

Lesbianism, back to the future!

The Impact of Setting Lesbian Representations in the Past

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Master's Thesis
June 2021

ABSTRACT

*The history of lesbian representation in film is neither a long, nor a pleasant one. The existence of lesbianism, along with other forms of female sexuality, was denied throughout history, which resulted in a lack of representation followed by decades of misrepresentation. Lesbians, in popular mainstream media, were often linked to crime, mental instability, psychopathy, sadism, aggression and carnality. Lesbian relationships were stereotypically depicted as being immature, a phase or a pairing with an imbalance of power. Within recent portrayals of lesbianism in film a new trend can be discerned; the telling of lesbian love stories in a historical setting. Since 2015 there have been several examples of films doing so and the number seems to be growing still. This thesis aims to examine the influence this historical setting has on the representation of lesbianism within the films *Carol* (2015), *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019), *Ammonite* (2020) and *The World to Come* (2020). Special focus will be placed on the way in which the representations are (un)able to challenge the existing patriarchal, heteronormative structures of society. In addition, by using films that were released between 2015 and 2020 this research intends to understand society's current considerations regarding lesbianism.*

The results of this research show that the historical setting when telling lesbian love stories has its fair share of problematic aspects when it comes to representation. The historical setting of these films is used to, on the one hand, criticize existing patriarchal structures of society, both in the present and the past, while, at the same time, creating enough distance between these historical representations and the present to maintain the existence of heteronormative stereotypes concerning lesbianism. The historical setting seems to provide a safe haven for filmmakers to maintain negative stereotypes of lesbianism in the name of historical accuracy, while simultaneously allowing them to openly criticize the restrictions that were historically placed on women by the patriarchy.

KEYWORDS: *Stereotype, Representation, Lesbianism, Historical setting, Heteronormativity*

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Introduction

On April 10th, 2021, *Saturday Night Live* aired a skit called “Lesbian Period Drama”, in which the popular TV-show poked fun at some of the recurrent themes and tropes surrounding lesbian representation with a historical setting in film (Drezen *et al.*). In two minutes and fifty-six seconds the show was able to highlight several of the problematic aspects of these types of representation by showing the trailer of a new film with the title ‘Lesbian Period Drama’. The trailer starts with shots of cliffs and a rough sea, before cutting to a husband bringing his wife to a doctor because she shows signs of being “a bummer”. As the wife is diagnosed as being “medically upset” she is prescribed grey, sea air, long walks and seagull noises. A female companion is appointed to her to help her through. The skit then graces the audience with shots that anyone that has ever watched a lesbian period drama will instantly recognize: longing gazes, short and sharp dialogue, straight and white actresses, the grazing of hands, a drawing scene and a cooking scene. The skit raises another interesting point with the narration:

“Two hours of excruciating tension all building up to a sex scene so graphic you'll think, 'Oh right, a man directed this.’” (Drezen *et al*, 2021)

The line criticizes the way in which male directors represent instances of lesbianism through the male gaze, resulting in often needless explicit scenes that border on the pornographic.

While the skit is obviously satiric, SNL hits the mark when it comes to the problematic nature of these representations while simultaneously pointing to the increasing popularity of the genre. Since a lot of these films are critically acclaimed, for instance *Carol* (2015) which was nominated for six Academy Awards and *The Favourite* (2018) which nominated for ten, one cannot help but wonder why the film industry is so set on portraying lesbians in a tragic manner. More and more it seems that films involving lesbian women can only be critically acclaimed if the lesbians within them are (1) set in the past and (2) portrayed as being sad, particularly about the fact that they are lesbians. The success of the films revolving lesbian relationships in the past is noteworthy but not surprising, since these stories are especially well received by straight, white audiences. They are therefore more likely to receive the funds and recourses necessary to be able to tell lesbian stories. But why are these historical stories such a big hit amongst mainstream audiences? What does the historical setting add, if anything?

During this thesis I will be focusing on lesbian representation in film and the role the historical setting has played in that representation. In doing so I will answer the following question:

What does the recurrent use of a historical setting in the films Carol (2015), Portrait de la jeune fille en feu (2019), Ammonite (2020) and The World to Come (2020) reveal about the representation of lesbianism?

To answer this question, I will be using Machin and Mayr's method of Multimodal Critical Discourse analysis to analyse the ways in which lesbianism is represented within the four films mentioned above, which were released between 2015 and 2020. When I talk about lesbianism, I not only refer to the figure of the lesbian as an individual but to the relationship, the dynamic as you will, between the two women as well. For instance, which bodies are seen on screen, and which are not? What does the absence of certain lesbian bodies mean in terms of representation? What is the function of the historical setting of the film? This research will question not only how these representations shape the impressions society has of lesbianism but also how the heteronormative culture of society shapes the representations of lesbianism in mainstream media.

1.1 Theoretical Relevance

A lot of the previous research done on the topic of lesbian representation in film was written in the 90's as a result of the increased visibility of lesbian women in mainstream media at that time (Ciasullo, 2001). The main academic disciplines that I draw from in this research are the humanities and social sciences. Hopefully, this research will add something to these disciplines as well, as I have yet to find any piece of literature that focuses specifically on the role of the historical setting in this type of representation. As the trend of setting lesbian love stories in the past is a trend that has been developing since the release of *Carol* (2015) one could say that the aim of this research may be one of the first of its kind. There has been a lot of attention concerning this topic within mainstream media, such as the above-mentioned skit in *Saturday Night Live* and numerous online newspaper articles on the subject, mostly written by lesbian women who either view these types of representations as problematic or who view them as a way to dive into the past. The results of this study could be filling a gap within literature concerning lesbian representation in film both because of the recency of the units of analysis as well as the focus on the historical setting within this study.

1.2 Societal Relevance

Studying this aspect of lesbian representation can influence the lesbian community in the sense that it will urge them to be critical of portrayals of their history, which will in turn affect how they view their history and in effect themselves. As lesbians were denied their own history throughout the ages, the need for one is apparent (Lesbian History Group, 1989). The problem, however, of setting lesbian love stories in history becoming a Hollywood trend is that it will probably lead to misrepresentation and the reproducing of stereotypical notions concerning lesbianism. Portraying lesbian women as being unable to be together in public for fear of prosecution, being unable to have a long-term and healthy relationship and overall being portrayed as being unhappy about who they are may influence the way in which society regards lesbians and how lesbians regard themselves and their place in society. Thus, researching the trend of the historical setting when it comes to lesbian representation may reveal insights concerning contemporary attitudes and perceptions of lesbianism in Western society.

1.3 Outline

In the second chapter of this thesis the theories concerning the key concepts used in this research will be explicated and a review of earlier works on lesbian representation will be given. This chapter will entail the theoretical foundation of my work. The third chapter will provide a thorough methodology, complete with a detailed description of the research design (from the criteria for data collection to the collecting of screenshots and screenplays) and the steps taken to enable a reliable research. Chapter four discusses the results of the analysis of the four films based on existing literature and personal findings during analysis. These results are set out under three themes: *The relationship between the two female characters*, *the female characters as individuals* and *the two female characters and their surroundings*. Lastly, in the final chapter the research question will be answered and the limitations as well as the societal and academic implications will be discussed.

Theoretical Framework

The general concepts of this research have to do with power; how representation and visibility are related to power, how the power of the dominant group is reinforced through the stereotyping of others and how these stereotypes fortify the heteronormative patriarchal structures of society. In this theoretical framework a few concepts will be discussed separately, but they are all connected to each other in some way or another. Firstly, I will present a short history of lesbianism and the functions of the historical film, as I feel these will clarify the need for a shared lesbian history and the reason why there are so many examples of lesbian films with a historical setting. Secondly, the need for representation and the practice of stereotyping within media will be discussed. I will go through the original concept, discuss the critique of that definition and then proceed to explain how the practice of stereotyping is rooted in the distribution of power within society. Lastly, I will explore representation of lesbianism and the ways in which the lesbian film could be capable of challenging the heteronormative structures of society and why.

2.1 Historical Perspectives

The historical setting of the four films that will be analysed plays an important part in this research. It is important to look at the history of lesbianism and how this history could possibly influence the representation of lesbianism in the four films selected for the research.

2.1.1. History of lesbianism

Lesbian history is a fairly new sub-category of historical research. From the 1980's onwards (often lesbian or homosexual) historians started doing research on the matter (Duberman et al., 1989; Lesbian History Group, 1989). The need for a lesbian history is the same as for other histories of minorities, such as women's history and Black history; for a social group to gain access to knowledge on one's cultural roots, traditions and experiences (Lesbian History Group, 1989). What makes lesbian history different from the history on other minorities stems from the fact that the stories of lesbians have systematically and deliberately been erased from history or their existence simply denied, making it impossible for lesbians to gain knowledge on their own histories and their place within the world (Lesbian History Group, 1989). There was a reluctance among traditional historians to use the word 'lesbian' when describing women from the past. One of the reasons for this reluctance is the negative connotation that is associated with the word 'lesbian'; the belief being that the word solely referred to the perverted sexual

behaviour that was associated with it (Lesbian History Group, 1989). Because of this negative connotation and society's unwillingness to admit to the existence of lesbianism, traditional historians usually glossed over those specific details of a woman's life by denying any relationships she may have had with other women, exaggerating her feelings for men or simply by outright denying they she was a lesbian (Lesbian History Group, 1989). There was an enormous amount of proof needed to claim someone was a lesbian. Even if a woman spent more than 35 years with a female companion, traditional historians did not call her a lesbian unless they had proof of the actual sexual relationship of the two (Lesbian History Group, 1989). This is where the difficulty lies for historians that do focus on the telling of lesbian stories; how do you tell stories when the evidence of their entire existence has been destroyed throughout the ages? Of course, there are examples of notable lesbians throughout history. For instance, Sappho, whose name and place of residence are words we still use to describe desire between women (Rupp, 2009). Other, albeit less notable, examples of lesbianism can be found throughout history and in almost every culture. In preindustrial Europe, for example, lesbian sexuality was seen as a sin and unnatural, but wasn't given the same kind of negative attention as male homosexuality (Duberman et al., 1989). There is evidence of lesbian sexuality amongst nuns as early as 423, when a nun who had taken holy vows was warned by Saint Augustine that nuns ought to love each other in a spiritual, not a carnal way (Duberman et al., 1989; Rupp, 1989). Traces of lesbianism were also found in other cultures, such as China, The Ottoman Empire and among American Indian cultures (Duberman et al., 1989; Rupp, 1989).

2.1.2. Function of the historical film

Usually, historical films are seen in either two ways: as reflections of the political and social situation of the era it was made in or as books that have been put on screen (Rosenstone, 1994). Rosenstone (1994) proposes a new kind of historical film that is able to deal with the relationship between the past and present in a serious way. These new visual works are not merely made with the sole intent of entertaining and generating profit, but rather to understand the past in a different way (Rosenstone, 1994). According to Rosenstone (1994) the rise of the new historical film has to do with communities that are in desperate need of historical connections, for instance: "post-colonial nations, ethnic, political, social and sexual minorities" (p. 4). Filmmakers' decision to move away from the more traditional forms of historical film could be that these are too intertwined with the values of prior social orders (Rosenstone, 1994). The new historical film can "resurrect ... emotional contents that show how the issues" of certain "periods still lie like a dark shadow across contemporary consciousness" (Rosenstone,

1994, p. 5). The past that is created on screen does diverge from the past that is provided by traditional history (Rosenstone, 1994). This is exactly the gap that is filled by these new filmmakers. History has always been told by the dominant groups within society and has always excluded certain minority groups out of it. By making these historical films, stories are being told that have never been told in traditional history before. Rosenstone's (1994) notion of a gap in certain untold histories for filmmakers to fill can directly be linked to the absence of a lesbian history as mentioned above. As a lesbian history has not wholly been told by traditional forms of history, these films could be filling the void that the lesbian community is feeling regarding stories of their own that ought to be told.

2.2 Representing and Stereotyping in Media

2.2.1 Representation

“How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation” (Dyer, 1993, p. 1).

The most important part of this research revolves around the concept of representation, to be precise: the representation of lesbianism. As Dyer's quote above concisely illustrates, the way in which social groups are represented has real life consequences regarding the way a group is seen, sees itself and is treated by others. When we talk about representation, we are looking at the ways in which certain groups are portrayed within cultural forms (Dyer, 1993). As large parts of society do not come in contact regularly with a lot of other social groups, they derive their knowledge from, amongst others, the representations they see in the media (Hart, 2000). How these parts of society continue to treat these minority groups could thus be influenced by how these social groups were represented in the first place. However, the effect of these representations does not only influence the way in which society perceives these social groups but also the way members of these social groups see themselves and their place within society (Dyer, 1993). In addition, representations also affect the way the group, its place in society and the rights the group has or should have is viewed by the ones who have the power to change the group's position (Dyer, 1993). Representation involves both the speaking of and the speaking for certain social groups; they have the power to select, arrange and prioritise certain

ideas about certain people (Pickering, 2001). The concept of representation is therefore particularly important to this research as the way lesbianism is represented within these four films will not only provide information on how lesbianism is perceived by the producers of these films, but it will create an image of what lesbianism is, how lesbians act and how they should be regarded within society. During this research I will not be looking at audience perception, but it is important to note that lesbian spectators' notion of their positions within society may be influenced by these representations of themselves within mainstream media.

The workings of representations are in and of itself complex. Firstly, we need to realize that representations are presentations in which codes and conventions were used that were available to the producer of any given media production (Dyer, 1993). These codes and conventions affect and restrict the contents of the media product in the sense that not everything could or can be said in any society at any given time (Dyer, 1993). The films that will be used during this research are all recent productions which were released no more than five years ago. The interesting thing to note here is whether the codes and conventions of the time we live in now provide a different representation of lesbianism than the examples of the past.

The codes and conventions part of production is what Stuart Hall calls the "encoding" stage of his encoding/decoding model; cultural forms are encoded with a meaningful message that can be decoded by the audience (1973). This to be encoded message is shaped and formed by a lot of factors, for instance the values and the beliefs of the producer but also by assumptions about the audience (Hall, 1973). According to Dyer there is not one fixed meaning attached to cultural productions (1993). Nevertheless, there is such a thing as a "dominant cultural order" (Hall, 1973, p. 13). According to Hall there are dominant or "preferred" meanings that map out different areas of social life (1973, p. 13).

"The domains of these preferred readings have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings: practices and beliefs, the everyday knowledge of social structures, of how things work for all practical purposes in this culture, the rank order of power and interest and a structure of legitimisation and sanctions" (Hall, 1973, p. 14).

Dyer (1993) adds that this rank of order and power within representations favour the side of "the rich, the white, the male and the heterosexual" (p. 2). If that is the case, the representations of lesbians are likely to be influenced by it; as these are representations of not only women, but

lesbian women at that. I will come back to the heteronormative, patriarchal structures of society and their impact later.

It is important to note that even though codes and conventions influence the content of a media product and that this encoded message within the media product is likely to be shaped by the dominant cultural order of society, that does not necessarily mean that all messages are received by the audience in the way the producer of the product intended. The way an audience receives the message depends wholly on how they decode the encoded message. In this way, representations are relative and the way in which they are seen dependent on certain factors as well. Audiences make sense of media productions in different ways – depending on the cultural codes that are available to them (Dyer, 1993). It may be the case that a certain audience does not share the same values as the producer because of the culture they were brought up in. In that case they will not receive the encoded message in the same way as the people who do share those specific values. This is where Hall makes the distinction between three types of decoding processes (1973). Firstly, there is the “dominant position”, which means the audience perceives the encoded message exactly as the producer of the product intended it to be perceived (Hall, 1980, p. 136). The audience understood the message that was encoded within the product and agreed with the message (Hall, 1980). The audience in this case is located within the dominant ideology of the producer (Hall, 1980). The second position is the “negotiated position” (Hall, 1980, p. 137). Within the negotiated position the audience can decode the message accurately, but they do not or do not entirely agree with the content of the message (Hall, 1980). An audience might not agree with the ideology behind the message but may be able to understand the necessity of the message at the same time (Hall, 1980). Lastly, there is the option of the audience receiving and understanding the message but decoding it in a total contrary way (Hall, 1980). This is the “oppositional position” (Hall, 1980, p. 138). The audience recognizes the ideology within the message but does not agree with it regardless (Hall, 1980).

2.2.2. The stereotype

Stereotypes are a well-known part of human society. The typification of certain groups that are associated with shared characteristics or traits is something people belonging to certain social groups are confronted with daily, even though stereotypes are generally considered to be short sighted generalisations which are unable to accurately describe the complexities of human behaviour. Sexual minorities are a perfect example of a social group that is often stereotyped, both on- and offscreen; more concrete examples of stereotypical representations of lesbianism will be discussed later. The concept of stereotypes will be a vital part of this research as the

practice of stereotyping reveals something about the values and beliefs of a society at a certain time. It is also a crucial element because this thesis is focused on the representation of lesbianism within film and stereotyping is a tool that is often used by popular mainstream media to maintain the power (im)balances within society.

