue that there are a number of key differences which ultimately place Die Antwoord more comfortably into the category of mass popular culture. I will start by explaining the merits of Hebdige’s definition of subculture, using this to compare Die Antwoord and convey the flaws in its attempt to represent the subculture of Zef.

According to Hebdige, the birth of a subculture must start with a crime against the mainstream culture, and end “in the construction of style, in a gesture of defiance and contempt” whose otherness possesses a specific significance, or meaning (1259). Hebdige emphasizes quite heavily the use of quotidian material objects as a means of creating an evocative subcultural style. Hebdige calls upon the example of punks, who utilized everyday household objects in their garish ensembles—lavatory chains, plastic bin-liners and safety pins were “taken out of their domestic ‘utility’ context and worn as gruesome ornaments” (Hebdige 1260). In their re-assemblage of everyday objects into extreme statements of contempt for mass culture and its authority over society, the punks were able to create a visual identity in such rejection. As a result, the punks were largely vetoed and spurned for their rebellion by older generations of Brits, while simultaneously being “canonized” by mainstream British media; they were seen at times as something to fear as they had the potential to destruct the “public order,” and at other points in time as inconsequential jokesters (Hebdige 1259). Thus, in offending the public, a subculture digs a niche location in that society for itself: “So the tensions

between dominant and subordinate groups can be found reflected in the surfaces of subculture—in the styles made up of mundane objects which have a double meaning” (Hebdige 1259). In fact, I assert that Hebdige’s emphasis on the point that subculture must possess the power to scar and deface the dominant culture from which it stems, as punk did, is the most important aspect of his definition (1259).

As Hebdige demonstrates, punk subculture was able to disfigure British popular culture in numerous ways. Using “confrontation dressing,” or the use of normal objects and the reconstruction of unassuming materials such as PVC and lurex, the use of female cosmetics for both men and women in garish fashions, extreme-colored hair and Mohawks, and the redefinition of school uniforms, punks aimed to create their own social “commentary” on what the concepts of “modernity and taste” should be, as well as what the definition of beauty should look like in mass culture (Hebdige 1260). In this display, the punk subculture destabilized the dialogues being put forth in the media on what it meant to be tasteful and beautiful, and what modern society attempted to define itself as. Punk style also put the sexually fetishized on display for the world to comment on: “Rapist masks and rubber wear, leather bodices and fishnet stockings... the whole paraphernalia of bondage... were exhumed from the boudoir, closet and the pornographic film and placed on the street where they retained their forbidden connotations” (Hebdige 1260). Punk brought the underlying sexuality that British pop culture attempted to smother into the public sphere, where its existence and prevalence could no longer be denied. Seeking reactions of disgust and anger from the average Brit, punks voluntarily exiled themselves as outcasts of society, which in turn defined the entire punk subcultural movement (Hebdige 1261). To have the ability to publically call into question the ethics of the mass culture from which a subcultural group stems in such a way that outliers from the subculture also begin to question it is a significant feat, and arguably the most definitive indicator of a successful revolt. This point is one of the key reasons that I have chosen to utilize Hebdige’s definition of subculture to analyze the authenticity of *Die Antwoord*.

Another key reason that Hebdige’s definition is so complimentary to this discussion of *Die Antwoord*’s failure to exemplify the Zef subculture is its emphasis on the relationship between revolt, art, and the lower class. As Hebdige demonstrates, punk was a movement focused on mass culture’s manipulation of the working-class. Punk music, in its deliberate unmelodic tones and amateurish sound, posed a direct attack against the “bourgeois notion of entertainment or the classical concept of ‘high art’” which excluded the working-class and made them a group of outside onlookers to an impenetrable form of art that was meant to be idealized (Hebdige 1261). Through live performances, punk bands such as the Sex Pistols, the Clash, and the Rejects instead sought to connect directly with audiences, merging the gap between performer and spectator. In allowing fans of all socioeconomic statuses to make “the symbolic crossing from the dance

floor to the stage,” and with band members engaging in mosh pits and the mutual destruction of both venue and instrument during live shows, punk bands rejected the traditional idea that audience and performer must be physically separated by means of a stage and theater seats (Hebdige 1262). No longer was art an unattainable concept to be idealized and aspired to, but something that could be interacted with, destructed, and manipulated as punk audiences crowded concert halls for these havoc-reeking shows.

In the rebellious cheap production of fanzines by working-class punks, the subculture once again was able to take the power of critique out of the hands of commercial media entities. These fanzines tended to include manifestos that were often identifiable in their language as being of working class origin, with their use of swear words and a refusal to correct typos and misspellings, even in final edits (Hebdige 1262). This group of working-class punks demonstrated a thriving dedication to the subculture; it was this subset in particular who took up the term “punk” as a mark of self-identity, reveling in its connotation for worthlessness, meanness, and trifling treachery (Hebdige 1263).

Like punk, the Zef movement that Die Antwoord identifies with has been largely defined by its glorification of the grungy, unkempt undertones in its name, as it is the derogatory identifier for South Africa’s white lower-middle working-class. According to scholar Anton Krueger, “Zef denotes a particular style of vulgar humour which has been emerging more and more in South Africa during the past decade,” that is constructed by “presenting a persona in a purposefully degrading way, exaggerating one’s appearance and mannerisms as low class, ill-bred, and boorish” (158). Yet this subcultural repossession of an offensive name for poor white South Africans is a fairly new phenomenon—the word “Zef” has deeper historical roots tied steadfastly to the South African apartheid.

This new countercultural redefinition of Zef is one that has evolved from a turbulent colonial history in South Africa. Historically, Zef is a subgroup within the Afrikaner (also called Afrikaans) subgroup of South Africa, or “the ethnic, white culture forged by the Great Trek (1835-1846)” of Dutch colonists to southern Africa (Krueger 160). As the creolistic formation of the Dutch settlers fought against both indigenous African groups and the British over 300 years to sustain their place in the southern region of the continent, the Afrikaners became the dominant population in South Africa when it was established as a union in 1910 (Climent, Hill, Macmichael, Skutsch 1156). The group rose to their peak of power in 1948 with the creation of the Afrikaner-based National Party, responsible for the implementation of the apartheid. Afrikaners remained in power throughout the century, eventually developing South Africa into a Republic in 1960 (Climent, Hill, Macmichael, Skutsch 1156).

Thus, “The ideologues responsible for the construction of hegemonic Afrikaner identity during the era that saw the rise (and fall) of apartheid, did so by painstakingly weaving Afrikaner nationalist ideology

into the fabric of Afrikaner society,” specifically through Afrikaner music (Van Der Merwe 349). And as Afrikaners solidified themselves within South Africa, class divisions within the group itself grew more pronounced—with lower, middle, and upper segments developing and becoming highly concrete (Climent, Hill, Macmichael, Skutsch 1156). As the most vulnerable group of Afrikaners, the lower class became an easy scapegoat for middle and upper-class Afrikaners to place the fault and shame of the apartheid upon after the fall of the National Party.

