Isolated Salvation: Analyzing Discourses on Sapphic Experiences in Lesbian Period Drama Films

By

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Abstract

My thesis focuses on discourses on sapphic experiences in four lesbian period drama films: *Carol* (Haynes, 2015), *Lizzie* (Macneill, 2018), *Tell It to the Bees* (Jankel, 2018), and *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* [*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*] (Sciamma, 2019). The genre of lesbian period drama films has lived through its peak in 2015–2020 and was followed by a series of criticisms on its uniformity and stereotype-driven plots. The aim of my project is to analyze the discourses on lesbian experiences in the four films by looking into how lesbian experiences are portrayed through the sapphic characters' relationships to their surroundings, to each other, and to themselves. I set out to examine how patriarchy manifests in directorial choices when depicting said relationships and how these representations of lesbian experiences might translate to contemporary lesbian audiences. First, I draw on quantitative data provided by internationally recognized human rights organizations and support it with country-specific examples to indicate homophobic discourses that affect lesbian lives and might be either contested or complemented by the discourses produced in my chosen films. Then, I lay the theoretical foundation for my research by examining the connection between discourses, power, and meanings through the lens of gender; providing a short study of psychoanalytic discussions on female homosexuality as a tool to help read gender relations in audiovisual texts; and looking at feminist and queer film theory on portrayals of lesbianism in cinema. Lastly, I apply this material for the film analysis. The main findings include both positive and negative depictions of lesbian experiences. I emphasize the extensive critique of patriarchal power relations that lesbian period drama films offer the audiences, unconventional ways of visualizing desire and intimacy, and the consistent positioning of sapphic desire as natural and freeing in contrast to the melancholia brought on by compulsory heterosexuality. The adverse portrayals point to unequal but normalized power dynamics

between lovers and directorial choices that still heavily rely on phallocentric Freudian ideas and heterosexual imaginary.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 16 942 words
Entire manuscript: 18 908 words

Signed _____ Aušrinė Smilgytė

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List of Abbreviations

ECtHR – European Court of Human Rights

EU – European Union

FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

ILGA-Europe – International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association – Europe

LGB – lesbian, gay bisexual

LGBTI – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex

LGBTIQ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer

NQC – New Queer Cinema

Portrait – Portrait of a Lady on Fire

"SNL" – "Saturday Night Live"

UK – United Kingdom

USA – United States of America

VOD – Video on Demand

Introduction

A lesbian period drama, a lesbian historical fiction, or a lesbian costume drama in film can be defined, as the very first word suggests, by its "representability of desire" (White, 1999, p. 16), that is of sapphic desire with the narrative set in the past. Lesbian historical fictions have certainly secured their place in the film industry (Garber, 2015, p. 130). This leads to question whether they are produced for a lesbian spectator in the same way the genre of chick flicks are imagined for a heterosexual female audience.

Recognizing lesbians as a potentially profitable audience requires "a careful look at the [...] representations of lesbianism" (Clark, 1995, p. 186). In other words, it requires analyzing and understanding the target group to present the viewers with at least somewhat familiar representations of their identities and experiences outside romantic relationships, both positive and negative. However, historical settings are significantly different from the lives of women-women today, who can access the films. Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt in their book *Queer Cinema in the World* (2016) underline that "[...] sexuality—its regulation, norms, institutions, pleasures and desires—cannot be understood without understanding the spaces through which it is constituted, practiced and lived" (p. 36), so the aspect of historical representation in lesbian period dramas is the key element that allows lesbian relationships to come about. With this in mind, the aim of my study is to analyze the discourses on sapphic experiences in lesbian period drama films and to see how the stereotypes and ideas about lesbianism (re)produced in this popular film genre might translate to contemporary lesbian audiences.

The films selected for the analysis are *Carol* (Haynes, 2015), *Lizzie* (Macneill, 2018), *Tell It to the Bees* (Jankel, 2018), and *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* [*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*] (Sciamma, 2019). I adopted three criteria for selecting the actual movies. First, the plot had to be set in a historical era and, preferably, each in a different location. Second, one of the

primary storylines had to follow the romantic relationship of two women, featuring at least one protagonist and finally, the film had to be released between 2015 and 2020. This timeframe was chosen because that is the period when the filmmakers took a special interest in this genre, and many films were released, some of them gaining extreme popularity worldwide (Sarkar, 2021). In addition, the time of making these films released between 2015 and 2020 is close to contemporary audiences with their knowledge and lesbian experiences in the Western world. For the limited length of this thesis, I focus on the social context of the European Union.