First and foremost, I believe it necessary to ask ourselves the questions as they were termed by Perkins (1979), namely: “what stereotypes are, how they function ... and why they are so resilient in the face of our rejection of them” (p. 135). The term was first coined by Walter Lippmann in his work *Public Opinion* (1922). Lippmann’s version of the stereotype functions as an ordering process, a shortcut, a way to refer to the world and to express “our” values and beliefs (Dyer, 1993, p. 14). The need to order things is present within society and, according to Dyer (1993), is an inescapable way in which members of society make sense of themselves and everything around them. However, he adds that there is no “definite true order” in the world and that the need to create order and the way in which it is done varies between cultures (Dyer, 1993, p. 12). Stereotypes function as short-circuits that block the capacity for analytical judgements, which make them seem like simple structures whereas they are very complex (Perkins, 1979). These orderings are always “partial and limited”, but that does not necessarily mean that they are entirely false (Dyer, 1993, p. 12). According to Lippmann (1922), the hastiness of modern life makes the use of stereotypes necessary as there is simply no time for any form of “individualized understanding” or “intimate acquaintance” (p. 90). In this sense, the use of stereotypes is time efficient. Stereotypes have in some cases been handed down throughout generations and because of it are practically regarded as biological facts (Lippmann, 1922). The idea of stereotypes as natural facts, something that is fixed and invariable, is one of the key issues of this concept. Even though stereotypes are per definition limited, they are still generally accepted as the absolute truth and thus the partiality and changeability of them is not recognized (Dyer, 1993). Pickering (2001) adds that the inflexibility of stereotypes as categories is held onto in the interest of power, making it seem that the power relations these stereotypes uphold are fixed as well. The simplicity and immediate recognizability of this process of attributing certain characters and traits to all members of a specific social group is in part the reason stereotypes are as effective as they are; they invoke a consensus across all of society (Dyer, 1993; Perkins, 1979). That consensus, however, is but one reflection of reality and that reality is influenced strongly by the distribution of power within society (Dyer, 1993).

Lippmann (1922) argues that another explanation for the use of stereotypes is defence of one’s own position in society. People live within their own reality; they know their place and

what to expect, they feel at home and know where they fit in. Lippmann (1922) states that any challenge of the stereotypes that make up that reality feels like a direct attack on the fundamentals of life as it is known (1922). These patterns of stereotypes are not neutral in the slightest, but “the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights” and they are “highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them” (Lippmann, 1922, p. 96). Using stereotypes is a way to feel safe in the position one occupies in society and “the fortress of our tradition” (Lippmann, 1922, p. 96). The power relations that are involved in the process of stereotyping are clear within Lippman’s statements; stereotypes are used to reinforce the positions of social groups within a given society and any challenge to these positionings feel like challenges to the fundamentals of society itself. The stereotype as a natural given emphasizes that feeling, as challenging it would mean challenging the natural order of things. Dyer (1993) notes that the social construction of reality within any given society is always a reflection of the ways in which power is distributed in that society; the ones with power get to decide the hierarchy of the ordering within that society. When Lippmann (1922) talks about the “the fortress of our tradition” (p. 96) he refers to the traditions of the people within society that have the power to come up with the stereotype and to enforce it (Dyer, 1993). Through stereotyping, members of oppressed groups along with all other members of society learn to value certain values and attributes above others, while at the same time being taught that they themselves do not have those desirable values and attributes and should not aspire to have them either (Perkins, 1979). These desirable values and attributes are characteristics of the dominant group (Perkins, 1979). If there are characteristics that are different from those of the dominant group they can be singled out and rendered uniform, creating an element of order; a hierarchy of power (Pickering, 2001). The attributed characteristics are presented as being natural and independent from the power relations through which domination takes place (Pickering, 2001). In this sense, the stereotyping of certain social groups can in fact influence the behaviour of the members of that group, as it can influence the way they view themselves and their place in society. The oppressed groups will have less access to the goods of society and the stereotypes will affirm this limited access and its legitimacy (Perkins, 1979). Stereotypes are thus reinforced for the sake of keeping the status quo of those in power within society. A challenge to this existing structure is much more threatening when it comes from the member of the dominant group, while challenges of the subordinate groups can be interpreted as confirmation of the value structure (Perkins, 1979). According to Pickering (2001), when people acknowledge the fact that stereotypes are not fixed at all but prone to modification they are confronted with a choice: either reproducing the stereotype or move away from it.

Stereotyping in film is a tool that can be used to further the existing hegemony (Berg, 1990). The status quo of society is maintained by representing minority groups as naturally oppressed and subordinate to the dominant group (Berg, 1990). Examples of stereotypical representations of lesbians will be addressed in the next section.

2.3. Lesbian Representation in Film

2.3.1 History of lesbian representation

As mentioned above, the existence of lesbianism, along with other forms of female sexuality, was denied throughout history, which resulted in a lack of representation followed by decades of misrepresentation. Rather, if there were any media representations, they would focus on homosexual men rather than women (Russo, 1981); illustrating Perkins' (1979) notion that a challenge to the value structure is only threatening if it comes from within the dominant group, namely: (white) males. Lesbianism in that line of thought only serves as confirmation of that existing value structure (Perkins, 1979). Thus, historically, lesbianism was not even allowed to become a "threatening" reality, like male homosexuality was (Russo, 1981). The earliest representation of lesbians onscreen was in the 1950's, in which lesbianism was presented as "an alien state of being" (Russo, 1981, p. 99). Films such as *Young Man with a Horn* (1950), *Caged* (1950) and *All About Eve* (1950) all portrayed lesbian women as neurotic, cold and deadly; as outsiders who held fast to the male roles they had fulfilled during the war (Russo, 1981, p. 100). From that point onward there have been numerous examples of negative portrayals of lesbianism within film. For instance, *The Children's Hour* (1962) in which two schoolteachers are falsely accused of lesbianism by a student, which is treated as a lie so terrible that it directly dismisses lesbianism as a valid option (Russo, 1981, p. 139). Or *Lilith* (1964), in which two girls get involved romantically in a mental hospital, which implies that the two were sick before starting the affair (Russo, 1981, p. 157). The trend of setting of the story as far away from the civilized world as possible is also telling on the way lesbianism is treated as something that must be kept separate from society at large. In *They Only Kill Their Masters* (1972) not only is one of the two women involved in a lesbian affair killed, but she and her ex-husband were killed by her own lesbian lover (Russo, 1981). The linking of lesbianism to crime or mental instability is not uncommon, as lesbians and lesbianism are frequently linked to psychopathy, sadism, aggression and carnality (Eacklor, 1994; Millbank, 1996). In both *Heavenly Creatures* (1994) as well as *Basic Instinct* (1992) the crimes that were committed by

the women in these films were linked directly to their lesbianism as causal (Millbank, 1996). Lesbians were portrayed as “luring men in through sexual means for the purpose of devouring/killing them” (Millbank, 1996, p. 456). The opposite is often true; as lesbians are the ones consumed by men through pornography and the ones at risk of violence by men, particularly if a woman leaves a male partner for another woman (Millbank, 1996). Not only are lesbians posed as physically dangerous to men, but they are also a threat to (white) masculinity, to the family as an institute and to the heterosexual system of society (Fenwick, 2011; Millbank, 1996). When looking at the representation of lesbian relationships other negative stereotypes arise. Lesbian relationships are typically depicted as being immature or a schoolgirl phase one should eventually grow out of (Millbank, 1996). Oftentimes there is a large age gap between the two principal female characters and the plot involves either a mother/daughter pairing, a dominant/submissive pairing or a sadistic dynamic (Millbank, 1996). In short, lesbian characters and lesbian relationships have historically been portrayed as being villainous, plagued by mental illness, murderous, while at the same time a pornographic sexual turn on for male spectators (Hollinger, 1998).

2.3.2. The lesbian film

There has been a long-standing debate about what can be considered a lesbian film. What can be considered as homoerotic desire is a major question in this debate. Stacey (1987) suggests that there is a homoerotic component in films which portray “a woman’s obsession with another woman” even if the obsession never leads to a sexual relationship (as cited in Hollinger, 1998, p. 4). Her suggestion groups lesbian portrayals and portrayals of female bonding together as both having a homoerotic dimension within them. From a female spectatorship stance, Stacey (1987) argues that it is pleasurable for female viewers to watch two female characters have a fascination with one another without having it “be reduced to male desire or female identification” (as cited in Hollinger, 1998, p. 4). However, in her work on female bonding Stacey (1987) does connect both identification as well as desire to films where there are no direct homoerotic elements (as cited in Hollinger, 1998). De Lauretis (1994) strongly objects to this notion by asserting that this approach confuses homoerotic desire with narcissistic identification and that women wanting another or wanting to be like the other cannot be combined (as cited in Hollinger, 1998). The reason for this unwillingness to combine the two stems from De Lauretis’ (1994) feeling that drawing together female bonding and actual lesbian portrayals threatens the existence of lesbian cinema and will result in a denial of lesbian sexuality by framing it as sisterhood or female friendship (as cited in Hollinger, 1998).

However, there is a middle ground to be found here. Holmlund (1991) pleads that both the more ambiguous lesbian portrayals as well as the more openly lesbian portrayals are all united in their opposition to compulsory heterosexuality, a concept I will come back to later (as cited in Hollinger, 1998).

According to Hollinger (1998) the ambiguous lesbian film is characterized by the fact that they tease viewers with “hints of lesbianism between the two principal characters”, which allows lesbian spectators to observe the relationship as being romantic in nature while at the same time allowing the heterosexual viewers to consider them as being “just friends” (p. 7). This is emphasized by the fact that the two principal characters are often very feminine; even if they were lesbians, they would be *femmes* and their lesbianism could easily be denied (Hollinger, 1998). The ambiguous lesbian film utilizes aspects of the strong, affectionate bond between the two principal female characters in a way that leaves much to be interpreted by the spectator; long looks, dancing together, hugging each other (Hollinger, 1998). A negative aspect of this ambiguity is the fact that spectators are essentially told that what appears to be lesbianism is rather a strong female friendship, denying the possibility of lesbianism all together (Hollinger, 1998). However, even though the ambiguous lesbian film does not contain any direct homoerotic content, the fact that the two principal characters are portrayed in a sincere loving relationship, albeit not a passionate one, rather than one that is based on imbalances and impurity is a positive change regarding the homophobic representations of the past (Hollinger, 1998). Because of the lack of homoerotic content there is also no instance of any pornographic exploitation by male spectators whatsoever and none of the characters are punished for their sexuality by being separated from each other or by dying prematurely, a trope that has been common practice amongst LGBTQ+ characters in film and television (Hollinger, 1998; Waggoner, 2018). According to De Lauretis (1994) the safety of the ambiguous lesbian film lies within its heterosexual implications; ambiguous lesbian imagery does not threaten the heterosexist ideologies within society.

When it comes to openly lesbian films, the sexuality of the two principal characters is made clear as being a homoerotic one (Hollinger, 1998). The openly lesbian film can be divided along a few lines. Firstly, there is a distinction between Hollywood productions, which often adopt a heterosexist way of telling a lesbian story, and productions of filmmakers outside of Hollywood, which are more likely to provide some insider insights on lesbian love (Hollinger, 1998). Of course, nowadays other countries besides the United States are also in the business of large-scale film productions and simply *not* being produced in Hollywood is no guarantee to a non-heterosexist adaption of a lesbian story. The United Kingdom’s film industry, for

instance, had a revenue of 3.46 billion pounds in 2019 (Stoll, 2021). Converted to American dollars that is about 4.22 billion dollars. In addition, openly lesbian films can be divided based on their plots as well. Hollinger (1998) distinguishes three types of plots: (1) the coming-out narrative, (2) the lesbian romance or love story and (3) the exploration of life within a lesbian community. All four films analysed in this research are lesbian romances. The lesbian romance film does not revolve around one of the character's exploration of their own sexuality, but rather "on the formation of a lesbian couple" and the hardships and obstacles they must overcome to be together as a couple (Hollinger, 1998, p. 9).

2.3.3. Lesbian visibility and its implications

When talking about lesbian visibility, one cannot help but think about how the figure of the lesbian is made visual in the first place and what a certain visibility or invisibility implies. Within mainstream representations of lesbianism in the media there are bodies that are seen and bodies that are not seen (Ciasullo, 2001). There is a distinction in mainstream media between the lesbian bodies that can be represented and the ones that cannot (Ciasullo, 2001). The lesbian bodies that have gained visibility within mainstream media are the ones that are "consumable" to heterosexual audiences: the *femme* lesbians. (Ciasullo, 2001). As mentioned before, the femmes are easily consumed by both lesbian spectators as well as heterosexual spectators because of the ambiguity of the femme's lesbian nature. According to Ciasullo (2001) the images of femme lesbians challenge the idea of what a lesbian looks like in our cultural imagination – a masculine woman wearing flannels and biker boots – and that the images of the femme can potentially be desirable to straight audiences. Femmes are non-threatening to heterosexual audiences because heterosexual women can identify with them and heterosexual men can desire them, as they are represented as conventionally attractive (Ciasullo, 2001). Eacklor (1994) adds that the lesbianism of a femme is made so ambiguous that it is seen as something that is flexible and open to change, whereas a *butch*' lesbianism is not.

Within mainstream media representations there is a tendency to exclusively represent lesbians that can be made invisible; if she is represented alone there is always the possibility that she is not even a lesbian at all (Ciasullo, 2001). The reason femme lesbians are the ones being represented after decades of non-representations is the film industry's focus on marketability; the femme lesbian can appeal to not only a lesbian audience, but a mainstream, heterosexual audience as well (Hollinger, 1998). Marketing strategies have moved from not representing lesbians at all in order to appeal to their mostly heterosexual audience to representing lesbians that are easily consumable by their heterosexual audience. The increased

visibility of lesbianism within mainstream representations and the positive change within the narrative surrounding lesbianism becomes meaningless if a femme is not coupled with someone who is a clear example of a lesbian – like a butch – because her lesbianism would in effect become invisible, or “an absent presence” (Kennedy, as cited in Ciasullo, 2001, p. 600). The butch is not or rarely represented in mainstream media because she “fails to fulfil heterosexual ideas about what is attractive and sexually appealing in women” (Ciasullo, 2001, p. 600). Fenwick (2011) affirms that “the portrayal of white female masculinity is still a taboo when it comes to lesbian representation” (p. 99). Whereas femme bodies can be “delesbianized”, butch bodies simply cannot (Ciasullo, 2001; Eacklor, 199, p. 323). While men often do not see the butch as desirable, they can identify with the butch to a certain extent, but “admitting the possibility that a woman can be a man, that the traits attributed to masculinity are not exclusively masculine, and perceiving lesbians as masculine reveals the threat to masculine supremacy lesbians pose” (Ciasullo, 2001, p. 604). According to Fenwick (2011) this threat is particularly present in white butch females, as they already have more access to the structures of society simply because they are white. As previously mentioned, the rank of order and power within representations favours the side of “the rich, the white, the male and the heterosexual” (Dyer, 1993, p. 2). The possibility that a white butch female can possess certain traits and attributes that are masculine without being male poses a threat to two out of three requirements: male and white. In this line of thought a black butch female would pose a considerably lesser threat to the dominant structures of society because she is black.

Even though the visibility of LGBTQ+ characters is on the rise – 18.6 percent of the 118 films counted by GLAAD (2020) in 2019 being LGBTQ characters as opposed to 18.2 percent the year before – there has been a significant decrease in lesbian representation – 36 percent as opposed to 55 percent the year before. The male characters outnumber the female character by a greater margin than the year before – 34 male characters as opposed to 16 female characters in contrast to 26 male characters and 19 female characters the year before (GLAAD, 2020). It is important to note that an increased visibility of gay characters (both male and female) does not necessarily reflect a societal attitude shift towards gays and lesbians (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002). Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) argue that within the heteronormative structure of society same-sex desire is often still seen as deviant and if same-sex-desire is portrayed at all it is through “heteronormative social and cultural conventions” (2002, p. 96). It is important to question the ways in which representations conform to and challenge the heteronormative structures of society (p. 102). Hart (2000) agrees, saying that future representations should take into consideration that sexuality must be discussed in a way

that does not imply the superiority of heterosexuality. Ciasullo (2001) adds that the increased visibility of lesbians is “marked by a striking homogeneity, a certain safeness” (p. 605). It is important to consider that the concept of visibility implies that someone decides what is a watchable image and what is not. (Ciasullo, 2001).

2.3.4. Challenging the heteronormative structure of society

One of the reasons for the lack of lesbian representation in mainstream media is the significant threat openly visualizing lesbians poses to the heterosexist and patriarchal status quo of society (Hollinger, 1998). Portraying lesbian relationships in mainstream media provides the audience with an alternative to the patriarchal heterosexual couple and diminishes the dependence on men when it comes to women’s sexual and romantic fulfilment (Hollinger, 1998). The natural fit between masculinity and femininity is at once under pressure; the lesbian film deconstructing “the male/female dichotomies” in its wake (Straayer, 1990, as cited in Hollinger, 1998, p. 11). As I will be looking at the way in which the heteronormative structures of society influence the representation of lesbianism, the question will be whether the films move away from stereotypical notions of lesbianism or reinforce them and contribute to keeping the status quo of the heteronormative patriarchal distribution of power and how they do so.