The term ‘Zef’ was coined in 1960s and 1970s South Africa for lower-middle class working Afrikaners, especially in the West and East Rand of Johannesburg; it refers to the Ford Zephyr model, a common car used by white working-class taxi drivers in these decades (Klopper). Middle and upper class Afrikaners derogatorily referred to owners of Ford Zephyrs as being ‘Zef.’ Zef culture therefore specifically has a link to the “lineage of white poverty,” experienced by lower class Afrikaners, and is tied directly with the “disgrace experienced by many white Afrikaner people after apartheid” (Krueger 158). “The inheritance of the present generation of Afrikaners... is largely one of shame” as they experience the reverberations of the brutality their ancestors inflicted upon native South Africans as well as other non-white migrants who had sought refuge in South Africa; this shame has largely been forcefully placed onto the shoulders of lower class Afrikaners, as they are the most vulnerable Afrikaner subgroup (Krueger 159). In recent decades, however, lower-middle class white South Africans have taken the term Zef as their own and used it as a prideful symbol of identity amongst the highly variant ethnic landscape in South Africa. The term ‘Zef’ has now been transformed from a derogatory term used against poor South Africans of Afrikaner descent into a phrase of pride used by the group themselves.

The sense of embarrassment and flip of power in the aftermath of apartheid has been embodied in current Zef culture as it has fought to reconcile with the “hegemonic Afrikaner identity” that had solidified itself with the “hardening of apartheid,” in particular through its means of dress and its unique style of music (Van Der Merwe 350). Yo-landi Vi\$\$er, the lead female singer of Die Antwoord, has been quoted saying that Zef is “associated with people who soup their cars up and rock gold and shit. Zef is, you’re poor but you’re fancy. You’re poor but you’re sexy, you’ve got style” (Hoby). In its relationship to the working-class, the Zef movement therefore embodies a commonality between itself and punk subculture. Ninja, the rap component of Die Antwoord, says “Zef is South African underdog kind of style,” noting that it has historically been a word of insult “for [a] long [time] in South Africa,” but that “the word kind of started transforming about 10 years ago” (Mechanic). Now, with its reformed identity, “Zef is the underbelly of the Afrikaans culture, but it also, like, is Afrikaans culture,” according to Ninja (Mechanic). Thus, the actual movement of Zef can definitively be argued as subcultural—the issue at play is instead whether Die Antwoord can be argued as an

authentic representation of Zef subculture.

This matter is a complicated one, as Die Antwoord does fulfill Hebdige's definition of subculture in many ways. For instance, as the self-identified face of Zef music, Die Antwoord has logically chosen the Ford Zephyr as its object of choice as a symbol to represent themselves with. In virtually every music video, blinged-out, graffiti-ridden Ford Zephyrs flash across the screen. In the music video for "Baby's on Fire," a Zephyr is driven in violent circles around Yo-landi Vi\$\$er, as she dances euphorically in a sand lot surrounded by sun-bleached pastel apartment buildings.



The additional presence of graffiti, the "Zef" logo emblazoned on their clothing, bright colors, gaudy jewelry, the use of Afrikaans language, and the overt use of a lower middle-class urban environment in its music videos, posters, and album artwork are all symbols of the Zef lifestyle that Die Antwoord intentionally places within its work, as well as weaves into its live shows and merchandise. Thus, Die Antwoord's manipulation of environment and use of unique clothing, hair, and accessories is a direct attempt at creating a homologous style, a requirement of subculture for Hebdige. Hebdige defines the term "homology" as "the symbolic fit between the values and lifestyles of a group, its subjective experience and the musical forms it uses to express or reinforce its focal concerns" which make up a "whole way of life"; in a 2011 interview, Ninja states rather explicitly that "Zef in South Africa is like a whole style. It's like a way of thinking, and dressing, and how things sound and stuff" (Hebdige 1263; "Die Antwoord Extended Uncut Interview"). Die Antwoord's commitment to being the face of Zef music is therefore a statement of being committed to the "Zef way of life."

1 Die Antwoord and friends posing with a modern-day Ford Zephyr. Their Zef logo can be seen in the lower right corner (*Dieantwoord.com*).



Much like the reaction of dismissal and denunciation of many older Brits of the 1970s of punk music and punk style, Ninja states that “a lot of the older [South African] people were like, ‘Jesus, this is fokken terrible—like the worst representation of South Africa ever’” (Mechanic). This statement indicates that there has been apparent opposition to the Zef representation of South Africa, and a refutation of it embodying multiple layers of the country’s culture from older and more traditionalist parties. In response to receiving vocal rejection by older generations of Afrikaners to the Zef culture they identify with, Die Antwoord has in some regard carved out a counter-culture that stands strongly in opposition to more central currents of South African culture. Die Antwoord has, at least on a minimal level, therefore possessed “the power to disfigure” South African popular culture in its representation of Zef (Hebdige 1259).

What must be assessed, then, is if there is a purpose to this disfiguration; does Die Antwoord have a social agenda underlying its rebellious song lyrics, its kitschy style, and its confrontational music videos, or is it an attempt to push social limits simply for the sake of it? Two key methods of forming such deviance from the norm of popular culture that Hebdige cites are social and sexual, which like much of punk artistry, Die Antwoord’s music—and especially its music videos—are able to “give an impression of multiple warping which was guaranteed to disconcert the most liberal of observers” (Hebdige 1265). In the band’s ability to create controversial social and sexual dynamics in its music videos, Die Antwoord has certainly proved its power to rebel against the portrayal of sexuality that popular culture propagates.

In the video for “I Fink U Freaky,” Die Antwoord members Yo-landi Vi\$\$er and Ninja can be seen in a dark, grungy, creepy environment acting in overtly sexual manners while repeating the words “I fink you’re freaky and I like you a lot” ominously throughout the video. With its use of animals not commonly

found in the music videos of the average pop star—such as ducks, weasels, and a white rat—and its scenes of Yo-landi being grabbed by bodiless hands layered on graffitied mattresses and bathing seductively in a tub filled with black, tar-like water, the obvious aim of the video is to make the viewer uncomfortable with its interpretation of sexuality. Yet, I would argue that this work is merely pushing the limits of tolerance for the strange and fetishized in the media merely for the shock-value, rather than creating a level of discomfort meant to force the viewer to question why certain taboos surrounding sexuality in the media are present and consequently rejecting such censorship. There is no indication in the video itself that Die Antwoord is intending to create a political or social commentary with the work—rather, it is meant to entertain the viewer in its audacious strangeness. The song’s lyrics are also deeply disconnected from the theme of ‘freakiness’ that the video promotes, even giving product placement to Dr. Dre Beats headphones:

“Hold up!/ Whoah whoah whoah/ Wait a minute minute Jesus Christ/ Yo my man DJ Hi-Tek,/ Shit this motherfucking beat is nice/ Back in the day them wankies/ Didn’t wanna believe in us/ Little did they know that they was in for a mutherfucker big surprise/ Left on, locked in my Zef Zone/ Ready for the diss, yo?/ Motherfucker guess so/ Overseas when the fucking heads get blown/ When everything will seem like Dr. Dre Beats headphones/ When I get home I lounge on my Zef throne, mate Mom after me cause I get so great/ making my money rapping over techno rave/ I can take you underworld lets go babe/ When I step up and do my thing put you in a trance/ My Zef motherfucking clique got it going on/ Fuck what you think I do what I motherfucking want/ I can make a million little mutherfuckers jump.” (Die Antwoord “I Fink U Freaky”).