The decision to include films that were produced in the United States of America (*Lizzie* (Macneill, 2018) and *Carol* (Haynes, 2015))) is grounded in Schoonover and Galt's (2016) claim that "queerness today is vividly constituted through representational forms and the cinematic apparatus that produces and circulates those forms globally" (p. 37). American cinema is more prevalent in the EU than the local productions. In 2023, theatrical releases in the EU and the UK on average included 370 movie titles, 108 (29%) of which were US productions. In 2019, US productions on average made up 27% of all theatrical releases in the EU and the UK (International Union of Cinemas, 2023, p. 17). Christian Grece's and Gilles Fontaine's study (2023) "Films on EU screens: A comparative analysis of the film offering in cinemas, on VOD and on TV", published by the European Audiovisual Observatory, shows that US-produced films made up a total of 49% of all films distributed in the EU in 2022 (p. 30). Out of all film supply available per country on average, the US was the country of origin for 42% of films, Europe – for 33% of films, and the remaining 25% were produced in other countries (p. 22). And when it comes to the consumption of European works, countries "rely much more on non-national works (79%) than on domestic works (21%)" (p. 6). That is only for legally distributed and obtained films. Furthermore, the choice to put American and European films side by side will make it possible for me to look at what discourses on lesbian

experiences the films I am analyzing contribute to as a genre and not separate locally produced and consumed pieces.

As my contextual framework, the first chapter focuses on situating lesbian period dramas in the realities of lesbians in the EU today. I use statistical data and supporting examples from several countries to indicate homophobic discourses that affect lesbian lives and might be either contested or complemented by discourses produced in film. In the second chapter, I direct my attention to existing scholarship that lays the foundation for my research. I examine the connection between discourses, power and meanings through the lens of gender, drawing on Norman Fairclough's (2003) Foucauldian approach to discourse. For the purpose of film analysis, I provide a short study of traditional and modern psychoanalysis as a tool to understand and read gender relations in audiovisual texts. Lastly, I look into feminist and queer film theory on portrayals of lesbianism in cinema. The third chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the chosen films, which I divide into three parts based on relationship types: the sapphic characters' relationships to their surroundings, to each other, and to themselves. I go through these layers analyzing how different relationships impact the protagonists' lesbian experiences and what discourses form in the process.

Chapter 1: Lesbian Period Dramas in a Contemporary Context

The first chapter focuses on identifying the context in which lesbian period drama films I have chosen for my analysis were released and are watched today.

1.1 Emergence of Lesbian Period Drama Films and Media Response

For a long time, lesbians, as well as other sexual minorities and even cisgender heterosexual women, have been lacking honest representation in cinema. The rise of the New Queer Cinema (NQC) marks a shift in recognition of queer filmmaking in the early 1990s, starting with films like *Poison* (1991) and *Paris Is Burning* (1991) debuting in film festivals across North America and Europe (Rich, 2013, pp. 17–18). B. Ruby Rich, who is credited for the term, described NQC as rich in energy, irreverence, and pleasure: "They're here, they're queer, get hip to them" (Rich, 2013, p. 18). Some filmmakers started directing narratives portraying homosexual experiences that have been historically suppressed, for example, the love life of Renaissance writers, and homosexuality under Nazi occupation. Others gave themselves the creative freedom to break out of sexual taboos and dive into "gender-fucking" or practices like bondage (Rich, 2013, pp. 20–26). Despite this breakthrough, the work on and by lesbians did not receive the level of recognition men got, and yet it marked "the beginnings of a new queer historiography" (Rich, 2013, p. 30), which brought lesbian representation from the underground.

More than two decades ago, B. Ruby Rich hoped for the door of the film industry to stay open long enough for queer cinema to find its audiences and proper recognition (2013, p. 30). Indeed, they did, leading to lesbian historical fiction gaining mainstream popularity in the 2010s (Garber, 2015, p. 130). At least 15 lesbian period drama pieces were released in the span of five years, from 2015 to 2020 (Sarkar, 2021), and this period marks the highest peak of this genre to date.

