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Anna Pomahac April 10, 2024

Hidden in Plain Sight: The Queer Lens in Lesbian Period Dramas

by

Anna Pomahac

Kim Loudermilk

Co-Advisor

Julia Tulke
Co-Advisor

Institute for the Liberal Arts

Kim Loudermilk

Co-Advisor

Julia Tulke

Co-Advisor

Tanine Allison

Committee Member

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Abstract

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At the height of the second feminist wave movement, Laura Mulvey developed the concept of the male gaze that revealed the sexist and objectifying ways of looking in traditional Hollywood cinema. While strides in academia and popular culture empowered women with a female gaze, research on looking relations for queer individuals remains minimal. Given my background in filmmaking, I became interested in analyzing queer looking relations from a film analytical perspective using a "lens," as opposed to a philosophical standpoint using a "gaze," as Mulvey did. This thesis explores the function and importance of the queer lens as a critical tool for analyzing filmmaking techniques that contribute to the tensions and desires between queer protagonists in queer romance films. Specifically, it focuses on the manifestations of these tensions and desires in aspects such as looks, point-of-view shots, medium or closer shot framing, and pacing. Through the examination of three lesbian period dramas, *Carol* (Haynes 2015), *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma 2019), and *Ammonite* (Lee 2020), this study serves both as a case study for the application of the queer lens and an exploration of the filmmaking techniques that depict queer love stories set in traditional, heteronormative, and patriarchal settings. This is particularly intriguing given the increased acceptance of queerness in contemporary society. Drawing on theories of looking from scholars like bell hooks and Michel Foucault, the queer lens provides a framework that empowers queer characters by offering them agency and facilitating the deconstruction of power relations. Furthermore, it offers valuable insights into recognizing queer tension and desire within the constraints of oppressive time periods depicted in period dramas, highlighting the versatility and significance of the queer lens in film analysis.

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Table of Contents

Table and Figure

Introduction

"Twelve lines of dialogue," "two and a half hours of runtime," "world's saddest flirting," and most interestingly, "Academy Award-winning glance choreography."[1] Those are the similarities SNL pointed out between *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma 2019) and *Ammonite* (Lee 2020) in their fictitious, comical trailer called "Lesbian Period Drama." In this skit, SNL highlights an apparent trend in queer filmmaking – "You get one a year, make the most of it"[2] – that restricts lesbian narratives to settings in the 18th century. Though most of their points are amusing to consider – as a majority of the comments on the video expressed agreement with the similarities: "As a professional lesbian I can say: All of this is accurate;"[3] "The lesbianness was just so intensely on-point"[4] – the fact that the sketch writers noted the presence of "glance choreography" alludes to filmic gaze theory, prominently expressed by Laura Mulvey and bell hooks, among others. "Glance choreography," a term invented by SNL, most likely refers to the glances and gazes that the two lesbian protagonists exchange as a way to bud romance or indicate interest throughout the movies. As such, "glance choreography" begs a question of agency amidst repressive settings for queer women.

SNL's "glance choreography" has shown up in Norwegian scholar Ylva Jonsdatter Haagensen-Løkke's thesis on looking in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* as a segue to challenge Mulvey's male gaze theory and the fundamental rules of looking in mainstream, heteronormative cinema.[5] Though there are foundational differences between "glance choreography" and the gaze

[1] Saturday Night Live, "Lesbian Period Drama," YouTube Video, 2:56, April 11, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgaLlP0xmqE.
[2] SNL, "Lesbian Period Drama."
[3] jsquirrel9523, comment on "Lesbian Period Drama," YouTube Video, 2:56, April 11, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgaLlP0xmqE.
[4] suzylux, comment on "Lesbian Period Drama."
[5] Ylva Jonsdatter Haagensen-Løkke, "Regarde-moi" (BA thesis, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 2021), 4.

in film – despite Haagensen-Løkke practically equating the two concepts – the role of looking in cinema is to create tension between characters when explicit action or dialogue is not attainable. Given that queer individuals historically had to rely on building this tension to subtly express desire or interest in oppressive societies, such a discourse around looking in film has found a niche home in queer cinema.

Queer cinema has taken great steps outside of the fringe, reconnecting with mainstream popular culture, a shift in part enabled by the fragmentation of audiences amid the transition from the Hollywood studio to the streaming model. This shift was significant to queer cinema's departure from the margins, which progressed normalizing queer narratives within film discourse and widening societal acceptance and understanding of queer experiences.[6] As American film critic B. Ruby Rich notes, "We're not invisible anymore," "we" representing the queer individuals in mainstream cinema during the New Queer Cinema period in the 1990s, when American filmmaking saw an increase in queer narratives post-AIDS epidemic.[7] According to Rich, early avant-garde and some experimental indie films were inherently very queer spaces "hiding in plain sight for years until it was safe to come out" and existing as an alternative cinema that politically and aesthetically countered the dominant ideologies perpetuated by mainstream Hollywood cinema.[8] After the AIDS epidemic, queer narratives were deemed "safe to come out," as queer individuals rallied to be heard more than ever before, resulting in a growth in production of queer films.[9] From a history of invisibility, queer characters have been

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[6] On the relation between the streaming platform's business model and its diversity of representation, see Hannah Giorgis, "Not Enough Has Changed Since *Sanford and Sons*," *The Atlantic*, September 13, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/10/the-unwritten-rules-of-black-tv/619816/.
[7] B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 42.
[8] Rich, *New Queer Cinema*, 4.
[9] Some of these films, both narrative and documentary, include *Paris is Burning* (Livingston 1990), *Poison* (Haynes 1991), *Swoon* (Kalin 1992), *Go Fish* (Troche 1994), *Safe* (Haynes 1995), *The Delta* (Sachs 1996), *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (Maggenti 1995), *The Watermelon Woman* (Dunye 1996), and *All Over Me* (Sichel 1997), among others.

given a platform to portray a diverse variety of narratives, not all of which are particularly commendable.[10] This was particularly a significant advancement for lesbian cinema, given that historically the Motion Picture Production Code primarily focused its censorship efforts on male homosexuality, emphasizing the extreme impact of the code on shaping visibility and representation within the film industry. Though in the late 1990s and early 2000s "lesbianism was still a fillip for voyeuristic tastes," films were "eagerly adapted by image-starved lesbian viewers."[11] Therefore, during this time representation became a priority over production quality as queer narratives expanded from indie films to television, especially as entertainment businesses continued to look for new stories to tell. This is most evident with the 2004-2009 TV series *The L Word*, wherein series creator Ilene Chaiken's goal was for every lesbian watching to feel her life has been represented in some way via a narrative plentitude of lesbian representation.[12] The series lasted a respectable six seasons, though not without facing criticism, as series creators attempted to reach not just lesbian and gay but also straight audiences.[13] Feminist film scholar Julia Erhart would consider this step in queer film and media and the discourse around such topics a "testament to the positive growth of an area that, until recently, has been characterized largely by censorship and absence," for alongside the increase of queer

[10] In her book *New Queer Cinema,* B. Ruby Rich discusses that after the NQC period in American film history, filmmakers still had the tendency to cover up the realities of queer lives to "present a respectable image in public." Rich is a fan of lesbian and gay films that "go beyond identification, oppression, or coming-out stories to tap into larger issues or deeper emotions," a task that proves difficult for filmmakers of queer narrative dramas and romances due in part to corporate production needs. Rich, *New Queer Cinema*, 43, 42.
[11] Rich, *New Queer Cinema*, 5.
[12] *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) is another serial worth mentioning, as it follows the "lives, loves, ambitions, careers, and friendships of a group of gay men and women living on Liberty Avenue in contemporary Pittsburgh, PA." See Showtime Networks Inc.; Brown and Westbrook, "Love's Narrative Lost," 48. Academic journals that feature topics of queer theory in film and media studies include *Screen*, *Wide Angle*, and *Media International Australia*. *Camera Obscura*, *Cineaste*, *Jump Cut*, and *Continuum* also regularly showcase queer research On the importance of narrative plentitude as it pertains to lesbian representation, see Karen Tongson, "Narrative Plentitude in *The Ultimatum: Queer Love*," *Film Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (Spring 2024): 57-61, https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2024.77.3.57.
[13] Much of the criticism focused on a lack of diversity among cast and characters, especially in terms of race, class, and expressions of non-normative gender. See Brown and Westbrook, "Love's Narrative Lost," 48; 54.

representation came an increase of contributions from queer theorists to the field of film and media studies.[14]

In distinction to queer television, lesbian period dramas, the focus genre of this thesis, tend to offer more cinematic value, often characterized by the higher quality production and technology. Even though all visual media can be exhibited through a unified method of display, they still necessitate distinct approaches to production.[15] For example, on one hand, in narrative multi-camera TV productions like sitcoms, two of three or more cameras might simultaneously capture cross-angles of two *different* actors facing each other in a three-wall set with the potential to be cut "live" through a switcher.[16] On the other hand, in narrative multiple-camera cinema productions, two cameras might simultaneously get two different, parallel shots of the *same* actor on a four-walled set that may only be edited in post-production.[17] The four-walled set allows for more flexible camera movements and aesthetic footage, which entails the ability to emphasize looks and gazes to develop story plots. This narrative tool plays a special role in queer period drama filmmaking; for though the dialogue may outwardly contribute to driving plot development, the camera shots that focus on looks of desire and interest drive the "forbidden" romance, especially since the historical setting of period dramas does not offer a space to converse about queerness openly (hence the "twelve lines of dialogue" joke from SNL). Russian director Sergei Eisenstein, who is known for his skillful editing of cinematic montages to deliver certain psychological effects on viewers, often for political purposes, maintained that, "*Central* stimulus is attended always by a *whole complex* of secondary stimuli."[18] In queer cinema, when

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[14] Julia Erhart, "Laura Mulvey Meets Catherine Tramell Meets the She-Man: Counter-History, Reclamation, and Incongruity," in *A Companion to Film Theory*, ed. Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999), 165.
[15] Peter Kiwitt, "What is Cinema in a Digital Age?", *Journal of Film and Video* 64, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 5.
[16] Kiwitt, "What is Cinema in a Digital Age?", 5.
[17] Kiwitt, "What is Cinema in a Digital Age?", 5.
[18] Sergei Eisenstein, "The Filmic Fourth Dimension," in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1949), 66.

the central stimulus is dialogue, the secondary stimuli tend to present themselves in the form of looks, which allows for audience interpretation of its underlying meanings.

In the realm of looking in queer cinema, lesbian characters appear to have found their representation in film narratives to reside in oppressive settings of the 18th, 19th, and 20th century when the patriarchy maintained a much firmer grip on their lives than in the 21st century. Why might that be so? I argue this shift indicates that contemporary filmmakers are finally given the opportunity to reimagine a queer past through a *queer lens*. I define the queer lens as a tool for analysis of filmmaking that captures the looks that represent the underlying queer tension and desire amongst the queer protagonists and its subsequent impact on their ability to attain agency and deconstruct power relations in the heteronormative settings of romantic queer films.

While the "queer lens" is at times mentioned in contemporary academic and popular culture discourse, it remains far from an explicitly articulated concept of film theory.[19] In fact, one of its most elaborate treatments took place far from academia, on a Reddit post in 2023. Here, user DavinaCarter inquired, "What exactly is [the] queer lens?" A different Reddit user responded, "Queer lens/[POV] is, for me, easier to spot when it's not being utilized. [In] Western [examples], [it is] basically any form of medium that [has] an LGBTQ+ character but is written in a way that is safe/bland enough for heterosexual audiences but not representative of the community it's representing."[20] Another user added, "I recognize when a work was made 'through a queer lens' when I can tell the writer/director is familiarized with the experiences of

[19] Examples include Holden Gluckenberg's 2019 "Traumatic Experiences Through the Queer Lens," which focuses on trauma regarding LGBTQ identities, and Anthony El G.'s 2022 "No Cure: Illness through a Lebanese Arab Queer Lens," which focuses on the relationship between illness and queerness, including but not limited to topics of queer architecture, poetry, mental healthcare interactions, and children's literature; Another example is Thomas Allen Harris's 2019 "Close Up: The New York Scene: On Becoming Me: 1980s NYC Arts and Culture Through a Queer Lens," which explores the intersection of Black queer art and filmmaking in 1980s New York, and Queer the Lens organization that empowers LGBTQIA+ creatives in photography and video.

[20] DavinaCarter, "What exactly is queer lens?" *Reddit*, July 2023, https://www.reddit.com/r/ThaiBL/comments/14iw7fw/what_exactly_is_queer_lens/?rdt=41085.

queer people from the 'inside' and it doesn't feel like an 'outsider' (a heterosexual cisgender person that isn't that close to the community) [is] try[ing] to create characters or situations based solely on stereotypes."[21] These notions of misrepresenting via stereotypes and "covering up the realities" of queer lives to "present a respectable image" relate to a question B. Ruby Rich received from a straight filmmaker: "Why are the women in these awful lesbian movies completely unlike any lesbian I've ever known?"[22] Rich concluded at the time that filmmakers seem to struggle figuring out what queer plots will hit the marketplace and receive production funding. Sometimes major motion picture productions prioritize selling a story that popular culture can get behind at the expense of telling the truth about real queer experiences.[23] As the latter user noted, however, alongside avoiding misrepresentation, there must be an element of the queer lens that offers an "insider" perspective and is thereby authentic to the queer experience as it is able to represent the true complexities and emotions within real queer partnerships.[24]

In the same Reddit discussion, another user followed up with the following question: "I suppose you might also be referring to queer lens regarding the actual filming?" to which no direct answer was provided.[25] My conception of the queer lens aims to answer this very question, focusing on exactly what filmmaking aspects make the queer lens accessible to understanding queer tension and desires via looks, alongside achieving agency and deconstructing power relations amongst the protagonists. In this thesis, I identify and examine several facets that

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[21] kidd_kat, comment on DavinaCarter, "What exactly is queer lens?"
[22] Rich, *New Queer Cinema*, 43.
[23] Rich has noted that "Behind every 'life partner' granola couple, there are twenty kinds of dysfunctional pairs with detail that would make your hair curl" (*New Queer Cinema*, 44). However, production companies tend to lean towards more surface-level, acceptable plots like coming-out stories in attempts to put queer narratives into the spotlight.
[24] This element resonates with the trend of queer narratives often being written by queer screenwriters or directed by queer directors. I will elaborate on this more in a later section.
[25] Nyx-Star, comment on DavinaCarter, "What exactly is queer lens?"

contribute to the queer lens in film, as outlined by the table below. This list is not exhaustive; rather, it features facets that pertain to my analysis of lesbian period dramas.

Characterization	**Importance**
Looks or gazes	These are key for subtextual tension. Especially in period dramas, much of the romantic build up occurs without explicit dialogue about queerness in favor of looks, gazes, and prolonged eye contact.
Medium or closer shots	This cinematographic choice emphasizes intimacy via proximity. Desire is most often visualized best the closer the camera can get to the characters feeling it.
Point-of-view (POV) shots	Resonating with the capture of looks between characters, when we can see from the perspective of one of the protagonists, we are projected into their mind and see the others they desire through their eyes.
Pacing	The craft of editing dictates how much time we spend understanding and feeling with the characters. Fewer cuts between shots indicate slower pacing, which puts more attention to the present shot and present emotions. More cuts indicate faster pacing, which portray overthinking or a more frenzied state of mind.

Table 1. Facets of the Queer Lens.

My discussion of the queer lens sits within a broader discourse on the significance of film for society. German scholar Walter Benjamin commented on the social function of film as one that "furthers insight into the necessities governing our lives" by its use of close-ups, accentuation of "hidden details in familiar objects," and exploration of "commonplace milieux through the ingenious guidance of the camera."[26] Film, according to Benjamin, establishes an equilibrium between humans and the apparatus, not just via an individual's presentation of themselves to the camera but also in terms of the representation of their environment by means

[26] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technologocial Reproducibility: Second Version," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and Others (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 37.

of this apparatus.[27] While period dramas may not be set in "commonplace milieux," they by all means incorporate "familiar objects" to those who have an understanding of historical time periods. Therefore, the way film stories are manipulated to tell narratives in period dramas offers as much of a commentary or new understanding on the historical time period as it does on the society in which it is produced.

In historical time periods, queer love was not as widely accepted and sometimes even punishable, though that does not mean that queer love was not present. To imagine a queer relationship in the 18th, 19th, and early-to-mid 20th century entails considering contemporary discourse on queerness and adapting it to the restraints of these historical settings. Spectators in the 21st century are able to interpret the film in both the authentic, reimagined queer experiences in a different time period, and the manners in which such "forbidden" love may still be prevalent today. Filmmakers, particularly those of lesbian period dramas, offer new perspectives on queer desire when placing queer individuals in a setting in which such desire is blatantly illegal and practically unthinkable, or inexplicable. To do so, they must rely on the functions of the camera to focus on and single out these "hidden details," most often in the form of looks, that fuel tension and desire.

With the dual goal of parsing out new perspectives in traditional or oppressive settings and capturing queer tension and desires via various filmmaking techniques, this thesis aims to devise an original conception of the queer lens and its purpose in lesbian period dramas.

The films of focus for this thesis include *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma 2019), *Ammonite* (Lee 2020), and *Carol* (Haynes 2015). *Portrait* and *Ammonite* have historical roots in eighteenth century France and nineteenth century England, respectively. Neither film discusses homosexuality openly due to its illegal and punishable nature, though the lead women are given

[27] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 37.

a space to explore queer desire.[28] *Carol* takes place in the early 1950s, around the time when homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), published in 1952 by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). Therefore, queer desire in *Carol* is portrayed as not only outwardly disdained, but consequential too. By the nature of these historical time periods and the development of queer theory within mostly U.S. and Anglophone political and academic discourses, it is important to note that all three films feature a predominantly white cast and crew.

I used several criteria to choose the films under discussion: the film must be released between 2010-2020; it must have entered mainstream cinema and be available on streaming services; and it must follow a romance between two lesbians that does not include death as a traditional trope for the lead queer women.[29] Additional films that I considered for analysis but ultimately decided against include *The Favourite* (Lanthimos 2018) and *The Handmaiden* (Chan-wook 2016). The former features the main women protagonists using queerness and queer desire as a way to influence the British Queen to serve their own status and power-driven agendas. Though the queer lens has facets that may be analyzed in a variety of spaces and films,

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[28] It is important to note that one of the lead women in *Ammonite* has conversations with another woman that insinuate a sexual past between them.

[29] Though death of characters may be a narrative story plot choice, there is a literary trope called "bury your gays" or "dead lesbian syndrome" that has persisted since the end of the 19th century – a time and social context in which "it is no longer necessary to give gay characters and stories bad endings in order to be published." The trope is defined by Haley Hulan as "a same-gender romantic couple, [where] one of the lovers must die or otherwise be destroyed by the end of the story." More often than not, this trope draws a direct correlation between the couple "confessing their feelings for one another, kissing, having sex for the first time and the character's death" often "mere moments or pages after their relationship is confirmed with the audience." The surviving lover then amounts this experience to "an experiment or temporary lapse in judgment – or even insanity, as homosexuality was classified as a mental illness until 1974 – and they can fall into the arms of a heterosexual partner to live happily ever after and lead a normal, straight life." The reason such a trope came to exist was primarily to allow queer authors to tell stories that featured characters like them without risking social backlash, breaking laws regarding any promotion of homosexuality, or the loss of their career and that of their publisher. "Bury your gays" is no longer a necessary trope, and its implementation is no longer the refuge it once was, majorly due ot the abolishment of anti-homosexuality laws and the formation of LGBTQ+ rights movements. See Haley Hulan, "Bury Your Gays: History, Usage, and Context," *McNair Scholars Journal* 21, no. 1 (2017): 17. https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mcnair/vol21/iss1/6?utm_source=scholarworks.gvsu.edu%2Fmcnair%2Fvol21%2Fiss1%2F6&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages.

this thesis is focused on romantic dramas as case studies, and *The Favourite* is classified as a comedy/thriller. The latter, *The Handmaiden*, takes place in 1930s Korea, a location that would require research related to East Asian queer histories that lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

The remainder of this introduction establishes the theoretical background of gaze theory and queer theory before specifying the role and importance of the queer lens as an analytical tool and a brief history of the word "queer." Each of the following three chapters explores the function and importance of the queer lens in my three films of focus via in-depth film analysis. In the first chapter, the inciting incident of each film is analyzed via the queer lens and its subsequent promotion of agency and deconstruction of power relations. The inciting incident is a narrative point in a film's plot structure where the queer lens first applies in revealing queer tension and desire, as it is the point in the story that diverges from "normalcy" and propels the story into motion. The second chapter focuses on the midpoints, where we obtain new understandings of each of the lesbian protagonists via the queer lens. The midpoint, split timewise in the middle of the film, is a narrative point in which the film arc takes a new direction, fueling the rest of the story until the end. Midpoints are particularly important to analyze via the queer lens, since they mark a shift in the relationship between the queer protagonists, or in my case, the lesbian women and their budding romance; their desire for each other is seen and understood differently. The third chapter assesses shifts in temporalities (i.e. flashbacks, flash-forwards, or time jumps). Branching off of queer theory, the study of queer temporalities offers an additional component for queer lens analysis that provides us with a twofold understanding of cinematic queer desire as it plays out in the field of queer theory. Interestingly, while *Portrait* and *Carol* entice temporality changes in their respective narratives, *Ammonite* stays linear in time. The impact of the endings, therefore, per the use of the queer lens,

differs greatly. See the figure I created below for a structural breakdown illustrating the common plot points found in a typical film timeline.