Its lack of consistency in its message conveys a dearth of commitment on the part of Die Antwoord to creating a subcultural manifesto to disseminate to its viewers—unlike the punk movement, which created its manifestos so succinctly with its fanzines and explicit song titles. While Die Antwoord’s lyrics cite ‘being Zef’ repeatedly, they fail to convey what being Zef actually entails. Combined with the overt product placement of the Dr. Dre Beats headphones in both the video and the song’s lyrics, Die Antwoord has also accepted capitalism’s presence in all forms of western culture, including art—something that a group truly in the throes of subculture would not do. I therefore conclude that Die Antwoord has failed to meet Hebdige’s definition of subculture in this regard.



Other examples of Die Antwoord's tip-toeing around the representation of a subculture is Ƴo-landi's defiance of authority and gratification towards forbidden sexual conquests in "Baby's On Fire," as well as the cinematography found in "Banana Brain," and "Cookie Thumper." In all three videos, there is an element of authority being broken, child-like behavior or dress being perverted into explicitly sexual images, and an obvious attempt at creating a strange environment for sexual engagement—yet no definite, concrete reason for rebellion against popular culture to be found. In the music video for "Baby's On Fire," Ninja plays Ƴo-landi's big brother, who throughout the video is attempting to thwart Ƴo-landi's plan to have sex with her love interest "JP." "I don't want that scumbag motherfucker hanging around my little sister! You hear me?" Ninja screams in the video's introduction, "They just got one thing on their minds, you hear me? One thing" (Die Antwoord "Baby's On Fire"). Similarly, in "Cookie Thumper" Ƴo-landi can be seen sneaking out of an orphanage populated with scantily-clad adult 'orphans' to visit "Aines," a black South African who has recently been released from prison. In "Banana Brain," Ƴo-landi is seen wearing a conservative dress reminiscent of that one would find on a china baby doll, and has long, platinum hair—a sharp turn to-

wards normality from her usual partially shaved hairstyle and revealing clothing. Yet, after sneaking her parents a full bottle of sleeping pills, Yö-landi escapes with Ninja to a Zef party where she kisses a woman and is confronted by Ninja with an enormous glow-in-the-dark strap-on. Thus, it is how Yö-landi acts, who she is with and where she is that conveys a loss of sexual and social innocence in a way that refutes the globalized sexual ideal of the heterosexual woman found in dominant popular culture: that she is a passive object, that she does not experiment with homosexuality, that she is obedient, and that her sexuality is conveyed for the arousal and pleasure of the male viewer.

And while these portrayals of the sexual are overt strays from those found in mainstream pop music, unfortunately, yet again, there is no consistent message throughout these videos that can be identified as explicitly Zef. While the videos are racy, stylish, and outlandish, in their destruction of social and sexual norms, the group fails to convey to the viewer what the Zef alternative to popular social and sexual imagery is. Are these videos conveying that sex is a deviant and rebellious act, a journey from childhood into adulthood, or that sex is something frivolous? It is unclear if, like the punk movement, Die Antwoord is attempting to redefine the boundaries of beauty and sexuality, or if it is seeking to communicate a completely different dialogue altogether. As Hebdige iterates, a subculture must have a specific set of messages around which it forms, and a political agenda that it wishes to propel with the group's style of dress, music, and art. While Die Antwoord says repeatedly that it is Zef in these songs' lyrics, we are still left in the dark as to what its personal definition of Zef truly is, why Die Antwoord is worthy of being the face of Zef, and what political messages the group stands behind.

Although through my analysis it has become apparent that Die Antwoord has failed to create an explicitly subcultural identity for itself, its "Fatty Boom Boom" music video is its most blatant refutation of popular culture, and thus comes the closest to being subcultural in nature. The video is a clear rejection of the music of pop star Lady Gaga, as a result of a Twitter battle that ensued between Lady Gaga and the band.

With the release of its album *Ten\$ion* in 2012, Die Antwoord's international popularity began to swell (Klopper). As a result, Lady Gaga, "probably the most acclaimed international pop star," of the time, invited Die Antwoord to perform as her opening act on her *Born This Way* tour—an invitation that the group aggressively refused, claiming that its "'Zef' style is too 'hardcore, like solid heavyweight' to be associated with the 'shitty pop music' of Lady Gaga" (Klopper). A subsequent Twitter skirmish erupted between Die Antwoord and Lady Gaga, who slandered the group: "i fink u freaky but you don't have a hit. hundred thousand tickets sold in [South Africa]. #thatsmyshit," tweeted Lady Gaga, riffing on Die Antwoord's song "I Fink U Freaky."

Die Antwoord's music video "Fatty Boom Boom" represents a reply to Lady Gaga's declaration of

popularity, and as a result encapsulates “The status and meaning of revolt” Hebdige requires in his definition of subculture—in this case, a revolt against American pop music being the idealized goal for all artists worldwide (Hebdige 1258). In the video, Die Antwoord creates a parody of Lady Gaga, having a male actor dressing in the iconic “Meat Dress” that the artist wore to the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards. “Lady Gaga” is first seen riding unamused in a beat-up minivan receiving a ‘tour of South Africa’; the camera flashes to graffiti-riddled streets, and black South Africans mingling with wild lions, hyenas, and a black panther in what the tour guide refers to as the “concrete jungle” (Die Antwoord “Fatty Boom Boom”). The character looks on listlessly, until her tour guide comes across Die Antwoord performing in the street, to which she finally reacts, “Oh my God, look at their freaky fashion! I should get them to open for me” (Die Antwoord “Fatty Boom Boom”). After her tour van is held up by a group of gunmen, ‘Lady Gaga’ is then subjected to a traumatizing gynecologist visit in which she has an ‘exotic’ South African insect extracted from her vagina, and is ultimately mauled by a lion and killed at the end of the video. In both Ninja and Y0-landi’s lyrics, they verbalize their rejection of Lady Gaga: “No, I do not want to stop, collaborate or listen... I’m takin’ over America, blowin’ up everything,” asserts Y0-landi, while Ninja negatively references the American pop star’s interest in the band: “Suddenly you’re interested ‘cos we’re blowing up overseas” (Die Antwoord “Fatty Boom Boom”). Throughout the video, Y0-landi can also be heard yelling such bellicose lyrics as, “Fight fight fight!/ Kick you in the teeth, hit you on the head with the mic” (Die Antwoord “Fatty Boom Boom”). This ‘killing off’ of Lady Gaga, as well as Die Antwoord’s aggressive lyrics, are demonstrations of an “elevation of crime into art,” one of Hebdige’s key required actions of a subculture (1258). The murder of Lady Gaga is a metaphorical representation for the homicide of pop music—in particular American pop music, which Die Antwoord believes it stands in stark opposition to. Thus, through violently killing Gaga in the end of the video while the band’s sadistic lyrics pound the viewer’s ears throughout, Die Antwoord is attempting to create a political message here regarding the sterilization of popular music, and to convey that it wants no part in the pop music regime.