The concept of *heteronormativity* was preceded by Rich’s (1980) concept of *compulsory heterosexuality*. In her ground-breaking article Rich brought to light how the institution of heterosexuality reinforces the patriarchal notions of male domination over women and how this is linked to the reinforcement of the notion that heterosexuality is innate to women by not presenting women with alternative options through representation (1980). Rich uses Gough’s (1975) eight characteristics of male power as a framework to describe the inner workings of our patriarchal society: (1) “to deny women sexuality or (2) to force it upon them”, (3) “to command or exploit their labor to control their produce”, (4) “to control or rob them of their children”, (5) “to confine them physically and prevent their movements”, (6) “to use them as objects in male transactions”, (7) “to cramp their creativeness”, or (8) to withhold from them large areas of the society’s knowledge and cultural attainments“ (as cited in Rich, 1980, p. 638). These characteristics seem out of date, but they are rather relevant to the focus of this research. One of the main focuses of this study is how the historical setting of the film affects the representation, making Rich’s (1980) compulsory heterosexuality very applicable. Now, a conceptualization of the concept of heteronormativity is in order. In their article Herz and Johansson (2015) follow Ruben’s definition of heteronormativity, namely: “the social organization of sex that rests upon gender, obligatory heterosexuality, and the constraint of

female sexuality” (p. 1010). They clarify that heteronormativity is not just the “every day and mundane ways which in heterosexuality is privileged and taken for granted”, but also something that is imbedded into the foundations and structures of our society and culture (Herz & Johansson, 2015, p. 1011) Heterosexuality is even normalized and naturalized on an institutional level, for instance through: marriage, family life and governmental economic support (Herz & Johansson, 2015). Heteronormativity as a system condemns the people who do not fit in and who fail to behave “acceptable” (Herz & Johansson, 2015, p. 1013). What is acceptable and what is not is dependent on the dominant culture within society and can either be reinforced through certain representations or challenged by them.

One of the ways in which lesbian films can challenge the heteronormative structure of society is through the female gaze, specifically the lesbian look, as opposed to the male gaze that was defined by Mulvey (1975). The traditional male gaze positioned the male as the active look, the one who projects phantasies upon the passive female object (Mulvey, 1975). The strength that lies within having two female protagonists in a film that desire each other is that not only is it a woman who is active look, challenging the dominion of the male filmic gaze, but in contrast to the active/passive positioning the lesbian look demands to be looked at in return (Hollinger, 1998). Both females are both subject and object of desire, making them equals and challenging the heteronormative male/female opposition (Hollinger, 1998). However, it is important to keep in mind that the phallogocentrism is deeply rooted in filmmaking and that even female filmmakers could in fact have internalized a masculine way of looking (Laing & Wilson, 2020).

As stated above, the representation of lesbians in mainstream media poses a particular threat to the heterosexist, patriarchal structures of society (Hollinger, 1998). Merely representing lesbians within these films, would be a challenge to the heteronormative structures of society in and by itself, as it would present women with an alternative to heterosexuality. However, if these representations maintain existing stereotypes regarding lesbianism, they will instead reinforce the notions of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable as determined by the dominant culture within society. Therefore, in order to challenge the heteronormative structures of society it is not only of importance for lesbians to be represented within mainstream media, but the way in which they are represented matters as well.

As was mentioned at the very start of the theoretical framework, the concepts within this research all have to do with power and the imbalance of power within society. The systematic and deliberate erasure of lesbians from history in the name of the patriarchy, have robbed

lesbians of a shared history. In addition to their invisibility in history, their representation within mainstream media was tainted with negative stereotypical imagery that portrayed them as a threat, not only to men, but to the family and thus the structure of the heteronormative foundations of society. Stereotypes are used as a tool to reinforce the existing hierarchy between the dominant group within society and the subordinate, oppressed groups. They convey which values and attributes are desirable, and which are not, who possesses these values and attributes (the dominant group), who does not and will not (the oppressed groups). The representation of these oppressed groups is particularly important because it can have real life consequences on the way society regards these groups and how they regard themselves. The values of the dominant culture can either be reinforced through certain representations or challenged by them. In the case of this research, the representations of lesbianism within these four films are particularly complex, as they are recent representations of lesbians in history. It will be interesting to see whether these portrayals will reinforce or challenge the existing status quo and how they will do so.

Methodology

In the methodology of this research the exact process of analysis will be clarified. I will start by giving an overview of the process of sampling and the gathering of the data for this research, including the screenplays and screenshots of the four films. I will then explain what Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis entails and why I have chosen this method to study the textual and visual materials collected. After which a detailed description of the analysing process will be provided. Finally, the issue of reliability and validity will be discussed.

3.1 Sample and Data Collection

The first step in qualitative research is to select cases and gather data for the analysis (Flick, 2011). In this research, purposive sampling was used to define the population of the research. Purposive sampling within qualitative research is used to “select information rich cases that best provide insight into the research question” (Emmel, 2014, p. 33). Purposive sampling allows a researcher to select cases deliberately as a way of setting up a collection of materials that will help study the chosen phenomenon in the most effective way (Flick, 2011). The phenomenon that was studied in this research is the representation of lesbianism in films with a historical setting. Three criteria were used to select the cases that were most informative to my research. Firstly, the plot of the film had to be set in the past, with the past being at least twenty years ago. I decided on this specific timeframe as for a setting to be perceived by an audience as ‘the past’ it must reflect a different time aesthetically; certain objects have to be present within a frame that can be easily and immediately recognized as belonging to the past (Rosenstone, 1994). Secondly, the film had to centre two women in a romantic relationship. It was important for the research that the plot revolved around the development of the romantic feelings between the two women, as this would allow for a fruitful comparison to be made between the four films. Thirdly, the films had to be recent productions, with a release date of maximum five years before the start of the research. The recency of the production allowed me to look at contemporary representations of lesbianism in a historical setting and would thus be very informative to my research question.

As units of analysis, I chose the following four films: *Carol* (2015), *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019), *Ammonite* (2020) and *The World to Come* (2020). This specific selection was made for several reasons. Firstly, even though these four movies are all set in the past each of them depicts a lesbian relationship at different times or places in history. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) is set in 1760’s France and describes the hardships of a young French

aristocratic woman that is soon to be married off to a Milanese nobleman when she falls in love with the woman who is supposed to paint her portrait. *Carol* (2015) tells the story of a young woman working in a department store in New York in the 1950's, where she meets a soon-to-be-divorcee mother. Whereas both *Ammonite* (2020) as well as *The World to Come* (2020) are set in the 19th century, they each give their own account of history. *Ammonite* (2020) takes place on the coast of Lyme Regis England in 1840 and explores the life and labour of palaeontologist Mary Anning. *The World to Come* (2020) – while also set in the 19th century – instead focuses on the trials and errors of two neighbouring married couples living on the American East Coast frontier and the impact of living there on both their mental and physical wellbeing. Even though these four films depict very different historical situations, they all share the same crucial aspect the whole plot revolves around: the emergence and blossoming of a lesbian relationship. An overview of the units of analysis can be found in Appendix A. Secondly, both *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) as well as *The World to Come* (2020) were directed by female directors. More so, Celine Sciamma, director of *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019), identifies as a lesbian herself, which will also shine a light on the differences between the representation of lesbianism as done by a heterosexual woman and a lesbian woman. This means that half of the units of analysis were directed by men and the other half by women. I think including female directors into a subject like my own can give important additional information on the way lesbian relationships are seen and depicted by both men and women and it will be interesting to see whether this information could uncover something about the patriarchal and heterosexist structure of society and the male gaze it is associated with. Thirdly, all four movies were released a maximum of five years before the start of this thesis. The recency of these works is particularly important to the research as the increased visibility of lesbianism in mainstream media itself has historically been stereotypical in nature (Russo, 1981). However, society is constantly changing, and developments are likely to have influenced the nature of lesbian representation. The recency of the work is therefore important to understand how society currently considers lesbianism.

The historical setting of the film and how lesbianism is represented within that setting is the focus of my research. Thus, I will not only be analysing the two female characters of each movie but also the way in which their relationship is represented within the movie and how these two female characters relate and are related to by their surroundings (their careers, class, ambitions, men). The characters in the film that are part of the lesbian relationship are for *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) Heloise and Marianne, for *Carol* (2015) Carol Aird and

Therese Belivet, for *Ammonite* (2020) Mary Anning and Charlotte Murchison, and lastly for *The World to Come* (2020) Abigail and Tallie.

For the analysis of this research, I utilized both screenshots and the screenplays of the movies. The screenshots were taken as print screens during the screenings of the movies. The screenplays were gathered using Google and terms such as “Carol screenplay” or “Carol script”. I was only able to obtain the official screenplay for *Carol* (2015), which could easily be found online for free and downloaded as a pdf. In order to use the other screenplays, I downloaded them as subtitle files and converted the .srt files to .doc files. This allowed me to open the subtitle files in Microsoft Word. I played each of the movies alongside the Word document to make sure that each line of dialogue was correct and furthermore connected to a character. In this way, I was able to ascertain the accuracy of the screenplays. For *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019), which is originally spoken in French, I compared two separate English subtitle files and used Google translate when there was conflict between them.

3.2. Operationalization

Based on the theoretical framework and the theories and concepts discussed, to understand the way the historical perspective interacts with the way lesbianism is represented in the present I looked at three specific aspects: (1) how the romantic relationship between the two female characters was represented throughout the film, (2) how both female characters were framed as individuals, particularly in relation to their sexuality, and (3) how both female characters were related by and related to their surroundings.

Within each of these films several components of the ambiguous lesbian film as well as the openly lesbian film, as mentioned by Hollinger (1998), can be discerned. Since Hollinger’s (1998) distinction between the two was written in the 90’s, a time when lesbian acceptance was still questionable (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002), it was fruitful to look at the way the love between the two women was portrayed in these recent films. When talking about and researching a concept such as love it is important to consider the way in which love means different things in different kinds of relationships. There is a distinction between *passionate love* and *compassionate love*, where passionate love is often described as an “intense longing for union with another” and compassionate love as “caring, concern, tenderness, and an orientation toward supporting, helping, and understanding the other” (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986, p. 385; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005, p. 630). According to Acevedo and Aron (2009) passionate love can vary from romantic to obsessive. As stereotypically relationships between two women have been portrayed as being a phase or being unhealthy, analysing the type of love

that is shown on screen shed a light on the way love between women is seen and represented. Romantic cues signalled the presence of either type of love within a scene (candles, a fireplace, the use of soft lighting or suggestive music). Factors that pointed towards passionate love were the clearer examples of sexual tension, such as caressing, flirting, gazing, kissing and sexual intercourse. While compassionate love was indicated through instances in which the women care for one another, help each other and try to understand each other on a deeper level.

Following the stereotypes surrounding lesbians as individuals that came to light in the theoretical framework, there are two aspects in particular that were interesting to look at. Firstly, how the women as individuals come to terms with their sexualities (if they do) and how they behave. As stereotypically a lot of negative character traits are attributed to lesbian women in media representations (cold, neurotic, man-hating, unstable, aggressive, etc.) it was interesting to note how these women were portrayed (Millbank, 1996). Secondly, how the women's femininity is represented in the film. There has been a tendency to mark a certain kind of lesbian as watchable through the lens of the mainstream media, namely: the femme (Ciasullo, 2001). Therefore, I will be looking at visual aspects that are often associated with femininity, for instance: certain types of clothes (dresses, skirts and certain fabrics), make-up (heavily applied or not, or popping colors like red or pink) and jewellery (gems, pearls, or simple, practical jewellery like a wedding band) (Glitre, 2011; LoBue & DeLoache, 2011),

Regarding how both female characters relate to and are related by their surroundings I will be looking at several components. Firstly, the socio-economic background of the characters (race, class, career) and how that socio-economic background influences the representation in terms of their broader roles within society. Secondly, the way both female characters relate to the men in their lives. A large part of this research is concerned with the heterosexist and patriarchal structures of society. Looking at the relations between both female characters and men (marriage, divorce, relationship, friendship) could not only shed a light on the presence of these structures but also on how lesbianism is represented within those structures (Hollinger, 1998; Rich, 1980).

3.3 Methodological approach

As mentioned above, this study involves the analysis of four films. To do so, I chose the method of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), which allowed me to analyse both the visual as well as textual material of the films. Apart from providing me with the tools to critically analyse both text and visual imagery, MCDA also concerns itself with the power relations and ideologies behind the meanings of these texts (Machin & Mayr, 2012). In the case

of my study this was particularly applicable as I have written about a sexual minority group which has a history of being either not represented at all or misrepresented (Ciasullo, 2001).

3.3.1. (Multimodal) Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse analysis (CDA) has its origin in Critical Linguistics, which treats language as a social practice that can be studied to reveal how people use language to promote certain ideas, views, values and identities in order to naturalise them (Machin & Mayer, 2012). Critical Discourse analysts build on that idea but added the links between language, power and ideology (Machin & Mayer, 2012). By describing and drawing out the practices and conventions within texts political and ideological investments can be revealed (Machin & Mayr, 2012). It also allowed Critical Discourse analysts to devote themselves to political intervention and social change by revealing stereotypes and ideologies in media texts and institutional discourses (Machin & Mayer, 2012). There is not one single version of CDA, however all shapes and forms of CDA do share the same principles: language is “a means of social construction” and “language both shapes and is shaped by society” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 2). According to CDA power relations are discursive and thus power is transmitted and practiced through discourse (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Machin and Mayer state that this power “comes from privileged access to social resources such as education, knowledge and wealth, which provides authority, status and influence to those who gain access and enables them to dominate, coerce and control over subordinate groups” (2012, p. 24). It is the aim of CDA to reveal these power relations that are present in texts (Machin & Mayr, 2012). MCDA has the same aims as CDA but brings visual imagery into the fold, allowing the researcher to incorporate every aspect of a text into the analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Authors of texts make deliberate choices that can be revealed with the help of MCDA (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Machin and Mayr describe several elements analysts should take notice of when analysing texts (2012). These elements are divided into the lexical choices and the visual semiotic choices that are made within the text (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The unveiling of power relations by using MCDA is particularly relevant for this topic, as the mere existence of lesbianism already challenges the power of the dominant, heteronormative norms of society. Studying the representation of lesbianism reflects how that society regards lesbians and their place in society.

3.3.2. Lexical Analysis

I will start with the lexical choices. Firstly, it is important to analyse the basic choice of words an author makes (Machin & Mayr, 2012). These *word connotations* can be revealed for instance

when some words are used predominantly or what purpose and whose interest certain words serve (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Secondly, the overemphasis or repetition of certain terms – or *overlexicalization* – is “usually evidence that something is problematic or of ideological contention” (p. 37). On the other hand, there is the absence of certain terms where you might have expected them (Machin & Mayr, 2012). This *suppression* is revealed by carefully analysing whether something is missing from the dialogue (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Lastly, some concepts or words do not only mean something on their own but also within a network of meanings (Machin & Mayr, 2012). These *structural oppositions* in texts for instance are terms like ‘young/old’ or ‘good/bad’ (Machin & Mayr, 2012). When one of the terms is used, it automatically implies something about the other in terms of difference or quality (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Particularly when it comes to lesbians and their place within society Machin and Mayr’s (2012) lexical choice of structural oppositions are commonly used, for instance ‘good/bad’, ‘normal/abnormal’, ‘natural/unnatural’ (Eacklor, 1994; Millbank, 1996).

3.3.3. Visual Analysis

When it comes to the visual semiotic choices it is crucial to be mindful of every visual detail. Firstly, there is iconography, which entails what is shown in an image (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The image can simply show certain people, places, events and/or things – or *denotation* – while at the same time an image can show the same things with the intention to get certain ideas across – *connotation* (Machin & Mayr, 2012). As Machin and Mayer (2012) state: “whether the communicative purpose of an image is primarily denotative or connotative depends to some extent on the context in which the image is used” (p. 50). Secondly, the attributes are the ideas and values that are communicated by the *objects* within an image and the way in which they are represented (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Every meaning of every object should be considered (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Thirdly, the *setting* of the image can be used to “communicate ideas, to connote discourses and their values, identities and actions (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Lastly, Machin and Mayr (2012) mention *salience*. Features are used to make certain things stand out and to draw attention to them, which implies their importance (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The ways in which these features are made to stand out are through: the use of potent cultural symbols (any elements carrying cultural significance), the size of certain items (implication of importance), the use of colour (striking colour or noticeable contrasts), the different tones (brightness or dimness that attracts the eye), the use of focus (details that are exaggerated or the opposite), the foregrounding of certain items (creating importance within the frame) and the overlapping certain items (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 56). In the case of these four films the

visual semiotic choice of salience is most prominent throughout all of them. Because of the historical setting of the films and the directors' choices of a certain simplicity when telling the story, most of the meaning within the scenes is conveyed using certain light tones, colours, focus and foregrounding.

3.4. Data analysis

3.4.1. General analysis

Before starting the actual analysis, a general analysis was conducted in order to establish whether theories and concepts from the theoretical framework could be identified in each of the four films. The general analysis allowed me to look at the films before doing any actual analysing of the lexical and visual material. For instance, Millbank's (1996) finding of the stereotypical dominant/submissive pairing of two women in film was immediately recognizable in the characters of Carol (dominant) and Therese (submissive) in the film *Carol* (2015). Another common trope that I discerned during the general analysis is the phasal aspect of the lesbian relationship and the tendency to punish the women involved in the relationship within *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019), *Ammonite* (2020) and *The World to Come* (2020). The implication of mental instability and violence within representations of lesbian women also came forward in *Carol* (2015), *Ammonite* (2020) and *The World to Come* (2020) (Eacklor, 1994; Millbank, 1996).