Media response to the surge in lesbian period drama films has been through an evolution itself. Frequent movie releases meant growing media recognition, but it soon became overwhelming. It seems that after the release of *Ammonite* (Lee, 2020), bloggers and entertainment media websites that were previously making lists collectively said "Enough!", and the titles speak for themselves: "Please, Not Another Lesbian Period Drama" (Guzzo, 2021), "Enough With The Lesbian Period Dramas" (Strapagiel, 2020), etc. The "Saturday Night Live" skit "Lesbian Period Drama" (2021), based on *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma, 2019) and *Ammonite* (Lee, 2020), parodied the uniformity of lesbian period drama films and did not hold back on pointing out the preposterous clichés used to portray sapphic relationships: prolonged staring, dramatic hand-touching, melancholia-drenched characters drawing each other's portraits, and an occasional ex-girlfriend popping back into the picture. Several of the parodied characteristics, as I will analyze in Section 2.3 Lesbianism in New Queer Cinema, are ways to break out of heteronormative cinema tradition, but the slow burn sometimes becomes overwhelmingly bland. Another important aspect that did not escape the eyes of the critics was the lack of diversity: all protagonists are "conventionally feminine white women" (Sarkar, 2021). A lot of lesbian period drama films and TV series are based on historical figures, for example, Emily Dickinson in *A Quiet Passion* (Davies, 2016), Anne Lister Gentleman Jack (Wainwright et al., 2019–2022), and Mary Anning, a palaeontologist in early 19th century Britain *Ammonite* (Lee, 2020), so their biographies do dictate a certain race and social status. However, the problem lies not with re-imagining their stories but with film companies not investing in portrayals of non-white love (Sarkar, 2021).

On the bright side, before the backlash, the genre attracted such renowned names in Hollywood and UK cinema like directors Todd Haynes and Francis Lee, actors Sarah Paulson, Kristen Stewart, Keira Knightley, Kate Winslet, and many more, each of whom has devoted fans amongst both gay and heterosexual audiences despite their own sexuality.

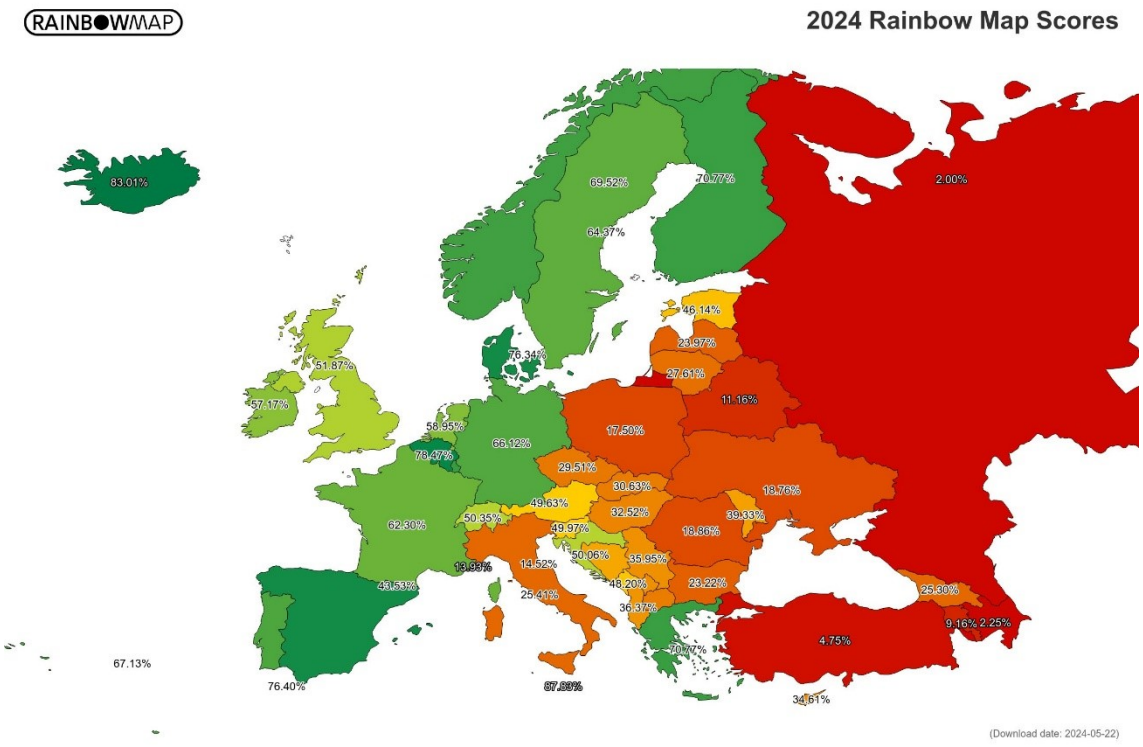
Rachel Weisz, for example, with her roles of an ex-ultra-Orthodox Jewish woman who fell in love with her childhood girl best friend in *Disobedience* (Lelio, 2017), and Queen Anne's sharp-tongued confidante and lover in *The Favorite* (Lanthimos, 2018), has since been titled a lesbian icon (Hastings, 2023). So has Cate Blanchett (Tabberer, 2023) and, give or take, every other woman who has played a sapphic character. Quite a few of them continued to take on roles of women-lowing-women in successful films and TV series. Famous and respected names increased press interest in these movies, which opened up (and still does) the space to talk about lesbian experiences and representations outside the films.