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However, Lady Gaga is both a fashion and a music icon that prides herself on her representation of the ‘strange.’ She has made numerous outlandish fashion statements at major music events, such as the “Meat Dress” that Die Antwoord references in its “Fatty Boom Boom” music video. Although Lady Gaga has never explicitly framed her music or her image as representations of a subculture, she has in many ways fulfilled Hebdige’s definition of subculture—possibly more so than Die Antwoord. Lady Gaga has created a distinct relationship with her fans that not many artists before her have cultivated, “built by her messages of self-acceptance and by her intense engagement with fans through social media” (Click, Lee and Willson Holladay, 360). Calling her fans her “little monsters,” Lady Gaga has stripped the word “monster” of its “negative connotations,” allowing her “fans to use her as a mirror to reflect upon and embrace their differences from mainstream culture” (Click, Lee and Willson Holladay, 360). Her fans are often unconditionally committed to the pop star; Lady Gaga’s commitment to the empowerment of her fan base has therefore created “a major dimension in people’s lives,” constructing meaning in her music and her persona (Hebdige, 1266).

Thus, can Die Antwoord truly discount Lady Gaga as not being subcultural? The group has only referenced the fact that Lady Gaga’s music falls within the pop genre, and their opinion of it being poorly crafted as reasons negating her subcultural potential: Ninja has claimed that “Pop music started getting fokken dumb—like the-retards-are-winning type style” (Mechanic). In critiquing her popularity, Vi\$\$er and Ninja view Gaga as lacking originality and authenticity. Yet Die Antwoord themselves is growing more popular; calling Lady Gaga out for her success is therefore highly hypocritical. On YouTube, “Fatty Boom Boom” has over 31,978,000 views; “Baby’s On Fire” has over 55,000,000, and “Enter The Ninja” has been viewed over 52,000,000 times (YouTube).⁵ And unlike Lady Gaga and punk music, Die Antwoord has no singular, focalized social agenda, choosing not to use its popularity towards any particular cause or message. Instead, as Sarah Kloppe so succinctly notes, “they are obsessed with surface, continually frustrating our desire to find deep meaning or consistency in their act.” While it is not technically required of any band or musical persona to possess a social or political agenda, a musical entity such as Die Antwoord that claims so starkly to be a participant in a revolutionary subculture must. As stated previously, demonstrating a reason for revolt and an agenda to be addressed in the art that it creates is a requirement for one attempting to claim membership to a subculture. If Die Antwoord was not arguing to be the face of a pioneering South African movement, their failure to demonstrate an agenda would be irrelevant; however, their announcement of being the best example of Zef music makes this lack of clear social or political message a significant failure.

As a result of the group’s use of blackface, it can be further argued that its utilization of subcultural

tools is ultimately problematic, creating harm in its promotion of racist practices to the public rather than pushing a profound social agenda. In “Fatty Boom Boom,” Yo-landi Vi\$\$er is dressed in blackface when ‘Lady Gaga’ first encounters Die Antwoord, and the scene is revisited throughout the video. It is to this image that the Lady Gaga character exclaims, “Oh my God, look at their freaky fashion!” (Die Antwoord “Fatty Boom Boom”).



There are also clips of white Afrikaners dressed in blackface in the “I Fink U Freaky,” and “Banana Brain” videos. Yet, it is the fact that Die Antwoord’s use of blackface is not utilized in a way that conveys a clear, direct social or political message that makes it horribly, completely problematic. In comparison, members of the punk movement often utilized the Swastika symbol on their clothing, but for a highly specific reason: to emphasize that the Swastika was just a symbol, and without its context of hate and evil, it is devoid of significance. As Hebdige claims:

“The signifier (swastika) had been willfully detached from the concept (Nazism) it conventionally signified, and although it had been repositioned (as ‘Berlin’) within an alternative subcultural context, its primary value and appeal derived precisely from its lack of meaning: from its potential for deceit” (1265).

Die Antwoord makes no attempt at using blackface to create social commentary—instead, it appears that it uses it simply because it will inevitably astound and shock viewers; the group is therefore promoting racist practices simply for the sake of entertainment, a practice that by now should have been buried deep in the past.

Klopper notes that “in South Africa, Die Antwoord has also repeatedly been accused of being ‘basically blackface,’ because of its appropriation of the distinctive gangster style rap of the ‘Coloured’ musicians of mixed-race origins who live in poverty-stricken communities on the Cape Flats, close to the heartland of tourist-friendly Cape Town.” Ninja’s explanation for this, while superficially logical, remains flawed:

“We like to absorb all the different elements of South Africa that we find interesting and attractive and unique. We’re like sponges. There’s things about the Xhosa culture that we love, and we love things about the Afrikaans culture; that’s very amusing and interesting to us. And then there’s the colored culture, which is a whole other thing. The PC-version people try and promote this image of South Africa as a rainbow nation and make it all like pretty and stuff. But it’s actually like this fokked-up, kind of broken fruit salad. ‘Cause all those things don’t mix that well together in the real world. But for us it does mix. That’s why we say it’s, like, ‘fokked into one person.’ ‘Cause that’s how we feel on a certain level. Like we absorb all these things, but they’re not harmoniously flowing together through the air in this pretty rainbow picture.” (Mechanic).

Thus, taking Klopper’s argument a step further, I conclude that Die Antwoord’s use of blackface and claim that its mixing of all types of South African culture into Zef appropriates and muddies ‘subculture’ in a destructive way, and in many ways white-washes all South African cultures as it brings them under the white Afrikaner umbrella from which Zef originates. In the band’s success, it sets forth the example that white-washing music and frivolously using racist symbols are acceptable practices in the music industry, and ones to be admired as they real in popularity for the artist. Considering Hebdige’s claim of “distinction between originals and hangers-on,” that “is always a significant one in subculture,” it can be argued that Die Antwoord, instead of being the face of Zef subculture, is a mere ‘hanger-on’ to the movement that never truly delves into Zef’s subcultural significance (1266). In the song “Happy Go Sucky Fucky,” Ƴo-landi screams, “Fuck your rules, fuck fuck your rules!” While this embodies “the idea of style as a form of refusal,” it remains unclear to what Die Antwoord is refusing, and why it is refusing it; the entire persona of Die Antwoord—the clothes, the bizarre and eccentric interpretations of sexuality, the cinematography in its videos all appear devoid of subcultural meaning.