A general analysis was written on each of the four films, which were later compared to one another. The reason for this initial general analysis was to ascertain which categories should be considered for the actual analysis. Throughout the four movies certain trends could be discerned. For instance, almost all the female protagonists were dressed in a very feminine fashion and their lesbianism could not be ascertained by simply looking at them; apart from the homoerotic content later in the films these women could easily have been heterosexual women. Another noticeable element was the fact that when it came to their behaviour, at least one of the two female protagonists would be grief-stricken and cold or anxious in their demeanour. These insights convinced me it was necessary to analyse the protagonists as individuals as well as a couple. The operationalization of this research was adjusted according to these trends, determining the themes as: *the relationship between the two female characters, the two female characters as individuals, the two female characters and their surroundings*. These themes

were essentially used to systematically look at each of the aspects of lesbianism and to order the data of analysis accordingly.

During the general analysis it became clear that the plots of each of these films followed a similar pattern. The pattern consisted of six elements: (1) the women first meet, (2) they are in each other's presence before they have admitted to their feelings (to themselves or each other), (3) they realize they have feelings for each other, (4) they act on said feelings, (5) they are forced apart and then (6) reunite at some point (successfully or unsuccessfully). There are other scenes of course that shine a light on how lesbianism is seen within society, for instance the scenes in which husbands or boyfriends make pejorative and sometimes threatening comments on the women's behaviour or the way in which the women act on their own or how they are seen by their respective communities. The selection of the scenes was based on this pattern and on these instances. In Appendix B a complete overview of the scenes selected for each movie can be found.

3.4.2. Analysis

The analysis followed a predetermined structure that was the identical for each film: (1) the gathering of screenshots, (2) the gathering of the script, (3) the organizing of screenshots, (4) the organizing of the script, (5) the analysing of the screenshots and lastly (6) the analysing of the script. The organising and analysing of the collected screenshots and scripts was done by using Microsoft OneNote. The four films were divided into separate folders which in turn contained the visual analysis and the lexical analysis. The visual analysis document contained the screenshots that were made of each scene with under each screenshot a table containing the elements following Machin and Mayr's (2012) visual discourse analysis: connotation, objects, setting and salience. The lexical analysis document contained each bit of dialogue as ordered by scene. Microsoft OneNote allowed me to highlight parts of the dialogue and to write the comments I had concerning the word connotations, lexicalization, suppression and structural oppositions right next to the script (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Textual and visual analysis of the data focused specifically on the themes mentioned above suggested certain noteworthy aspects related to the representation of lesbianism within these four films that could be discerned within all of them. These aspects were then used to formulate sub-categories to organize the results of the research. For the theme *the relationship between the two female characters* the sub-categories *lesbian relationships as compassionate*, *lesbian relationships as passionate*, *lesbian relationships as a phase*, *lesbian relationships as balanced/imbalanced* were determined. For *the two female characters as individuals* these were *the feminine/masculine lesbian*, *the*

stable/unstable lesbian. And finally for *the two female characters and their surroundings* the sub-categories *the restrictions on women* and *the situating of the two women* were formulated.

3.5. Reliability and Validity

The reliability and validity are crucial to any research, whether it be qualitative or quantitative. The reliability of a research is dependent on its replicability (the way in which it can be reproduced by another researcher with the exact same results), while the validity reflects the way in which a research' findings accurately reflect the data (Noble & Smith, 2015). While exact replicability within qualitative research is difficult to achieve, there are strategies a qualitative researcher can adopt in order to improve their research' reliability. For instance, the researcher's own status and personal biases should be identified, as these could affect the outcome and replicability of the research (Noble & Smith, 2015; Seale, 2011). Another strategy a researcher could adopt is the keeping of meticulous records on all aspects of the methods that were used during the research, which must be consistent and transparent (Noble & Smith, 2015; Seale, 2011). Within the research there must be "clarity in terms of the thought processes during data analysis and subsequent interpretations" (Noble & Smith, 2015, p. 35).

For this research I used Machin and Mayr's (2012) framework of Multimodal Critical Discourse analysis. In the section above I described in more detail the process of analysing the data using their framework of Visual Discourse Analysis for the visual material and the Critical Discourse Analysis for the lexical material of the films (Machin & Mayr, 2012). By using this method, as it was laid out by Machin and Mayr (2012), the crux of my research can be considered as reliable. Examples of the methods used during this research are included in Appendix C and Appendix D. Both during the general analysis as well as the actual analysis I kept both written as well as typed out records of every detail I noticed, which gives a clear overview of my thought process during analysis and provides insights into the path between the data and the eventual findings of the research. Considering the transparency of this research, examples of the selection of the scenes including time stamps and number of screenshots are provided in Appendix B. As for my personal bias and status, there are certain limitations to this research. My research focuses on the way in which a sexual minority, lesbians, are represented in these four recent films. As a lesbian, white woman, my views on the matter are inevitably biased in one way or another, as the way in which lesbians are represented within mainstream media affect me personally. The fact that I am a white woman could also influence the way in

which I view these four films; if I were not, a more intersectional approach may have been used to look at these films.

Results

During this chapter the results of the analysis of the four films will be provided. The quoted sentences within this chapter are taken from the movies *Carol* (2015), *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) referred to as PDLJFEF, *Ammonite* (2020) and *The World to Come* (2020) referred to as TWTC. The first section of the results focuses on the way the relationship between the two principal female characters is represented throughout these films, subsections that will be discussed are: *lesbian relationships as compassionate*, *lesbian relationships as passionate*, *lesbian relationships as a phase* and *lesbian relationships as balanced/unbalanced*. The second section will discuss the female principal characters as individuals and deals with the following subsections: *the feminine/masculine lesbian* and *the stable/unstable lesbian*. Finally, the last section centres around the surroundings of the two principal female characters and considers the subsections: *the restrictions on women* and *the situating of the two women*.

4.1 Relationship between the two female characters

4.1.1. Lesbian relationships as compassionate

As mentioned previously, compassionate love between two people can be revealed through instances of caring, concern, tenderness, and an orientation toward supporting, helping, and understanding the other (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). Throughout these four films several aspects of compassionate love can be distinguished. The lesbian relationships that are portrayed in these four movies all liken the lesbian relationship to a system of support that the women had been lacking before meeting each other. One of these aspects is the providing of tools to enable the other's personal development and motivating them to pursue their ambitions.

In the beginning of *Carol* (2015) Therese (the young woman that eventually gets involved with the older Carol) is in a heterosexual relationship with Richard (her boyfriend). She has been photographing as a hobby, but when Carol asks if she wants to become a photographer Therese replies: "I think so. If I have any talent for it". As Therese tells Richard about her plans to build up a portfolio and apply for a job at the New York Times his only reaction is: "Have you been thinking any more about Europe?", dismissing Therese's ambitions entirely and focusing the conversation back to his plans for Therese and himself (Carol). However, after learning Therese does not own a decent camera, Carol gifts Therese a camera and a suitcase full of film for Christmas. The photographs that Therese makes of Carol during

their brief relationship become part of the portfolio that eventually leads to a job at the New York Times.

Abigail (a woman who has just lost her daughter and is stuck in a loveless marriage) in *The World To Come* (2020) uses her self-education as a means to distract herself from the sorrow of losing her daughter. Her need for personal development is emphasized by the repetition of the word “atlas”, something Abigail desires to have and states several times, both in the narration as well as in dialogue. The atlas in this situation symbolizes Abigail’s need to know more of the world around her, a way to broaden her horizon. She tells Dyer (her husband) of her plan to buy an atlas with the 90 cents she has saved for herself, and he responds: “Could buy your husband a gift”. As was the case with Therese, Abigail’s ambition is dismissed completely. For Abigail, meeting Tallie (the other woman in the relationship) creates a sense of enlightenment which is emphasized by the soft, yellow tones that are used in the scenes of the two women together as opposed to the dark, blue tones whenever Abigail is alone with Dyer. The marriage between Abigail and Dyer is characterized by practicability, as is underlined by Abigail telling Tallie: “He admired what he viewed as my practical good sense”. Abigail is seen by Dyer as someone mechanical, as one of the machines he uses to work the land, which is emphasized by the overlexicalization of words concerning machinery: “efficient”, “handy”, “practicle”, “mechanical”. Whereas Tallie immediately recognizes the feelings and unspoken words that are buried underneath Abigail’s introverted nature, which is emphasized when Tallie says: “But I bet you're more accomplished in your writing.”. Tallie motivates Abigail to write, sometimes forces her to open-up and literally gives her the world when she buys Abigail an atlas for her birthday.

Even though Héloïse (the woman forced to marry a Milanese nobleman) in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) is the one who is stuck in an unwanted situation because of her arranged marriage, Marianne (the one there to secretly paint her portrait) is the one who finds support and a sense of freedom in Héloïse. As a painter, Marianne is tied to certain conventions and rules regarding her work; rules every painter lives by. In addition, as a female painter Marianne is banned to study certain objects, such as the male anatomy. The restrictions these rules pose on Marianne are made clear when she finishes the first portrait of Héloïse. Héloïse asks Marianne: “You mean there is no life? No presence?”. By saying this Héloïse criticizes the way creative autonomy is taken away from (female) painters by the rigid rules they are forced to work by, crushing the life out of the person portrayed on the canvas. Her words strike a chord with Marianne, who lets go of the rules when she does the second portrait. Héloïse constantly pushes her to explore the boundaries of what she can and what she cannot do as a

female painter. Another example of this is when Héloïse suggests recreating the scene of Sophie's (the maid working for Héloïse's mother) abortion for Marianne to paint it. Historically, abortion alone would be enough reason to execute a midwife as a witch (Heinrich & Sprenger, 1971), so depicting such a scene opens new possibilities for Marianne's (and other women's) creative work.

A different example of compassionate love can be found in *Ammonite* (2020). After Charlotte goes sea bathing and catches a cold, she becomes terribly ill and falls on Mary's floor. The doctor tells Mary that Charlotte will need constant care. Mary cannot afford staying at home and nursing Charlotte back to health, but she does so either way. This type of caring for each other is linked to compassionate, rather than passionate love. Another aspect of this is the way Charlotte motivates Mary during her work. Charlotte spots a large boulder that may contain a fossil, but Mary dismisses the idea of taking it with them as it is "too big" and "impossible to move". Charlotte persists and together they dig out the fossil and take it back to Mary's home, as can be seen in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1: Screenshot taken by author from *Ammonite*.

4.1.2. Lesbian relationships as passionate

Each of the four films portray lesbian intimacy or imply the presence of lesbian intimacy, indicating that there is a presence of passionate love between the two female principal characters as well. There is a certain dichotomy when it comes to portraying sex between two women. On the one hand, female lovers are equated with romance, love and sensuality. Lesbian sex oftentimes has been represented as soft and sensual; caresses, longing gazes, sighs (McWilliam, 2017). While on the other hand lesbian sex has been associated with the pornographic material that is consumed by a mostly male audience (Hollinger, 1998). These portrayals are very explicit and leave nothing to the imagination (Hollinger, 1998). The tame

portrayal of the lesbian sex scene can be seen as problematic because of its stereotypical nature and the denial of the existence of lust and desire in women, but on the other hand there has been a lot of critique on lesbian sex scenes that were so explicit and male oriented that the actresses portraying the parts felt violated because of it (Aftab, 2019).

In *Carol* (2015) there is one sex scene, and it is characterized by its softness. The pace is slow; Carol takes her time to take in every detail of Therese's body. Both the soft lighting on the bodies as well as the music on the background refer to love and romance, rather than just sex and lust. The scene is filled with shots of skin from all angles. During this intimate moment Carol and Therese find the time to look each other in the eye for a good fifteen seconds before continuing. The actual sexual act that is shown is Carol's blond locks of hair sprawled over Therese's stomach, indicating that she is performing oral sex. The scene gradually fades out with the sighs of both Therese and Carol still being heard. A similar scene is shown in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019), the exception being that the movie does not visualise any of the sex scenes. Rather it implies that the characters have had sex by cutting from an intimate kiss in front of the fireplace to Héloïse and Marianne waking up naked in bed together. There are several very intimate moments between the two women, such as a scene where they lay naked on the bed casually and decide to try a certain drug together; herbs that Héloïse has obtained during the bonfire. One of the shots depicts Héloïse massaging the herb into Marianne's armpit, as is shown in Figure 2. This is the most sexual visualisation in the entire movie. The lighting is soft and the amount of skin that is shown within the image is testament to the fact that sensuality and sexuality can also be acquired without the male oriented notion of penetration and without any power imbalances between the two participants of the sexual act (McKee, 1997).

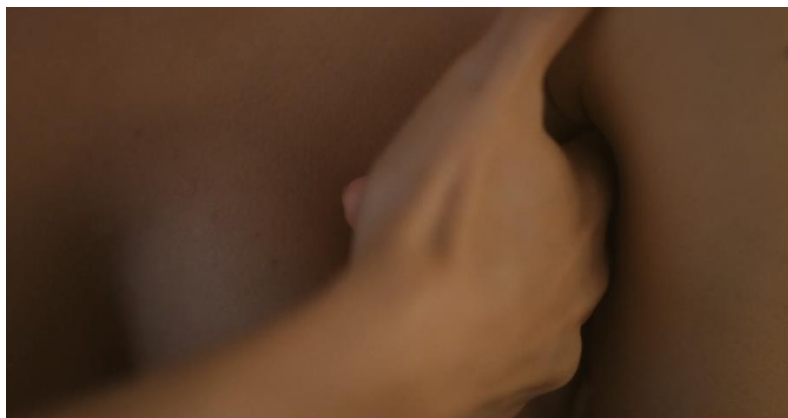


Figure 2: Screenshot taken by author from PDLJFEF.

The depictions of sex in *Ammonite* (2020) and *The World to Come* (2020) are more explicit and show the presence of lust and urgency between the two principal female characters. There are two sex scenes in *Ammonite* (2020) and one implied instance of sex between Mary and Charlotte. While the atmosphere of both sex scenes is highlighted by romantic cues such as candles and soft light tones, the scenes are mostly characterized by a certain urgency and lust. The way in which this is done is by the rather frantic moving of the two women as they are intimate and by the editing technique of fast-cutting, giving the sense of being in a rush. During their last night together the angles of the two bodies are very explicit, showing both women fully nude and on top of each other switching positions three times in the few minutes the scene lasts. Instead of sighs and gasps the women are shown refraining themselves from screaming, as Mary's mother is sleeping in the room next door. The intimate moments between Abigail and Tallie in *The World to Come* (2020) are less explicit, but nevertheless portray the women as frantically entangled. There are no full sex scenes within the film. Instead, the film uses a montage of all the times Abigail and Tallie were intimate together. The timing of this montage is dubious, as Abigail lays next to Tallie's dead body and seems to reminisce these moments just after she had been murdered, implying that Tallie was murdered because of her passion for women. The two women are showed in bed together, partially covered by blankets. The bare upper bodies women are seen in a soft light, indicating the romantic tone of the situation. Again, the technique of fast-cutting is applied here as the montage seemingly shows all the times the two women were intimate. Abigail and Tallie can be heard sighing, but also moaning. At one point Abigail tells Tallie: "you're going to leave a mark", indicating the roughness of their lovemaking.

4.1.3. Lesbian relationships as a phase

There is a tendency within films representing lesbian relationships to imply that they are not relationships at all, but rather a childish phase that the women involved have been unable to grow out of (Millbank, 1996). Another problematic stereotype in the representation of lesbian relationships is the stereotype of a mother/daughter pairing (Millbank, 1996), which I will come back to later. The linking of lesbian relationships to a type of "schoolgirl phase" implies the structural opposition of lesbian relationships as not authentic or mature relationships (Millbank, 1996, p.455). It suggests only heterosexual relationships are mature relationships and that the lesbian relationship is but a means to an end. Another common trope to indicate to the temporary nature of lesbian relationships are the killing or dying of one of the two female lovers or the forced separation of the two as a sort of punishment for their behaviour (Hollinger, 1998;

Waggoner, 2018). Even these four recent films tend to portray these stereotypical notions to some extent. In the case of *Carol* (2015), it is constantly emphasized that Therese's feelings for Carol are just a crush and not real, mature love; insinuating lesbianism is a phase one needs to grow out of. An example of this is when Therese agrees to join Carol on her trip instead of travelling to Europe with Richard they get into a fight. Richard doesn't understand why she would go with a woman she barely knows. He says:

You've got one hell of a crush on this woman is what... You're like a schoolgirl!
(Carol)

His words were said from a place of hurt, but nevertheless play down any real feelings there could be between the two women. Therese is portrayed as a lovesick fool who does not know right from wrong. The idea of the heterosexual relationship as being the ultimate goal for women in society is emphasized by the overlexicalization of words that have to do with marriage when Richard and Therese are together, such as: "marry me", "married", "marriage" and "future".