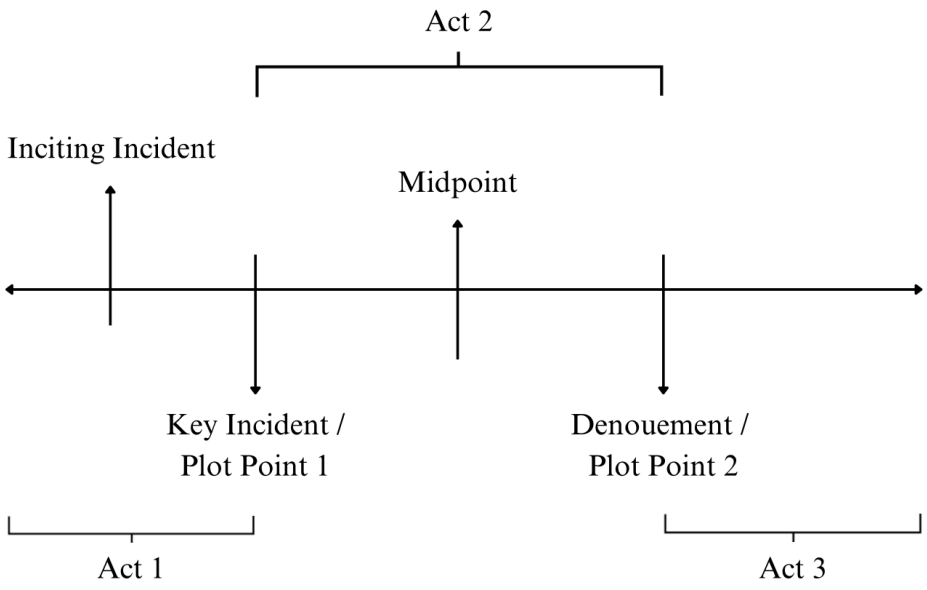

Figure 1. Typical Narrative Structure of Screenplays.

The queer lens is a tool for analysis of the filmmaking techniques that contribute to the tensions and desires often manifested in the looks, point-of-view shots, medium or closer shot framing, and pacing between two queer protagonists in queer romance films. This thesis applies the queer lens to three different lesbian period dramas, both as case studies for the filmic tool and a simultaneous exploration of why filmmakers might be telling queer love stories that take place in traditional, heteronormative, and patriarchal settings when such an identity was not acceptable while producing them in a time when queerness is significantly more accepted. With a basis in looking theories, namely from hooks and Foucualt, the queer lens offers empowerment to queer characters by giving them the space to exercise agency and deconstruct power relations. The

queer lens, furthermore, offers insight on how to recognize queer tension and desire, particularly during oppressive time periods in period dramas, through a variety of filmmaking techniques.

Theoretical Background: Gaze Theories

My conception of the queer lens was born from film theories about the gaze. Several notable scholars influenced the notion of desire as it relates to looking in cinema, especially in traditional Hollywood productions wherein sexism and racism permeated the popular, mainstream visuals. Laura Mulvey is a British feminist film critic who, at the height of the second wave of feminism, coined the term "the male gaze" to describe the perspective that most mainstream Hollywood films adopt when visualizing women. In her famous 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey identified that the male gaze functions in a threefold: the gaze of the male filmmaker looking at the female actors, the gaze of the spectators looking at the female characters, and the gaze of the male characters looking at the female characters diegetically. Most of this "looking" is inspired by the over-sexualization, objectification, and fetishization of women in films that pleasure men, often from a sense of voyeurism, which Mulvey attributed to Sigmund Freud's concept of scopophilia. From this psychoanalytic approach, Mulvey deduced that cinema is inherently voyeuristic and that looking is a key component of the cinematic experience, noting "in a world structured by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female."[30] In this heterosexual division of labor, women are "bearer[s], not maker[s] of meaning."[31] Inspired by French scholar Jacques Lacan's conception of the mirror-recognition stage in a child's development of the ego, Mulvey famously noted, "As the spectator identifies with the main male

[30] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," in *Screen* (Glasgow: Oxford University Press, 1975), 62.
[31] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 58.

protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence."[32] In other words, spectators inevitably take on the male gaze as their own, becoming "the objectifier to keep from identifying with the objectified."[33] This psychoanalytic notion of recognition and identification arises from Freudian concepts of narcissism and the constitution of the ego libido.

Mulvey's work was taken up, expanded, and contested in Black feminist scholar and critic bell hooks' 1992 essay "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." Here, hooks coined the term "the oppositional gaze," grappling with the denial of the Black spectator's right to look in America. Hooks defines this gaze as one where the spectator resists "complete identification with the film's discourse" via "ruptures" that ground the "relation between black spectators and dominant cinema prior to racial integration."[34] More specifically, hooks emphasizes that Black female spectators have had to construct their presence as an absence, receiving limited visual pleasure from the perpetuated white supremacy of mainstream Hollywood cinema – a notion that has historically resonated with queer spectators in terms of the heteronormativity of mainstream cinema. Hooks pushes this concept to incorporate subordinates in relations of power learning to adopt a critical gaze, an oppositional one, that politicizes "looking" relations. She famously wrote, "Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency."[35]

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[32] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 63.
[33] Jessica Marie Deveraux, "Cinema and The Female Gaze: An Examination for Queer Representation," *Essais* 11, no. 1 (2021): 86.
[34] bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 117.
[35] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 116.

While agency has a role in manipulating the gaze, it is also an important factor in the queer lens, as agency is critical in queer cinema. Agency in queer narratives allows queer individuals to navigate their stories with control, even if there is an evident lack thereof in the time periods in which they are set. Traditionally, agency has allowed queer individuals to find queer joys and desire in narratives that are not explicitly coded as such, similarly to how hooks describes Black female spectators exercising agency in constructing a critical lens against dominant white ideologies in cinematic narratives. Furthermore, in relation to hooks's formulations, the word "queer" in queer studies has typically been defined oppositionally, as a demonstration of "non-, contra-, or anti-straight" qualities, including any imagery that falls outside of hegemonic representation.[36] Therefore, it is evident that hooks's oppositional gaze possesses elements that align with the queer lens, and in many ways, the queer lens is an articulation of the oppositional gaze.

It is important to note, however, that Mulvey and hooks, as well as other gaze scholars such as Jacques Lacan and Linda Williams, all have in common an inextricable linkage with spectatorship and (dis)identification.[37] My conception of the queer lens does not share this focus on the audience, focusing instead on the other two of the three dimensions Mulvey outlined for

[36] Erhart, "Counter-History, Reclamation, and Incongruity," 174; This imagery may include representations of s/m sexuality, intergenerational sex, or interspecies sex, as outlined by scholar Julia Erhart. These topics are beyond the scope of this thesis. See Julia Erhart, "Laura Mulvey Meets Catherine Tramell Meets the She-Man: Counter-History, Reclamation, and Incongruity in Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Film and Media Criticism," in *A Companion to Film Theory*, ed. Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999), 174.

[37] Jacques Lacan initially conceived of the gaze in the film as a mastering gaze, the interpretation Mulvey adopted, though later he thought of it in precisely the opposite way – the point at which mastery fails. Lacan thought of the gaze as not the look of the subject at the object, but the point at which the object looks back. Scholar Todd McGowan sees Lacan's new rendition of the gaze in film as involving "the spectator in the image, disrupting her/his ability to remain all-perceiving and unperceiving in the cinema." Lacan's adjustments to his theory of the gaze transform the spectator's understanding of the filmic experience, adapting the gaze as objective rather than subjective. See Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI*; Todd McGowan, "Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes," in *Cinema Journal* 42, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 27-47. Another male gaze scholar worth mentioning is Linda Williams. In her 1984 essay "When the Woman Looks," Williams argues that there is a sense of "othering" that occurs between the two spectacles of the woman and the monster in horror films as a byproduct of the male gaze. Both are seen as "different" in whatever way that may be (castrated, mutilated) and, in effect, find similarities within themselves. See Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks," in *The Dread of Difference, 2nd. Ed.: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (New York: University of Texas Press, 2015), 17-36.

the male gaze: the gaze of the characters at each other and the gaze of the camera at the characters. Though the queer lens has facets unmentioned in the gaze scholars' analyses, such as editing and cinematography, the gaze of the characters does inherently contribute to the display of tension and desire in lesbian period drama settings. Since the queer lens strays from the study of spectatorship and how spectators may or may not identify with the characters depicted on-screen, a method of gaze theory and its dimensions is not entirely applicable for the functions of the queer lens.

Theoretical Background: What Makes a Love "Forbidden"?

We have all heard of the "star-crossed" lovers, where destiny dictates no future for two individuals madly in love. We have also heard of the unlikely lovers on the basis of the status quo, whether it be unlikely due to differences in age, familial, religious, racial, cultural, and/or geographical distance. Though unlikely, such love is not impossible, but it is the status quo, which is also differing at every historical time period, that nonetheless deems it "forbidden," and therefore often unseen both on and off-screen. Amongst all these characteristic *differences* between individuals that demarcate their love "forbidden," there is one *similarity* that used to qualify as such: same sex love. Since this similarity may be accompanied by a whole host of the other differences I note above, the stakes for the unlikely and "forbidden" same sex love are multiplied. As I mentioned earlier, the status quo changes over time and dictates the level of "forbiddenness" on different types of unlikely love. Since same sex love is no longer taboo and increasingly accepted, particularly in affluent Western societies, writers and directors are using their voices now more than ever. One recurring motif is a kind of queering of history to revisit,

reimagine, and reclaim historical periods when same-sex love still *was* taboo and deemed "forbidden." What can we make of this intentional shift towards oppressive time periods?

Firstly, we learn how a queer "look" looks and how it functions, as it offers agency and deconstructs power relations. We also learn how this "look" is captured by the camera, as it shows someone's perspective. This "look" is often best defined between queer protagonists in period dramas, where it becomes a vehicle for subtextual dialogue rather than outright conversation. It doesn't mean, however, that outright conversation in more contemporary films disallows the application of the queer lens; rather, alongside the explicit dialogue, the "look" and filmmaking choices (POV shots, medium or closer shots, and pacing) that constitute the queer lens may remain a consistent subtextual indicator for queer tension and desire. Filmmaker and film critic Ren Jender, referencing Sonic Youth's co-founder Kim Gordon's memoir, notes the general importance of looks for queer individuals: "To flirt as a queer person is to immerse [oneself] in the act of looking and being looked at, sometimes in secret. For many of us, that gaze at someone or some image is how we first realized our sexuality."[38] Jender's paraphrasing of Gordon's experience seconds the notion that the "look" is the signal of queer desires.

While Laura Mulvey does note the ability of the cinema to "[shift] the emphasis of the look" as "it is the place of the look that defines cinema," she speaks in terms of the inherent psychoanalytical structures of heterosexual, male/female representation that the traditional, Hollywood narrative film propagates.[39] It is this psychoanalytic background that determines the "pleasure and unpleasure offered by traditional narrative film."[40] Mulvey's assessment of the role of the "look" in traditional cinema, therefore, differs on a basis of the heteronormative analysis

[38] Ren Jender, "'Portrait of a Lady on Fire' Understands Queer Desire," *The New York Times*, December 9, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/09/opinion/portrait-of-a-lady-on-fire.html.
[39] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 67.
[40] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 67.

of psychoanalysis. Lauren Michele Jackson noted in an article that, "Contrary to Mulvey's approach, uses of the 'gaze' today – be it the male gaze, the white gaze, the straight gaze, and so forth – seem more invested in matters of identity than in the project of aesthetic analysis. They want to name who is doing the looking rather than how."[41] This thesis aims to do the exact opposite: I name *how* the looking is done through an in depth "aesthetic analysis." The looking is done not via the "gaze" as we know it through gaze theory, wherein identity politics are formulated. It is done via the *queer lens*: a tool that promotes a visual understanding of subtextual themes that empower feminist and queer values. While there is someone inherently doing the looking in the queer lens analysis of lesbian period dramas, this thesis is more interested in how that look conveys desire or builds tension amongst the characters in the plot than in who might be looking at such desire unfold, whether that be a spectator or a character with a right to a more powerful look.

Theoretical Background: A Brief History of "Queer"

Fully grasping the premise of the queer lens entails an understanding of the term "queer," one which has undergone several adaptations in its relatively short history. "Queer" first entered the English language in the sixteenth century to mean "strange or eccentric."[42] In the twentieth century it was used as a derogatory term to describe "effeminate" men and "manly" women.[43] In the 1980s, "queer" was reclaimed as an umbrella term for LGBT people who came together "in a way they never had before and have not done since" to protest the mistreatment of HIV+ individuals during the AIDS epidemic, particularly by the Reagan administration in the United

[41] Lauren Michele Jackson, "The Invention of 'The Male Gaze'" *The New Yorker*, July 14, 2023, https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/the-invention-of-the-male-gaze.
[42] Leanne Dawson, "Introduction: Queer European Cinema: Queering Cinematic Time and Space," *Studies in European Cinema* 12, no. 3 (2015): 185, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17411548.2015.1115696.
[43] Dawson, "Queer European Cinema," 185.

States.[44] "Queer" was intended to be more "in your face" and more inclusive than earlier terms that tended to refer to specific subsets of the gay communities while excluding others, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.[45] From this grass-roots political activism, "queer" was picked up by the academy, namely with Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identities* (1990), which many consider the pioneering text of queer theory. In this book, Butler challenges traditional, binary notions of gender and identity, arguing that these are performative acts rather than inherent or fixed categories. This destabilization of identity and emphasis on performance became central to the development and popularization of queer theory, influencing numerous scholars across various disciplines and contributing to broader discussions of sexuality, gender, and identity.[46]

While not exclusively a queer theorist, it is important to note French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976) had a profound impact on queer theory as well, influencing and inviting many queer theory scholars to discuss power and sexuality in the Western world.[47] Some notable authors that drew from Foucault's theories include Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the author of *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). While Foucault's book involves a historical analysis that traces the development of discourses around sexuality and power over time, Sedgwick considers queer performativity, closeted identities, and psychoanalytic theories to discuss sexual and gender roles, emotional and

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[44] Dawson, "Queer European Cinema," 185.
[45] Additionally, "queer" was seen as a more "economical alternative to cumbersome taxonomical listings" included in the acronym of LGBT. "Queer," then, was promoted as a term "beyond labels" that included "lesbians, queens of color, bisexuals, cross-dressers, transgendered people, and sexual others of all stripes in addition to gay white men." See Erhart, "Laura Mulvey Meets Catherine Tramell," 174.
[46] Though this is beyond the scope of this thesis, other notable scholars include Teresa de Lauretis, known for her work on feminist and queer theory that explored issues of sexuality, identity, and desire; Sara Ahmed who explores the lived experiences of queer individuals and the ways queerness is embodied and perceived; and Leo Bersani, who investigates queer subjectivity, desire, and the complexities of intimacy.
[47] See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). Note that the first French version of the book was published in 1976, but the first English translation of the book was published in 1978.

psychological dimensions of sexuality, and hidden or closeted aspects of sexuality as well as the contradictory nature of the closet.[48] Though film and media researchers have injected new life into the area of queer studies, the work of queer theorists must be credited for aiding in the origins, influences, and development of queer film and media studies.

In his 2016 essay "Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory's Affective Histories," gender studies scholar Kadji Amin further synthesizes where scholars have taken the term "queer" in academia and proposed important alternatives to its ambiguous, aspirational, and anti-identitarian tendencies that are crucial to this thesis. Amin offers "attachment genealogy" as a method of "exposing, fragmenting, and reworking *queer's* historical inheritances to enable *queer* to do different work in new contexts."[49] Currently three decades past "queer's" origins, new contexts are formed frequently, as fluidly as the term itself. This factor affects cinematic discourse significantly, as films create contexts within their settings and the time in which they are produced give it a certain context as well, both of which allow "queer" to take on a variety of meanings. My thesis proposes that lesbian period dramas are a particularly interesting terrain for explorations of the queer lens because they render visible a tension between contemporary and historical conceptions of "queer."

David Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz's 2005 article "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" pushes for a social and political urgency to recharge the term "queer" and give it the edge it once had in the 90's. They believe "to queer" is to intervene, free from the term's historical debt to same-sex sexuality. In support of these claims, Amin succinctly articulates, "Queer theory has long celebrated *queer* as an almost infinitely mobile and mutable

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[48] See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).
[49] Kadji Amin, "Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory's Affective Histories," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 3 & 4 (Fall/Winter 2016): 174, https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2016.0041.

theoretical term that, unlike *gay* and *lesbian* or *feminist*, need not remain bound to any particular identity, historical context, politics, or object of study and, for that very reason, promises a cutting-edge political intervention."[50] "Queer," therefore, can be used during historical contexts wherein the term did not exist as people commonly know it today, such as the eighteenth century. It is a word that defines not just same-sex sexuality, though that too is incorporated in its multifaceted meanings, but also the political interventions of the "norms" per each time period, each with a different version of "queer's" affective history. The idea of "queer's" affective historicity entails that "queer" not only takes on different meanings, but also evokes different feelings, within various time periods, including the present.

In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) Muñoz declares, "The present is not enough," and collates queerness with the utopian longing for a different future that does not proceed from the fallen state of the present. Amin, however, suggests that "queer" could be rendered lively by an engagement of its multiple pasts due to its affective historicity rather than by a future of continual modification by something else.[51] Amin suggests that "queer" is a term "*sticky* with history, one that bears the impression, in its characteristic gestures, dispositions, and orientations, of its travels in time and space."[52] To operate on this new understanding of "queer" as a sticky term would mean both remembering the contexts of the word's academic emergence during the '90s and excavating alternative historical imaginaries that teem within "queer." If at one point during the '90s "queer" became an umbrella term for LGBT, the most common association of meaning with the term, it should be valid to use it as such. "Queer's" affective historicity allows the word to do new kinds of work with different objects in

[50] Amin, "Haunted by the 1990s," 174.
[51] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 17; Amin, "Haunted by the 1990s," 181.
[52] Amin, "Haunted by the 1990s," 181.

a range of historical, cultural, and geographic contexts. Julia Erhart synthesizes this notion and connects it with film and media studies as such:

> Throwing into question traditional or accepted understandings of sexuality but also, more broadly, gender, maleness, femaleness, love, sex, and desire, "queer" provoked a reevaluation of the object of the critical enterprise itself. This was particularly true in the area of film and media studies, where the notion stimulated discussions about aesthetics, marginality, and the relationship between art and audience, in addition to conversations about the difference between "queer" and the terms "gay" and "lesbian."[53]

Erhart's sentiments indicate that film serves well as a platform for queer discourse, as the various ways of storytelling, either in support of (with high production value) or against (such as avante-garde or experimental indie style) traditional cinema, offer myriad possibilities and opportunities to make statements that garner new understandings about sexuality, desire, love, and more.

Furthermore, "queer" is frequently used not only as an adjective or a noun, but also a verb. In the past "to queer" meant to read against the grain. Scholar Leanne Dawson mentions that "highlighting homoerotic or queer elements in film that is otherwise perceived as straight…is a technique long used by LGBT cinema-goers in order to identify more identities like, or similar to, their own, particularly in times when there was a dearth of homosexuality on-screen."[54] While queer lens analysis doesn't directly tend to matters of spectator (dis)identification with the protagonists on-screen, Dawson's statements reveal that other queer analysis techniques have long been in use when queer representation was significantly more dire. While queer studies offer a method for imagining these alternatives to hegemonic systems, queer cinema actualizes it via narrative storytelling.[55]

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[53] Erhart, "Counter-History, Reclamation, and Incongruity," 174.
[54] Dawson, "Queer European Cinema," 185.
[55] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University, 2011), 89.