As Hebdige concludes, a subculture must identify “the status and meaning of revolt, the idea of style as a form of Refusal, [and] the elevation of crime into art” (1258). Thus, in order to be deemed a subculture, Die Antwoord must do all three. While Die Antwoord has demonstrated its ability to utilize “the idea of style as a form of Refusal,” in its rebellious lyrics and dismissal of authority in favor of sexual deviance in many of its music videos, as well as an “elevation of crime into art” with its many displays of graffiti, and its use of violence in “Fatty Boom Boom,” Die Antwoord fails to demonstrate subcultural meaning in its revolt (1258). The band does not seek to promote a particular sociopolitical message in its work, or to gather its fan base around one clear, common theme. While Die Antwoord has developed a clear fashion style and a cohesive aesthetic for its music videos, its inclusion of marketable products in its media, such as Dr. Dre Beats headphones and the many Pokémon paraphernalia placed within its videos consequently conveys a desire on the part of the group to sell products rather than a goal to inspire its audiences. In combination with its apolitical use of blackface and appropriation of the music and culture of many marginalized groups in South Africa, Die Antwoord has ultimately failed to fulfill Hebdige’s definition of subculture.

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The Histories of Todd Haynes's *Carol*

– Camille E.B. Boechler

Abstract:

These three essays examine three distinct histories of *Carol* (2015), directed by Todd Haynes, which overlap each other: the production history, the critical/academic history, and the popular reception history. The purpose of this project was to develop a closer and more in-depth understanding of Haynes's film, not only of its content and form but also of the conversations that surround it. In researching what has already been written about the film, this project proposes to add meaningful insight and rhetorical analysis of the film as well as the mainstream critical discussion it has garnered. The first two sections written on *Carol*'s production and critical/academic histories are brief, although that is not to say that the histories themselves are not deeply complex and lucrative.

Rather, the focus of this project is shifted toward an examination of the popular reception of the film. This larger section takes a close look at popular reception for *Carol* and identifies trends in reviews that, despite being favorable, do little justice for the film and also carry homophobic undertones. Mainstream discussion of *Carol* has so far offered little generative commentary on the film, instead often attempting to universalize the film and thereby erasing its important representation of Queer women. Discussion of the film also has a tendency to take an apophatic tone by defining *Carol* by what it is not, rather than what it actually is. In completing this project, I hope that it may shed light on the indiscretions in conversations about *Carol* and steer discussion toward a richer and more nuanced way of digesting the film's many triumphs and complexities.

Biography:

Camille E.B. Boechler is a recent graduate of Louisiana State University, where they earned their Bachelor's in Film and Media Arts. While at LSU, Camille completed rigorous course work related to film theory/criticism. Their primary research interest is Queer theory, which led Camille to complete an independent study with Assistant Professor Phillip Maciak centered around Queer film. For the final assignment, Camille was to research three distinct histories of a chosen film: the production history, the critical history, and the popular reception history. Camille was drawn to Todd Haynes's *Carol* (2015) and thus selected it for their three essays.

The Histories of Todd Haynes's *Carol*

Production History

Carol's production history is perhaps as complicated as the film itself. Adapted to screenplay from Patricia Highsmith's 1952 novel *The Price of Salt* by Phyllis Nagy in 1997, *Carol* remained in production for another eight years until it was finally released by The Weinstein Company in 2015. Beginning in 1996 as the endeavor of executive producer Dorothy Berwin, *Carol* saw multiple revisions in its screenplay, changes between its producers and directors, as well as several stalls and halts along the way before the project fully came into fruition.

In an article for *The Hollywood Reporter*, Seth Abramovitch discusses the entire history of *Carol* from its original source text to the film's wrap in a detailed and thorough timeline of the film's production. Abramovitch touches on many of the complications in the film's development and production, such as the lack of interest and funding from Hollywood when it came to a mainstream lesbian movie. Also included in his article are quotes from the cast and crew on the production of *Carol* and on the film itself as a whole. One of the quotes referenced in the article is a statement made by actress Cate Blanchett, who played Carol Aird, a wealthy New Jersey socialite: "the challenge with *Carol* is that we're viewing this same-sex relationship through the prism of a 2015 film," touching on a tendency for contemporary viewers of the film to label *Carol* as a universal love story because of the progression of Queer acceptance since the film's time period of the 1950s.

Carol's development and production did not begin to fully pick up momentum until 2011 when Berwin's rights of *The Price of Salt* lapsed, giving producer Elizabeth Karlsen the chance to obtain the rights. Under Karlsen's production, Nagy was brought back on to the project, despite Nagy's initial rejection out of fear that the project would never gain traction. By early 2012, Blanchett was not only cast in a lead acting role, but she also served as one of the producers through her own production company, Dirty Films Ltd. Though Blanchett's enthusiastic involvement was one of the more helpful selling points of the project, there were still difficulties in securing a director for the film. By 2013, Todd Haynes (who had previously heard about *Carol* in passing) had an opening in his schedule, prompting his recruitment to the project. Shortly following the crucial hire of Haynes was Rooney Mara in the other lead acting role of Therese Belivet, a vaguely dissatisfied shop-girl with larger ambitions of becoming a photographer. Upon hearing of Haynes's involvement, Mara readily accepted the part, despite having rejected it when initially offered the role earlier.

Once *Carol* had finally gotten through its lengthy development period, preproduction began in early 2014. Miriam Bale, for *Indiewire*, interviewed Haynes on the sources from which he pulled his inspiration for both *Carol*'s narrative structure and its visuals and aesthetics. Ever the meticulous and careful filmmaker, Haynes kept an image book on hand to compile various influences for *Carol*'s signature visual style. Haynes collaborated with cinematographer Ed Lachman in order to create the film's trademark "soft, muted look," working with a "soiled color palette," and pulling inspiration from women photojournalists from *Carol*'s time period, such as Ruth Orkin, Esther Bubley, Helen Levitt, and Vivian Maier. Lachman also shot on 16mm film, stating that the "grain created a certain emotional quality."

Another primary influence for Haynes while he directed *Carol* was the abstract photography of Saul Leiter (whose work was so important, in fact, that Somerset House featured a display of Leiter's photography alongside stills from *Carol*), which Haynes cites as integral to developing *Carol*'s stunning cinematography. Typically capturing subjects behind, through, or reflected by varying surfaces, Leiter's work is known for its motif of mediation. Haynes discusses the ways he thought Leiter's work appropriately fit the atmosphere of *Carol*, as characters Therese and Carol are frequently seen through varying layers of mediation, which places an emotional lens on the story.

In yet another impressive feat in *Carol*'s production, the film was completed in a thirty-four-day shoot entirely in and around Cincinnati (which Haynes notes has "striking architectural similarities to mid-century Manhattan, right down to its signage") with a modest budget just under \$12 million. Despite this and several other triumphs, *Carol*'s long and complicated production history still demonstrates many of the contemporary issues in Hollywood. Since its inception, *Carol* has undeniably been carried by its lesbian involvement, from initial producer Berwin to screenwriter Nagy. However, if it were not for male director Haynes's involvement (who actually was not even familiar with the legacy of *The Price of Salt* prior to taking on the project), it is unclear if *Carol* would have been completed, much less to have gone on to achieve the critical acclaim that it has. Though Haynes mentions that for every film of his, he has had to "struggle [it] into being," *Carol*'s production is exceptional in the incredible amount of roadblocks it faced, which prompts questions concerning Hollywood's interests and priorities.