The duration of the relationship between the two female characters and the fact that it will only last for a period is highlighted differently throughout the plots of the other three movies. At the start of *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) Héloïse's mother, the Contessa, stipulates the time in which Marianne must secretly paint the portrait of her daughter; the Contessa wishes to leave for the shore in six days time, with the portrait. Marianne can join her for another job in Milan if she wishes to do so. After Marianne destroys the first painting the Contessa leaves for the shore and orders her to have the painting finished when she returns in five days. The women are giving a total of eleven days for their relationship to develop and to end. Visually this is made clear by the flowers on the kitchen table, which are full of life as soon as the Contessa leaves and the relationship between Marianne and Héloïse is allowed to flourish and dead the day of the Contessa's return as the two women are forced to separate. As can be seen in Figure 3 and Figure 4 the colour tones of the shot changes from a yellow tone, symbolizing warmth, to a blue tone, symbolizing coldness. This forced separation and Héloïse's eventual marriage to a Milanese nobleman reinforce the idea of lesbianism as a phase, with a heterosexual marriage as the goal.



Figure 3: Screenshot taken by author from PDLJFEF.



Figure 4: Screenshot taken by author from PDLJFEF.

Abigail in *The World to Come* (2020) is tasked by her husband to keep a diary of the small daily routines that often go unnoticed in his own ledger; the tasks she has done during the day, which tools were lent out, outstanding bills, etc. Each scene of the movie thus opens with a diary entry of the day and the date. There is a special emphasis on the passing of the time and the changing of the seasons, made clear by both the visual of the turning of the pages as well as the overlexicalization of words that have to do with either winter – “freezing”, “cold”, “winter” – or summer – “heat”, “warm”. This emphasis is important because it highlights the small period Abigail and Tallie had together. As Abigail lays down beside Tallie’s corpse on her marital bed after she’s been murdered by her husband, a montage is shown of all the times Abigail and Tallie had been intimate. Pages of the diary entries are turned rapidly and shown alternately with short shots of the two women in bed together. In total the romantic relationship between Abigail and Tallie lasted 26 days, spread out over the course of five months. Tallie’s murder by the hands of her own husband after he reads Abigail’s letter to Tallie adds to the ‘Bury your gays’ trope and implies Tallie has to be punished for her unnatural behaviour (Waggoner, 2018). This is emphasized by Finney’s (her husband) repetitive use of bible quotes

as he reminds Tallie that a husband holds the authority over a wife's body, stripping away any agency, and the violent outbursts when she does not allow him to touch her.

As Roderick (Charlotte's husband) in *Ammonite* (2020) leaves her in Lyme Regis with Mary to cure her melancholia by ways of sea bathing and resting, he says: "And it would only be for... four weeks. Perhaps five. But no more than six...". In doing so, a predetermined time frame is given in which the relationship between Mary and Charlotte will progress and end. Eventually, Charlotte returns home to London and the two women are forced to separate.

Of course, the fact that these relationships alone last only a specific amount of time does not directly imply that the character's lesbianism is phasal as well. However, it is difficult to say with certainty that some of these characters have a sexual orientation towards women only. Especially since the word "lesbian" is suppressed in all the films, never being spoken once, and the only time love is admitted is when Carol tells Therese "I love you" in one of the film's final scenes. In addition, there is no explicit mention of the women's sexual orientation within the dialogue, with the exception of Carol in *Carol* (2015) and Mary in *Ammonite* (2020). The fact that Carol has a sexual preference for women is made clear throughout the plot as she loses custody of her daughter over her lesbianism. In the case of Mary, a female ex-lover is introduced in the plot, which implies that she was sexually attracted to women before she met Charlotte.

4.1.4. Lesbian relationships as balanced/imbalanced

As mentioned before lesbian representations are often connected to the stereotypical notion of the mother/daughter bond. Feminist theorists such as Miller, Dinnerstein and Chodorow considered lesbian relationships as a way of trying to recreate the mother/daughter bond that young girls have in their childhood, or as a consequence of having the mother as the only parenting figure (Rich, 1980). The maturity of the heterosexual relationship thus stems from the fact that the women within a heterosexual relationship have developed further than the ones in a lesbian relationship. Another imbalance that often comes up in representations of lesbian relationships, which emphasizes the idea of a 'mother/daughter pairing', is a large age gap between the two women and a power balance of dominant/submissive (Millbank, 1996). This can be seen in these films as well. Both *Ammonite* (2020) as well as *Carol* (2015) tell the story of a lesbian couple which have a large age difference. How many years there are between the characters of Therese and Carol, and Mary and Charlotte is not stated specifically. However, the age difference between Carol and Therese is emphasized several times throughout the films. When Carol and Therese first meet, Therese works at the toy department of a large department store. Carol has come to buy her daughter, aged four, a doll. When the doll is sold out, Carol

asks Therese what she would have liked at that age. Therese then says she did not like dolls very much and Carol asks her what she would have wanted instead. Carol then proceeds to buy what Therese would have wanted. This referral to Therese's childhood as being closer to her than Carol is to hers emphasizes not only the large age difference between them, but the mother/daughter dynamic as well. This is stressed further in a shot of Carol and Therese at the counter, which can be seen in Figure 5 below.



Figure 5: Screenshot taken by author from Carol.

Therese looks very small as she looks up at Carol. Her eyes are wide, and she wears a Christmas hat. Carol wears an expensive looking fur coat and an elegant red hat. In the background we see some dolls and a sign that says: “mommy’s baby” (Carol). The shot perfectly encapsulates the dynamic between the two women at that point in the film. Therese looks innocent and naive, while Carol looks sophisticated and mature. The mother/daughter dynamic is so clear in this film because the story revolves around Carol gradually losing her daughter throughout the developing relationship between Therese and Carol. Carol is not allowed to see her daughter, but it feels like she uses Therese to fill that void in her life. An example of this is the way Carol brushes her daughter’s hair before her daughter is taken away from her and later on brushes Therese’s hair just before having sex for the first time. Another instance of this is Carol’s emotional reaction when she sees a picture of Therese around her daughter’s age.

Another case in point of the imbalance of the lesbian relationship are the class differences between the two female characters. The class differences are very noticeable, however, throughout each of the plots of these movies the class differences seem to become unimportant or fade away for the duration of the relationship between the two women. This

implies a certain equality between the two women when they are together, away from public eye. In *Carol* (2015) it is made clear from the start that Therese and Carol come from very different backgrounds. Carol's outfits are always impeccable; fur coats, expensive jewellery, elegant dresses. While Therese's outfits are very plain and sober looking. Their homes reflect this class difference as well. Carol lives in a large manor in the country with large windows, high ceilings and furniture made from dark oak. Therese lives in an apartment building in which she must share the telephone in the hallway with the other tenants. The paint in her apartment is flaking and the furniture doesn't quite seem to match. The same can be said for all other films. However, towards the end of the film the situation shifts. As Carol goes through her divorce, she is forced to get a job herself, to pay for her apartment in New York City, while Therese on the other hand goes through a transformation of her own as she works at the New York Times. In a sense, Carol scales down a notch in terms of class, while Therese scales up, reaching each other halfway as equals.

In *Ammonite* (2020) the age difference is noticeable but does not create an imbalance between the two women when they are together. The age difference does not create a dominant/submissive dynamic, nor a mother/daughter dynamic. The reason the age difference does not create this kind of dynamic has to do with the difference in class between the two women. As Mary is older and lower class and Charlotte is younger but higher class, the imbalance of age is balanced out. In addition, Mary tells Charlotte she never intended on having children because she had her work. With this, any motherly qualities that are automatically associated with women in general are dismissed by Mary. The differences regarding their class are emphasized most by scenes that show them living their lives in their own respective worlds. Mary and her mother have dinner in the dimly lit, grim looking kitchen with crumbling walls. Their dinner consists of a plate of broth and an egg each. At the same time Charlotte is shown having dinner with Roderick in a fancy, well-lit restaurant, where Roderick orders oysters, beef, potatoes and a bottle of wine just for himself. Mary wears practical outfits, which consist of a plaid blue dress and a dark blue coat, hiking shoes and a pair of pants underneath her dress. She wears the same outfit every day and when her hands are dirty, she wipes them clean on her dress. Charlotte is shown wearing beautiful dresses made of expensive looking fabric, golden earrings and heels. She owns several of these dresses and switches them regularly. After Mary and Charlotte grow closer, Charlotte starts wearing hiking shoes as they roam the beach together and is no longer afraid to get her hands dirty when digging out a fossil. She also helps carry the coal for the fire and tries her best at cooking, something she has clearly never done before.

The class difference in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) is personified by the character of the Contessa. When the Contessa is around, everyone around the house acts and dresses according to their respective statuses in society. Héloïse and the Contessa are upper-class and clothe accordingly, in tight corsets and dark blue dresses with an intricate pattern of flowers. Marianne is upper-middle class; as the daughter of a well-known painter and a painter herself she is able to enjoy the luxuries of having a maid within the country house while at the same time being an employee of the Contessa herself. This is made clear by the room she gets appointed, which used to be a reception and is still full of old furniture. Sophie, the maid, is lower class and when the Contessa is around, she lives a life of servitude. This is emphasized by her maid's outfit: a simple beige dress, a white apron and a white coif. As soon as the Contessa leaves for the shore and the relationship between the two women evolves romantically, however, the class distinctions disappear entirely as the three women that are left in the country house perform each other's tasks. The disappearance of class from the film is visualized in the scene of the three women sitting at the kitchen table as can be seen in Figure 6; Sophie (right) is sitting at the table embroidering, Marianne (middle) is pouring them all a glass of wine, while Héloïse (left) is cutting up vegetables and cooking them over the fire. Now it is Héloïse wearing the apron and Sophie's coif is nowhere to be seen either.



Figure 6: Screenshot taken by author from PDLJFEF.

Lastly, there are no actual class distinctions between the two couples in *The World to Come* (2020). As the plot revolves around the hardships of life on farms on the American East Coast frontier, both couples are essentially farmers. However, there is a distinction between the two couples when it comes to wealth. Abigail and Dyer (her husband) live sober lives and must count each penny just to make it through another winter. They cannot afford any luxuries

whatsoever. Abigail's clothing is sober; she wears the same black skirt and black blouse almost every day. Tallie wears a dark grey pin-striped skirt, a white blouse with fringes around the buttons and the sleeves and a dark brown patterned jacket. It is the quality of the clothes that highlight the difference between them; the fringes on the blouse, the pattern and sturdy fabric of the jacket. When the two couples have dinner together, Finney (Tallie's husband) complains about the carelessness of his hired hand. Finney's attitude to the less fortunate comes forward when he complains about the carelessness of his hired hand. He states pejoratively: "I told him that his shirt had so many holes, he can make a necklace of it.". Dyer replies that they often wish they could afford a hired hand. The issue of wealth between the two men is noticeable. However, in the case of this film the relationship between the two women eradicates any difference of wealth between them. As Abigail states in the narration: "I never saw on her countenance the indifference of fortunate towards the less fortunate.". Tallie and Abigail are portrayed as being equal.

The class aspect within these representations of lesbianism is interesting. For one, the fact that the relationships involves both someone who can be considered as higher in class and another who can be considered as lower in class, implies that lesbianism is not something that only belongs to one class. It affirms that homosexuality exists amongst all classes of society. The actual pairing of the couple provides some interesting insights as well. In the case of *Carol* (2015), *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019), and *Ammonite* (2020) the upper-class status of one of the women within the relationship provides a certain safety from prosecution, as these women had the means to uphold a certain lifestyle and privacy. Oftentimes, the marriages to their husbands were economical in nature and thus a certain individuality was involved. In all three above mentioned films a maid is privy to her mistress' tendencies, but because of their low statuses they are not regarded as any real threat. This is emphasized when in *Ammonite* (2020) Charlotte kisses Mary in front of her maid. When Mary pulls away, stunned, Charlotte says pejoratively: "That's just the maid.". It seems to suggest that the romantic involvement between the two women is the only reason to see another as an equal, while other lower-class women are treated as such, lower-class.

4.2 The two female characters as individuals

4.2.1. The feminine/masculine lesbian

As mentioned before, the femmes are easily consumed by both lesbian spectators as well as heterosexual spectators because of the ambiguity of the femme's lesbian nature. Femmes are a non-threatening type of lesbian; heterosexual women can identify with them, and heterosexual men can desire them, as they are represented as conventionally attractive (Ciasullo, 2001). The lesbianism within the femme is seen as flexible and open to change, whereas that of a more masculine lesbian is not (Eacklor, 1994). Within these four films there is a clear trend to depict lesbians that are, at least to some extent, feminine.

Carol is the best example of femininity within these films, as she not only dresses herself in well styled combinations of skirts, blouses and coats, she also wears jewellery like golden bracelets, earrings and a pearl necklace that match the outfits perfectly. In addition, her make-up – consisting of bright red lipstick, black eyeliner and mascara – and her nail polish – also bright red – complete the picture. Even though Carol is very feminine, the film makes it clear that she uses her femininity to disguise her true identity as a lesbian woman. This confirms the notion that a feminine lesbian that is not linked to another lesbian is essentially invisible, as the lesbian as a figure in our cultural imagination is associated with unfemininity and non-femaleness (Ciasullo, 2001). It suggests that lesbianism and femininity are mutually exclusive. While Mary is the closest any of the films come to depicting a more masculine lesbian. Mary dresses herself for practicability and often leaves her home dressed in a simple dress with a pair of pants underneath, as her work on the beach involves a lot of walking, kneeling and digging. She wears no make-up, no jewellery, and her unkempt hair is bound in a loose knot in her neck. The film also points to certain masculine attributes in Mary. When Mary and Charlotte walk the shores together for the first time Mary can be seen peeing on the beach. This instance is striking because public urination is often associated with males and in 19th century England there were certain standards of decency, for women in particular (Draznin, 2001). Another example of Mary's implied masculinity is when she leaves the piano recital to smoke tobacco outside in an alley. Historically, smoking tobacco was associated with masculinity and power and smoking tobacco in public was reserved for men alone (Pollard, 2004). Mary's masculine attributes are underlined by the contrast she forms compared to Charlotte, who is very feminine. Charlotte is portrayed wearing the most exquisite dresses, with matching headcaps, lace or silk gloves, golden earrings and perfume. Her hair is always combed and worn up. The female characters in both *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) as well as *The World to Come* (2020) are feminine in the sense that they conform to the norms of their respective times when it comes to clothing: dresses, blouses and skirts. However, none of these women wear any other visual

elements that point to their femininity: no jewellery, no make-up, no high heels. Their femininity is there, but it is not signalled to be the most important part of themselves as individuals.

As each of the plots play out a specific point in history, the reason for their femininity could be placed on the historic setting of the characters, as homosexuality was a criminal offense in many countries (Rich, 1980). Even though acts of lesbianism were often not specifically mentioned within legislation, socially lesbian women could still face the consequences of their actions (Rich, 1980). The portrayed flexibility of these women's lesbianism can thus partly be attributed to the impression of self-protection that characterized lesbians in these historical periods.

4.2.2. The stable/unstable lesbian

Another negative stereotype that is portrayed often regarding lesbians is the fact that they are mentally unstable, which can result in impulsive and even violent behaviour (Millbank, 1996). The portrayals of the women within these four films seem to conform to this idea. In each of the films one of the two female characters is experiencing emotional suffering caused by either a separation or grief, causing them to act irrationally at times.

It is made clear that both Abigail, *The World to Come* (2020) and Charlotte, *Ammonite* (2020), lost their daughters just before the start of the film. Their state of mind before meeting their female counterparts could be described as grief-stricken. The opening scene of *The World to Come* (2020) shows Abigail visiting her daughter's grave on their land. Abigail has clearly lost touch with the world around her, as she walks around the farm like a ghost while Dyer (her husband) watches worriedly. After visiting the grave, the narration of Abigail states: "I have become my grief. I have become my grief." The overlexicalization of these sentences emphasises the heaviness of her grief and how it affects her mentally. Her mental state deteriorates even further after losing Tallie (Abigail's lesbian lover) near the end of the film. Figure 7 shows Abigail so distraught that she must be physically restrained by her husband as to not hurt herself and she is prescribed medicine to calm her. The tone of this scene is dark and gloomy, contrasting the earlier scenes of Abigail and Tallie together sharply, which are bright and sunny. Abigail's expression is one of anguish and Dyer's hands as well as her own are pressed upon her chest, near her heart. It is testament to the heartbreak Abigail is experiencing. Abigail consoles herself by fantasizing that when Dyer leaves for town to gather supplies, she will accompany him, "take his rifle and go to Skaneateles and kill Finney where he sits".

Although we never actually see Abigail kill Finney (Tallie's husband and murderer), the insinuation that she will plays into the stereotypical view of lesbians as murderous and violent.



Figure 7: Screenshot taken by author from TWTC.

In *Ammonite* (2020) Charlotte's state of mind becomes clear through several scenes of her lying in bed during daytime, staring ahead of her. As shown in Figure 8, a pale looking Charlotte is lying in bed, staring blankly at the windowsill where a moth is frantically fluttering against a glass under which it is captured. The moth in the glass symbolizes the way in which Charlotte too is a prisoner, of her grief. Her skin looks pale and the dark circles under her eyes suggest that she is not sleeping well. Her hair is unruly, and she wears her nightgown in these shots, where she is seen in the privacy of her room. This contrasts with the scenes in which Charlotte is seen walking outside, as her status demands her to look decent and sophisticated when in public. However, the outfit she wears in the first scenes of the film only underscores the level of grief Charlotte is experiencing; a black cap, a black dress, a black coat and black lace gloves. Black mourning dresses were typically worn for a time after the death of a loved one, especially by the upper-class (Ruberg, 2008). Nevertheless, it is noticeable that Roderick is not wearing black but lighter taints of brown, whereas men were also expected wear black during the first period of grief (Ruberg, 2008). This difference indicates the difference between the levels of grief either parent is experiencing at that moment; Charlotte is still grieving heavily, while Roderick seems to have moved on already. Roderick does not even mention the death of their daughter when he talks to Mary about Charlotte. Instead, he tells her: "My wife, Charlotte, she hasn't been at all well of late. She suffers... Well, it's mild melancholia, perhaps.". Charlotte's state of mind and Roderick's assumption that she needs sea bathing to cure her

melancholia cause Charlotte to go bathing in the rough sea, nearly drowning in the process and causing her to fall so ill that she is inches away from death.