According to film and gender studies scholar Harry Benshoff, queerness can appear in various places with queer content. It can either appear in "scripts by lesbian, gay, or queer authors," or it could be "conveyed to a scene via a lesbian, gay, or queer director," or "seen in the performances of actors who were lesbian, gay, queer."[56] *Carol* checks two of these boxes. Patricia Highsmith, the writer of *The Price of Salt* (1952) upon which *Carol* is based, was a lesbian, albeit one that, like many other sophisticates at the time, viewed homosexuality as a psychological defect that could be fixed.[57] The director of *Carol*, Todd Haynes, is also openly gay and has directed numerous other queer films, such as *Poison* (1991) and *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), and other queer period films, such as *Swoon* (1992) and *Far from Heaven* (2002). *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is written and directed by Céline Sciamma, who identifies as a lesbian, as does Adèle Haenel, the actress who plays Héloïse. Sciamma has written a queer film, *Being 17* (2016), and along with writing, directed another queer film, *Tomboy* (2011), in addition to *Portrait*. Lastly, *Ammonite*'s writer and director Francis Lee also identifies as gay, having written and directed one other queer film, *God's Own Country* (2017).

Benshoff believes that queerness arises from a co-configuration of text *and* viewer. Thus, if queerness can emerge from particular practices and moments regardless of the identities or experiences of viewers, queerness may just as easily be performed by heterosexuals as by homosexuals. This would justify the lack of queer actors in my films of focus in this thesis, though it is important to note the ongoing discussion about casting self-identifying queer actors versus straight actors into queer roles.[58] Current research on this topic maintains the importance

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[56] Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 13-16.
[57] Margaret Talbot, "Forbidden Love," *The New Yorker*, November 22, 2015, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/11/30/forbidden-love.
[58] Award-winning actress Kate Winslet, one of the actresses in *Ammonite*, has mentioned to IndieWire that, on the other hand, that there are several actors who are hiding their sexuality in fear that "it will stand in the way of their being cast in straight roles." Clearly the debate about sexuality and acting, though beyond the scope of this thesis, is multifaceted and complicated. See Ryan Lattanzio, "Kate Winslet Says She Knows 'At Least Four' Gay Actors

of authentic representation and avoiding tokenism and/or stereotypes, though concerns and criticisms center around actors' range and skill, privacy and disclosure, and balancing representation.[59] While it is important to consider the spaces where queerness may appear, crossing off all of the checks on a checklist of potential queer spaces does not necessarily determine nor define what constitutes one film "more queer" nor "better" than another; rather, Benshoff provides us with access to consider, amongst ongoing conversation about what exactly constitutes a queer film, the spaces where queerness often manifests in the making of queer films.

Terrified of Coming Out in Hollywood," *IndieWire,* April 5, 2021, https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/kate-winslet-gay-actors-hollywood-coming-out-1234628060/.

[59] See Alfred L. Martin, Jr., "The Queer Business of Casting Gay Characters on U.S. Television," in *Communication Culture & Critique* 11, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 282-97.

Chapter 1 *The Queer Lens in Inciting Incidents*

Every movie has an inciting incident that disrupts the plot from "normalcy," for whatever that may entail in each context.[60] As author and screenwriter Syd Field notes, the inciting incidents in films serve two important and necessary functions in storytelling: "(1), it sets the story in motion; and (2), it grabs the attention of the reader and audience."[61] In the queer romantic period dramas films that I am focusing on, it appears to be common practice to introduce the queer love interest to the already-introduced queer protagonist in the inciting incident, regardless of if they are aware of their queerness. These primary interactions establish the connection or interest that puts the rest of the plot/relationship into motion. Therefore, I argue that these inciting incidents are primary locations where the queer lens may first be used for analysis. I also argue that while generally inciting incidents are the first narrative moments in which the plot is disrupted from "normalcy," I adjust the inciting incidents based on what I believe sets the *romantic* story into motion for the analysis of the three lesbian period dramas, as opposed to the overarching narrative story plot. Within these more specific moments, the queer lens first reveals the potential tension between the women protagonists through their looks at each other, or, in other words, indicates that the interaction of the two women protagonists may not actually be heterosexual, like most would assume at the time.

While some contemporary, romantic queer films feature characters that are "out," prompting an easier recognition of the queer lens in the inciting incidents, queer period dramas go about it in slightly different ways. In *Carol*, Carol is shown as a matriarch with more experience and confidence than Therese, so Carol dictates the romantic undertone of their first

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[60] There is also a key incident, also known as Plot Point 1 (see Figure 1), that sends the screenplay into Act 2 (see Figure 1), where the rising action and majority of the point of the movie begins. See Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*. New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 2005.

[61] Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 2005), 131.

conversation. This is not to say that Therese, who appears lonely and distanced from the rest of her coworkers at the time of their first conversation, is not immediately intrigued by Carol's presence. In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, while Marianne's attention to Héloïse's facial features and body may indicate romantic intentions other than just her mission to paint Héloïse without her knowing, it is Héloïse's reciprocal curiosity in Marianne that dictates the quiet exchange of interest between the women. In *Ammonite*, since it appears that Mary initially feels burdened with the job of taking care of Charlotte before warming up to it, it ends up being Charlotte who expresses interest in her temporary caretaker, especially as the combination of space away from her husband and Mary's aid improves Charlotte's symptoms of melancholia. This complements any past lesbian experiences that the narrative insinuates Mary has had. Such instances help us understand how the queer lens creates different meanings within varying versions of queer life while still anchored in fundamental film techniques. How do we recognize the tension and intrigue amongst the women protagonists? What elements, both in terms of camera and stylistic choices, make their interactions notably different than typical, friendly interactions between women? All of these aspects factor into the queer lens, for it is a tool that analyzes both the space and the perspective where queerness may flourish in plain sight through craftful, artistic, and cinematic capturing of perspectives via the camera and looks via the characters on-screen. As a reminder, the facets of the queer lens that explore such aspects in particularly lesbian period dramas are the looks, medium or closer shots, POV shots, and pacing.

The perspective of the camera during inciting incidents interferes with the heterosexual and patriarchal settings where the story takes place, the context where the "normalcy" begins, while nodding to the current, generally more accepting, and liberal milieu in which the film itself

is produced.[62] This latter point will be particularly interesting to consider for *Ammonite* due to its biopic genre. Queer audiences, then, may take away, among other things, the sort of methods necessary during repressed historical time periods to relay interest, tension, and desire towards someone of the same sex (between two women in my case studies) from a new, modern, and academically supported perspective.[63] I will use a number of scholars, predominantly hooks, Mulvey's gaze formulations, and Foucault's theories on relations of power, in my queer lens analysis of the inciting incidents in order to promote a greater understanding of the goals and importance of the queer lens in films.

Starting with *Carol*, how do we recognize the queer tension? What elements, both in terms of camera and stylistic choices, make the two main protagonists' interaction notably different than a typical customer service interaction? During the Christmas season of 1952, 19-year-old Therese Belivet (Rooney Mara) is an aspiring photographer working in Frankenberg's department store in Manhattan. It's a busy, bustling day at Frankenberg's right around Christmastime, and shoppers are looking for gifts, mainly dolls, as evidenced by the numerous display cases filled with dolls, for their children. Directly before this scene, we see Therese occupied with ensuring the Lionel model train set works. Her interest in and knowledge about the train sets over the dolls echo her divergence from the gendered norms one may expect from women at the time, foreshadowing her divergence from the heterosexual norms later on. This is further supported when the glamorous woman asks Therese what her favorite doll was

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[62] Based on Pew Research Center's survey on the acceptance of homosexuality, 72% of American individuals, 86% of French individuals, and 86% of British individuals say homosexuality should be accepted by society. These three countries reflect the milieu in which my films of focus are produced and take place, as *Carol* is American, *Portrait of a Lady in Fire* is French, and *Ammonite* is British. See Jacob Poushter and Nicholas Kent, "The Global Divide on Homosexuality Persists." *Pew Research Center*, June 25, 2020. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/06/25/global-divide-on-homosexuality-persists/.

[63] Other queer identities, such as transgender, intersectional, and asexual, are beyond the scope of this thesis in consideration of their histories. On trans history, see Genny Beemyn, "Transgender History in the United States," in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*, ed. Laura Erickson-Schroth. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

growing up, to which Therese hesitantly responds that she never really had dolls. A few minutes later, Therese mentions that at the woman's daughter's age she would have wanted a train set, after being asked about it. This gender nonconformity may just as well suggest to the older woman that Therese has queer potential. In the inciting incident scene, Therese is reminded to wear her Santa hat by a manager to accompany her coworkers. She stands out of place behind a doll-filled cash register, a detail that supports Therese's detachment, loneliness, and disconnection from the rest of her coworkers.

Suddenly, a glamorous woman (Cate Blanchett) in a mink coat and red scarf and hat with a dazzling blonde bob catches Therese's eye from afar. Though initially depicted in a wide shot, which usually insinuates emotional distancing, it is evident that this woman stands out to us by the length of the shot. This emphasizes the time we spend looking at the woman perusing the train station area from Therese's point-of-view (POV). The glamorous woman makes eye contact with Therese, and then we see Therese framed in a medium shot from behind the counter as the camera slowly moves in. This tracking shot on Therese creates the effect of enchantment and mesmerization. In Therese's POV shot, the camera wobbles from out of focus of the glamorous woman to a different, visually mundane shopper and her daughter looking for the bathroom. The rack focus POV shot indicates that the shopper and her daughter are merely a distraction to Therese, who was intrigued by the blonde, older woman in the mink coat.[64]

Once again from Therese's POV, the camera looks back at the location where the blonde woman once stood, though she has gone, as we now just see a flock of young boys crowding the train station area, supporting the heteronormative, gendered norms of the time. Next we see a

[64] Rack focus is a filmmaking technique of adjusting the camera lens's focus during a continuous shot. The focal plane "racks" when it shifts from one object in the frame to another, one blurring and the other gaining prominence. See "Rack Focus – Everything You Need to Know," Nashville Film Institute, accessed April 7, 2024, https://www.nfi.edu/rack-focus/.

close-up shot of a pair of seemingly expensive, brown gloves. Pan up, and we see the same glamorous woman. This shot mimics Therese's POV through the camera based on where her attention is drawn. The woman asks about which doll to get for her daughter in a confident and gentle manner, framed in a medium shot to indicate that the gap between the two has been closed in. In shot-reverse-shot form, which consists of one person blurred in the foreground looking at the other person talking clearly in the shot, Therese responds that they are out of the ones she would want, which prompts the woman to light her cigarette. Therese gently informs her that she is not allowed to smoke inside the department store to which the woman sighs and mentions, "Shopping makes me nervous."[65] Therese smiles and replies, "Working here makes me nervous." Throughout this dialogue, both women make consistent eye contact, a direct unmediated gaze of recognition, the mink-coated woman speaking with gentle confidence and Therese reserved, yet seemingly enchanted. Their eye contact and proximity in the medium shots and tight framing exudes a sensation of interest in one another and intimacy, respectively, and are coupled with the honesty of the dialogue, suggesting their nervousness. The shots, starting with Therese's dialogue about being nervous working at Frankenberg's, split off from shot-reverse-shots to rather lengthier POV shots from each woman that emphasize the time we spend seeing and understanding their respective natures and the underlying tension during their conversation. This stylistic choice mirrors the slowed down pacing of their interaction, which is another key element of the queer lens, as it simmers with romantic tension. Here, and as we will see more later, the queer lens is supported by politicizing "looking" relations, as bell hooks would call it.[66] Though rather than from a spectator "learn[ing] to look a certain way in order to resist," the

[65] Haynes, Todd, dir. *Carol*. (Cincinnati, Ohio, USA: Number 9 Films, 2015).
[66] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 116.

protagonists of *Carol* establish a mutual gaze that resists the homophobic norm of the pre-Eisenhower, post-World War II, overall uncertain time period in the United States.[67]

In much of his work on the relations of power, Michel Foucault notes that power relations are "mobile, reversible, and unstable," so "there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance…there would be no power relations at all."[68] In the 1950s United States, when homosexuality was officially declared a mental disorder, these power relations, rooted in heteronormativity, are evidently against homosexual behavior and tendencies. The queer lens in films, therefore, supports the possibility of resistance against this power structure in place, as it offers a space for acknowledging and subverting the norm of its time via gazes and looks that emphasize desire. Furthermore, "power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free," per Foucault's theory.[69] In the inciting incident in *Carol*, the eye contact within the medium and medium close-up, lengthier POV shots of the queer lens release the protagonists from the reins of the dominating norm, offering the possibility of agency to build "forbidden" connections, such as the one between the women at Frankenberg's, since all members in relations of power are given a level of freedom to resist.

Tapping into Therese's so-called "less feminine" interests, Therese suggests that the glamorous, older woman in *Carol* could buy her daughter a model train set rather than a doll. The woman agrees, though as evidenced by their intrigue in one another, Therese almost forgets to go through with the payments amidst her romantic flusteration. As she settles her payments, we learn that her name is Carol Aird.[70] To prolong their interaction, Carol continues to ask

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[67] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 116; In the same year that *Carol* takes place (1952), the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) officially classified homosexuality as a mental disorder.
[68] Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and Others (New York: The New York Press, 1994), 292.
[69] Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 292.
[70] *Carol* was adapted into a screenplay by Phyllis Nagy based on the novel *The Price of Salt* (1952) by Patricia Highsmith. Due to the controversial reactions that a lesbian novel at the time would garner, Highsmith wrote the novel under the pseudonym Claire Morgan. In the 1990s, the novel was republished as *Carol* under Highsmith's real

Therese questions and continues conversations about her daughter, Rindy, and Christmastime, to which Therese shyly, perhaps due to a combination of her introverted nature and the respect that Carol's strong presence demands, responds and smiles softly. This interaction remains cut in medium shots, tightly framing the intimate proximity of the women, per the queer lens. The aura of fascination and enchantment that the queer lens reveals flavors Carol and Therese's first interaction all the way to the end of the scene. Before Carol leaves, she turns around and adds, now in a closer, medium shot than the wide shot she was initially framed in when Therese first spotted her, that she likes Therese's Santa hat, a small yet important detail in the budding of their tension-loaded connection. Not only is every other employee also wearing a Santa hat, but the time of the year in which the story takes place warrants such apparel often without much commentary – unless that commentary serves alternate functions, such as complimenting with the purpose of relaying romantic interest. Therefore, it is only fitting that Carol, intentionally or not, forgets her gloves; Therese must return them to her. They must meet again. For the first time in this scene, as Therese watches Carol leave, the camera begins to move from a stationary to a deliberate horizontal pan, indicating change both in camera movement and the narrative plot. Something has impacted both women, and before any dialogue is said about it, we can see it through the camerawork. A few scenes later, after Carol receives her gloves along with the train set from Therese, we verify that their initial encounter during the inciting incident of the plot was meaningful, as Carol invites Therese to get lunch: an offer that renders explicit the queer connection formed via the queer lens.

In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the queer lens hides more subtextually in the inciting incident of Marianne and Héloïse's first few walks together, for as far as viewers are concerned,

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name, about 40 years after the mostly-closeted Highsmith admitted that she was the novel's author. See Erin G. Carlston, "Essay: Patricia Highsmith's 'The Price of Salt,' The Lesbian Novel That's Now a Motion Picture," in *The National Book Review* (2018).

Marianne's looks may outwardly and simply signify the job she is getting paid for. Through the queer lens, however, we may recognize that these early looks are indicative of the seeds of interest that later blossoms into a bond of love. After a rough, wavy boat ride to the island off the coast of Brittany, France, Marianne (Noémie Merlant) arrives at a castle, settles into the reception room where she will sleep and paint, and learns about Héloïse's (Adèle Haenel) background: the woman of her mission. For context, Marianne has been hired by the Countess of the castle to paint a portrait of her daughter, Héloïse, for her future Milanese husband to approve or disapprove of their potential partnership. In the first 18 minutes of the movie, Marianne discovers many key details that are important to know prior to analyzing the inciting incident. Firstly, her father had painted portraits for this family in the past, and thanks to his gender, he, unlike Marianne, has been able to receive credit in the art industry during this time period. Secondly, the maid, Sophie (Luàna Bajrami), is hardly familiar with Héloïse herself, as Héloïse had been in a nunnery off the island, and Héloïse's sister had committed suicide to escape her unwanted betrothal to the same man Héloïse is set to marry. Thirdly, Héloïse, reluctant of the marriage herself, has refused to sit still for a portrait that a previous male artist attempted to paint of her. Therefore, the Countess hired Marianne to attempt the same painting, only this time without Héloïse knowing. As far as Héloïse is concerned, Marianne is just there to accompany her on walks outside the castle.

I assign the inciting incident in *Portrait* to the scene where Marianne accompanies Héloïse on their first walk together, for much like in *Carol*, this marks the first time the women meet and their looks indicate their newfound interest in one another.[71] After Sophie informs Marianne that Héloïse is ready to go, we first encounter Marianne at the top of a staircase, as

[71] Also important to note here is that *Carol* and *Portrait* both start in flashback scenes that then propel us back into the past to the start of when the women meet for the first time. Flashbacks and other temporal changes are discussed in depth in Chapter 3.

indicated by the low angle of the medium shot. To entertain Marianne's POV, the reverse shot takes on a high angle, above the chandelier, to reveal a cloaked woman standing in the hallway, facing away from Marianne. Marianne proceeds slowly and carefully down the stairs. From Marianne's POV, we follow the cloaked woman from behind as she opens the door and walks outside, not once looking back at Marianne at this point. Each reverse shot of Marianne here shows her face toward the camera, medium-close up shot's distance away. Through the queer lens, this shot choice reveals Marianne's intrigue in the cloaked woman, as her careful and curious gaze almost breaks the fourth wall by looking so close to the camera's lens.

At 19:36 minutes in, the blonde hair peeks out of the dark cloak until the hood of the cloak falls off as Héloïse picks up speed. We see the first glimpse of the ocean as Heloise begins to run full speed towards the edge of the cliff, Marianne, though running, falls behind, as evident by the shift from a medium close-up to a medium shot. Marianne appears nervous that Héloïse may jump off, just like her sister, and sprints after her. Right before the edge, however, Héloïse stops and catches herself, the camera tumbling behind her; Marianne stumbles into a stop, relieved. At around 20 minutes, we see Héloïse turn around for the first time. This close shot of Héloïse's face is so akin to Marianne's POV, that it appears as though Héloïse is almost directly looking at the camera, almost breaking the fourth wall, much like Marianne's earlier reverse shot. Here, it is important to note that the introduction of Marianne's direct gaze occurs prior to Héloïse's returning gaze.

In her gaze analysis of *Portrait*, film scholar Ylva Jonsdatter Haagensen-Løkke argues that any voyeuristic illusion induced by Marianne's POV shot is broken by Héloïse's returning gaze.[72] Per Haagensen-Løkke's terms, voyeurism is defined by the ignorance of the observed, so the dialectical nature of Laura Mulvey's gaze theory is challenged. Through the queer lens, the

[72] Haagensen-Løkke, "Regarde-moi," 22.

power relations are shifted: even if the observer (Marianne) would typically host a more "powerful" gaze as the one who is doing the looking, the observed (Héloïse) challenges it and looks back – not just at Marianne, but at the spectators associating with Marianne's perspective. The importance of considering the observer and the observed in *Portrait* here in particular lies in the dynamics of the artist and their muse, which is the backbone of this lesbian period drama narrative. French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre considers this looking back in such a dynamic impossible: "We can not perceive the world and at the same time apprehend a look fastened upon us; it must be either one or the other. This is because to perceive is to *look at*, and to apprehend a look is not to apprehend a look-as-object; it is the consciousness of *being looked at*."[73] In this sense, this kind of a gaze has the potential to subjugate us; it's about the battle of objectifying looks, which would be reasonable due to Héloïse's refusal to be painted. She refuses to be subjugated and rendered as an object, particularly at the expense of an unwanted betrothal. In the same scene, however, it is evident that the looks between the women are not mutually exclusive, as Sartre would have it. The role of the observer and observed are challenged from the very beginning through the queer lens. In her documentary *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power* (2022), director Nina Menkes quotes the highly acclaimed director and screenwriter Agnès Varda: "The first feminist act is looking. To say, 'Ok, you're looking at me. But I am looking right back.'"[74] Given the women-driven cast and narrative of *Portrait*, emphasized by the lack of men throughout the film, the significance of Héloïse looking back not only challenges Sartre's beliefs, but also echoes feminist values that support the agency of looking back. These values resonate with hooks's sentiments, as she writes, "Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we

[73] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1956), 224.
[74] Menkes, Nina, dir. *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*. (California: Menkesfilm, 2022).

see."[75] While Marianne's position as a painter more so than her status as a woman assigns her the position of "the Other," and while hooks's sentiments focus on spaces of agency for Black people, the idea that upon interrogating the gaze that looks upon us and looking back at it is fundamental to one of the goals of queer lens analysis: offering freedom to queer individuals to navigate traditionally restrictive spaces with agency.