Critical/Academic History

Having only just premiered two years ago at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival (and even later for mainstream audiences in late November of 2015), *Carol* still does not have many academic and critical texts written about it. With the exception of Patricia White's essay "Sketchy Lesbians: *Carol* as History and Fantasy," the closest texts surrounding *Carol* are the multitude of scholarly writings on director Todd Haynes's filmogra-

phy in general. Coming from a subsection of Brown University's English department called Semiotics (an appropriately vague label given the subject's fluid and often highly subjective nature), Haynes has a reputation for his intellectually dense films that prompt a thorough archive of academic texts. Because of the lack of similar texts written about *Carol* thus far, it is useful to examine the various essays written on Haynes's other works. In addition to illuminating *Carol*'s current status as a critical text, this collection of scholarship can also be used to identify patterns in the academic writing surrounding Haynes, which can then be used to predict a future for *Carol*'s forthcoming critical legacy.

In "Pathos and Pathology: The Cinema of Todd Haynes," Mary Anne Doane discusses Haynes's treatment of pathology, a theme that is investigated in many of the other critical texts on Haynes, although it is approached differently by everyone. Doane identifies Haynes's affinity for melodrama, irony, and subversion, which are also commonly cited in other surrounding texts as modes through which Haynes manifests the theme of pathology central in his works. In this essay, Doane argues that Haynes frames pathos and pathology together in order to discuss and navigate marginality, which for Haynes is always either in the form of "the woman... or the queer" (17). While *Carol* is notably subtle and offers little in the way of melodrama, Therese and Carol encounter marginalization throughout the film as they are faced with Harge's (Carol's jilted husband) rage, the private investigator hired to expose Carol, and Harge's attempted implementation of a "morality clause" against Carol in the custody battle for their daughter Rindy. While a "morality clause" suggests a discretion more in the ethics of Carol's character than in her psychology, it still carries implications of Carol's perceived pathology via her homosexuality.

Marcia Landy similarly focuses on the subversive body politics of Haynes's films in her essay "The Dream of Gesture: The Body of/in Todd Haynes's Films," which details the roles that the "young and adult body, the cinematic body, and the body politic" play in his films. In a thorough account of Haynes's filmography (as of 2003, when the essay was published), Landy examines how each of his films' treatments of the body "destabilize normative responses to the world that conventional forms of cinematic representation produce." Haynes's early short from 1988, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* sets the precedent for his fascination of and relationship with the body in his later films. *Superstar* is frequently given large amounts of critical attention due to Haynes's experimental use of Barbie dolls and sets for the film's characters and locations. Landy argues that Haynes's depiction of Karen's illness in *Superstar* becomes a challenge for viewers, not just in the physical implications of it, but also in the way it fundamentally upsets and "affront[s] the aspiring normality of the middle-class Barbie world" (125). Landy summarizes *Superstar*'s impact on the remainder of Haynes's filmography:

Superstar indeed reveals symptoms and offers clues to a body in crisis, but the film's investigation

involves connecting the crisis of Karen Carpenter's illness to larger social, political, and cultural crises through the insistent insertions of catastrophic images that invite a rethinking of reductive pseudoscientific conceptions of health and illness based on a different consideration of symptoms and clues. In its insistent probing and complicating forms of representation of the body as derived through media representation, *Superstar* provides a map to travel through Haynes's later films, which are also critical of historical and scientific knowledge that passes via media as the common sense of the time. (126)

While *Carol* is less experimental, it too has the potential to offer a "destabilization" of "normative responses" to convention and form. Although there have been many great strides in the Queer rights movement, the representation of Queer love and desire is still, in many ways, political and controversial. The radical nature of Therese and Carol's relationship is augmented further by the time period the film is set in, pre-Stonewall riots and before Queer visibility was anywhere near the levels it is today.

In an equally thorough interpretation of Haynes's filmic techniques, "Coming Around Again: The Queer Momentum of *Far From Heaven*," Dana Luciano explores Haynes's development of what she identifies as "queer time" in his 2002 film *Far From Heaven*, once again focusing on the ways in which Haynes subversively works against cinematic conventions. In Luciano's account of Haynes's filmography, the "queer slant" Haynes offers to history (cinematic history, in particular) repositions contemporary viewers, who are likely accustomed to a culture in which Queer identity is increasingly visible and accepted, back into a period of time in which heteronormativity was even more pervasive than it is today. Queer time is also embedded with the "homoerotic possibility" of (re)reading texts and extracting potential narratives that "rewrite or look away from the hetero happy ending" (251). *Carol*, both in its 1950s setting and in Haynes's narrative and stylistic choices is an example of Queer time in Haynes's cinema; Haynes mentions one of the potentialities present in *Carol* in an interview where he comments on Therese's encounter with vintage record store lesbians, which suggests a different trajectory that Therese's story could have taken but did not (Bale).

Central to these works is the assertion that by "exploring the misappropriation of images of illness and health, normality and pathology," Haynes "diagnose[s] the crisis of contemporary society" (Landy, 123). However, White's "Sketchy Lesbians" offers a drastically different take on Haynes's filmmaking. Whereas other critical writings on Haynes's films argue and discuss the ways he works against cinematic and social conventions, White asserts that nothing about *Carol* is fundamentally political. White addresses a pattern in the film's popular reception in which *Carol* is described as a universal film that is, at its core, about love (as opposed to being a more specified portrait of same-sex desire). Although most reviewers cite this universal

quality of *Carol* as one of its many triumphs, White argues that this actually limits the possibilities of the film's narratives. White laments the "movie that might have been," claiming that *Carol*'s focus on middle- to upper-class white women purposefully casts a shadow on the reality of what the lesbian scene in early 1950s New York would have been.

Given *Carol*'s immense complexities and the vast archive of critical texts about Haynes's other films, it is doubtful that *Carol* will fail to inspire anything short of a plethora of academic writing. It will be interesting to follow *Carol*'s critical reception, especially in the ways that it will compare and contrast with previous scholarly writings on Haynes's filmography. It is possible that *Carol* will prompt a shift in the rhetoric surrounding Haynes's work, potentially exploring the ways that, despite his intentions, Haynes is also guilty of perpetuating limiting and oppressive cultural traditions.