Figure 8: Screenshot taken by author from Ammonite.

Héloïse in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) lost her sister who committed suicide in order to escape her arranged marriage to a Milanese nobleman, leaving Héloïse suffering her fate. Héloïse's grief is portrayed differently than it is for Abigail and Charlotte. Héloïse's grief expresses itself in anger, rather than sadness. In the first scenes of the film Héloïse's expression is a constant scowl, which is emphasized by the fact that Marianne tells Sophie a few days after her arrival: "I haven't even seen her smile.". As Marianne interrogates Sophie on the circumstances of the sister's death, Sophie tells her that she saw the woman's broken body lay at the bottom of the cliff and that she thinks she jumped as "she didn't cry out". During their first walk together Héloïse suddenly takes off in a run towards the edge of the cliff, seemingly wanting to re-enact the circumstances of her sister's death, leaving Marianne to trail behind her anxiously. However, Héloïse tells Marianne that she did so because she had dreamt of being able to run for years. Héloïse's grief does not result in any violent or irrational actions. She is not depicted as instable in her mental state and seems quite capable of expressing her anger on the unfairness of her situation. Even though Héloïse is shown experiencing grief, she can be considered an example of stability.

Carol experiences another sort of loss in *Carol* (2015), namely the loss of her child due to a custody battle with her soon-to-be ex-husband. The heaviness of this situation on Carol's mental state of mind is made clear by the fact that Carol seems to lose focus at any given moment, even when in conversation with Therese. Carol also smokes when she is anxious, which she does a lot throughout the movie, often with shaking hands. As soon as Carol finds

out a private detective had taped her and Therese having sex the previous night in order to prove her misconduct in court, Carol frantically grabs a small gun from her suitcase and storms into his room, cocking the gun, pointing it at the private detective's head and says: "where's the tape, you sonofabitch?". When the private detective tells her, the tape has already been sent she points the gun at the equipment and pulls the trigger several times, but nothing happens. Frustrated she instead throws the gun at the equipment. Considering that Carol knows she loses her daughter the moment the tape containing evidence of her "misconduct" reaches her husband, the action almost seems justified, especially in the light of the fact that the two women had run into the man who turned out to be a private detective on several occasions during their trip. Carol's reaction is one of emotion and one of shock. However, the fact that Carol's first instinct is to hold a gun to the private detective's head implies certain violent tendencies and recklessness. This is visualized in Figure 9, in which Carol is shown holding the gun and Therese is looking at her in a state of shock; holding her hand to her chest, her eyes wide and her mouth open. Carol's murderous and determined look when aiming the gun are in stark contrast to Therese's reaction to the situation.



Figure 9: Screenshot taken by author from Carol.

4.3 The two female characters and their surroundings

4.3.1. The restrictions on women

Something striking within these representations of women is that it brings to the forefront the restrictions that were historically placed upon women by the heteronormative, patriarchal society they lived in one way or another; not just in who and how they loved, but also in having ambitions or having any achievements to their name. In addition, by using Gough's eight

characteristics of male power, it becomes clear that even though these films focus on female stories, often through the female gaze, instances of male power are very evident within them (Gough, 1975, as cited in Rich, 1980).

In *Carol* (2015) Harge (Carol's husband) symbolizes the values of the patriarchal, heteronormative structures of society as he prosecutes Carol based on her sexual preference and threatens to rob her of their daughter. Just before filing for sole custody of their daughter, Harge is in denial about their marriage being over. He visits their home and tries to convince Carol to join him at his parent's house for Christmas. When Carol refuses his offer, he grabs her upper arm and starts threatening her, stating: "Come with me now. If you don't - if you - let me - open that car door - if you won't come...". Harge tries to use his male authority over his wife to get what he wants. When Carol refuses, he punishes her by filing for sole custody. Carol's role as a mother is thus restricted because of her lesbianism, as the custody battle is based on a morality clause, implying that it is immoral for a woman to love another woman and be a mother simultaneously. It suggests that a lesbian cannot be an exemplary figure to a child, as she will encourage immoral behaviour, as decided upon by the dominant group.

The opening scene of *Ammonite* (2020) shows Mary's first fossil being carried into the British Museum. A maid is shown on her hands and knees, scrubbing the floor of the museum as she is ushered to move by a group of men carrying the heavy fossil to its destination. As soon as Mary's fossil reaches its destination the label with her name on it is replaced by name of the curator who presents the fossils, thus literally erasing her name and her achievements from history. The presence of the maid in the scene reminds spectators of the inferior place of a woman in 18th century England and the removal of Mary's name emphasizes this notion further. Charlotte, however, is used as an example of a woman that is trapped in a life of which the path has been predetermined by others from the moment of her birth based on her sex as well as her class. Charlotte is an upper-class married woman, but with this comfort of living come certain expectations. She is portrayed as having no agency whatsoever, as even her dinner is ordered for her by her husband.

Marianne in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) is restricted from developing her art by the patriarchy, as women were not allowed to paint nudes of male models to prevent them from gathering any knowledge on the male anatomy. These measures cramp her creativity, preventing her, in her own words, "from doing great art". Marianne is thus forced to submit the pieces that she has painted under her father's name, erasing her own achievements in the process. Heloïse, much like Charlotte, is a victim of her class and sex as she is forced to marry

a Milanese nobleman on her mother's orders. The Contessa herself admits being married-off to Héloïse's father in the same manner, repeating the cycle of upper-class arranged marriages.

The *World to Come* (2020) is the film in which the most examples of male power can be found. Both Dyer (Abigail's husband) and Finney (Tallie's husband) personify the workings of the patriarchal society, each in their own ways. Dyer does so by controlling Abigail's produce without ever mentioning any of her labour in his ledgers. Hers and the invisibility of other women's labour at that time is explained poignantly by Abigail when she says:

“My mother once told me in a fury when I was a little girl that my father asked nothing of her except that she work in the garden, harvest the produce, preserve the fruit, tend the poultry, milk the cows, manage the household duties, and help out in the fields when needed. She said she appeared in his ledger only when she purchased a dress.”

Dyer also denies Abigail permission to make the trip to Onodaga Country to make sure Tallie is alive. Abigail's new-found confidence causes her to ignore this and go anyway, but the fact that Abigail has to ask permission to move anywhere is in and of itself an example of male power. Finney's male power is more explicit. He regularly confines Tallie physically, sometimes for days on end. When he suspects there is something going on between Tallie and Abigail, he takes Tallie West. Tallie's letters to Abigail imply that Finney forces himself upon her, as her letter states:

“I believe I've enjoyed myself less these last few weeks than any other female who ever lived. During what little time I have to myself, Finney reads aloud instructions for wives from the Old Testament.”

As the letter is narrated Tallie is shown undressing herself, staring ahead blankly. Her skin is pale and there are dark circles under her eyes. Finney is undressing himself next to her. Both husbands in *The World to Come* (2020) are used as examples to expose and critique the patriarchal notions of society.

4.3.2. The situating of the two women

The analysis of the four films reveals a clear trend of situating lesbianism at a safe distance from the rest of society. The films not only situate the intimate moments between the two

women almost exclusively inside the domestic sphere, but the space they occupy for the duration of the relationship is remote and ends as soon as one of the two re-enters society, as public space is highly heteronormative (McWilliam, 2017). This trend reinforces the notion that lesbian intimacy and mobility cannot be combined (McWilliam, 2017).

In *Carol* (2015) Therese and Carol take a road trip West. When they are on the road, going from hotel to hotel, their relationship really evolves romantically. The sex scene between the two women is the only one that is not situated inside the safety of the domestic sphere. However, as they soon find out, there is no privacy for lesbian women within the public space and they get caught by a private detective. This is a good example of the fact that the right to privacy is exclusively reserved for married heterosexuals, which is made clear by male policing (McWilliam, 2017). Carol and Therese are already halfway across the country when Carol leaves Therese to return to New York and deal with the custody battle, leaving Therese a letter to say goodbye. As soon as Carol leaves for New York the relationship ends, almost as if their lesbianism can only exist outside of society and not within it.

The same can be said for *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019), which situates the women on a remote island in Brittany, France. The surroundings of the large country house Héloïse, her mother and their maid inhabit seems to be surrounded only by rolling hills, steep cliffs and the rough sea as far as the eye reaches. The Contessa's presence functions as the personification of society's expectations of women and as soon as she leaves the relationship between the two women flourishes romantically. However, as soon as the Contessa returns and both women are forced to leave the island, they are forced to separate for good.

Ammonite (2020) portrays this notion in almost the same way, only the remote location is not France but Lymes Regis in England. Whereas Mary's house is surrounded by similar hills and cliffs, the house is situated in a small village. The village acts as a sort of haven in which the relationship between Mary and Charlotte can exist. Once Charlotte returns to London it is impossible to maintain it, as is proven by the disastrous attempt at a reunion of the two.

Finally, *The World to Come* (2020) situates their principal female characters in the American East Coast frontier, perhaps the most remote location of all. This is made clear when Abigail tells Tallie about her grandmother: "Imagine faring forth into a wilderness, hoping to build the foundations of a home". The opening shot of the film emphasizes the wilderness of the area surrounding their home, as it shows the denseness of the forest before the camera cranes forward to show Abigail and Dyer's home through the trees. Abigail's and Tallie's location is so remote that they barely come in contact with other human beings apart from each other and their husbands. Their intimate moments are spaced within the privacy of the domestic; in

Abigail's marital bed. Their lack of freedom and privacy is made clear when the two women lay underneath a tree together, chatting and kissing. It is a very intimate moment, as their blouses are partially open, and their hair is loose. When they hear the snapping of a branch somewhere in the forest their heads shoot up, as if caught. The reaction of the two women emphasizes the constant fear of male policing when in public. When Abigail and Tallie have been intimate, Tallie is taken away by her husband and eventually murdered; another example that lesbianism and mobility do not go hand in hand.

Conclusion

5.1 Major findings

The objective of this thesis was to answer the research question as it was set out in the introduction, namely: What does the recurrent use of a historical setting in the films *Carol* (2015), *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019), *Ammonite* (2020) and *The World to Come* (2020) reveal about the representation of lesbianism? By analysing the four films mentioned, using Machin and Mayr's (2012) method of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, I conclude that the historical setting of these films is used to, on the one hand, criticize the existing patriarchal structures of society, both in the present and the past, while, at the same time, creating enough distance between these historical representations and the present to maintain the existence of heteronormative stereotypes concerning lesbianism.

In terms of representation of lesbianism several aspects are noteworthy. The first aspect of interest has to do with the imbalance of power within the lesbian relationship, or rather: the balance of power. The representations of the lesbian relationship within these four films are ultimately ones that are based on the equality of the two people engaged in the relationship. Even though lesbian relationships were often believed to be divided along the lines of gender roles (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984), the butch being the male in the relationship and the femme being the female, this division is not seen within these representations. The imbalance of a dominant and submissive personality within the relationship, in the form of a mother/daughter pairing as mentioned by Millbank (1996), has only explicitly come forward in the example of *Carol* (2015). Something that is significant is the class differences between the two principal female characters within these representations. The lesbian relationship in *Carol* (2015) involves a young shop clerk and an upper-class woman. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) and *Ammonite* (2020) both involve the pairing of what is essentially, through the involvement of others, an aristocrat employer and a (lower) middle-class employee. The pairing in *The World to Come* (2020) involves the wife of a rich farmer and the wife of a poor farmer, which is not necessarily class related but rather an imbalance of resources. Each of the four films, however, represent the women involved in the relationship as equal partners by showing the contrast between the absence of any class differences when the two women are alone together and the reality the women must live in when they are outside of the safety of the relationship. The aspects of compassionate love that are apparent within all four movies in the form of

emotional and physical support displayed between the two principal female characters is in sharp contrast with any other meaningful relationships in the women's lives.

Even though the films tend to portray the lesbian relationship as one of equality, at the same time the stereotypical notion of lesbianism as a phase is apparent in each of the films as well. As has often been the case in representations of lesbian relationships in mainstream media, the females involved in the lesbian relationship ultimately ends by either a forceful separation or death (Waggoner, 2018). In both *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) and *Ammonite* (2020) one of the two women are forced to (re)turn to a heterosexual marriage, as is expected of women of their class within these historical periods. While the women in *Carol* (2015) are forcefully separated by a looming custody battle that serves as a punishment of one of the women's lesbianism. One of the women in *The World to Come* (2020) is killed by her husband because of her lesbianism, leaving the other stuck in a loveless marriage to her husband. The implications of maintaining these stereotypical notions are severe. Lesbian relationships are portrayed as being short-lived affairs, not as serious options for women, which is tantamount to Rich's (1980) concept of compulsory heterosexuality. The fact that three out of four films end in one of the women (back) in a heterosexual relationship, albeit not happily so, reinforce the heteronormative notions they could be challenging.

The third aspect of interest within these representations has to do with the portrayal of these women as individuals rather than as a couple. Again, within these representations of lesbians as individuals, existing stereotypes can be discerned in almost all the films. The portrayal of the lesbian as murderous, violent, unstable, mentally ill, unstable and aggressive (Hollinger, 1998; Millbank, 1996; Russo, 1981) is a negative stereotype that has been used in films throughout history. In each of the films one of the principal female characters is grief-stricken one way or another, ultimately causing irrational and sometimes violent behaviour. The mental stability of the women is often directly linked to their lesbianism. In *Carol* (2015), Carol's deteriorating mental stability progresses along the evolving of her relationship with Therese. While in *Ammonite* (2020) and *The World to Come* (2020) the melancholia of the women is at its worst just before they start their lesbian affair with the other woman. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) is the only exception; even though one of the women has lost a sister, she is portrayed as stable and able to rationally speak her mind. Three out of four representations of lesbian relationships link lesbianism to both tragedy, mental instability and

irrational behaviour. It is surprising, considering the recency of these four works and the apparent progress society has made over the last decade.

Even though these four films can be considered as examples of openly lesbian films as described by Hollinger (1998), it is the ambiguity of all but one of the female characters' lesbianism that is noteworthy. Every one of the principal female characters except for Mary, *Ammonite* (2020), can be considered femme lesbians whose lesbianism is only visible within the privacy and safety of their homes. The moment the female characters set foot in public their feminine appearance allows their lesbianism to become something that is questionable, or even invisible. Can we truly speak of lesbian visibility when the representations on screen suggest lesbianism is something that can exist in private exclusively? These portrayals confirm Ciasullo's (2001) notion that the femme lesbian is the only type of lesbian that can be represented within mainstream media, as the femme is easily consumable by both a heterosexual as well as a lesbian audience. The homogeneity and the safeness of these representations (Ciasullo, 2001) are also tantamount to the ambiguous nature of the female characters' lesbianism. The films not only situate the intimate moments between the two women almost exclusively inside the domestic sphere, but the space they occupy for the duration of the relationship is remote and ends as soon as one of the two re-enters society (McWilliam, 2017), reaffirming the public space as heteronormative and not fit for lesbianism. As soon as one of the two principal female characters leaves the secluded bubble in which the lesbian relationship was allowed to exist the relationship ends, as if lesbianism can only exist outside of society and not within it. This trend reinforces the notion that openly lesbian intimacy and mobility cannot be combined (McWilliam, 2017).

The four films have all succeeded in bringing the restrictions that were historically placed on women to the forefront. It is interesting to note that, even though these films are lesbian love stories, they take an openly feminist stance against the patriarchal structures of society. Through a lot of the dialogue the principal female characters within the films tell each other about the restrictions they have to face and openly question or criticize the way society was set up for women like them (e.g. artists, scientists, farmers) and the inequality they face as opposed to their male counterparts. The open conversation concerning their position as women is a striking contrast with the closed off silence concerning their lesbianism.

The historical component within these four representations of lesbianism is one of the main focuses of this research. The trend of setting lesbianism in the past becoming more and more popular among filmmakers seeking to tell lesbian stories since the release of *Carol* (2015). In using a historical setting in the telling of lesbian stories, the filmmakers essentially create a distance between these portrayals of lesbians in the past and our present society. The negative stereotypes that are maintained within these representations can directly be waved away as being true to the historical narrative of that particular time. A butch lesbian will indeed not be represented in a period piece, as homosexuality was a criminal offence in a lot of countries (Rich, 1980) and butch lesbians would attract a lot of attention. Thus, the ambiguity of the lesbians represented within these four films can be attributed to the historical setting, as lesbians were expected to hide in plain sight in fear of prosecution. The difficulty of maintaining a lesbian relationship, the phasal aspect mentioned above, can be ascribed to the historical setting as well, as women's roles within society were historically very different; women were often not even allowed possessions of their own or were regarded as the possession of men themselves (Rich, 1980). Meanwhile, by using a historical setting, problems that are faced by lesbians in the present can be conveniently ignored and be put down in comparison to the tragic fates of lesbian women of the past. Setting a lesbian story in the past is the choice a filmmaker makes consciously. Even if some of the problematic aspects of these representations of lesbianism can be attributed to the historical setting, the choice to use a historical setting was made consciously and therefore the choice to maintain these stereotypes was also made consciously. The remoteness of the setting of the lesbian relationship along with the historical aspect that is used in each of these films, give grounds for such representations without seeming stereotypical. However, even if the stories are visually historical, it is crucial to remember that these stories were written in the present. Thus, stereotypical notions that were included within these representations, stem from the present, not the past.