A little later in their walk, Héloïse walks down the cliff, her dark blue cloak swaying in the wind, and Marianne enters the shot wearing a brown coat, a few feet behind her. Héloïse sits down on the beach, Marianne right next to her. We see a medium-close up of Marianne's profile looking at the ocean, framing her in close, layered proximity with Héloïse to narrow the focus of the frame and hint at its intimate undertones. When Marianne turns to her side, a covered Héloïse is revealed, also looking at the ocean. It appears as though Marianne is studying her object that she will then later secretly paint. Then, Héloïse looks back at her with curiosity, which prompts Marianne to look away at the ocean. These exchanged looks happen three times, with Marianne initiating the looks. The next time Marianne looks at Héloïse, though, Héloïse is revealed to have already been looking at Marianne – and just like that, the typical dynamic inherent between the observer and the observed is once again challenged: Héloïse initiates the gaze, and thereby manipulates the gaze given to the observed, opening up the possibility of agency, per hooks's formulation.[76] Héloïse is given a space to entertain the feminist act of looking back, as Varda maintains it, through the analysis of the queer lens. The pacing of this long shot without cuts is slow and deliberate to emphasize the looks, allowing us to process the curiosity and interest that the women share with one another as well as the deconstruction of typical painter/muse power relations.

[75] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 116.
[76] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 116.

Therefore, the queer lens is responsible for rejecting Sartre's mutual exclusivity in the consciousness of "being looked at." As director Céline Sciamma said in an interview at Cannes, "The artist is not dominant – she is being looked at as much as [the muse] looks."[77] The queer lens aids in exposing these new power relationships, which, as Foucault notes, must be controlled by practices of freedom, and which, as hooks notes, are offered to those who are given the space to exercise their agency and look back.[78] When together, the women are temporarily free of the grasp of the patriarchy, as there are hardly any men portrayed on the island and barely any written into the script. Therefore, the love that later forms between the women is indicative of a rejection of the patriarchy in addition to a rejection of heterosexual norms. These sentiments reflect Sciamma's intentions with her film, as she noted that "the word didn't even exist to define lesbian love – so that's why there are no men, because we know the frame, we know they're there."[79] In such a free setting, the queer lens reveals the lesbian love to be like an emancipation from boundaries, conflict, and shame.

The freedom to reimagine history is also evident in *Ammonite*, particularly due to the biographical nature of the narrative. *Ammonite* is loosely based on the life of Mary Anning (1799-1847), who was a fossil collector in the early nineteenth century and whose discoveries greatly shaped what we know about paleontology today.[80] As a woman at the time, she was often uncredited for her finds in a male-centric scientific field, especially her remarkable, renowned discovery of the sea lizard dinosaur, the Ichthyosaurus, that established her reputation. Roderick Murchison is one such geologist whom Mary not only introduced to the world of minerals, rocks,

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[77] Amy Taubin, "Interview: Céline Sciamma," *Film Comment*, November-December 2019 Issue, https://www.filmcomment.com/article/interview-celine-sciamma-portrait-of-a-lady-on-fire/.
[78] Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 284.
[79] Taubin, "Interview: Céline Sciamma."
[80] Manjari Johri, "Francis Lee's Period Film *Ammonite*: An Exploration of Gender, Class, and Sexuality," *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* 9, no. 1 (January 2024): 90.

and fossils, but also helped contribute to his scientific pursuits and later publications.[81] Furthermore, Roderick's wife, Charlotte Murchison, a mineralogist herself, was said to have greatly influenced her husband's research as well, with her efforts in the field also championing the future of women in science.[82] While it is historically accurate that Charlotte and Roderick Murchison traveled to Lyme Regis where they met Mary Anning, there is no historical indication that Mary and Charlotte actually pursued a romantic relationship. In an interview at the BFI London Film Festival, however, director Francis Lee pointed out, "There was so much evidence of letters written by women to other women about deep, passionate loving relationships that were totally underground. At the time, society believed women had no sexual pleasure organs so the idea of two women being together was just not even thought about."[83] Lee's approach to reimagining, and in a way repairing, Mary's life in this narrative resonates with the feminist agenda of "giving a voice to the unsung, unacknowledged women whose accomplishments were clouded due to gender discrimination."[84] Additionally, as I will touch on later, I would argue the queer tension that Mary and Charlotte share for one another resonates closer with attraction and passion rather than true love, demonstrating a different angle of a queer romance than is seen in *Carol* and *Portrait*.

Up until around 33 minutes into the film, we witness Mary (Kate Winslet) reserved and stoic, yet content in the solitude her work requires. The setting of the film is bleak, drab, and gray, including inside her house, shop, and outside on the beach, which amplifies the themes of loneliness and isolation that prevail throughout the film. Cinematographer Stéphane Fontaine

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[81] Annabel Gutterman, "*Ammonite* Tells a Partly True Story of Two Women Pursuing Love and Science. Here's What's Facts and What's Fiction," *TIME*, November 13, 2020, https://time.com/5911139/ammonite-movie-true-story/.
[82] Gutterman, "*Ammonite* Tells a Partly True Story."
[83] Isabel Stevens, "'I'm Drawn to Survivors': Francis Lee on Ammonite," *British Film Institute*, August 26, 2020, https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/interviews/francis-lee-ammonite-kate-winslet-paleontologist-mary-anning-lff-2020-closing-night.
[84] Johri, "Francis Lee's Period Film *Ammonite*," 90.

mentions, in reference to the stylistic choices on the setting, "We were blessed because that winter [in Lyme Regis] was quite gloomy…we wanted everything to be fairly austere," which he added intentionally deviated from what "you might normally use for a period movie."[85] These choices aid in establishing Mary's everyday routine of collecting fossils on the gloomy shoreline, caring for her ailing mother, Molly (Gemma Jones), and tending to her mundane, "tourist" shell and fossil discoveries.

One day, Roderick Murchison (James McArdle) enters Mary's shop in Lyme Regis with his wife, Charlotte (Saoirse Ronan), where he attempts to learn Mary's ways in fossil collecting. Roderick appears socially bourgeois, contrasting Mary's working class status in an isolated seaside, and introduces himself as an educated man, coming off as condescending to the women, which sets up the stage on which the story develops. Though Mary challenges the typical status quo of women through her pivotal participation in a male-centric scientific community, Roderick's patronizing behavior, both to Mary and Charlotte, reveal the "perpetually asymmetrical" relations of power that are fixed in this time period and that allow for only an "extremely limited margin of freedom," per Foucault's theory.[86] Rewriting history to account for and reimagine the narratives that portray hidden queer lives is exactly what hones in on the "limited margin of freedom," then challenges it, and expands it, creating a space for queer agency during a time of clearly asymmetrical power relations.

It is evident from the very second Roderick and Charlotte enter the shop that Mary wants nothing to do with them except for the money they are willing to pay for her services. In light of a lengthy geological expedition Roderick intends to embark on, Roderick stretches his favor to

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[85] Adrian Pennington, "Stéphane Fontaine AFC Reveals How He Created the Look for *Ammonite*," *Uniting Cinematographers Around the World: British Cinematographer*, December 1, 2020, https://britishcinematographer.co.uk/stephane-fontane-afc-reveals-how-he-created-the-look-for-ammonite/.
[86] Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 292.

ask Mary to be a mentor for Charlotte and take her on her morning shoreline walks. He explains she is suffering from "mild" melancholia, her doctor prescribed her "sea air," and she should get some rest and stimulation, so that he can get his "bright, funny, clever wife back," revealing his patriarchal privilege and authority.[87] Mary reluctantly agrees, more so for the price Roderick is willing to pay than for Charlotte's company. Though initially Mary dismisses Charlotte's disagreeable efforts at learning about her work or acquainting one another, Charlotte falls ill with a high fever after bathing in the ocean, leaving Mary with the job of taking care of her – "Miss Anning, it is a woman's position to care for a fellow sister, is it not?" asks the new, foreign doctor, Dr. Lieberson (Alec Secareanu). Dr. Lieberson calling Charlotte Mary's "fellow sister" nods at how women are perceived during this time period, for though the queer relationship between Charlotte and Mary isn't historically documented, it doesn't mean that it couldn't have happened. Instead, all women caring for women, and some later attracted to women, were considered "friends" or "fellow sisters" by the powerful, patriarchal, and/or heteronormative Other without batting an eye at the possibility that two women together could be anything more.

Up until this point, we see Mary as a distant and bitter character with ambiguous feelings, provoking detachment from viewers. What we do notice is her attention to detail and dedication to her work via her body language. One can only imagine that her jaded nature is a result of men taking all of the credit for her incredible findings in the paleontological field and leaving her with hardly any coins to scrape by. At about 34 minutes, we see Mary care for sickly Charlotte as she applies cold compresses to her forehead, then her arms, in a medium shot, framing the women in relatively close proximity. Charlotte whimpers, breathes heavily, and whimpers some more as she speaks in her nightmares. Mary, in a medium close up shot, closer now so that we can see in better detail her reactions to Charlotte, studies her and readjusts her forehead compress gently.

[87] Lee, Francis, dir. *Ammonite*. (Lyme Regis, West Dorset, England: British Film Institute, 2020).

In a scene that I will discuss in more depth later, Mary then goes to buy some salve for Charlotte's illness, an instrumental move unadvised by Dr. Lieberson. Upon her return, she rubs the salve together and warms it up before applying it to Charlotte's back and, rather intimately, her chest in a long shot of medium close ups on her careful hands. Lee insisted on showing Mary's hands in a closer frame, as it resonates with Mary's self-taught paleontologist job that requires careful manual labor with her hands.[88] Through the queer lens, however, such close up frames work in a romantic tangent with her rubbing the salve near Charlotte's breasts, indicating the potential presence of further intimacy between the women. It is important to note here that due to the intermediate scene wherein Mary goes to buy salve, the scene that I would call the inciting incident for the romantic narrative in *Ammonite* gets split in half, which is the scene where Mary cares for sick Charlotte. The inciting incident here, therefore, ends up morphing into more of an inciting moment that spans across a couple scenes due to the nature of its content; Charlotte must heal, which Lee must have decided cannot happen faster than a scene for purposes of realism.

At about 39 minutes, we see a medium close up profile shot of Mary looking at a sleeping Charlotte. These medium close ups that string through Mary's caring moments are some of the closest combination of shots we see of her thus far, at least in comparison to the distance that we often see Mary from. The way the shots are framed hint at the potential feelings Mary may be experiencing when considering opening herself up to someone new, aside from her constant working lifestyle. Through the queer lens, the closeness and angle of the shot of Mary looking at Charlotte this second time is just enough to indicate that something has changed in Mary's demeanor. Typically there is so much going on in Mary's mind that we never fully understand, but when Mary begins to sketch Charlotte in her sketchbook as she is resting, we become aware

[88] Pennington, "Stéphane Fontaine AFC Reveals How."

that Mary's acute attention to Charlotte hosts significantly more compassion than her previous bitterness towards her. At 40:42, Charlotte turns around in Mary's POV medium shot to look at Mary and faintly smiles, which hints through the queer lens that Mary's care is met with mutual appreciation that foreshadows Charlotte's attraction toward Mary.

We are additionally reassured this exchange of looks is meaningful, for in scenes past the inciting incidents, Charlotte brightens up, free from her husband's restraints, and smiles more often. Every subsequent gaze from Charlotte towards Mary beholds a sense of gratitude and contentment that is completely absent when in her husband's company. Though it is not immediately clear that these two women are attracted to one another, especially with such a disheartening exposition, the queer undertones of the tight-proximity medium close up shots amidst all of the further shots, along with the mutual exchange of gazes, support the presence of tension and desire that the queer lens unearths within the inciting incidents. The women are given the freedom to exercise agency in their explicitly male-dominated world, free from men in the frame and male attention or power. These choices display the women's "power" that exists aside from "the conventional marital structure of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," which often effaces agency and freedom from them, as is evident in Charlotte's relationship.[89] The act of agency lies within Mary exercising her freedom to "search those margins, gaps, and locations on and through the body where agency can be found," as she not just tends to a "fellow sister," but embraces the development of attraction and desire via the queer lens with said "sister."[90] With this freedom, Mary chooses to accept Charlotte as a new source of affection into her work-filled life that has been embittered from getting overlooked and ignored due to her social class and gender. It is important to note here, though, the general lack of POV shots, a facet of

[89] Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 292.
[90] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 116.

the queer lens, in *Ammonite*'s inciting incidents. The lack of these shots offers a potential reason as to why the queer tension between Mary and Charlotte remains as an attraction rather than true love, as we aren't given full access to embrace either protagonist's full perspective and instead detach as observers of Mary's ambiguous internal sentiments. Fontaine describes this choice as intentionally "quite observational," so as "not [to tell] the audience what to think or what they have to feel."[91] He does so almost too well, for the detached nature of the "observational" camera lessens the possibility of any deeper connection between the women.

Through a queer lens analysis, we are able to see how the looks, medium or closer shot framing, POV shots, and pacing unearths the first moments of budding romance between the two women protagonists in the inciting incidents of *Carol*, *Portrait*, and *Ammonite*. *Carol* features the enchantment between two women meeting for the first time in a not-so-typical customer service interaction, expressing the agency, as supported by Foucault and hooks, that the women were able to act on amidst the 1950s American setting that would have proclaimed any queerness as mental illness. *Portrait* deconstructs the typical power relations between painter and muse as Héloïse looks back at Marianne, as supported by Varda and hooks's notions on the feminist acts of looking, during Héloïse and Marianne's first walk together outside the castle. *Ammonite* offers a complicated look into Mary's troubled, reimagined yet repaired biographical past and addresses Mary's choice to embrace Charlotte into her life, exercising her agency to act with affectionate care for another woman in her otherwise overlooked and ignored life.

[91] Pennington, "Stéphane Fontaine AFC Reveals How."

Chapter 2 *The Queer Lens in Midpoints*

While the inciting incident first addresses queer desire and/or tension in period settings, as that is when the romantic story plot begins, per Syd Field's formulations, the midpoint further emphasizes the presence of the queer lens in the narratives, as the relationship between the women in my chosen period dramas becomes more solidified. The midpoint of a narrative is where the plot takes a different direction, offers viewers a new understanding, or fuels the fire that burns until the end of the movie. As the name suggests, the midpoint generally occurs near the middle of the movie. It is particularly significant for the queer lens analysis, as it offers new insight into the progress of each of the womens' relationships that has been building up to this point and changes the course of the rest of the narrative.

It is important to note here that for each movie that I analyze through the queer lens, there are different aspects of the narrative that subsequently impact the display of queer tension and desire. These differences come about as a result of the variety of ways of telling romance stories. For example, while the queer lens empowers the women's agency to entice their desires in all three movies of focus, *Carol* touches on the dichotomy of public versus private queer life, while *Portrait* touches on the dynamic of the observer and the observed via the painter and the muse, and *Ammonite* touches on the notion of being "hidden in plain sight," much like how the queer lens functions.

Immediately prior to the midpoint in *Carol*, Carol had just received news that her husband, Harge (Kyle Chandler), is petitioning the judge to consider a "morality clause" against her that would expose her homosexuality and give him full custody of their daughter, Rindy. Additionally, Therese had just had a conversation with her boyfriend, Richard (Jake Lacy), about if he has ever been in love with a boy, to which he scoffs, denies, and then elaborates that he has

heard of "people like that," and that "there's always some reason for [homosexuality] in the background." Therese questions, "So you don't think it could just happen to somebody, to anybody?" to which Richard disagrees, and barks, "What are you saying? Are you in love with a girl?" in an accusatory fashion. I elaborate on this prior scene, as it is very indicative of what "classic" love should have looked like in America in the 1950s. Richard and Therese seem like they know and like each other, but one more than the other. Richard, the more passionate one, wants to marry Therese very soon. We learn, however, they haven't slept together yet, nor dated that long, yet the scrutiny and judgment in Richard's voice when Therese asks about same-sex love is evident. Therese may have feelings for Carol, but with company like Richard's, she does not feel comfortable exploring them when he is constantly applying external pressure to marry him. In the face of Richard's "intense attentiveness," this scene demonstrates the "difficulty…of maintaining the illusion of having some coherent and consciously chosen personal identity," as Therese struggles navigating her own.[92] Carol has called her "flung out of space" before, addressing the "illusion" part, or in other words, the uncertain, queer identity part of the difficulty. It is evident, however, that Richard grapples with this "illusion," especially as he struggles truly understanding Therese due to his negligence and exasperation to her discussing sexuality ambiguously.

Since the time period for this film is Christmastime, it is the season to bring family and/or loved ones together to celebrate the holidays. Neither Carol nor Therese have a family they would want to go back to, yet they both feel pressure to join one. While Richard is counting on Therese to come with his family to celebrate Christmas in France, Harge forces and fails to convince Carol to come to his family's Christmas in Florida. Therese ends the scene on a

[92] Marta Figlerowicz, "Lesbian Photographers: Affect and Cinematic Self-Discovery," in *The Oxford Handbook of Film Theory*, ed. Kyle Stevens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

powerful note: “Richard, I am not ready for that. I cannot just make myself.” With such a strong stance on their relationship, Therese exercises agency to reject the status quo. Richard’s desires for Therese follow a typical heterosexual direction, which Therese defies when she glares at him in a fashion that demonstrates hooks’s formulation of the oppositional gaze and the agency of looking back: “Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.” And it *does*. In 1950s America, rejecting the heterosexual status quo for the interest of a queer desire changed the reality of Therese’s narrative and the reality of queerness at the time, especially when it had just been declared a mental disorder. This “stare” is a byproduct of the queer lens, as it contextualizes the agency that supports the queer lens in subsequent scenes. Even though the “stare” itself doesn’t convey desire at the moment, it does reveal a different sort of tension, not necessarily romantic but rather angry.

It is also worth noting that prior to the midpoint, Carol has a conversation with Abby (Sarah Paulson), her former partner in a relationship that has strengthened Harge’s suspicions about a romance between Carol and Therese. Carol brings up the morality clause to Abby, and Abby mentions a different woman she has been seeing (“a redhead”), which brings to light the seemingly underground queer scene in New York City during the 50s. When Carol brings up the idea of going west for a few weeks and hints at possibly taking Therese with her, Abby notes that Therese is young. She says to Carol, “Tell me you know what you’re doing.” Carol responds, “I don’t. I never did.” At this point, I would agree with critic Sheila O’Malley that, “Carol, ironically, is a stronger character when seen from a distance.”[93] I interpret “stronger” here as more “powerful,” which is evidenced by Carol being depicted as older, wealthier, and more sexually experienced than Therese. This factor may be attributed to the fact that the novel from which *Carol* was adapted was initially completely written from Therese’s perspective. *Carol*’s

[93] Sheila O’Malley, “Carol,” *RogerEbert.com*, November 20, 2015, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/carol-2015.

screenwriter, Phyllis Nagy, decided to incorporate scenes from Carol's perspective, though these scenes render Carol vulnerable, as the scene described above shows. Carol, then, is perceived as "stronger" or more "powerful" from Therese's perspective, as Therese remains mystified by Carol's "acts" and navigates the complications of falling in love with her. As O'Malley notes, "'Performing' is how Carol gets through her life, so every gesture is a 'bit': the way she lights a cigarette, or tosses her hair back, even the way she looks at Therese across the table."[94] If the age difference wasn't enough, these "bits" strengthen Carol's presence and exude a level of power that awes Therese and keeps Carol in this elevated position of power. The way she "looks at Therese" offers insight into the use of the queer lens that is empowered by her "acts" and "bits."

In showing scenes such as the one between Abby and Carol, this power relation is deconstructed: Carol may come off as calm and collected from the outside, but on the inside, she has no agenda for how to navigate her own feelings for Therese. This dichotomy actualizes the "mobile, reversible, and unstable" nature of power relations.[95] Foucault even uses age as an example of power relations, explaining that intimidation of the older individuals can just as easily be deconstructed by younger individuals, which directly relates to the breakdown of Carol's inherent power relation over Therese that we see long before Therese feels it too. When she does feel it too, scholar Marta Figlerowicz notes, "There is something open-ended and [non-tactical] about Carol's and Therese's swinging, unspoken mutual balances of power."[96] Figlerowicz, rather brilliantly, analyzes these "mutual balances of power" as such:

> Throbbing with potentiality, the film does not point to any single event or image as this potentiality's satisfying, climactic fulfillment. Instead, it allows its various forms of intensity to coexist with each other on the same plane: rather than simply build up to on

[94] O'Malley, "Carol."
[95] Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 292.
[96] Figlerowicz, "Lesbian Photographers."

