

Real intimacy

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [March 16, 2016](#) issue



HUMAN FRAGILITY: A careful adjustment is made to Michael and Lisa, the puppets in Charlie Kaufman's stop-motion animation feature *Anomalisa*. © 2015 Paramount Pictures. All rights reserved.

Three of the films nominated for an Oscar—*Anomalisa*, *45 Years*, and *Carol*—are poignant meditations on intimacy and a person's agency in falling and staying in love. All three exhibit a breathtaking emotional restraint that makes them unusual in Hollywood.

Anomalisa is a stop-action animation film that uses doll-sized puppets; the film is shot frame by frame by repositioning the puppets. The puppets are just unreal enough to illuminate something very real about human embodiment. The awkward sex scene between two puppets, for example, made me squirm with recognition. Oh God, I thought, that's what two human bodies must look like engaged in that kind of sex. The scene both moved me and grossed me out—not a bad antidote to glossy Hollywood sex. Director Charlie Kaufman rightly points out that this type of animation “communicates fragility and humanity and brokenness.”

Anomalisa is about the longing to connect to another human being and the things that stand in the way. Michael (voiced by David Thewlis) is seeking a perfect woman who will save him from the soul-crushing sameness of his life. But when he meets Lisa (voiced by Jennifer Jason Leigh), the “anomaly” of the title, Michael cannot see her for who she is and is too selfish to establish a connection even though he craves it. The film is a meditation on the difficulty of relating to another person and letting that person into one's life.

When we first meet Kate and Geoff Mercer (Charlotte Rampling and Tom Courtenay) in *45 Years*, they are preparing to celebrate 45 years of marriage. Their intimacy is conveyed through small gestures and daily habits. There are also hints, through oblique comments and snappy retorts, of the grievances of a long marriage—he can be a blowhard; she can be passive-aggressive. But they move in the rhythm of daily life like a conjoined creature, one made out of two.

But when an event from Geoff's past resurfaces, Geoff and Kate are forced to remember that they are different beings. Kate suddenly sees her husband as a person with a past instead of what had seemed like an eternal present. The pain of this revelation for her is not in learning something that she did not know, but in wondering if it still matters.

I can't remember a movie that took lifelong marriage as its subject without adding the threat of immanent death; *45 Years* does this, and celebrates the achievement of fidelity without taking it for granted.

Carol, an adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's novel *The Price of Salt*, is about the unlikely love affair between Therese (Rooney Mara) and Carol (Cate Blanchett).

With a minimum number of words and gestures, Mara conveys the complex inner life of Therese, a young woman in 1950s New York who's trying to understand what it means to fall in love. When she's swept up in an unexpected romance, Therese "goes along."

"Going along," it turns out, is a character fault. She almost marries a boyfriend prematurely, does not rebuff a kiss from another suitor, and when she meets Carol, she automatically says yes to every invitation Carol offers. Her coming-of-age involves more than realizing her attraction to Carol: Therese realizes that she has a voice in who and how she loves.

The story has some pulp: nasty divorce proceedings, wired hotel rooms, and the danger of same-sex intimacy in the era before the 1969 Stonewall riots. But it rises above melodrama, thanks to Therese's realization that although love is not always a conscious choice, it requires making a choice.

This might be the theme of all three films. Erotic love is a force that can overtake us and remake us. But to survive in its wake, we must know ourselves well enough to will the good, even when it's hard to know what that good is.

All three of these films dig deeply into the ways we inhibit, sustain, or create intimacy, and they do so with an emotional subtlety that's unusual in Hollywood romances. Their restraint is our freedom: we are left wide open to feel the perils and pleasures these characters explore.