Finally, it is interesting to note how the sex and sexuality of the directors may have influenced these depictions of lesbianism, particularly when it comes to sexual intimacy between the two women as this aspect of lesbian representations are often associated with the male gaze (Hollinger, 1998). As mentioned earlier, two out of four films were directed by women. Céline Sciamma, director of *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019), identifies as a lesbian herself. It is noteworthy that *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) is the only film that does not explicitly show any sexual acts between the two principal female characters, instead focusing on the lesbian gaze (Hollinger, 1998) and female sensuality. While the male gaze

places the female as the passive subject opposing an active male object (Mulvey, 1975), the women in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) are actively looking and being looked at, while the few men that enter the frame are passive bystanders. *The World to Come* (2020) was directed by Mona Fastvold, a heterosexual woman. Even though the lesbian gaze (Hollinger, 1998), that looks and ask for a look in return, is strongly present within the film, there are certain instances of male policing that place the two female principal characters at the mercy of the aggressive male gaze as they are seen outside of the safety of their domestic space, but only when the two women are together. This is in line with Mulvey's own criticism of her earlier work, as female filmmakers could have internalized a masculine way of looking because of its deep roots within filmmaking (Laing & Wilson, 2020). *Carol* (2015) was directed by Ted Haynes, a heterosexual man. It is interesting but not surprising the film containing the most stereotypical imagery of all the movies was directed by a male. The same can be said of *Ammonite* (2020), directed by Francis Lee, in which the sex scenes are so explicit that it borders on the pornographic.

5.2 Limitations

One of the limitations of this research is my own positionality as a researcher, which was previously discussed in the methodology part of this thesis. Another limitation of this research may be the fact that I decided to focus on a broad scope when it comes to the representation of lesbianism in these four films (the relationships, individuals and surroundings) instead of focusing on one and going more in-depth. This may have distinguished the richness of the results. This choice was made deliberately as focusing on only one of these aspects would not have been able to cover the entirety of the lesbian experience as represented in films. Future research on this matter could therefore focus more on either the figure of the lesbian as an individual, or the lesbian relationship and the dynamic, and take a more in-depth approach.

Another limitation to this study lies within the Eurocentricity of the units of analysis. I have chosen these four films partly because I was already familiar with them. This earlier knowledge of the films as a spectator rather than a researcher may have influenced the study to some extent. The fact that these are all dominant, western depictions of lesbianism in film limits the scope of this research, as focusing on non-western representations may lead to different results entirely. I would urge future research to focus more on non-western examples of lesbian representations in films with a historical setting, an example being *The Handmaiden* (2016). Following a non-Eurocentric perspective in researching the representation of lesbianism in film, especially when looking at films with a historical setting, could show entirely different views

on lesbianism culturally. The four examples used within this research are representations of instances in western history specifically, which brings to the forefront the Judeo-Christian understanding and repulsion of lesbianism with all the societal consequences that entails. A non-Eurocentric view could reveal a much less bleak history of lesbianism.

5.3 Societal and theoretical implications

During this research I analysed the way in which lesbianism was represented within four recent films, focusing on the role the historical setting played within this representation. While the topic of lesbian representation in mainstream media is no newcomer when it comes to academic research, there is not one piece of literature, that I know of, that focuses specifically on the role of the historical setting in the representation of lesbianism. The recency of the trend of setting lesbian representations in the past may be the cause of the non-existence of any previous literature on the matter. By not only analysing the figure of the lesbian as an individual but the relationship between the two women as well a comprehensive image could be sketched of how lesbians were treated in recent portrayals. I set out to question not only how these representations shaped the impressions society has of lesbianism but also how the heteronormative culture of society shapes the representations of lesbianism in mainstream media.

Theoretically, this research shows that lesbians are still considered a significant threat to the heteronormative and patriarchal structures of society, as the historical setting and the distance between the past and the present is to create a safe space in which lesbian is allowed to exist for a short amount of time before being forced to end (tragically). The alternative of the patriarchal heterosexual couple is still portrayed as not being a valid option in the long run. At the same time the ambiguity of the lesbians represented within these films make it so that their lesbianism is in effect invisible, possibly preventing any lesbian spectators in the present to identify with the characters in these movies. Fields of study that could benefit from this research include gender studies, film studies and history, as this research brings to the forefront not only the necessity of recent examples of lesbian representation in film and TV, but also the strides that have yet to be made in outgrowing certain stereotypical imagery that seemed to have lingered until this day. When it comes to the historical field of study, this research could function as somewhat of an inspiration for further historical research to look at the accuracy of the historical elements within these films and others like them. As the number of films representing lesbian love stories in a historical setting is still growing, there is no shortage of

material to look at. Societally, the research shows that even though a lot of progress has been made in regarding equal rights for LGBTQI+ individuals in the West there is still a lot of territory to gain when it comes to letting go of the negative stereotypes that continue to haunt lesbian representations in mainstream popular culture today.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: Overview of the units of research

| Title | Carol | Portrait de la jeune fille en feu | Ammonite | The World to Come |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Release date | 2015 | 2019 | 2020 | 2020 |
| Director | Todd Haynes | Céline Sciamma | Francis Lee | Mona Fastvold |
| Screenplay | Phyllis Nagy | Céline Sciamma | Francis Lee | Ron Hansen Jim Shepard |
| Production companies | Number 9 Films Film4 Productions Killer Films | Lilies Films Arte Hold Up Films | BBC Films BFI See-Saw Films | Killer Films Sea Change Media M.Y.R.A. Entertainment Yellow Bear Films Hype Film Ingenious Media |
| Duration | 118 minutes | 120 minutes | 120 minutes | 89 minutes |
| Plot | Therese Belivet works at a department store where she meets the upper-class soon-to-be divorcee, Carol Aird. The two are intrigued by one another and soon start an affair. Carol's divorce takes a turn for the worst when her husband files for sole custody of their daughter based on a morality clause. | An 18 th century female painter, Marianne, travels to a distant island in Brittany where she is tasked to paint a portrait of a young lady, Héloïse, for her future husband. The portrait has to be painted in secret as Héloïse refuses the marriage. The two grow closer and a relation between the two develops and ends when the final painting is finished. | 19 th century palaeontologist Mary Anning spends her time roaming the beaches and collecting fossils. Charlotte Murchison is left by her husband to heal her melancholia by walking the sea with Mary. When Charlotte falls ill Mary nurses her back to health and a relationship between the two develops that ends when Charlotte's husband returns from his travels. | In the rural west of the United States in the 19 th century Abigail and her husband dyer live on a farm. Abigail is devastated by the loss of their daughter a few months earlier. She meets Tallie and Tallie becomes a welcome distraction from her grief. After they begin a sexual affair the distance between them and their husbands increases and Tallie is killed by her husband Finney because of it. |

APPENDIX B: Scenes used during analysis, time stamps and number of screenshots

Carol (2015)

| Scene | Time stamp | Number of screenshots |
|--|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Opening scene | 00:00:00 - 00:08:09 | 10 |
| Therese and Carol first meet | 00:08:10 - 00:13:28 | 4 |
| Therese and Carol have lunch | 00:19:29 - 00:23:50 | 6 |
| Therese visits Carol at her home | 00:34:48 - 00:42:16 | 10 |
| Carol meets with her attorney | 00:45:16 - 00:49:22 | 4 |
| Therese talks to Richard about homosexuality | 00:49:23 - 00:52:17 | 5 |
| Carol visits Therese at her home | 00:53:58 - 00:57:12 | 3 |
| Therese and Richard fight | 00:57:13 - 00:58:59 | 2 |
| Carol and Therese have sex | 01:14:06 - 01:18:26 | 9 |
| Goodbye | 01:25:34 - 01:31:54 | 7 |
| The Hearing | 01:38:33 - 01:42:41 | 5 |
| Reunion | 01:44:20 - 01:49:55 | 5 |
| The Party | 01:49:56 - 01:52:14 | 3 |
| Ending | 01:52:15 - 01:54:25 | 3 |

Portrait de la jeune fille en feu (2019)

| Scene | Time stamp | Number of screenshots |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Opening scene | 00:00:00 - 00:02:49 | 4 |
| Marianne's first night | 00:07:36 - 00:12:17 | 8 |
| Marianne talks to the Contessa | 00:14:42 - 00:16:28 | 5 |
| Setting up the canvas | 00:16:29 - 00:18:39 | 4 |
| Marianne and Héloïse's first walk | 00:18:40 - 00:22:45 | 10 |
| Marianne and Héloïse's second walk | 00:25:20 - 00:28:17 | 6 |
| Marianne and Héloïse's second walk | 00:30:03 - 00:32:44 | 2 |
| Marianne talks to the Contessa again | 00:32:45 - 00:34:44 | 3 |
| Marianne plays the harpsichord | 00:34:45 - 00:40:15 | 9 |
| Marianne's confession | 00:45:41 - 00:48:44 | 6 |
| Revealing the portrait | 00:48:45 - 00:52:53 | 10 |
| First posing session | 00:52:54 - 00:55:05 | 4 |
| Helping Sophie with her baby | 00:58:22 - 01:03:34 | 8 |
| Second posing session | 01:03:38 - 01:06:17 | 6 |
| Third posing session | 01:07:32 - 01:09:48 | 3 |

| | | |
|--|---------------------|----|
| Bonfire and first kiss | 01:14:26 - 01:20:02 | 10 |
| Second kiss and morning after | 01:21:23 - 01:24:55 | 7 |
| Painting the abortion | 01:27:38 - 01:30:16 | 7 |
| Fourth posing session | 01:30:17 - 01:33:12 | 5 |
| Marianne and Héloïse fight | 01:34:45 - 01:38:07 | 5 |
| Marianne draws herself in Héloïse's book | 01:42:15 - 01:44:17 | 4 |
| Last night together | 01:44:18 - 01:47:04 | 1 |
| Contessa arrives | 01:47:05 - 01:49:26 | 5 |
| Goodbyes | 01:49:27 - 01:51:29 | 9 |
| Art gallery | 01:51:30 - 01:54:13 | 5 |
| Ending | 01:54:14 - 01:58:15 | 3 |

Ammonite (2020)

| Scene | Time stamp | Number of screenshots |
|---|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Opening scene | 00:00:00 - 00:08:38 | 4 |
| Mary and Charlotte first meet | 00:08:39 - 00:12:42 | 6 |
| Charlotte grief-stricken | 00:19:00 - 00:21:08 | 7 |
| Roderick asks Mary to walk with Charlotte | 00:21:09 - 00:22:56 | 3 |
| Mary and Charlotte's first walk | 00:22:57 - 00:28:53 | 9 |
| Charlotte falls ill | 00:30:33 - 00:33:08 | 7 |
| Mary cares for Charlotte | 00:34:01 - 00:35:57 | 7 |
| Mary still cares for Charlotte and draws her | 00:38:40 - 00:41:11 | 12 |
| Mary and Charlotte's second walk | 00:44:01 - 00:46:13 | 7 |
| Piano recital | 00:56:01 - 01:04:34 | 12 |
| Mary and Charlotte's third walk | 01:04:35 - 01:07:50 | 5 |
| Mary and Charlotte have sex | 01:07:51 - 01:12:18 | 7 |
| Mary and Charlotte's fourth walk | 01:12:52 - 01:15:20 | 5 |
| Charlotte plays the harpsichord | 01:16:07 - 01:17:45 | 4 |
| Mary and Charlotte have sex for the second time, last night | 01:22:22 - 01:27:20 | 12 |
| Goodbye | 01:27:21 - 01:30:04 | 7 |
| Reunion | 01:40:40 - 01:49:31 | 8 |
| Ending | 01:50:03 - 01:52:33 | 6 |

The World to Come (2020)

| Scene | Time stamp | Number of screenshots |
|---------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Opening scene | 00:00:00 - 00:06:35 | 6 |

| | | |
|--|---------------------|----|
| Memories of daughter | 00:06:36 - 00:08:43 | 4 |
| Visiting the grave | 00:08:44 - 00:10:16 | 3 |
| Abigail and Tallie see each other for the first time | 00:10:17 - 00:11:36 | 5 |
| Abigail and Tallie first meet | 00:11:37 - 00:17:58 | 8 |
| Abigail and Tallie pluck the birds | 00:19:38 - 00:22:35 | 6 |
| Abigail refuses sex with Dyer | 00:22:36 - 00:23:47 | 2 |
| The two couples have dinner | 00:23:48 - 00:26:28 | 6 |
| Abigail's birthday | 00:26:29 - 00:33:11 | 5 |
| Abigail and Tallie reunite | 00:41:51 - 00:46:41 | 9 |
| Abigail and Tallie first kiss | 00:46:41 - 00:54:06 | 12 |
| Distance withing two couples grows | 00:54:07 - 00:58:41 | 7 |
| Abigail and Tallie relax in the woods | 00:58:42 - 01:01:41 | 5 |
| Finney interrogates Tallie | 01:01:42 - 01:03:12 | 3 |
| Distance between Abigail and Dyer | 01:03:13 - 01:04:26 | 4 |
| Tallie and Finney fight at night | 01:04:27 - 01:05:35 | 3 |
| Abigail worries over Tallie | 01:05:36 - 01:07:27 | 5 |
| Abigail is mad at Dyer and his ledger | 01:07:28 - 01:08:25 | 3 |
| The two couples have dinner again | 01:11:31 - 01:15:19 | 7 |
| Abigail's heartbreak | 01:18:35 - 01:20:20 | 4 |
| The letters | 01:20:21 - 01:26:30 | 11 |
| Tallie's death | 01:26:31 - 01:32:27 | 8 |
| Ending | 01:32:28 - 01:37:52 | 7 |

APPENDIX C: Examples of Visual Discourse Analysis



Figure 1. Screenshot taken by author from the movie Carol (2015).

| Detonations and Connotations | Objects | Settings | Salience |
|---|--|--|--|
| The soft lighting and the closeness of the characters show the intimacy between the two women and their developing feelings toward each other. | <p>Carol:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bracelet • Pearl necklace • Elegant light blue dress • Golden bracelets • Red nailpolish <p>Therese:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black turtleneck • Plaid dress • Black hairband | The two women are sitting in the large living room of Carol's home. Therese plays the piano while Carol stands behind her with her hands on Therese's shoulders. | Practical light: soft lighting caused by the lamps in the house as well as the lights of the Christmas tree. |
| Therese's clothing and hair style make her look very young and naive, while Carol's outfit and posture are that of a mature woman. That combined with the way the shot is set up almost | Piano | | Both are the focus of the shot. |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| make it seem like a mother is encouraging her daughter to play the piano. | | | |
| The use of a hip level shot emphasizes the action of Carol putting her hands on Therese's shoulders | | | Hip level shot. They are both in the centre of the frame. Therese is visible from the head to her waist, while Carol is only visible from the neck to the hip. |



Figure 2. Screenshot taken by author from the movie Portrait de la jeune fille en feu (2019).

| Detonations and Connotations | Objects | Settings | Salience |
|---|---------------|--|---|
| Marianne's nudity and the soft tones that are used within this shot refer to a sense of freedom within Marianne as a person. | Two canvases. | Marianne dries herself and her canvases in front of her fireplace while she smokes a pipe. | Practical lighting: lightsource fireplace. Soft tones. |
| Historically tobacco was very masculine and women were not allowed to smoke it in public -> another indication that we get a peak inside the secret that are the lives of historical women. | Pipe | | Marianne is the center of the frame, while beside her are the two canvases. |

| | | | |
|--|-----------|--|--|
| The two canvases indicate that she will not be doing one, but two portraits. | Tobacco | | |
| | Fireplace | | |
| | | | |



Figure 3. Screenshot taken by author from the movie Ammonite (2020).

| Detonations and Connotations | Objects | Settings | Salience |
|---|---|---|---|
| The distance, both physically and mentally, between the two women in this shot is obvious by the way they are positioned so far away from each other. | <p>Mary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dark blue coat • Knitted woollen gloves • Off-white scarf <p>Charlotte:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black cap • Black dress | Mary eats a sandwich on the beach while Charlotte stares gloomily into the sea. | Ambient lighting -> daylight on a cloudy day. Grey tones, cold. |

| | | | |
|---|----------|--|--|
| Mary is wearing practical clothing that make it easy to roam the beach and do her work, while Charlotte is wearing her mourning dress -> the two women are different. Mary does not care for etiquette and status while Charlotte lives revolves around it. | Sandwich | | Mary is situated to the left of the frame, foregrounding Charlotte who is further away in the center of the frame. |
| The fact that Mary is focused and Charlotte is not refers to Mary's attitude towards Charlotte at this moment in time -> she doesn't even concern herself with the young woman and merely eats her sandwich in peace. | | | Mary is focused while Charlotte is unfocused. |