> one major emotional and expressive climax, the film enjoys multiple small [semi-climaxes] one after the other, as if each one might be the final instance of partial connection Carol and Therese achieve and no further, definitive explanation of what they mean to each other might be found. In a sense, *Carol* thereby plays into the notion of female eroticism as defined by multiple centers of repeatable pleasure, rather than by a single phallic object poised toward a central moment of fulfillment.[97]

Within this "same plane" of intensity, it becomes evident that Therese is able to achieve an equal and mutual level of power to Carol. The most defining moment where such equality is met is after the midpoint, when Therese counters Carol, interjecting after Carol initially denies a discounted shared luxury suite while ordering a hotel room for the two of them on their road trip out west (more on the road trip later). The gaze they exchange after this destabilization of Carol's inherent powers suggests "their thrill…from the way they refuse to transform into more conventional expressions of affection or commitment," indicating a more feminine acceptance of becoming equals rather than an unsolicited breach of power.[98] Prior to that moment, however, we get to see the power relations deconstructed through Carol's vulnerability, as well as through the womens' "multiple small [semi-climaxes]" that reveal small parts of what they mean to each other. The simultaneous discovery of what the women mean to each other also adds onto that equal power relationship, as one is no more secure than the other in what their future together may look like. The deconstruction of these power relations and freedom to exercise agency are both goals of the queer lens analysis. These goals result from exhibiting queer tension and desire, despite all of the barriers that may make such a queer love unlikely, including age and status differences in *Carol*. Additionally, as we know from hooks, the looks are powerful in creating spaces for queer agency, especially if the looks are returned. While the queer lens is directly

[97] Figlerowicz, "Lesbian Photographers."
[98] Figlerowicz, "Lesbian Photographers."

identifiable in the midpoint scene, the scenes leading up to the midpoint are equally important in understanding the context where the queer lens can be applied.

The midpoint in *Carol*, both due to timing and plot direction change, is best assigned to the scene when Carol comes over to Therese, gifting her a suitcase full of film and a film camera to support her photography aspirations. The interaction is initially filmed behind a wall, in a way that feels like the camera is two rooms away from them, as the two women fit into a sliver of the frame. This framing of the wide shot creates an effect of peering into their lives from the outside, just as the relationship between Carol and Therese takes on such "outsider" status. Continuing to align with Haynes's visual direction to parallel Christmastime, Carol wears a red sweater, and Therese wears a soft green sweater, while Carol examines some of Therese's printed photos that she had hung up. Figlerowicz expands on the role of Therese's photography, which provides an additional layer to the queer lens. She notes that "photo cameras represent a hope of catching a portrait of [the characters'] desires and these desires' objects that could be definitively framed and labeled."[99] Therese's photo of Carol in her large mink coat and signature hat demonstrates this idea: Therese had captured a moment of her desire that could be "definitively framed and labeled," unlike their relationship.[100]

Returning to *Carol*, in the moment the photograph of Carol offers insight into Therese's desire, for the queer lens applies twofold here; not only do we see Therese's looks at Carol that convey desire through the movie camera, but we also see Therese capture her own look through her photography camera. This doubly emphasizes the dual function of the queer lens within the narrative, as it remains a tool not only for analyzing what went into making the film (shot

[99] Figlerowicz, "Lesbian Photographers."
[100] The "hope of catching a portrait of their desires" is paralleled in *Portrait*, except rather than through photo cameras, it's done through paints, brushes, and canvases. Not only does Marianne quite literally paint a portrait of Héloïse that will be "definitively framed and labeled" for her future husband, but she also sketches Héloïse in her sketchbook in hope of "catching" her desire. This notion of hope in capturing a desire more permanently is further supported in *Ammonite*, as Mary draws Charlotte in her notepads much like Marianne.

choices), but also the plot within the film (narrative choices) that both convey queer desires through careful shot selection and looks. When the next photo that Carol sees is one of Therese as a child, we are diverged from the queer lens to the other mother-based narrative that follows Carol's despair over the impending loss of custody of Rindy. Carol goes to sit down on Therese's couch, once again seen from behind a wall in a wide shot, and cries softly. Therese walks over quietly and puts her hand on Carol's shoulder in the same wide shot. Though Carol is initially startled, she rests her hand on Therese's, and we can assume that Carol updates Therese on the morality clause.

The next scene takes place on the rooftop, where Carol mentions that she plans to embark on a journey to the west, so that she can briefly escape the divorce settlements. Since the same characters are reintroduced with an assumed small time gap that accounts for a change in location, it is safe to say that the conversation that started inside Therese's apartment moves outside to the roof as a continuation of the midpoint scene. On the rooftop, Carol is once again in her signature red coat, foregrounding the intentional green shadow hues on the buildings around her in a medium shot, close in proximity though further than Therese's framing. This shot difference may contribute to Carol's presence that she often demands through her "acts," as O'Malley calls it in comparison to Therese's more quaint and delicate aura that is better felt up close. After a brief explanation of her road trip, she says rather than asks Therese, "And I thought perhaps, you might like to come with me." Therese, who was initially looking away, her profile shown in a medium close up shot, shoots her head immediately at Carol and looks at her with longing eyes, full of quiet surprise yet undeniable excitement. The intimate proximity to Therese's face in the medium close up allows us to fully observe her gaze of desire as she returns Carol's look. The dynamic of Carol standing during this invitation and Therese sitting and

therefore having to look up to Carol contributes to the power relations between the women, though Therese's longing eyes, per the queer lens, show nothing short of desire despite the power imbalance (that later equals out). The pacing between shots slows down as well with fewer cuts in between, further supporting the amount of time we spend feeling with and understanding both of the women's perspectives. Therese looks at Carol for over five seconds without any response or break in eye contact. The duration of her pause, emphasizing again the slowing down of pacing, gestures at Therese's pleasant bafflement and Carol's simultaneous hope. It also prompts Carol, still in that medium shot, to ask gently this time, "Would you?" Two beats later, Therese finally responds, "Yes. Yes I would," and accompanies it with a small yet meaningful smile. This conversation propels the rest of the movie into a road trip where the two women can truly explore themselves together, free of any homophobic and male-imposed restraints. Part of these restraints include "how their private life [later becomes] violently publicized so that Carol's adultery supposedly proves her an unworthy mother," which supports how public versus private life is a prominent theme in the movie.[101] We then can see that the queer lens can best be applied to the perspective of seeing the women exercise their queer agency in more private spaces while struggling with their sexualities in public spaces. For the first time, Carol and Therese are able to be truly alone to discuss these matters and make their road trip happen. Up until this point, the women would either meet in public spaces or get interrupted while spending time together. It's important to note, however, that the kind of agency that Carol and Therese are able to exercise in private spaces is different from the queer agency in public spaces that is often associated with queer progress as a result of moving from private to public visibility. This divergence may be attributed to the 1950s American setting that attempts to limit queer agency in public by claiming

[101] Wim Staat, "Todd Haynes' Melodramas of the Unknown Woman: *Far From Heaven, Mildred Pierce,* and *Carol*, and Stanley Cavell's Film Ethics," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 36, no. 6 (2019): 530, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10509208.2019.1593018.

queerness a mental disorder. In some ways, however, the queer agency in private is considered equally as "progressive" during this time period, as queer individuals may act on their desires regardless of the norm.

While the queer lens has a role in deconstructing clear power relations through its promotion of agency, particularly in private spaces in *Carol*, the queer lens in *Portrait* plays a similar role for power relations that affect the women's agency differently. Marianne and Héloïse's power relations lie in the dynamic between the artist and their muse. The artist holds power over the muse, as the muse becomes the artist's object of focus, setting up the dynamic of an observer and the observed. In the scenes leading up to the midpoint, the complex relationship between simply looking and being seen is held in tension through the queer lens. Around 46 minutes into the film, Marianne admits that she's a painter; while Héloïse appears very disappointed, she doesn't say much except that she will go for a swim. While most of her disappointment may be more clearly related to the lie that she believed, another part of her disappointment may be attributed to her bonding up to this point with Marianne. Marianne mentions she is scheduled to leave later that day. Why must she go, especially so soon? At the end of the scene, Marianne suggests returning to the castle, after Héloïse takes a dip in the ocean. Héloïse points out, "It explains all your looks," as she sits in a medium close up that reveals her shivering and her eyebrows slightly furled in a frown, but the edges of her lips curled up in a quaint smile.[102] The medium close up here maintains the undertones of intimacy in her remark about Marianne's looks, gesturing at the romantic tension that Héloïse felt as a result of Marianne's frequent gaze. It appears as though that while she obviously isn't happy about the news, she isn't surprised that she hasn't escaped her fate of betrothal. This indicates that Marianne was able to offer Héloïse some agency to feel a romantic tension from her looks,

[102] Sciamma, Céline, dir. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. (Saint-Pierre-Quiberon, Brittany, France: Lilies Films, 2019).

despite her lack of transparency, which is something Héloïse had not often experienced in her aristocratic, hegemonic, traditional life. Via the queer lens, Marianne had opened a door of possibilities for Héloïse.

When Héloïse first sees the portrait Marianne has painted of her, she realizes that while Marianne had only been able to "look" at Héloïse, she did not truly *see* her. While their dynamic may have taken a more romantic turn via the queer lens in the inciting incidents and every scene leading up to Marianne's reveal of the truth, at this point Héloïse realizes that Marianne's painting objective has prevented her from really understanding, seeing, and getting to know Héloïse. This is best demonstrated when Marianne explains to Héloïse, rather defensively, "Your presence is made up of fleeting moments that may lack truth." Marianne is centered in a medium close up shot wearing a red dress to contrast with her dark brown eyes and hair. The medium close up shows us Marianne's perspective during this important conversation, the shot proximity suggesting intimate tensions through the queer lens. Quickly cutting to a similarly centered, medium close up shot, we see Héloïse, wearing an emerald green dress that complements her blue eyes and blonde hair, as she responds, "Not everything is fleeting," and a few beats later, "Some feelings are deep." The pacing of this conversation, accompanied by the genuine sorrow both from Héloïse's solemn reactions and brief but touching dialogue, offer us time to understand the emotions both women are experiencing. The slowed pacing contributes to the impact of Héloïse's words as if Héloïse was saying, "I thought the feelings were mutual." After Héloïse leaves to fetch her mother, the Countess (Valeria Golino), it is most clear that Marianne's surface-level understanding from just looking rather than seeing Héloïse's whole self is not just detrimental to Héloïse, but to Marianne as well. In the same medium close up, we spend some close time with Marianne, who within the span of 15 seconds exhales shakily, rubs her forehead

in distress, grabs a cloth, and smudges the face off of the portrait right before the Countess comes to look at it. The Countess subsequently attempts to fire Marianne, but Héloïse, off-screen, decides, "She's staying," and adds, "I'll pose for her." Héloïse initially rejected becoming a subject to an unwanted portrait for an unwanted betrothal, feeling like a bird stuck in a cage of patriarchal expectations for women. Via the queer lens, however, Marianne was able to offer a new perspective of agency to explore both of their desires that would have otherwise been neglected by the repressive nature of the time period they live in. Marianne now has an additional five days to paint and truly *see* Héloïse before the Countess returns from her journey. Five days for them to be together, along with Sophie, the maid. While Héloïse may not be able to escape her fate with her future Milanese husband, and while Marianne must still do her due diligence for the Countess and paint Héloïse's portrait, the unobstructed five days together offer them at least some time to explore their true feelings, as we gather via the queer lens.

This scene sets us up for the true midpoint of the story, where the queer lens deconstructs the power relation between the observer and the observed, the painter and the muse. It is important to note that between this scene and the scene I will focus on more in-depth, we are taken through several other scenes that I will briefly touch upon for continuity purposes. Firstly, Marianne prepares a sectional on top of a low table where Héloïse is to sit and pose. Marianne directs Héloïse on how and where to sit verbally, and then physically helps move her arms into a better position. This scene offers context on the typical dynamic between an artist and their muse, with the artist demonstrating complete and higher power. Then, we are taken through several scenes where, after Sophie reveals to Marianne that she may be pregnant since she hasn't had her period for a while, the women help her abort the child through a series of old-fashioned

methods. These visuals and narrative choices reflect Sciamma's attention to feminine needs and experiences unobstructed by male dominance or power.

At around 1 hour into the film, Marianne and Héloïse are sitting in a wide medium shot at a table, lit by a singular candle. The wide medium shot places the women a respectful distance apart; not too close, yet not too far. Héloïse asks if Marianne has had to have an abortion before, to which Marianne solemnly says yes, and to which Héloïse concludes that she must have known love. Héloïse asks what love is like, and "How does it feel?" but Marianne never responds, or never has a chance to, for Sophie passes out from one of their abortion methods.[103] This interaction is coupled with a scene, where after putting Sophie to bed, Marianne watches Héloïse sleep. The shot is beautiful: a tight medium shot – suggesting intimacy in a very close proximity – with Marianne sitting upright, still in her red dress, gazing at Héloïse who is laying down to the left of Marianne, parallel with the bed frame, still wearing her green dress. The room is lit warmly from a diegetic fireplace and several candles. Marianne grabs a sketchbook, and begins to sketch Héloïse while she is sleeping, until Héloïse wakes up. Marianne smiles at her gently in a medium close up, exuding the effect of being up close and personal, and Héloïse smiles back in a medium close up, equally up close and personal. Filmmaker and film critic Ren Jender's sentiments resonate clearly with this scene: "The woman who is being looked at must look back at the woman (or the camera) looking at her for any real connection to take place. And the look she gives has to be one that communicates not only pleasure in being looked at, but pleasure in what she sees."[104] Along with the romantic, candle-lit, warm ambiance of the mise-en-scène, the

[103] Marianne and Héloïse had Sophie hang from the ceiling by her arms, drink some abortifacient herbal tea, and continue hanging from the ceiling. This was after they had made her run back and forth on the beach in an attempt to terminate Sophie's unwanted pregnancy.
[104] Jender, "'Portrait of a Lady on Fire' Understands Queer Desire."

gentle smiles and gazes at each other in the tight frames relay exactly the pleasure of being both looked at and looking. To answer Héloïse's question, this is what budding love feels like.[105]

Now to the true midpoint scene of *Portrait*. From a medium close up of Marianne's sketch of Heloise sleeping, the scene cuts into a medium close up of Marianne's in progress painting of Héloïse, the same type of shot edited as a parallel scene transition. Then, we see a medium close up, now serving to bring us to a more personal level, of Marianne, frustrated as she says, "I can't make you smile. I feel I do it and then it vanishes." Her red dress is bright from the diegetic natural light that glistens a soft blue on her dark hair. The red contrasts the blue hues of the pastel, wooden background and the blurry white canvas in the foreground. Héloïse responds, "Anger always comes to the fore." She's in a full medium, centered though much further away from the camera, exuding much less intimacy in comparison to Marianne's medium close up, as if to assert that she is the subject of observation from Marianne's POV. To continue with this line of analysis, the more distant the shot (medium), the less intimacy we gather through the queer lens, and the less power we visualize in the artist/muse dynamic; au contraire, the closer the shot (medium close up), the more intimacy we feel from a queer lens analysis, and the more power we sense in such a dynamic.

The window panes at either side of the zoomed out, distant shot reveal green hues that echo Héloïse's emerald green dress. The pastel, cyan-washed wooden background stands out with a few horizontal auburn wood panels, matching the color of the box that Heloise rests her

[105] It's important to note here that, in *Ammonite*, while Mary also sketches Charlotte sleeping around 40 minutes in, their connection feels a little less electric, further solidifying my hypothesis that their romantic connection is closer to that of attraction to each other rather than love. Along with the drab, window-lit, diegetic lighting, Mary and Charlotte are framed in a medium shot that looks more observational than personal, suggesting a different kind of desire through the queer lens. When Charlotte turns around in bed to meet Mary's eyes, Mary deflects her gaze nervously, which albeit still suggests a romantic fluster, but nonetheless a shallower connection than that between Marianne and Héloïse. This relative shallowness between them may also be attributed to the lack of shared smiles upon making eye contact, which unclearly communicates "not only pleasure in being looked at, but pleasure in what she sees," to use Jender's criteria for "real connection."

arm on. The setting of this scene is so thoughtful in color choices and spatial arrangement, that it looks like a filmic painting within itself. Their skin has a "texture that [suggests] an oil painting," as cinematographer Claire Mathon sought "softness, with no hard shadows," to achieve "a slightly satiny and non-realistic result that remains natural and extremely living," as the color was detailed and heightened.[106] Mathon mentions that, "The film look enhanced the cyan that I liked very much in balance with the red and green dresses."[107] The choice to shoot digitally, furthermore, creates a "contemporary echo" to the film, as Mathon and Sciamma aimed to "[re-invent] and [enhance] our 18th century image to current realities."[108] Along with tremendous attention and time to perfect and control the lighting, all of these cinematographic elements contribute to what I believe gives the queer period piece its cinematic value, as it is visually successful in transporting us into a painting in both its filmic and narrative state.[109] Scholar Madeleine Pelling describes it as such: "Self-conscious of its own cinematic form throughout, the film's concern with the processes and spaces by which queer women make art is twofold and extends beyond Marianne's canvas to Sciamma's screen."[110] Pelling's meta-analysis of the advanced and thoughtful artistry within the scene and on-screen from both of the queer artists

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[106] Chris O'Falt, "'Portrait of a Lady on Fire' Cinematography: The Perfect 18th Century Digital Painting," *IndieWire*, February 28, 2020, https://www.indiewire.com/features/craft/portrait-of-a-lady-on-fire-cinematography-claire-mathon-celine-sciamma-1202214143/.

[107] O'Falt, "The Perfect 18th Century Digital Painting."

[108] O'Falt, "The Perfect 18th Century Digital Painting."

[109] I use the term "cinematic" to mean ingenious and craftful filmmaking, as the term tends to carry praise. The term itself, however, is thick with myriad meanings, ranging from just indicating a visual medium is simply "filmic" to identifying the features of the film that are characteristic of its visual success. Film philosopher Aaron Smuts summarizes "cinematic" as a cluster of characteristics in films that include the following: "expansive scenery, extreme depth of field, high camera positioning, and elaborate tracking shots" (4). See more about the discourse on the term "cinematic" in Aaron Smuts, "Cinematic," *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 23, no. 46 (October 2013): 78-95, https://doi.org/10.7146/nja.v23i46.16383.

[110] Madeleine Pelling, "Recentering Peripheral Queerness and Marginal Art in Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019)," *Humanities* 10, no. 73 (May 2021): 13, https://doi.org/10.3390/h10020073.

support my stance on its cinematic value and experience of the film as a "physical record of queer lives."[111]

"Definitely with you," Marianne responds immediately from off-screen in response to Héloïse's comment about anger coming to the fore. We see Heloise react physically to this comment, as she inhales deeply. Then, we cut straight back to the powerful yet intimate medium close up of Marianne, standing confidently in the center of the frame, canvas now out of the frame, as she responds, "I didn't mean to hurt you." Cutting back to Héloïse in the same centered medium shot as before, still distanced and therefore less powerful and intimate in comparison, she casts her gaze to the floor in front of her. She wipes her lips with her hand, and not very reassuringly, insists, "You haven't hurt me." From off-screen again, we hear Marianne say, "I have, I can tell." We are still looking at Héloïse while Marianne continues, "When you're moved, you do this with your hand." Héloïse bites her lip before responding, "Really?" to which Marianne immediately says, "Yes," and as she does, we cut back to Marianne, still in a powerful and closer medium close up frame, who after a long, intentional pause, adds, "And when you're embarrassed, you bite your lips." We then cut back to Héloïse, who finds herself presently biting her lip, still in her less powerful medium shot, observed and posing in Marianne's POV. Her gaze back at Marianne appears closer to a glare at this point. That's when Marianne off-screen continues, "And when you're annoyed, you don't blink." Héloïse, rather unamused, responds, "You know it all."

At this point, we can tell that Marianne has carefully studied her muse, Heloise, as granted by the objective of her stay. She presumes her power over Héloïse as the observer who has described the tendencies of the observed. We cut back to Marianne again as she tells Héloïse, "Forgive me, I'd hate to be in your place." Héloïse, however, responds off-screen, "We're in the

[111] Pelling, "Recentering Peripheral Queerness," 13.

same place," and then on-screen, breaking her posed position in favor of sitting upright with her hands on her lap, "Exact same place." This dialogue and the physical disruption of her posed positioning presupposes a significant shift in the power relations; as Foucault reminds us, the nature of power relations are "mobile, reversible, and unstable."[112] Héloïse, exercising agency over the power of her returning gaze, urges the painter, Marianne, "Come here. Come," insisting on a role reversal. Marianne timidly approaches Heloise from off-screen and is prompted to step closer to Héloïse, as Héloïse gives her positioning directions much like a painter would. "Look," Héloïse says, nodding her head in the direction of the canvas. In a medium shot, the same as Héloïse's distanced, observed position, we now see the two of them equally observed, equally framed, and thereby equal to each other as a result of the queer lens deconstructing these power relations.