Popular Reception History

Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* has over time garnered a highly devoted cult following amongst lesbian demographics as well as cultivating a complicated history. *The Price of Salt* is a novel that stands out in stark contrast against other works by Highsmith that have since been adapted to film (*Strangers on a Train* and the *Ripley* series being two notable examples). Similarly, *Carol* is, in many ways, not a typical release from Haynes. *Carol* stands out aside other films by Haynes because even underneath all of its complexities and nuance, its overall plot is simple: *Carol* is, at its core, a story about love. Though its primary focus is centered around the romantic connection between two people, *Carol* is at once concerned with so much more. *Carol* is not just a love story, but a specific love story – a lesbian love story.

Because of the film's long pre-production period, *Carol* was highly anticipated for years before its release. It was met with a largely positive response from mainstream and critical audiences alike after its premiere in May 2015 at the Cannes Film Festival and then again shortly after its (extremely limited) release in theaters in the United States around the end of 2015. Applauded for both its technical expertise and its incredibly touching storyline, *Carol* received several award nominations and went on to win many of them. It came as a surprise to many of the film's fans when it was not a candidate in the Best Picture category in the 2016 Academy Awards. Perhaps even more perplexing was the Academy's choice to not nominate Mara as a contested Best Actress, even though Blanchett was nominated for her equally leading role in *Carol*.

Overall, the lack of racial diversity in the Academy Awards nominations over the years has been met with dissent by many, prompting the viral #OscarsSoWhite movement (a fault of which, admittedly, *Carol* is also guilty). The controversy surrounding *Carol*'s nominations is yet another aspect of the larger contempo-

rary issues in Hollywood. In the case of *Carol*, the Academy's distinction between Blanchett for Best Actress and Mara for Best Actress in a Supporting Role is only one of several examples of Hollywood's undeniable problems with misogyny, homophobia, and even more specifically lesbophobia.

The troubling aspects of *Carol*'s popular reception do not just begin and end with the Academy Awards, however. While misogyny and homophobia are perhaps most clearly visible in the example of the Academy Awards, the rhetoric in *Carol*'s popular reception is arguably not much more progressive, despite the film's widely positive reviews. Several reviews of *Carol* describe the film as universal, which is to say, it ultimately does not matter that the film's protagonists are Queer women who are romantically involved because *Carol* actually speaks to everyone's experiences of love and relationships, which are not limited to Queer people.

Although certainly an important aspect of the film, the relentless focus on *Carol*'s universality raises questions about the people writing these reviews: is it more comfortable to view *Carol* as universal because it is just too isolating for mainstream heterosexual audiences if the focus is on Therese and Carol's Queerness? Is the particular specificity of these women's identities still somehow too jarring in post-marriage equality America that it cannot be critically discussed despite being integral to the film?

Many of *Carol*'s reviews also demonstrate a tendency that critics have to define *Carol* by what is *not*, rather than by what it *is*: *Carol* is not a traditional "boy-meets-girl" love story, it is not an erotic portrait of lesbianism, it is not a political film... With an overwhelming archive of lesbian films that are either too bad to be taken seriously or are beautifully crafted masterpieces that inevitably end tragically, it is not surprising that people are noting that *Carol* is a rare exception. While it is certainly gratifying to discuss the ways that *Carol* departs from the unfortunate tradition of lesbian films, centering all criticism around on the ways that *Carol* is specifically not a bad lesbian movie dismisses the many ways that *Carol* is, on its own, a beautiful and captivating portrait of a lesbian relationship in 1950s America. With a misguided focus on the film's universality and subversions from stereotypical lesbian-related media, the clumsy treatment of *Carol*'s complexities in its popular reception demonstrates critics' fundamental inability to critically assess the film and its larger cultural context in a constructive way that does the film justice as well as provide insightful social commentary.

Since *Carol* made its way into mainstream public attention, it has spurred comparisons to Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), another film featuring a Queer love story that was met with large amounts of critical praise. Several speculations arose regarding whether *Carol* would leave a legacy as the "lesbian *Brokeback*." In a way, *Carol* is indeed similar to *Brokeback Mountain*, at least in its popular reception: both films are frequently discussed as being more about love itself than their characters' sexualities. Zach Gayne,

interviewing Haynes for Twitch Film, likened the two films, stating that though tension and conflict surrounding characters' Queerness "has driven many a great film... the triumph of *Carol* has less to do with the 'gay dilemma' than the problem of good old-fashioned love..." Gayne then shifts his attention away from *Brokeback Mountain*, going on next to compare *Carol* to David Lean's 1945 film *Brief Encounter* (a movie Haynes cites as providing his inspiration to bookend *Carol* with an opening sequence that is also at the end of the film): "Much like Lean's film ceases to age on account of its central truth, *Carol* deserves to stand the test of time."

Gayne and Haynes also discuss the impact that *Carol*'s source text, Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt*, had on Haynes when he read it in preparation for directing the film adaptation. The two talk about some of the differences the film's screenplay had with the original novel, one of the biggest differences being the characterization of Carol. Gayne observes that Carol is a "softer" character in the movie than she is in the book and that she "wounds [Therese] throughout the entire story." The two also discuss the role that gender and sexuality plays in the story, Gayne claiming that "far more relevant than the characters' sexual orientation is the age gap." Though most other people's discussions of *Carol* also center around beliefs that more important to the film is the subject of love, and that it does not necessarily matter that the main characters are two Queer women, Gayne is even more adamant on this point. Gayne may have good intentions in directly attributing *Carol*'s impact to the film's universality, but he fails to consider the many other reasons that *Carol* is an exemplary film.

David Sims, writing for *The Atlantic*, defends *Carol* in yet another one of the film's many favorable reviews. Sims makes a case against some of the dissenting reviews the film received for being too "cold" or "chilly," arguing that *Carol* is actually a film that is extremely invested in depicting the depth of the characters' feelings, the initial repressions and the eventual emergence of which make the film so powerful. In his emotional appeal, Sims also takes note of *Carol*'s universal treatment of love, claiming that "Therese's devastation when [her] relationship [with Carol] falls apart should be painfully familiar to anyone who's ever experienced heartbreak." Sims, however, makes an important distinction from Gayne's central claim, which is that "Haynes's genius is in the ways he taps into universal anxieties about love and relationships without ever letting go of the sense of imprisonment that came from being gay in the 1950s." Gayne's discussion of *Carol*'s universality, intentional or not, dismisses the importance of the film's Queer representation, in a way that Sims does not by acknowledging that Therese and Carol's Queer identities are still important.

However, Sims's discussion is still centered around an objectifying heterosexual male gaze despite any attempts to reject it. Of particular interest to Sims are the interactions and conversations between Therese and Carol throughout the film. He mentions that the film has many instances where the two wom-

en have fleeting touches and glances, a lot of their affection showing through the subtle nuances in their pleasant small talk. Sims points out that Therese and Carol never “remotely stoop to the level of innuendo,” which is a bit of an unnecessary detail to include – after all, why bring this up if it is not something brought up by the film itself? Sims writes this to make the argument that one of the reasons *Carol* is good is because it does not produce an image of a lesbian relationship as an erotic spectacle. Although it is true (and important) that *Carol* does not create an objectifying view of Queer women, Sims’s blunt attention to the fact that *Carol* is not “that kind of film” still suggests that, because it is a film about Queer women, it lends itself to becoming another exploitative lesbian movie. This is yet another way of erasing and belittling Queer women’s experiences by subjugating it to a male heterosexual gaze.