Figure 4. Screenshot taken by author from the movie The World to Come (2020).

| Detonations and Connotations | Objects | Settings | Salience |
|---|---|--|--|
| Male policing. Just as the women get comfortable with each other Dyer walks in and disturbs them. The whole atmosphere seems to change as the tone of the shot darkens. | Abigail: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simple black blouse Dark blue skirt | Dyer comes in as Tallie and Abigail drink tea. | Practical and ambient light: Both the fireplace as well as natural sunlight through the windows. Dark tones. |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dark brown belt <p>Tallie:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White blouse with fringes around the buttons • Brown and green wrap, nicely finished <p>Dyer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black hat • Stained black coat • Black pants | | |
| Abigail is seated in between Tallie and Dyer. She looks back at Dyer coming in from the cold while Tallie sits on the right in the comfort of the fire. This is a reference to how her relationship with Tallie and with Dyer feel emotionally. | Cups | | Abigail is the centre of the frame in between Tallie to the right and Dyer to the left |
| Abigail and Dyer live a sober life as is apparent by their home. -> everything is rather dark and there are no luxury items, only what is strictly needed to survive. | Teapot | | |
| | Oil lamp | | |
| | Plates | | |
| | Pots and pans | | |
| | Pantry | | |

APPENDIX D: Examples of Critical Discourse Analysis

Word connotations = PURPLE

Overlexicalization = RED

Suppression = GREEN

Structural oppositions = BLUE

Movie 1. Carol (2015)

| Script text | Notes |
|--|---|
| [Richard] I don't get it. I don't get it, Therese. Who is this woman to you? | Distance between Richard and Therese is emphasized by the repetition of these words. Richard will never be able to understand Therese or Therese's feelings. |
| [Therese] She's a friend. | Therese dismisses the sexual tension between them. |
| [Richard] I'm your friend, Terry. Phil is your friend - Dannie. This woman - you don't even know her. | Richard offers male examples of friends and thereby dismisses the existence of female friendships. This woman is repeated -> pejorative reference to Carol. This refers to the slightly obsessive nature of Therese and Carol's relationship. |
| [Therese] You can forward any mail to Chicago, General Post, but I just paid rent through February. I had a little money saved up for the - for... | Therese had money saved for her and Richard's trip to Europe. |
| Richard looks up at her sharply. Therese looks away from him. | |
| [Richard] For our trip. Our trip, Terry. And now you're - I don't believe this is happening! | Therese's name or nickname is repeated several times by Richard, indicating he tries to use the sense of familiarity between them. |
| [Therese] I can't explain it. I just - | Therese has never had feelings like this before. |
| [Richard] What? You've got one hell of a crush on this woman is what... You're like a schoolgirl! | Indication that love between two women is immature and not serious but childish. |
| [Therese] I do not - I just like her is all. I like talking with her. I'm fond of anybody I can really talk to. | WLW relationships as being more about emotions than lust. Therese denies the special bond between herself and Carol. |
| This stings him, and they exchange a sharp look. | |
| [Richard] Nice. You know what I think? I think two weeks from now you'll be wishing you... She'll get tired of you and you'll wish you never- | Repetition of these word emphasizing that Therese is making a mistake by giving up her secure relationship with Richard for the unknown future with Carol |
| [Therese] You don't understand-! | |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>[Richard] I do - I understand completely. You're in a trance!</p> <p>[Therese] I'm wide awake. I've never felt more awake. Why don't you leave me alone?</p> <p>Therese has surprised herself with her boldness.</p> <p>[Richard] Are we over? Is that what this is?</p> <p>[Therese] I didn't say that. But why should I want to be with you if all you do is argue about this?</p> <p>[Richard] To say - to say for a minute you practically want to say goodbye because of some silly crush!</p> <p>[Therese] I didn't say that. You said it.</p> <p>Richard grabs his jacket and starts out the front door.</p> | <p>Reference to Therese's obsessive love for Carol.</p> <p>The term 'awake' implies that Therese was asleep before. Unaware of this part of herself. The repetition of the word emphasizes the certainty of this decision.</p> <p>Therese is undergoing a transformation that is set in motion by revelations she has about herself.</p> <p>Lesbian relationships as immature and silly as opposed to a 'real' relationship</p> |
|--|---|

Movie 2. Portrait de la jeune fille en feu (2019)

| Script text | Notes |
|--|--|
| <p>[Marianne] You're saying nothing?</p> <p>[Héloïse] Is that me?</p> <p>[Marianne] Yes.</p> <p>[Héloïse] Is that how you see me?</p> <p>[Marianne] It's not only me.</p> <p>[Héloïse] What do you mean, not only you?</p> <p>[Marianne] There are rules, conventions, ideas.</p> <p>[Héloïse] You mean there's no life?</p> <p>[Héloïse] No presence?</p> <p>[Marianne] Your presence is made up of fleeting moments that may lack truth.</p> | <p>Héloïse does not recognize herself in the first portrait.</p> <p>Héloïse is in disbelief by the way Marianne has portrayed her in the portrait.</p> <p>Reference to the rules painters are bound by, diminishing their agency and creativity. As opposed to the 'life' within Héloïse that is not captured in the portrait. As opposed to the 'presence' of Héloïse's personality that is not captured in the portrait.</p> <p>The fleeting moments Marianne refers to are the moments she has shared with Héloïse up until now. The 'lack of truth' are the feelings</p> |

| | |
|---|--|
| [Héloïse] Not everything is fleeting. | for Héloïse she wishes to deny, wish is the truth. |
| [Héloïse] Some feelings are deep. | Héloïse dismisses Marianne's denial of the significance of their shared moments. |
| [Héloïse] The fact it isn't close to me, that I can understand. | Héloïse implies that she has feelings for Marianne. |
| [Héloïse] But I find it sad it isn't close to you. | An artist should be close to their work |
| [Marianne] How do you know it isn't close to me? | Marianne neither confirms nor denies that she isn't close to the portrait. |
| [Marianne] I didn't know you were an art critic. | Marianne dismisses Héloïse's criticism of the portrait |
| [Héloïse] I didn't know you were a painter. | |
| [Héloïse] I'll fetch my mother. | |
| [Marianne] It wasn't good enough. I'll start again. | |
| [Contessa] You're joking. | |
| [Marianne] I'm sorry. | |
| [Marianne] It wasn't satisfactory. | It would have been satisfactory for the Contessa, but Marianne refers to herself here. |
| [Contessa] You're incompetent then. | As opposed to a 'competent' painter, who would have provided a satisfactory portrait |
| [Contessa] You can leave. | |
| [Héloïse] She's staying. | |
| [Héloïse] I'll pose for her. | By agreeing to pose for Marianne Héloïse indirectly agrees to her arranged marriage |
| [Contessa] Really? | |
| [Héloïse] Yes. | |
| [Contessa] Why? | |
| [Héloïse] What does it change for you? | Héloïse does not answer the question |
| [Contessa] Nothing. | |
| [Contessa] I'll be away five days. | Reference to the time they have together |
| [Contessa] When I return, it will be finished. | |

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| <p>[Contessa] And I decide, not you.</p> <p>[Contessa] Understood?</p> <p>[Contessa] Say goodbye like when you were little.</p> | <p>'it' refers to both the portrait as well as their relationship</p> <p>As opposed to the adult she is now. The Contessa reminiscence on the past.</p> |
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Movie 3. Ammonite (2020)

| Script text | Notes |
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| <p>[Maid] Tradesmen's entrance is around the side. Go all the way back.</p> <p>[Mary] I'm here as a guest of Mrs. Charlotte Murchison.</p> <p>[Maid] Miss Anning?</p> <p>[Mary] Yes.</p> <p>[Maid] I beg your pardon, miss. Please, do come this way.</p> <p>[Maid] Please wait here, miss.</p> <p>[Mary] Thank you.</p> <p>[Charlotte] That's just the maid.</p> <p>[Charlotte] Thank you, Anne. That will be all.</p> <p>[Charlotte] Oh, Mary! My Mary!</p> <p>[Charlotte] I can't believe you're here. How was the journey?</p> <p>[Charlotte] I wish you would have let me send a carriage.</p> <p>[Mary] It feels a very long way from Lyme.</p> <p>[Charlotte] Oh. I had it all planned out.</p> <p>[Charlotte] We'd have tea, and then I'd show you, but I just don't think I can wait any longer. Come on!</p> | <p>The maid assumes Mary is one of the employees rather than a guest and won't let her in through the front door. Class distinction.</p> <p>Mary is not what the maid had expected</p> <p>Now that it's established that Mary is a guest she is allowed to come through the front door. Class distinction.</p> <p>As opposed to someone who you should take notice of. Charlotte treats her maid as sub-human.</p> <p>Reference to Charlotte's status and wealth, in which Mary is not interested in the slightest.</p> <p>Reference to Mary as a creature of habit.</p> <p>Charlotte has been preparing something for quite a while it seems.</p> |

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| [Charlotte] Close your eyes. You must close your eyes or it will ruin everything. | |
| [Mary] I don't think I like surprises. | Reference to Mary as a creature of habit. |
| [Charlotte] You can open them. | |
| [Charlotte] It's yours. | |
| [Mary] Mine? | |
| [Charlotte] Yes. | |
| [Mary] To stay the night? | Mary clearly does not understand what is happening. |
| [Charlotte] Well, yes, but no. | |
| [Charlotte] Also yours to move into. | Reference to Charlotte being used to getting what she wants. |
| [Charlotte] To live here with me. | Reference to Charlotte taking decisions on Mary's behalf. |
| [Charlotte] Here, I thought you could put your mother's figurines. | Reference to Charlotte taking decisions on Mary's behalf. |
| [Charlotte] And here you can write your journal. | |
| [Charlotte] Such a good light, isn't it? | Charlotte is trying to sell her idea to Mary. |
| [Mary] But I have my home. | Mary does not want to leave Lyme for London. |
| [Charlotte] And in here... | Reference to Charlotte using her wealth to take decisions for Mary. |
| [Charlotte] They're for you. I had them made just for you. | |
| [Charlotte] Feel this one. | The dresses she had made are of great quality. |
| [Charlotte] Oh, and one last thing. | Reference to Charlotte taking decisions on Mary's behalf. |
| [Charlotte] My room. So we'll be next to each other, always. | There is a bitterness here, as she has not thought to ask Mary what she wanted. |
| [Mary] You've thought of everything. | |
| [Charlotte] I hope so. | Reference to Charlotte taking decisions on Mary's behalf. |
| [Charlotte] I didn't want you to worry about anything. | |

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| <p>[Charlotte] Well, say something.</p> <p>[Mary] Sorry. I really shouldn't...</p> <p>[Charlotte] Mary.</p> <p>[Mary] I wanted to see my relic in the British Museum today, so I should...</p> <p>[Charlotte] We'll see it later once we've settled you in.</p> <p>[Mary] I feel... I feel I'm at a great disadvantage.</p> <p>[Charlotte] Pardon?</p> <p>[Mary] I feel I've been misled.</p> <p>[Charlotte] I don't think I have...</p> <p>[Mary] I was invited for a visit.</p> <p>[Mary] And now it seems I've been hoodwinked in some way.</p> <p>[Charlotte] Mary...</p> <p>[Mary] Why did you not mention all this in your letter?</p> <p>[Charlotte] I wanted to see the look on your face.</p> <p>[Mary] You presumed I'd be fitted into your life, here, like one of my relics in your fine glass case.</p> <p>[Charlotte] No, of course not.</p> <p>[Mary] Will you label me, too?</p> <p>[Charlotte] No, that's not what I want. That's not what I intended.</p> <p>[Charlotte] I want this to be different.</p> <p>[Charlotte] Our different.</p> | <p>Mary doesn't say anything because Charlotte will not like what she has to say.</p> <p>Reference to Charlotte taking decisions on Mary's behalf.</p> <p>Reference to the class difference between them. As opposed to the advantage Charlotte has, being able to buy everything she desires, even Mary.</p> <p>Mary feels trapped by Charlotte.</p> <p>Mary would at least liked to have had a say in the matter.</p> <p>Mary feels trapped by Charlotte. Reference to lesbians as imprisoned in some way.</p> <p>Different from her marriage to Roderick.</p> <p>Repetition of the word different to refer to a specific kind of different. Reference to lesbianism.</p> <p>Reference to lesbianism. Sarcasm.</p> |
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| <p>[Mary] This must make your husband very happy.</p> <p>[Charlotte] Who cares?</p> <p>[Mary] Oh, please don't make fun of me.</p> <p>[Charlotte] Roddy is content with his life. Very content.</p> <p>[Charlotte] And because of you, he now has a proper interest that takes up most of his time.</p> <p>[Mary] You make it sound so neat, like I planned it.</p> <p>[Charlotte] Of course not.</p> <p>[Charlotte] Please, why are you doing this?</p> <p>[Charlotte] I don't want to go back to the life I had before you.</p> <p>[Mary] What about my life, Charlotte? My work?</p> <p>[Charlotte] I can't bear to think of you suffering out on those beaches in all weathers.</p> <p>[Charlotte] And now you'll be free to do your important work, your scientific work.</p> <p>[Mary] You don't understand me.</p> <p>[Charlotte] No!</p> <p>[Mary] Your proposition makes me feel like some fancy bird in a gilded cage.</p> <p>[sighs]</p> <p>[Mary] I need to find lodgings for tonight.</p> <p>[Mary] I wish you'd told me before.</p> <p>[Mary] I could have saved the boat fare.</p> <p>[Charlotte] Mary... Mary!</p> | <p>Reference to Charlotte being used to getting what she wants.</p> <p>The repetition of the word 'content' indicates that Charlotte is trying to convince herself more than she is Mary.</p> <p>Mary taught him about paeleontology. Leaving Charlotte and Mary time to be together.</p> <p>Reference to lesbians as imprisoned in some way.</p> <p>Mary adresses the fact that Charlotte hasn't even considered Mary's agency in the matter.</p> <p>As opposed to the luxury life she could be living in London.</p> <p>As opposed to the 'unimportant work' Mary does now. 'Scientific work' as more important than other work.</p> <p>Reference to lesbians as imprisoned in some way.</p> <p>If Mary had known she wouldn't have come.</p> |
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Movie 4. The World to Come (2020)

| Script text | Notes |
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| [Abigail] Her manner is sweet and calm and gracious. | As opposed to harsh, frantic and aloof. Abigail seems to describe the ways of a woman as opposed to the ways of a man. |
| [Abigail] And yet her spirits seem to quicken at the prospect of further conversation with me. | Tallie has a quick wit. |
| [Abigail] I find that everything I wish to tell her loses its eloquence in her presence. | Abigail is tongue-tied in Tallie's presence |
| [Tallie] So how did you come to meet Dyer? | |
| [Abigail] He was the oldest son of a neighbor. | |
| [Abigail] He helped out on my father's farm. | |
| [Tallie] And was he instantly smitten by you? | |
| [Tallie] He was, wasn't he? | |
| [Tallie] He was instantly smitten by you. | |
| [Abigail] He admired what he viewed as my practical good sense. | Marriage as a trade deal |
| [Tallie] You don't countenance words like "smitten", do you? | Tallie pokes at Abigail's shy, introverted nature |
| [Abigail] I suspect I use all the same words you do. | |
| [Tallie] I suspect you don't. | |
| [Tallie] In speech, yes, because you're shy. | |
| [Tallie] But I bet you're more accomplished in your writing. | Tallie sees right through Abigail's introverted nature |
| [Abigail] Thank you. | |
| [Tallie] Your good sense, that's all your husband was smitten with? | Repetition of the word 'smitten' is an indication here that Dyer was indeed smitten with Abigail, but Abigail was not smitten with him. |
| [Abigail] And my efficient habits. | |

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| <p>[Tallie] That's all?</p> <p>[Abigail] My handy ways.</p> <p>[Abigail] Dyer likes mechanical things.</p> <p>[Abigail] I have no doubt he would've been happier had he been allowed to pursue the natural scientific bent of his mind.</p> <p>[Abigail] Circumstances forced him into farming.</p> <p>[Tallie] And despite all of that, his heart compelled him to you?</p> <p>[Abigail] Well...</p> <p>[Abigail] You would have to ask him about that.</p> <p>[Tallie] And what would you say if I asked you?</p> <p>[Abigail] I suppose that as a suitor, he was... not generous, but he was just.</p> <p>[Abigail] And that he was affectionate, if not constant.</p> <p>[Abigail] I wasn't sure of his suitability.</p> <p>[Abigail] But my family felt that more improving might be in the offing.</p> <p>[Abigail] After all, it is a long lane that has no turning.</p> <p>[Tallie] You both have much to be thankful for.</p> <p>[Abigail] We do.</p> | <p>Abigail lists all kinds of practical qualities but says nothing about love or attraction. Marriage as a trade deal Abigail is a mechanical thing to Dyer. As is their relationship.</p> <p>Tallie questions the love part of their relationship</p> <p>Marriage as a trade deal</p> <p>Marriage as a trade deal</p> <p>Abigail admits she didn't have any feelings for Dyer.</p> <p>Marriage as a trade deal</p> <p>An unpleasant situation will improve eventually</p> <p>Tallie implies that herself and Finney have not. In terms of love.</p> |
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