The women lock eyes briefly, the green-dressed blonde sitting, and the red-dressed brunette standing right next to her. As soon as Marianne looks in the direction Héloïse tells her to, the camera begins to smoothly move in closer through a tracking shot, as Héloïse says, as she looks at Marianne, "If you look at me, who do I look at?" The camera continues to move in closer and closer, as Marianne deflects her gaze elsewhere, presumably conflicted at this deconstruction of the innate power relations between her role and Héloïse's. The zoom stops at a medium close up of the two women: the same, intimate and powerful shot that first framed Marianne in the role of the observer. That's when Héloïse begins to list the things *she* has observed about Marianne.

As Marianne touches her forehead, signaling confusion or disbelief, Héloïse notes, "When you don't know what to say, you touch your forehead." Marianne shoots a look of surprise at Héloïse, raises her eyebrows slightly, then glances back at the direction of the canvas

[112] Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 292.

at the place where she once had more power, and gently smiles.[113] Héloïse continues, "When you lose control, you raise your eyebrows." Marianne, dropping her smile, deflects her eyes away from the canvas, unsure of what to say. She lets her eyes lead her back to Héloïse's face, glancing at her lips, as Héloïse adds, "And when you're troubled, you breathe through your mouth." By using Marianne's tactics directly against her, Héloïse makes it clear that while Marianne has been observing every aspect of Héloïse, Héloïse has, too, been observing every aspect of Marianne.[114] The acute attention both Marianne and Héloïse share at one another, made evident at this midpoint scene by their dialogue, unearths a queer form of desire. Sciamma's choice to build up to this scene through POV shots of looks and gazes prior to having the women express verbally how much these looks and gazes mean to them indicates an effective showing of queer desire, rather than telling, until the time is right. That time is not only when the women are alone, but also at the midpoint of the film, which efficaciously signals the shift in the romantic dynamic between them that continues until the end of the film. The queer lens, then, reveals that the gaze the women share right after this dialogue is one filled with palpable tension, as they

[113] This gentle smile may be attributed to Marianne's acceptance of their equivalence. Given Héloïse's dialogue after this gesture, however, Marianne's smile is perhaps better interpreted as one of confusion, uncertainty, and disbelief. While these mixed feelings may appear outwardly as a sign of loss of control from Marianne's more powerful position, I would argue that they may just as well feature Marianne grappling with her feelings, or queer desires, toward Héloïse.

[114] Filmmaker and film critic Ren Jender would maintain here that, "To be a woman is to observe others observing you." This is important to consider during this deconstruction of power relations between artist/muse, for it demonstrates that both women are equipped to observe the observing eye, regardless of any women/women power dynamic differences. See more in Ren Jender, "'Portrait of a Lady on Fire' Understands Queer Desire," *New York Times*, December 9, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/09/opinion/portrait-of-a-lady-on-fire.html.

reach an equal level of power.[115] The women lock eyes, with no dialogue or sound, for a lengthy 6 seconds, occasionally glancing at each other's lips.

In her experience of first seeing this scene, *Medium* writer Nicola de Vera was convinced that the two would "finally kiss," though, as she wrote, "Just when we are lured in by the undeniable chemistry and seduction of it all, Céline Sciamma pulls the rug from underneath us, as if saying, 'Not yet.'"[116]According to YouTube host Michael Tucker, initially it was this moment in *Portrait* where Céline Sciamma was going to have the women kiss for the first time, but rather than releasing the tension, they held onto it and let it build.[117] Mathon mentioned in an interview that,

> Filming the dialectic of gazes, the force of attraction between the two women, was one of the subjects of my work. I had to try to be a camera that looks, that peers and to always find the correct centering of the faces within the frame. Céline [Sciamma] wanted to

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[115] To elaborate further on sexual equality, actress Kate Winslet spoke on her experience as a reimagined queer Mary Anning working with actress Saoirse Ronan's Charlotte Murchison in an *Ammonite* cast interview. She mentioned, rather interestingly, "I've filmed intimate scenes before, but mostly with male actors – and it suddenly occurred to me that there is an automatic power dynamic that comes into play when doing that type of scene with a man. As a woman, you assume the man will take the reins, or steer the energy of the scene, and you as the female character will be 'taken' in some way. I realized that I have allowed myself to be that taken one. It's been absolutely fine, I've been perfectly comfortable with it – but to be in a situation with Saoirse where it was utterly equal, it made me feel kind of angry at how that hasn't occurred to me before. Why shouldn't I have felt equal to my male counterparts? And that's the way society is, and now we have to make a noise about…wanting to be equal, about deserving to be equal." Winslet's take on the inherent equality between two women in intimate moments, both on-screen and in reality, offers insight into the importance of the queer lens. She unearths the preconceived notions of male dominance when it comes to intimacy that she had never questioned before, offering us a different perspective on the many ways in which power relations manifest, and thereby the many ways to which the queer lens resists these manifestations. See "Press Kit: Ammonite, A Film by Francis Lee," The British Film Institute, British Broadcasting Corporation and Fossil Films Limited, 2022, https://my.romacinemafest.org/media/6979/ammonite_production-notes_final_29042020.pdf.

[116] Nicola de Vera, "An Ode to the Cinematic Masterpiece, 'Portrait of a Lady on Fire,'" *Medium*, February 7, 2024, https://medium.com/counterarts/an-ode-to-the-cinematic-masterpiece-portrait-of-a-lady-on-fire-e0f19e3476e0. Given her queer identity, it is interesting to also note how she described, "So while our desires are already at elevated levels from this emotionally charged scene, we continue to wait, trusting that the pay-off will be worth it." Her choice of saying "our desires" indicates that not only does the queer lens tool for analysis offer meaningful impacts from viewing queer desires on-screen to a queer audience, but it is also generally impactful in offering any sexually-identifying audience an understanding of the feeling of queer desire and tension, as evidenced by her general use of "our."

[117] Lessons from the Screenplay, "How Good Filmmaking Brings a Script to Life," YouTube Video, 16:32, May 27, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5S4PyBR364.

> make this proximity palpable. We had to look at these faces and [try] not to frame them. To be with them.[118]

Sciamma and Mathon achieved such a visual experience of "being" with the women by allowing their camera to "linger, almost as if reading the actresses' thoughts and desires."[119] This directly relates to the queer lens' facet of pacing and its importance in offering us time to process the queer "thoughts and desires" between the women through their looks, expressions, and body language. Mathon's intention of trying "to be a camera that looks, that peers" resonates with one of the ways that the gaze functions in cinema, per Mulvey's formulations. Rather than a male filmmaker looking through the camera "as it records the pro-filmic event," Sciamma works with a female cinematographer, Mathon, to garner a feminine perspective that would best suit the dynamic between the women.[120] Mathon's tight, medium/medium close up framing and strategic centering of the women exude non-objectifying and unobtrusive intimacy from its "palpable proximity," doubly supported by shot analysis from the queer lens and Mathon's stated goals. After all, though Marianne is rendered vulnerable when Héloïse looks at her with the same confidence that Marianne once had, she is neither helpless nor powerless. Instead, "the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange," as Foucault theorizes, prioritizing the two-way fluidity of such a dynamic rather than that of a new power relationship.[121]

Marianne walks away from the frame, back to her canvas, and the camera recenters and zooms a little closer in on Héloïse, suggesting that while Héloïse is aware of her role as a subject, she has now visually reclaimed her power through the queer lens. Here, the Foucauldian notion that "liberation paves the way for new power relationships" proves to be true in the form of

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[118] O'Falt, "The Perfect 18th Century Digital Painting."
[119] O'Falt, "The Perfect 18th Century Digital Painting."
[120] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 68.
[121] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 4-5.

liberation that offers agency to the women to feel and act the way they wish to against the patriarchal constraints of the eighteenth century and as equals to one another.[122] The last shot of the scene, from Héloïse's POV, is Marianne once again behind the canvas, but this time the furthest we have seen her yet in a wide shot, more distanced than when we first saw Héloïse, revealing more details in her surroundings than we had seen prior. This visual exaggeration re-emphasizes the total shift in the artist/muse power dynamic, directly contrasting with the powerful medium close up of Marianne that the scene started with. Given that this scene is at the midpoint of the film, rendering the women equals via a destruction of power relations offers a new lens through which we see the women until the end of the film.

Similarly, in the midpoint scene of *Ammonite*, we begin to understand the gravity of Mary's feelings for Charlotte, which up until this point had been rather ambivalent and unassuming. There are a few key scenes worth mentioning due to their function of elevating the importance and understanding of the queer lens in the midpoint prior to discussing what I believe the midpoint scene in depth. We first see Charlotte cleaning Mary's mother's white porcelain figurines that represent each one of her dead children. In a way, Charlotte's interaction with these mirrors her own despair over the loss of her own child, which is never explicitly stated but often hinted at. At this point in history, the typical duties for women consisted of marriage, taking care of the home, and raising their children, so Charlotte fundamentally felt like a failure and alone more than ever. Protective over her "children," Molly interrupts Charlotte's efforts and takes her figurines away. Then, right after Mary enters to check in if something's wrong, Dr. Lieberson enters with an invitation for Mary to a musical evening. He mentions, "I thought after all your

[122] Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 283-284; In addition to the theme and filmmaking techniques that portray equality, Sciamma told *The New York Times* that she wanted "the 'cinematic equality' of casting women who were the same height and age" as a visual reinforcement of equality. See more in Elizabeth A. Harris, "How 'Portrait of a Lady on Fire' Sees Power in Two Women in Love," *The New York Times*, February 13, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/movies/portrait-lady-fire-celine-sciamma.html.

work with Mrs. Murchison, you might like a little treat." Mary, however, displeased with Dr. Lieberson's exclusivity, responds, "What about Mrs. Murchison?" and proceeds to explain that "Mrs. Murchison appreciates music much more than I do. Where's her invitation?" Mary's questioning gestures outwardly, for the first time, that she cares for Charlotte and appreciates her company, suggesting an affectionate development in her otherwise stoic nature. Halfway through Mary's dialogue, the camera cuts to a medium close up of Charlotte, who is still sitting at the table where she had been cleaning the figurines. Through the queer lens, the medium close up offers us a closer, more intimate proximity to Charlotte, as she longingly gazes at Mary, the corners of her lips curling into a small smile. From Charlotte's brief glances at Dr. Lieberson and extended gaze at Mary, we may deduce that Mary's grand gesture is a significant step in their relationship towards something more romantic than just a friendship.

Mary continues, "I would naturally be accompanied by Mrs. Murchison in her own right. Do you not think?" to which Dr. Lieberson immediately responds, rather taken aback, "Yes," and takes a beat before adding, "I just thought given Mrs. Murchison's condition, this might prove a little…overstimulating." Mary shoots back, resisting the typical power relation between a doctor and a working class member, "Rubbish." Recognizing Mary's rejection of the status quo, especially as a woman, Dr. Lieberson adds, "As her doctor, I would strongly advise against it," but Mary asserts her relationship with Charlotte, as she replies, "And as her friend, I disagree." During this conversation, we cut back and forth in medium close up shots of Dr. Lieberson and Mary as they speak. The queer lens still applies since the medium close ups bring us to acknowledge the doctor and Mary more intimately, and as a product of the tool's analysis, Mary is able to deconstruct the inherent power relations between her and Dr. Lieberson. The difference, however, lies in the dialogue and Charlotte's look at Mary. While Mary and Dr.

Lieberson make eye contact, Mary's look at the doctor serves more as an act of resistance against Dr. Lieberson's romantic pursuit than as a look of mutual intrigue, as supported by her clear and succinct dialogue. This resistance is further supported by Charlotte's gazes at Mary, for after every few shot-reverse-shots between the doctor and Mary, we get an establishing shot of all three of them that reveals Charlotte smiling and gazing up at Mary, her look supporting the presence of a queer desire.

After Mary's staunch disagreement, we then cut back to a medium close up of Charlotte, once again the frame's closeness suggesting intimacy, but this time she casts her gaze elsewhere. Hooks considers this significant, for those who choose to stop looking may do so as a "gesture of resistance, [for] turning away was one way to protest, to reject negation."[123] Charlotte's act of looking away from the conversation signals her exercising her agency "to protest" and "to reject" the male supremacy from the doctor's belittling vernacular. He puts down Charlotte in front of her, calling the musical evening "overstimulating" for her, even though she is no longer ill, as a way of assuming the "traditional ideas of femininity associated with softness, being delicate, and docile."[124] In this manner, the queer lens is an articulation of the oppositional gaze, as both maintain a "power in looking" and the look's possibility to open up agency, even if the diverged look is an act of resistance.[125] The agency to give oneself the right to look or divert a look as a form of resistance holds true for individuals who have faced historical oppression and lack of media representation, whether that be Black people, queer people, or women.

"Dr. Lieberson, I will happily attend your recital," Mary continues in the same medium close up as before, "But with Mrs. Murchison." Dr. Lieberson, less interested in the married Charlotte than in the unmarried Mary, has no choice but to agree. Throughout this conversation,

[123] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 121.
[124] Johri, "Francis Lee's Period Film *Ammonite*," 94.
[125] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 116.

while Charlotte exercised her agency to look away, Mary unfalteringly stares at Dr. Lieberson, hardly breaking eye contact. This supports hooks's feminist stance that not only will she stare, her look will change reality.[126] In many ways, Mary's look changes the reality of the status quo, the patriarchal expectations for women at the time, and the inherent power relations between the doctor and the woman scientist. The queer lens supports Mary's agency to reclaim her power and female sociability despite all of the disadvantages stacked against her.

In the next scene before the midpoint, Mary enters the room where Charlotte's getting ready. She's framed in a close up shot, so we feel closer to her despite her stoic expression. From Mary's POV, Charlotte's smiling back at her and gestures to the back of her untied corset. In the same long take, Mary enters from the foreground as the camera follows her into the room and then focuses on Mary's careful hands as they tie Charlotte's corset – once again paralleling the manual labor that her job requires.[127] The next shot features Charlotte in the foreground and Mary looking at Charlotte's back in a medium close up shot, still stoic yet thoughtful. The layering of the women with Charlotte in front and Mary behind tighten the proximity of the women, indicating a heightened sense of intimacy. From the layered shot, we cut to a profile shot of the two, still at a medium close up, but this time exposing the intimate proximity from a different angle. Charlotte turns around and smiles at Mary, who then in her own shot, returns a very small smile, which is a significant indicator of mutual desire given Mary's usual flat expressions. Charlotte offers some perfume to Mary, the two locking eyes throughout the process, gesturing at a queer tension. Actress Kate Winslet, who plays Mary, mentioned in a cast Q&A when talking about what interests each woman about each other, "The way she smells, of perfume and nice fabrics…it's not Mary's world at all. There's an intoxicating aroma that

[126] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 116.
[127] Pennington, "Stéphane Fontaine AFC Reveals How."

follows Charlotte, and for Mary it's something very new – something that she's never imagined she'd stand that close to."[128] As both women share fascination in one another, a sense of mutual attraction feels palpable. The scene proceeds without dialogue, indicating that nothing needs to be said for their budding romance to be felt. All of the "talking" is done through POV and medium close up shots, facets of the queer lens that filmically relay queer desire.

In the scene directly before the midpoint, we see Mary and Molly in an establishing shot sitting at the kitchen table.[129] Then, Charlotte comes in, framed in a personal medium close up, fully dressed and hair made up. We cut to Mary in a shot somewhere between a medium close up and a close up (for the sake of simplicity, I will call it a close up shot), as she turns from her profile almost towards the camera, looking up at Charlotte. This shot emphasizes Mary's gaze at Charlotte. Tightening up Mary's frame forces viewers to take a more intimate and subjective perspective that speaks for Mary, allowing us to interpret her underlying feelings amidst her ambiguous nature. This tight close up shot is repeated a few times: first we see Charlotte's medium close up, then the close up of Mary; then another medium close up of Charlotte, this time making eye contact with Mary, before back to the close up of Mary; then a further medium shot that reveals more of Charlotte's dress, as Charlotte glances at her dress before back at Mary with a smile. After we get to see more of Charlotte's dress, Mary, in her close up shot still, opens her mouth a bit, demonstrating her awe and desire in Charlotte's appearance. Then, after one more cut back to a medium close up of a smiling Charlotte, we see perhaps the biggest smile from Mary in her close up shot. The back and forth editing in this scene illustrates the tension rising between the women, as if each shot emphasizes a look that stacks and stacks on the

[128] "Press Kit: Ammonite, A Film by Francis Lee," 10.
[129] This scene is arguably a continuation of the last scene since at the very end of the scene right before, Molly calls Mary over to the kitchen from off-screen. Therefore, this scene, now in the kitchen, could be considered a continuation, as Mary and Molly are both at the kitchen table.

building of desire. The queer lens applies here as well, for the combination of POV, medium and closer shots exude queer desire in a quicker-paced scene that flashes back and forth between each look. Except for Charlotte, who we see glance at her dress and back at Mary, as if to show her childlike excitement about their outing together, Mary's eyes never leave Charlotte, further solidifying her attraction to her. Molly, the only other character in the scene, isn't shown past the establishing shot, except for a hint of her hair in the foreground – this moment is to be singled out and shared just between Mary and Charlotte.

There is one more important scene that gives important context to the midpoint scene and context to the queer landscape in 1840s England. Before the inciting incident, we are introduced to a wide shot of Mary entering somebody's garden oasis. We learn that Mary has come to visit a friend, Elizabeth Philpot (Fiona Shaw), who remains unnamed for the duration of the scene. During this interaction, Mary is timid and closed in, constantly avoiding eye contact, visually insisting that she is only coming to visit Elizabeth to complete her objective, which is to purchase salve for sick Charlotte. When Elizabeth offers Mary to come inside her home, we can safely surmise they must be friends. When Elizabeth says, "I like your hair longer. It suits you," however, we are hinted at a history between the two women that was perhaps romantic. This, followed up by Elizabeth's "You know you can always ask me for help," and "You sure you don't want to come in?" in a dialogue-driven scene solidifies suspicions of a romantic history between the women and exemplifies an instance where the queer lens reveals a different kind of tension present between the women, a tension between two former lovers. Based on Elizabeth's everlasting care for Mary and Mary's subsequent neglect, we may also surmise that it had been Mary who must have ended their relationship. We see this as Elizabeth maintains eye contact in medium over the shoulder shots, while Mary casts her glance elsewhere, as if to suggest, in

adaptation of hooks's notion of looking away as an act of resistance, that if Mary "looked too deep," her encounter with her former love would hurt.[130] Medium shots often offer a sense of intimacy when two queer characters are in a frame together; the over the shoulder camera blocking, however, creates a sense of distance between the women instead, visually indicating that the character in the foreground is far enough from the character in the frame for it to capture half of their body alone. This scene provides important insight to Mary's past, as we get a glimpse of romantic complexity that may not have been evident otherwise and demonstrates her previous experiences not only with women, but also with opening up her heart to other people and things aside from her mother and her job, respectively. Mary does not mention Charlotte once, letting Elizabeth believe that it is her mother who needs the salve. The fact that Mary is keeping Charlotte to herself, as evidenced by her unreciprocated gaze, is something that may be attributed to Mary's early stages of attraction and care toward Charlotte.

The midpoint scene begins with a brief shot outside the music venue before Mary and Charlotte go inside. Charlotte reaches for Mary's hand, and a close up shot singles out Mary and Charlotte holding hands. This gesture marks a way in which the queer lens applies to a close up shot that shows desire through a different, more physical outlet than a look or a gaze. When inside, Mary and Charlotte are featured in their own medium shot in the corner, apart from the rest of the conversations and party, the shot's proximity supporting their intimacy.[131] Mary doesn't know quite what to do or say, her hair sloppily made up with far less extravagant dress than Charlotte's; she feels like an outcast. Charlotte, on the other hand, is familiar with such settings, and it shows; it's evident she's just near nervous Mary to keep her company.

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[130] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 121.

[131] Since this scene has the same characters going through the same situation just in different rooms, including an exterior to interior shift, each new location is considered a "continuous" part of the same scene in screenwriting. See Field, *Screenplay*, 2005.