Rather unsurprisingly, much of *Carol*’s cast and crew also frequently talk about *Carol* in a casually homophobic manner. In an interview conducted at the Cannes film festival, Mara, Haynes, and Blanchett discuss the film’s reception at the festival, as well as the chemistry between Mara and Blanchett. The actresses make tongue-in-cheek remarks that Haynes needs to sit between them and that Blanchett needs to be “all covered up.” Their jokes are indicative of a common trend of casual lesbophobia in which straight women pretend to be sexual and/or romantic partners of each other for humorous purposes. But what exactly is the joke here – an intimate relationship between two women? Queer women’s relationships with each other are already too frequently dismissed and rarely taken seriously and although Mara and Blanchett’s intentions likely were not to discount the experience of Queer women, their remarks still have the same implications.

Mara also comments on *Carol*’s sex scenes, claiming that she did not think that gender made much of impact because, from an actor’s perspective, any love scene (regardless of gender) is always different just because different people are involved. Mara noted this in a tone that suggests she felt that the sex scenes were not worth discussing, but Blanchett provides a slightly more complicated point of view:

We can [still] talk about [the sex scenes]. Todd was very clear what the function [of the scene] was and what was going to be shot. You know, I think it’s [an issue] when you’re in those situations where you think “who’s this for? How is this advancing the story?” But people focus on that stuff, you know, and I don’t think they’d focus on it if I were a man or if Rooney were a man. It was just another scene, but you know, you want to make sure it’s done in a way that is in no way gratuitous – that it’s beautiful and it’s erotic and it’s conflated – the things you want it to convey.

Blanchett and Mara both frame their statements around the universality of the scene (“we’re all just humans rubbing up on each other,” says Mara), but reach different conclusions. Blanchett even mentions later in the interview that she “think[s] [*Carol*] is simultaneously an outsider film and an insider film.” Here, Blanchett acknowledges a frustration (perhaps similar to Mara’s) with invasive questions about the sex scenes in

convey.

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Carol is in many ways a film that is about the universal experience of being in love. It is not incorrect to identify this when writing about the film, as it is one of the film’s standout qualities. However, the ways in which *Carol*’s universality is discussed are worth considering in any readings of the film. B. Ruby Rich identifies “two ways to dismiss a gay film” in her essay “New Queer Cinema”: the first is to claim a film is “just a gay film” and the second is to claim a film is “a great film that just happens to be gay.” Harmful ways that *Carol*’s universality is discussed align with Rich’s second form of dismissal. Ideally, issues such as sexuality would not necessitate specific attention drawn to them, as no single expression of sexuality should be viewed as either “correct” or “incorrect.” However, this philosophy is not actually progressive within the current political environment where, despite having achieved marriage equality, Queer people are still faced with multiple challenges, including (but not limited to) ongoing violence against the community, discriminatory housing practices, and lack of job security. When basic human rights are still a struggle for a certain class of people to achieve, it is irresponsible to dismiss and erase their identities and lived realities, even if under the guise of being a proponent for “equality.”

A second trend in the popular reception of *Carol* is a tendency to define the film in negative terms, to explain what the film is *not* doing, the intention being to somehow shed light on what the film *is* doing. In a rather rough history of lesbian-related film and popular media, traditionally there are two incarnations a lesbian story can take: low-grade erotica or a tragic cinematic masterpiece that, in the end, glorifies lesbian suffering. One of the contributing factors to all of the hype around *Carol* is that it noticeably exists outside of this binary. It is not technically incorrect to claim that *Carol* is not a film that “titillate[s], scandalize[s], or shock[s],” as Abramovitch notes in his thorough account of *Carol*’s production timeline. Likewise, it is also true, as Sims notes, that *Carol* is “ultimately a story that dares to hope when the formula of a period gay romance might demand tragedy.” *Carol*’s existence as outside of this paradigm is not unimportant. However, as is the case when discussing the film’s universality, the way *Carol*’s subversion is discussed in popular reception of *Carol* indicates a clumsy and reductive take on the film itself.

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As previously mentioned, it is not surprising that much of *Carol*'s reception would focus on the ways that it is not like most lesbian films. Even the film itself has a complicated relationship with the different paths the narrative could pursue. In arguably one of the most crucial (and poignant) moments of the film, Therese meets the gaze of two women (who are coded as lesbians through their style of dress and their demeanor) from across a record store. This brief encounter introduces the possibility for the story to take an alternative route – one that involves a focus on Therese's awakening sexuality coinciding with the discovery of a readymade community in 1950s lesbian New York. The story that unfolds instead is about Therese and Carol's intense romantic bond. Haynes notes the importance of this scene and Therese's distancing from the record store lesbians in the Bale interview:

Whoever those women are who Therese looks at in the record store... make her in some sense feel a kind of aversion, [leading to] an absolute moment of wanting to distinguish herself from that kind of representation of difference. What you see is that those women and their rejection of traditional feminine garb and manners and self-presentation, that's a different story. And that takes place in a different world than *Carol*, so you're learning about women who are still very much codified by the society.

The distinction Haynes makes here shows that on top of not being an erotic thriller nor a tragic masterpiece, *Carol* is also not intended to be a political film motivated by any central pedagogy (although it is important to note that this does not necessarily mean that insightful political commentary cannot still be extracted from the film).

Despite the film's affliction to subvert against tired lesbian film tropes, however, centering criticism around *Carol* in an apophatic manner is ultimately limiting not just to the film's several cinematic triumphs, but to mainstream audiences as well. Limiting rhetoric surrounding the film in this way sets a precedent for *Carol* (as well as other Queer films) to be viewed through a restrictive lens in which stories about Queer people can only exist in opposition to heteronormativity. Framing Queer people's marginalization in this way only further enforces the dominant hegemonic views on gender and sex because it establishes a single default from which one can either deviate or follow, rather than the vast multiplicity of a fluid spectrum. Marking Queerness only through the ways in which it departs from heteronormativity denies Queer people agency to independently identify themselves: we already know what *Carol* is *not*, but what about what this film actually *is*?

Carol is a complex film and it can be difficult to pinpoint much of what it is doing. Many of *Carol*'s triumphs are indeed because of how universal its story about the deep love between two people is, but it is also important that those two people are specifically women. It is also a long-due film about Queer women that does not end in tragedy, but at the same time *Carol* is so much more than a (somewhat) happy lesbian film to which all audiences can relate regardless of sexuality – it is an honest and gentle portrait of lesbian women during a time in the United States when it was even less acceptable to be Queer.

Engaging even beyond its narrative, *Carol* is provocative and elegant with extraordinarily masterful cinematography and beautiful sets, perfectly matched by its touchingly emotional musical score. Limiting the way that *Carol* is read and interpreted ignores and dismisses many aspects of the film that are actually worth discussing.

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