When Dr. Lieberson approaches the women, he offers to introduce Mary to some of the guests, but Mary rejects him and asks for the ladies' room. The doctor then helps Charlotte integrate into the conversations among the guests – one of whom happens to be Elizabeth. In another continuous part of the same scene, we see that Mary did not go to the ladies' room; instead, she was having a smoke outside, perhaps to relieve her anxieties from such a setting, though also perhaps to avoid Elizabeth's presence inside. Back inside again, she is the first to her seat, situating herself in the back of the musical room as evidenced by the wide shot with rows of chairs in front of her. She is nervous, as we can see her tug on her dress sleeves. She sits in a chair not only farthest from the musicians, but also nowhere particularly near another seat, paralleling her visual status as an outsider. The interior is warmly lit diegetically by a candle and a projector, which contribute to the "unpolished texture" of the film look, with "vintage-style color rendition and skin tones," darker to resonate with the gloomy themes of isolation and detachment.[132]

Dr. Lieberson rings a bell, and announces, "Ladies, gentlemen, new friends. Please do take your seats as we are about to begin." This dialogue is significant because the doctor's addition of "new friends" rather than simply grouping his "new friends" Mary and Charlotte into the "ladies" category indicates that the two warrant a category of their own, suggesting that they are already labeled as "different" from the rest of the crowd at the forefront of the musical evening. The aristocratic ladies and gentlemen pile into the musical room, filling up the first few rows. Charlotte is among them, as she is captured in a medium close up following Elizabeth into the room, the two in intimate proximity. We cut to Mary's centered medium close up shot, taking her perspective in watching Charlotte's actions. Charlotte continues to walk to the front row in the same shot, as a woman says, "Do sit here." While the film's subtitles vaguely suggest that it's

[132] Pennington, "Stéphane Fontaine AFC Reveals How."

simply a woman's voice that says the dialogue, we can infer that it is Elizabeth beckoning Charlotte to sit next to her. This inference is supported by the reverse shot of Mary ever-so-slightly leaning back into her chair, her expression remains stoic as always with only a singular blink to suggest her disbelief. We cut back to a medium shot of Charlotte, covered by other aristocrats in the foreground from Mary's perspective, as she smiles at Mary and takes a seat next to Elizabeth, unaware of their past partnership. Charlotte's eye contact with Mary re-emphasizes her care and affection for Mary, though due to its briefness and the framing with a conflict of interest, the queer lens suggests a complication in relaying desire rather than its facets promoting such desire. Very faintly, we hear Elizabeth say, "This is marvelous," in total ignorance of Mary's presence in the far back. The reverse shot of Mary centered in the same medium close up brings us back to assess her sentiments about the events unfolding in front of her. Her mouth slightly gaping open, we see her realize that Elizabeth is chatting it up and flirting with Charlotte. How might she be able to tell? Not only are the women nestled right next to each other, but even from behind, Mary can see Elizabeth making frequent eye contact with Charlotte. These signs and gestures hint at the signs of queer intimacy that may be picked up by any other queer individual, even though these instances are transported to the nineteenth century in *Ammonite*.[133] We then cut to the same wide shot of Mary all the way in the back of the room, only now it is filled with guests, musicians, and Charlotte blurred in the foreground. The distance between Charlotte and Mary is tangible in this shot, revealing their social class and status differences.

[133] Clinical psychologist Dr. Frankie Bashan, a "renowned relationship coach and dating expert," notes in her article on lesbian flirting that eye contact, smiles, and proximity, among other things, are effective ways of flirting among queer individuals. This is important to note, for some of her outlined methods may have been used amongst queers in historical time periods, such as how we see it in Francis Lee's *Ammonite*. On contemporary lesbian flirting, see Frankie Bashan, "Lesbian Flirting: How to Do It and How to Recognize It," *Little Gay Book*, April 16, 2019. https://littlegaybook.com/lesbian-flirting/.

From Mary's perspective, the camera sits a few rows behind Charlotte and Elizabeth, framing them in a wide medium close up shot with some guests in the foreground. Charlotte and Elizabeth sit rather closely together as they talk softly. In one sequence, we see Mary looking at their interaction, tangibly nervous, as we focus on her personal, centered medium close up shot. This then cuts back to the wide shot of the whole room, where we notice Mary shuffling her hands, which then cuts to Dr. Lieberson in his own close up shot, the camera framing him from behind to show how he's turning back to look at Mary. His clear close up from behind visually opposes the lack of clarity of Charlotte due to distance and other guests blocking as Mary attempts to observe her. This insinuates that while Dr. Lieberson is much more visible and framed in a much closer shot – which, through such relative proximity, reveals his underlying interest in Mary – Mary is nonetheless more interested in Charlotte, despite her obstructed line of sight and minimally returned eye contact. Since the shots of Charlotte and Dr. Lieberson both come from Mary's POV, they are established as two individuals that complicate Mary's situation in the present moment.

Next in sequence, we see a medium shot of the cellist, and then, Charlotte softly laughing with the women in the front row. Charlotte turns around to glance back at Mary mid-laugh. Her efforts to meet Mary's gaze indicate a level of mutuality in her desires towards Mary. Mary responds with the same stoic expression in her centered, medium close up. To parallel the editing of this sequence, we get another wide shot of the crowd, where we have another opportunity to see Mary's nervous hand shuffles and dress tugs. This parallel sequence continues with a different angle of the cello, but resumes with the same angle on Charlotte and Elizabeth quietly chatting, this time without Charlotte turning back to glance at Mary. Mary, still framed in the same shot, reveals so many of her emotions from her stoic, expressionless façade through every

nuanced mouth movement or head gesture. The camera is ever-so-slightly shaky, as it was all recorded handheld.[134] This accentuates Mary's breaths, as her internally tumultuous emotions are revealed by her heavier, visible breathing. The queer lens, though applicable to the whole sequence, is particularly applicable to the shots of Mary, for her queer desires for a new woman are accompanied by jealousy of her former lover. The quicker pacing of these looks throughout the scene indicate that the queer lens functions in a slightly different manner than we have seen in *Portrait* and *Carol*. Rather than slowing down the pace via longer shots to emphasize every exchange of looks, the *Ammonite* midpoint sequence moves relatively faster to show the negative tensions Mary is battling with internally.

The queer lens, while quicker in pacing, still emphasizes looks to portray desire in medium or closer shots. What makes this scene so peculiar and different is its ability to show that the queer lens here is hidden in plain sight. Mary's desires and the negative tension she feels watching Charlotte and Elizabeth bonding are both something that we as viewers are able to understand from Mary's perspective, but neither of which Dr. Lieberson has any access to understanding. Whenever the doctor turns back, he is met with an unreciprocated gaze from Mary, as she appears discontent for reasons he would not be able to fathom.

A slideshow is depicted on the walls during the musical evening. Elizabeth leans in to Charlotte to talk to her about it. We cut to the same medium close up shot of Mary, the camera still shaking a bit to accentuate her heavy breaths. This shot, however, is longer than the other ones of Mary. We spend approximately 18 seconds with Mary as she continues to breathe heavier and heavier, barely blink, clenching and unclenching her jaw in her own centered shot featuring nobody else in the background. After those 18 seconds, she finally gets up and leaves the room. This act is shown in the wide shot with a full room so that we can see Charlotte blurred in the

[134] Pennington, "Stéphane Fontaine AFC Reveals How."

foreground, never turning around to notice Mary's disappearance, and simultaneously see Dr. Lieberson unblurred, woefully noting Mary's swift departure. If viewers didn't have a chance to catch the doctor seeing her leave, the next close up shot from behind Dr. Lieberson confirms it, as he looks towards the door and back at her empty seat with sorrow. In a continuation part of the scene, Mary exhales deeply outside, back to the door in a medium close up. She approaches the window, peeking inside, only to see Elizabeth talking up Charlotte and laughing animatedly. Mary takes a second for herself, processing her stressful and disheartening outing, and casts her gaze away from the window before leaving the venue for good to walk back in the torrential downpour rather than taking a horse carriage.

The midpoints of films offer important narrative points that shift not only the direction of a film, but specifically for my films of focus, also a shift in the dynamic between the women. The queer lens applies slightly differently in each film given each of their differing themes. Along with the theme of public versus private life in *Carol*, the queer lens offers us insight into the deconstruction of power relations, despite Carol's inherent power over Therese in terms of wealth, age, and sexual experience. The midpoint reveals a space for the women to exercise their agency in private and agree upon a road trip out west. While *Portrait* thoroughly discusses the power dynamic between the painter and the muse, the midpoint scene sets up Héloïse to deconstruct this inherent power relation in favor of the women becoming equals. The masterful cinematography and mise-en-scène of this scene double as a filmic painting within the painting narrative. In *Ammonite*, we encounter the queer lens in different variations, as the women still exercise agency, though this time both in forms of looking as power and looking away as resistance. Furthermore, Mary, rather than deconstructing, asserts herself amidst the power relations inherent in the looming patriarchy. With more of a focus on the analysis of blocking, the

midpoint in *Ammonite* offers us an understanding of how the queer lens applies in forms of conflict, as the desire between Mary and Charlotte isn't strengthened by actions or choices they make together, as in *Carol* and *Portrait*, but rather challenged and therefore revealed.

It is important to note here that it is past the midpoint that physical aspects of intimacy between the women are shown, including kissing and sex between the lesbian women protagonists. Since the queer lens emphasizes the analysis of how queer tension and desire are relayed amongst queer individuals in lesbian period dramas, it is not my focus to assess the coitus that result from *releasing* tension. At such points, which I would argue occur right before Plot Point 2, or the denouement, the queer lens no longer serves to promote a greater understanding of power dynamics and queer agency, so it is beyond the scope of this thesis to venture into intimacy analysis and politics.

Chapter 3 *Queer Lens and Queer Temporalities*

While Chapter 1 and 2 embrace narrative points, namely the inciting incident and the midpoint, as sites of aesthetic visualization and empowerment through the queer lens, Chapter 3 diverges from structured points in favor of flashbacks, flash-forwards, and time jumps to illuminate a different angle of the queer lens.[135] These time fluctuations in queer narrative film connect to a vast amount of literature on queer temporalities, as scholars focus on the many ways that queerness might have a distinct relationship to temporality.[136] Sam McBean notes that scholars who have focused their studies on queer temporalities share in common the idea that "temporality structures intimacy and belonging, where a queer approach to time [recognizes] how desire might disrupt normative modes of feeling in time."[137] In lesbian period dramas, this disruption by desire is amplified, as the "normative modes of feeling" in historical times were particularly rooted in heterosexual and patriarchal foundations. Queer desires in period dramas challenge these "modes of feeling" to offer alternative perspectives on love, and in effect, challenge the temporality that structures conventional "intimacy and belonging," both within its place in the historical narrative and contemporary culture and society. While contemporary queer films are increasingly suggesting a trend toward some form of "intimacy and belonging" in

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[135] Flashbacks as cinematic devices have a rich foundation in literature. Adriana Gordejuela examines film flashbacks as rich multimodal narrative devices, as she analyzes the "cognitive underpinnings of film flashbacks and the mechanisms that lead viewers to successfully comprehend them." See Adriana Gordejuela, *Flashbacks in Film* (London: Routledge, 2021). Maureen Turim maintains that the flashback is a "crucial moment in a film narrative, one that captures the cinematic expression of memory, and history." See Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film* (London: Routledge, 2013). For an extensive breakdown of cinematic flashbacks and their purpose, also see Lawrence Luchoomun, "Mental Images in Cinema: Flashback, Imagined Voices, Fantasy, Dream, Hallucination and Madness in Film" (PhD diss., University of Roehampton, 2012).

[136] See Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010; Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007; José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2009; Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009.

[137] Sam McBean, "Queer Temporalities," *Feminist Theory* 14, no. 1 (2013): 123, http://fty.sagepub.com/content/14/1/123.

progressive cultures and societies, queer period dramas feature queer individuals who are given the agency to entertain their desires through the queer lens. They, however, must also accept that their identities, and thereby any form of belonging or acknowledged intimacy on a societal level, are not outwardly welcome nor recognized, as desire resists "normative modes of feeling" in favor of uncommitted yet deep connections.[138]

To consider a few other scholars in the field of queer temporality, film scholar Roger Hallas defines queer cinema as a "rejection or neglect of narrative linearity and trajectory" in favor of alternative temporal paths.[139] Furthermore, queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman maintains that "queer temporalities, visible in [various] forms of interruption…are points of resistance to [a] temporal order that, in turn, propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others: that is, of living historically."[140] Freeman's sentiments on "living historically" as a proposed other point of resistance to an established temporal order suggest a theoretical reason as to why queer cinema is making such a shift towards queer period dramas. With a foundation in queer theory, the queer lens extends past narrative plot points to account for the filmmaking techniques that experiment with time shifts. In *Portrait* and *Carol*, the interruptions in linear time come in the form of flashbacks. The narratives start in a scene, flashback for most of the story, and then return to finish the starting scene, like in *Portrait*, or retell it and then expand after, given the viewers' new understanding, like in *Carol*. In *Ammonite*, the most "interrupted" the narrative gets is in the form of a brief time

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[138] Related to this marked difference between desire and belonging, Leila J. Rupp discusses the issues with contemporary queer desires, such as the relative unlikeliness of queer women to suppress their desires in comparison to straight women. Rupp claims this may be because "it is hard to ignore one's desires when they fly in the face of heteronormative expectations." These queer women, however, face a whole host of other kinds of dilemmas, especially "uncertainty about the boundary between erotic love and intense friendship" and the confusion that comes with the increasing visibility of more "non-normative sexualities" than ever before. Leila J. Rupp, "Queer Dilemmas of Desire," *Feminist Studies* 45, no. 1 (2019): 67, https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.45.1.0067.
[139] Roger Hallas, "AIDS and Queer Cinephilia," *Camera Obscura* 52, no. 1 (2003): 93.
[140] Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xxii.

skip no more than a couple weeks into the future to further the dynamic between the women protagonists. I will argue that the effectiveness of this interruption doesn't completely align with the theory of queer temporality, and therefore the film lacks a strong basis to apply the queer lens in this way. In effect, the ending lands visually flat and emotionally unresolved.

In film scholar Wim Staat's interpretation of *Carol*, the repeated scenes in the fourth minute and after one hour and forty minutes are "[director Todd] Haynes' way of showing what a difference in perspective entails for our understanding of the boundaries between public and private life."[141] While Staat's assessment agrees with the themes present in *Carol*, I interpret the repeated scenes as Haynes' way of demonstrating how the queer lens operates differently and distinctly in each situation. In the first scene that we later learn marks the start of a flashback, we are offered the perspective of a passerby (who we later learn is Therese's former fiance, Richard). The camera follows the man entering the Ritz Hotel to a fancy restaurant and ordering a drink at the bar. Then it pans across people at the dining room of the Ritz Hotel lobby, intentionally allowing Carol to stand out via strong lighting, her bright blonde hair radiating. Cinematographer Edward Lachman notes that this initial scene situates viewers in an urban environment as a social and political commentary on the American values at the time, filled with growing materialism and optimism for the future. Lachman mentioned that Haynes "was using women, being imprisoned by their domestic, small-town notions of the values of the community outweighing personal desires and needs" to show how "beauty became a form of oppression," relating to the resistance struggle of the queer women in a homophobic society.[142] Therese is facing Carol, so we only see the back of her head, but this is enough for Richard to come greet

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[141] Staat, "Todd Haynes' Melodramas of the Unknown Woman," 532.
[142] Kristopher Tapley, "Cinematographer Edward Lachman on 'Carol' as a Stylistic Foil to 'Far From Heaven,'" *Variety*, December 7, 2015, https://variety.com/2015/film/awards/carol-cinematographer-edward-lachman-todd-haynes-far-from-heaven-1201655217/.

Therese. This blocking lets us first acknowledge someone who stands out (Carol) and simultaneously invites us to meet the other person (Therese) with the help of her former fiance. A small-talk conversation with a party invite ensues, and shortly thereafter, a medium shot offers us a wide enough look at Therese that centers her in the frame and allows us to see the activity behind her, though just barely cropping Carol and Richard out of the shot. In the same shot, Carol puts her hand on Therese's shoulder, revealing the first hint of a potential connection between the women; we see this first time around Therese's blank, perhaps confused, yet thoughtful gaze in response to her touch, as she tilts her head toward the direction of the contact. Carol then shakes Richard's hand and leaves in the same shot as well. While Carol's touch appears intentional, there is no look to support any sexual tension between her and Therese, and though a medium shot may promote intimacy, the lack of context dissipates the likeliness of the queer lens applying and effectively functioning the first time we see this scene.

When the same scene gets repeated an hour and forty minutes later, we notice different things as a result of the queer lens' subtextual permeation of queer desire and agency in a public space. Carol gets out of a call and enters the same restaurant where the film started. Therese is sitting at a table for two, presumably waiting for Carol, who enters from behind her. Therese maintains an ambiguous smile throughout their whole interaction, and Carol smiles warmly, her bright red lipstick radiating her smile, content with just seeing Therese after months apart. She wears a pin on her jacket, demonstrating her maturity and classiness. Therese, makeup-less for a majority of the film, has her hair done, fancied with makeup, indicating signs of life improvement since the last time they met. Initially, the women are framed in medium shots as they catch up on their lives, a typical shot choice for dinner scenes. Later in the conversation, however, when Carol talks about Rindy living with Harge, the shot changes to medium close up,

exuding a tension through the queer lens that is amplified given what we now know about their history. Carol offers Therese to come live with her in her new apartment in an "awkward, almost formal invitation," as Staat calls it, as she barely looks her in the eye, indicating a nervousness uncharacteristic of Carol's usual composed nature, yet characteristic of a queer desire that hasn't dwindled.[143] Therese, blank and emotionless, responds, "No, I don't think so." Carol then immediately switches to a less imposing invitation to join her and some friends in a restaurant for dinner, to which Therese doesn't respond, or doesn't know how to respond.[144]

While for most of their conversation the camera remains stationary on each shot-reverse-shot, the lens begins to slowly zoom-in into both of the women staring into each other's eyes – Carol's eyes watering, Therese's eyes wide – marking a technical choice by Lachman that builds the tension and invigorates the lead up to Carol's "I love you." Carol's openness to express her feelings is indicative that any power relation previously present between her and Therese have been equalized, as Carol is once again seen as vulnerable by her teary eyes. Even if Therese wanted to respond, Richard interrupts the conversation within mere moments. Carol touching Therese's shoulder before leaving gets repeated, but this time from a new angle, which aids in a completely different understanding. The shot featuring Carol gently squeezing Therese's shoulder cuts into a close up from behind Therese, bringing us significantly closer to Therese's perspective and to the underlying history of intimacy between the women. Therese not only tilts her head in the direction of Carol's touch again, but from this new angle, we see her close her eyes upon the contact, longingly, as we see from her perspective what it really means to her to feel Carol's touch. This pure moment, singled out through repositioning of the camera angle, shows how the facets of the queer lens make a significant difference in meaning

[143] Staat, "Todd Haynes' Melodramas of the Unknown Woman," 532
[144] Staat, "Todd Haynes' Melodramas of the Unknown Woman," 532.

depending on how the queer desire is shown. We now have context of tension through the gaze the women share, and the context of their romance throughout the whole movie. The close up shot tightens the proximity between Therese's past and present lovers. Richard, on her other side, is absent from this new shot configuration, except for when his hand enters the frame to shake Carol's. The result of this parallel: a whole new perspective on the desire and agency that blossoms from the queer lens. Within the context of queer temporality, the repeating of visuals, per Freeman's formulations, become "productively queer ways" to "intervene on the historical condition of seeing itself."[145] As the film creates a space to see any object or individual or experience any story, repetitions question what we know about seeing or experiencing, thereby providing a queer way of interacting with the content for an alternative temporal understanding.

While *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* may not repeat scenes, the first scene of the movie returns and continues around one hour and fifty minutes later after the majority of the movie occurs in a flashback. We begin with a sketching lesson in an art studio. Marianne speaks through the instructions for her young girl students while simultaneously posing as the muse for them. After some time, Marianne notices somebody brought out a painting that she had painted "a long time ago." The painting is of a gorgeous, dramatic natural landscape with a woman slightly off-centered to the right of the wide canvas with the bottom of her dress on fire, brightly illuminating the nighttime. Only a few rays of moonlight, slightly off-centered to the left, balance out the darkness, diffracting rays across the clouds. Marianne mentions, upon being asked, that the title of this piece is called "Portrait of a Lady on Fire." Though Marianne initially had wished that the painting was not brought out, the painting foreshadows what we later learn in Act 2 of the film, when she had taken inspiration from Héloïse's own dress catching on fire during a whimsical bonfire night. During that scene, a bit after the midpoint, Héloïse and Marianne shared

[145] Freeman, *Time Binds*, xviii.

eye contact for so long that Héloïse almost didn't notice her dress had caught on fire. Since looks and slow, deliberate pacing are both facets of the queer lens, and especially so if the look is a prolonged form of eye contact, the queer lens provides us with an understanding of the gravity of their mutual desires. We know from there that the tension between them was so built up, per the queer lens, that in the next scene they kiss for the first time.[146]

Around an hour and fifty minutes later, we return back to the art studio, after we have seen the full backstory between the lovers told, or in some ways retold, in the form of a flashback. Marianne is back in her art studio, browsing through the sketches after the art class is over. Marianne comments to one of the girls, "You've made me look so sad," to which the girl responds, "You were," and Marianne clarifies, "I'm not anymore." This dialogue provides us with insight on how Marianne is doing so many years into the future since the last time she saw Héloïse: she has never stopped remembering her fondly; their love burns on.

In the next scene, Marianne attends a gallery where one of her paintings is displayed. After wading through a crowd of mainly men, she stands proudly in front of her painting. A man compliments her father's painting, to which she corrects him that it's her own, though she had to submit it under his name to get accepted into the gallery at all. Sciamma ensured that not only are we aware of the sexism during this time period, but we notice Marianne sort of like an outsider; she won't get formally acknowledged as a painter, yet she has paved her own alternative path, much like her alternative path to love, and much like the alternative temporality that this narrative explores.

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[146] Something that is also interesting and worth noting in the scene is the wide shot in which Marianne sees Héloïse with her burning dress, while Marianne remains framed in a medium close up. This touches back upon the distance from which we see the muse in comparison to the painter's much closer shot that relay difference in power relations. This, however, doesn't necessarily rid the women of their equalization that they gain at the midpoint, just provides us with context wherein Marianne takes on a painter's perspective to later recreate (as we know in the opening scene) what she had seen in that scene post-midpoint.

Marianne reads a brochure on the paintings at the gallery, until a specific one catches her eye. She winds through the aristocrats until she reaches another painting: Héloïse and her daughter. The camera zooms in on this painting as people move out of the way, as if to show Marianne's stride towards it from her perspective. When the people clear the area so that we, in Marianne's POV, can see the painting, the shot cuts to a medium close up of Marianne looking at the painting, almost breaking the fourth wall as we take Héloïse's perspective within the painting. Given that the combination of the medium close ups and the POV shots are both facets of the queer lens, we may deduct that the love and desire between the women has never diminished, even over the many years apart. In a reverse shot, we see Héloïse now in a medium close up, looking right back at Marianne, until the camera slides down to her daughter and Héloïse's hand on her book. When the shot reverses back to Marianne, we see her mouth gape open, as she realizes what the camera then closes up on: Héloïse's finger curling open her book to reveal the page number 28. This page number is significant, for in an earlier scene Marianne had sketched a self-portrait in one of Héloïse's books so that she could remember her. The exact page of her sketch was page 28. While the queer lens had brought to light, through looks and intentional filmmaking techniques, a potential for their love and desire to persevere after so many years, we can now confirm that their love in memory is undoubtedly mutual. This confirmation, in the form of page 28, affirms that the queer lens still applies to our analysis of queer desire despite one side of the look being painted. We see Marianne's medium close up one more time; she smiles to herself briefly before her eyes glisten as the memories return. The scene ends with Héloïse looking back from the painting.

The narrative in both *Portrait* and *Carol* are both similarly structured with the majority of the story shown in a flashback, its alternative time arrangement reflecting the epistemology of

queer temporality. *Ammonite*, however, does not interfere with the linear temporality of the narrative, and in some ways, this reflects its arguably less impactful ending in comparison to the other two lesbian period dramas. After Charlotte and Mary part ways in light of Roderick's return, Mary retreats back into lonesome work and before long, her mother dies. Elizabeth comes to visit her to express her condolences and her thoughts on Charlotte, revealing that Charlotte had evoked something new out of Mary that she hadn't been able to do when they were together. When Mary receives a letter invitation from Charlotte to visit her in London, Mary takes Elizabeth's insight as a sign to reconnect the passion that the women shared, despite their differences in age, class, personality, and sociability.

Mary takes a long journey by boat to visit Charlotte, venturing further than she has ever been in her life, both in terms of location and comfort zone. Lee provides us with enough visual cues to clearly contrast Lyme Regis, where Mary is from, from the drastically different environment in London. In some ways, these exterior visual cues foreshadow the difficulty that the women have in truly understanding one another. The social class differences are obvious enough that the Murchisons' maid initially mistakens Mary for a tradesman based off of her appearance before letting her in as a guest. While Mary waits for Charlotte, she notices that Charlotte has displayed one of her ammonite fossils under her name; a relic to remember her by, much like how Marianne held onto the sketches of Héloïse she drew in *Portrait* and Therese to the photos she took of Carol in *Carol*.

When Charlotte and Mary finally meet up, Charlotte almost immediately, passionately kisses Mary in front of the maid, and tells Mary not to worry, for "it's just the maid." Her word choice to say that "it's *just* a maid" reminds us of her wealthy social status. This disparity appears and reappears so many times at this point, that it becomes obvious that while Charlotte

didn't have as much of a hard time adjusting to Mary's lifestyle, Mary would, on the contrary, have a hard time adjusting to Charlotte's. Since Charlotte is so quick to kiss Mary upon reuniting, their intimacy appears at face value, promoting the notion of attraction more so than true love. The women sit down on a couch, the two of them framed in a medium close up profile shot. The proximity, as per usual, indicates intimacy, which has been blatantly present since the beginning of their reunion. The most Mary musters up to say to Charlotte is a comment on how far she is from Lyme Regis before the two kiss again.

While the context prior to their reuniting indicated that Mary did miss Charlotte, there seems to be an unequal balance of comfort and energy that reveals Charlotte's inability to empathize with the difficulties dealing with the differences that have been thrust on Mary so suddenly. This contrasts Mary's ability to care for Charlotte when she needed it the most. Unable to contain her excitement, Charlotte practically drags Mary up the stairs to show her a surprise in a wide shot. The wide shot, taken by a handheld camera, not only distances us from the women, but also shakes the frame, exuding uneasiness and unsteadiness. This takes us out of that underlying tension or bond that the queer lens reveals in exchange for a more surface-level one. Charlotte shows Mary a room in her house. She explains that it's Mary's room to not just stay the night, but to move into so that they can live together. The shots in this scene also consist of mainly wide shots, further distancing us from any underlying tension or romance that a closer shot would suggest, per the queer lens. Additionally, the handheld camera, shaky at the edges, continues to add a layer of anxiety to the energy of this scene, contributing to Mary's internal distress.

Rather than feeling romantic tension from the women's desires, we feel uneasy, as if the connection between Charlotte and Mary has been severed by misunderstanding. Given the

impact that Mary and Charlotte had on each other, Brian Tallerico describes Charlotte's misjudgment as, "She too has been changed by this union, but she responds to that change differently."[147] Since we know that Mary tends to close everyone out of her life, per Elizabeth's statements earlier in Act 3 when she comes to express her condolences about Molly, it is safe to say that Charlotte has "changed" Mary's demeanor, allowing her a comfortable space to open her heart to Charlotte. On the other hand, since we know that Charlotte had lived a sad, lonely life with her husband, it is only clear that Mary has disrupted Charlotte's otherwise traditional housewife lifestyle into an exciting, new queer relationship. They were both changed, and in many ways positively impacted, by their union.

The types of shots, apart from the shaky close ups of the table she prepared for Mary to work on and all the clothes she had made for Mary, are all predominantly long and medium wide. These demonstrate that while Charlotte expected this reveal to excite Mary, thinking that they can now be "equals" and live together, she completely failed to consider Mary's home and lifestyle that Mary is used to: "Your proposition makes me feel like some fancy bird in a gilded cage," Mary tells Charlotte. While Charlotte attempts to break down her wealthier, bourgeois status for Mary, she forgets to consider that Mary mentions that she would feel like she's displayed in a case much like the ammonite Charlotte kept to remember Mary. They fail to meet eye to eye, quite literally, and perhaps it's because Charlotte's higher social class blinds her from acknowledging that despite living in a reclusive, small, coastal town by herself, Mary is content with it and doesn't require such a drastic change to still appreciate Charlotte.

Even if some of the shots in this scene are medium shots, the lack of eye contact and tangible discomfiture are both clues to why the queer lens isn't supported by the filmmaking

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[147] Brian Tallerico, "Ammonite," *RogerEbert.com*, November 13, 2020, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/ammonite-movie-review-2020.

techniques to unearth any queer desires. The inability for the queer lens to apply in this scene coupled with the linearity of the narrative that doesn't quite align with notions of queer temporality ultimately fail to climax with a powerful ending. This is not to say that it is expected for these movies to have "good" endings, per se. *Carol*'s ending may have a pleasantly positive twist at the end, offering potential for the growth of Therese and Carol's relationship, as Therese leaves her party to return to Carol at her dinner with friends, signifying that she has chosen to be with her. *Portrait* never quite mentions that Marianne and Héloïse reunite; they just remember each other and the love they shared fondly.

It is the narrative choices and the subsequent filmmaking techniques that support a blundering end for the emotional buildup in *Ammonite*. The most redemption that occurs for this arguably flat ending scene is the prolonged eye contact in the medium shots of Mary and Charlotte at the British Museum across the glass cage where Mary's Ichthyosaurus is displayed, as Charlotte's eyes long for forgiveness and Mary's soften in consideration. While the queer lens applies here to this final scene to signify an inkling of hope that perhaps the attraction that the women share hasn't fully been extinguished after Charlotte's fumble, the cage between them provides a physical barrier that makes one question: will they ever see eye to eye? Will they ever understand each other?

After an assessment of queer temporalities, it appears as though diverging from narrative linearity hosts theoretical underpinnings in support of queer theory, queer cinema, and the queer lens. I say this with caution, nonetheless, for though the ending of *Ammonite* struggles with closing Mary and Charlotte's relationship, I am not here to make assumptions that every queer period film must have a disruption in temporality to confirm its effectiveness; rather, I aim to point out that Mary and Charlotte's relationship maintains its basis in desire in the form of

attraction rather than love, for the queer lens supports such sentiments. On the other hand, the flashback in *Carol* reveals new perspectives on a repeated scene at both the beginning and the end of the film. This flashback is effective in measuring the gravity of the relationship between Therese and Carol, as the queer lens applies differently to both the renditions of the scene. While at the beginning of the movie the scene offers a male perspective on the dynamic between an older woman and his ex-girlfriend, the end of the movie shifts the perspective to the women's, as they share a mutual tension that Therese disguises better than Carol. *Portrait*'s starting scene and ending scene before and after the flashback doesn't repeat, but rather serves to set the scene, inspire a memory, which then becomes the vast majority of the movie in the form of a flashback, and then recall the memory. This fundamental structure, while disrupting linear temporality in favor of a queer approach to understanding time, creates an overarching significance and deeper meaning for the relationship that we see develop between Marianne and Héloïse: the love story between these two women is continually reinforced as meaningful to both of them, mutual and beautiful throughout. It is Marianne's fond memory of Héloïse that propels the movie, then their love story, and then Marianne's confirmation that Héloïse has not forgotten about her either, despite many years apart.

Conclusion

In a time when queer voices are increasingly recognized and represented, the expansion of queer narratives has a widespread reach to more audiences than ever before through the cinematic platform.[148] Queer film narratives, particularly romantic ones, excavate the common dilemmas queer individuals face when expressing or navigating queer desire for someone else. Putting these voices into mainstream cinema gives viewers the opportunity more than ever to not only understand queerness better, but also determine what goes into articulating queer desires. To achieve either of these goals, an aesthetic and technical analysis of such films is warranted.

While lesbian period dramas may not be the perfect instruction manual on how to flirt as a queer individual, they nonetheless offer valuable insight into how queer desire is portrayed in our current time period. Contemporary "dating experts," like Dr. Frankie Bashan, may be able to articulate some of these elements without the motion picture platform as a mediator. I found some of her tips and tricks, namely eye contact and proximity, to parallel quite closely with the kind of build up of queer tension and desire that lesbian period dramas entertain.[149] In addition to these factors, however, there are a series of filmmaking techniques that are unique to the cinematic experience and its portrayal of queer desire. The queer lens is a tool for analysis that considers these techniques. Based in queer, film, and feminist theory, the queer lens examines the look and filmmaking techniques, more specifically medium or closer shots, POV/perspective shots and pacing, and expands their importance into larger discourses on queer desire, queer

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[148] Statistics show that countries in Western Europe and the Americas are generally more accepting of homosexuality than in Eastern Europe, Russia, Ukraine, the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. There also appears to be a correlation between wealthier countries and higher rates of homosexual acceptance. Jacob Poushter and Nicholas Kent, "The Global Divide on Homosexuality Persists." *Pew Research Center*, June 25, 2020. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/06/25/global-divide-on-homosexuality-persists/.

[149] Frankie Bashan, "Lesbian Flirting: How to Do It and How to Recognize It," *Little Gay Book*, April 16, 2019, https://littlegaybook.com/lesbian-flirting/.

agency, and power deconstruction, as supported by scholars such as Laura Mulvey, bell hooks, and Michel Foucault.

Whereas contemporary queer cinema is free to use dialogue to convey queer desires, lesbian period dramas are far more restrained due to their homophobic time constraints, so looks and gazes dictate much of the budding romance or attraction between the women protagonists. This factor inspired my decision to pursue lesbian period dramas as case studies for the queer lens, for the magic of filmmaking elevates the onscreen depiction of queer desire in lesbian period dramas to deliver an additional level of profound cultural and theoretical impact. In the introduction of their recent collection, scholars Amy Villarejo, Rebecca Wanzo, and Patricia White pose the question, "Does lesbian representation signify something beyond women desiring women?"[150] As far as this pertains to using the queer lens on lesbian period dramas, it is safe to say yes. Nodding to both its profound impact and the scholars' question, an application of the queer lens in lesbian period dramas reveals the critical concepts of freedom to exercise agency and to deconstruct power relations. These concepts still may apply and empower queer individuals today on a different, but important scale.

Furthermore, revisiting and reimagining history and historical time periods through queer narratives is both an indicator of turning the page on homophobia and embracing the stories never told. When Francis Lee received backlash for queering Mary Anning's biography, he announced on X (formerly Twitter), "After seeing queer history be routinely 'straightened' throughout culture, and given a historical figure where there is no evidence whatsoever of a heterosexual relationship, is it not permissible to view that person within another context…?"[151]

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[150] Amy Villarejo, Rebecca Wanzo, and Patricia White, "Introduction," *Film Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (Spring 2024), https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2024.77.3.31.
[151] Francis Lee, March 17, 2019, 4:50 a.m., comment on backlash for queering Mary Anning's life story.

The contexts of period dramas offer a sense of repair for the lost and untold histories of queer individuals.

We need the queer lens because it does something that the gaze – whether designated female or queer – doesn't: it deviates from *who* is doing the looking and *who* has the power, or right, to look in favor of *how* the looking is manifested and *what* sort of filmmaking techniques make up these looks on-screen.[152] Thus far, I have only applied the queer lens to period pieces, for a majority of the analysis of queer desire within relies on looks and the queer lens' other filmmaking facets rather than dialogue and more outward manners of expressing desire. Queer period pieces reveal queer emotions and feelings in contexts when the queer individuals did not have the right vocabulary or spaces to navigate them. These factors make the period drama an ideal backdrop for illustrating the functions of the queer lens. Queer and same-sex love narratives are increasingly more talked about in more contemporary films, such as *Bottoms* (Seligman 2023), wherein the lesbian teen best friends embrace being losers *and* lesbians, or *Red, White, & Royal Blue* (Lopez 2023), which reimagines a fictional British royal family's prince and U.S. president's son in love, as they attempt to keep their relationship under wraps given their high-profile public lives.

The queer lens is an analytical voice for historically underrepresented queer communities. While I exist as a queer individual in an insular community and institution, where everyone is free to express and explore their sexual identities to the fullest potential, I am well aware that

[152] To elaborate, there are characters and a camera that inevitably are "doing the looking" within the queer lens analysis. The emphasis, however, is not on who is and isn't granted the right or the power to look, such as whose look objectifies and whose look empowers, as it is with gaze theories. Such analysis integrates identity politics that the queer lens is less so concerned about; rather, the queer lens focuses on the aesthetic filmmaking analysis that makes mutual, queer looks of desire possible. Also, it is worth noting that while I use the queer lens to mainly analyze queer desire, the theoretical frameworks on which the concept is based may support other queer looks that are not always directly related to a look of desire. Examples of this that I have touched upon include Therese's defiant stare back at Richard as she rejects his forceful insistence on their marriage, and Charlotte's act of looking away to resist the doctor's look, as he ignores her feelings and belittles position in society. The oppositional gaze supports the power and agency that they both reclaim through the queer lens.

there are many parts of the world, including within more accepting countries like the U.S., that are not as open and accepting of it. Though my thesis explains the theoretical basis and technical filmmaking aspects that factor into the queer lens, my hope is that the queer lens may be readily detectable much like the male gaze. It doesn't matter who's watching the queer period film for the queer lens to make an impact, because it's not about *who* is watching and identifying with the queer protagonists, it's about *how* it's being done.

I believe that the queer lens has potential to apply to other queer films, though further research would need to be done to support this claim. If I had more time, I would watch *Rafiki* (Kahiu 2019) and *Wild Nights with Emily* (Olnek 2018) to further my analysis of the functions of the queer lens. Furthermore, given my focus on lesbian period dramas, I have found the queer lens to do a certain type of empowering work specifically for women, though further research may be conducted with gay period dramas to see how the queer lens functions for men in films such as *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee 2005) or *Boys in the Band* (Mantello 2020).

Additional research of the queer lens may also extend to consider queer films in different decades, such as the early 2000s and past 2020, as the films I chose to analyze were restrained to releases between 2010-2020. In the same vein, while my thesis focuses on lesbian period *dramas*, it may also be interesting to consider the queer lens in different queer cinema genres to see if or how its functions change. For example, romantic dramas may have a different impact, in both their narrative structure and the queer theory that supports the queer lens functionality within, in comparison to romantic comedies or romantic thrillers. Alongside different genres, it is equally important to further research into non-period films. This research of contemporary, non-period films may be coupled with meta-analyses of the "queer aesthetics" in non-period films that pioneered in the New Queer Cinema movement of the 1990s. How has the queer

"look" or aesthetic in films changed over the decades? How does that impact the queer lens? Queer films have suggested a shift into a more cinematic style, as evidenced by higher production quality and the shift into the mainstream.

Another component worth researching further would be how the queer lens changes after queer tension or desire is released after a physical action is done, such as kissing or sexual intercourse. I would argue that the queer lens doesn't necessarily stop applying after such instances, but rather it takes on a new form; one that I have not looked into as much given my case study genre of lesbian period dramas.

The queer lens emerges as a pivotal and timely tool in contemporary film analysis, echoing the transient nature of concepts like Mulvey's male gaze, which are intrinsically tied to their historical context. As mainstream cinema witnesses a burgeoning growth in queer narratives, the queer lens not only contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding queer cinema but also expands discussions on looking relations in film. By scrutinizing the intricate relationship between filmmaking techniques and the manifestation of queer desire, the queer lens offers valuable insights into recognizing and understanding queer experiences of desire and expression.

Furthermore, the queer lens serves as a lens through which we can revisit and reinterpret history, offering a deeper understanding of the repressed queer narratives of the past. It illuminates the progression of queer desire over time and underscores the transformative power of queer stories in mainstream platforms, providing visibility and a sense of belonging for queer viewers.[153] The queer lens also plays a crucial role in reimagining an untold queer past, allowing

[153] Consider *Love Lies Bleeding* (Glass 2024), wherein Lou (Kristen Stewart), a butch, scrawny lesbian meets Jackie (Katie M. O'Brien), a muscular, relatively more feminine bisexual. These characteristics, along with the film genre considered to be a romance thriller, provides insight into what kinds of progressive narratives we see in contemporary queer cinema and the different forms that the queer lens may take in its analysis of queer desire.

filmmakers the liberty to depict same-sex historical romances and the agency and power deconstruction within repressive settings. This empowerment extends beyond the narrative, resonating with queer individuals who may still struggle with visibility and acceptance in contemporary society. Drawing from theoretical foundations such as hooks and Foucault, the queer lens not only empowers queer characters within the plot but also empowers queer individuals who engage with these narratives, offering a renewed sense of agency and validation.

While the contested topic of queer representation inevitably surfaces in discussions surrounding the queer lens, it is essential to recognize that the queer lens primarily focuses on the relay of queer desires between individuals rather than direct identity representations. The queer lens, nonetheless, encourages a critical analysis of filmmaking practices that may facilitate or hinder such representations, highlighting the importance of recognizing and crediting the role of filmmaking in shaping queer narratives. The queer lens is a dynamic and multifaceted tool that not only enhances our understanding of queer cinema but also fosters empowerment, visibility, and a deeper appreciation of queer narratives and experiences both past and present.

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