1.2 Lesbian Realities in the European Union and the United States of America

To be able to answer my research questions on how the four films I will be analyzing might "speak" to contemporary lesbian audiences, in this section, I investigate the realities of lesbian experiences in the European Union. I delve into data on the legal protection of LGBTI persons throughout Europe (as provided by ILGA-Europe) and present an overview of representative surveys published by the European Commission and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). Being a Lithuanian, a portion of the examples concern Lithuania, but I situate them in a broader Eastern European and Balkan context.

The annually released Rainbow Map index by ILGA-Europe indicates the legal and policy situation of LGBTI persons in European countries, including non-EU countries. It reflects on equality and non-discrimination, family protection, legal gender recognition, hate crime and hate speech, and other domains of life. The newest data shows that the EU average for all categories is 50.60% out of 100.00%, with Malta on top of the list with 87.83%, and Poland being the lowest-ranking of the EU Member States with 17.50%. Just by looking at the map of the overall scores (Figure 1), one can easily draw insights on differences between Northern/Western European countries – with the exception of Italy – and those on the Eastern side of Germany, which are lacking in ensuring human rights of their LGBTI citizens.

Figure 1: 2024 Rainbow Map scores by ILGA-Europe



The gap between Northern/Western and Central/Eastern countries is even bigger when looking at separate categories. For example, in the category of family, which includes legislation concerning marriage equality, other forms of legal protection of same-sex couples, adoption, and medically assisted insemination, Lithuania and Poland fails to meet any of the 11 criteria and scored 0.00%, while Belgium, Malta and Sweden led with 99.94%. In the area of civil society space, the majority of EU countries have proven to provide protection for LGBTI organizations and activists and scored above 80.00%, while Poland stood out with 16.67% (ILGA-Europe, 2024). Due to the European Commission's pressure and threats to withhold funds, Poland has just recently gotten rid of its "LGBT-free zones" which started appearing after the president, Andrzej Duda, declared that "LGBT is not people, it's an ideology" in 2020 (Dunin-Wąsowicz, 2023). This extreme measure has been taken against Hungary over the breaches of "judiciary independence, academic freedoms, LGBTQI rights and the asylum system" (Abnett, Strupczewski, 2022). Liberal Lithuanian politicians and

human rights experts have voiced their concerns that Lithuania might face a similar fate after the Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas) voted to maintain the current formulation of the Law on the Protection of Minors against Detrimental Effect of Public Information (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021) which deems public information on same-sex relationships and marriages harmful to children under 14 years old (Gaučaitė-Znutienė, 2023). These worries are not unwarranted as the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has previously pointed out that only one other EU Member State, Hungary, "[..] has in its law explicit provisions which consider information relating to same-sex relationships harmful to minors and ban its dissemination to them [...]" (*Macatė v. Lithuania*, 2023). Said legislation in Hungary was passed in June of 2021 (Rankin, 2021), and the European Commission launched an infringement procedure immediately after, condemning the law and the attitude towards the LGBTI community "in the strongest possible terms" (*Macatė v. Lithuania*, 2023). The common thread between low-scoring countries is their ideological investment in anti-gender, anti-LGBTI discourse on the level of policy formation and refusal to comply with EU regulations regarding equality and diversity.

The absence of legislation ensuring the rights and protection of LGBTI people for lesbians means a couple of things. Firstly, they face challenges and risks when creating families, such as being denied access to information on their partner's health in case of medical emergencies, inheritance-related questions, and parenthood. For example, the only influential Lithuanian same-sex couple in which both were assigned female at birth[1] welcomed their first daughter at the end of 2023. Birutė Sabatauskaitė, who is currently on parental leave as the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson of the Republic of Lithuania, and her partner Jūratė Juškaitė, the director of Lithuanian Centre for Human Rights, have been

[1] It is important to note that neither Sabatauskaitė nor Juškaitė brings up their sexual orientation or gender identity in the interview, but they do address themselves as two moms and as a same-sex couple.

publicly speaking about their relationship as activists, so the new addition to the family made news articles as well. When the pair appeared on a talk show *Pasikalbėkim* [Let's Chat] to discuss their experiences as new moms, Juškaitė expressed their disappointment in the existing legal system and frustration towards it by saying that they have been paying taxes just like all other working people, but because they are not the birth mom, paid parental leave was inaccessible. "Formally, I am no one to my daughter [...] If our relationship with the family doctor wasn't good, I wouldn't be able to take my child to the doctor. They didn't even agree to put my last name on her birth certificate," Juškaitė added later (tv3.lt, 2024). Earlier this year, Juškaitė also went public after a bank declined their request for car leasing with Sabatauskaitė as a co-debtor because this service was provided to married couples only, and this is simply not an option for same-sex couples in Lithuania. Within a week after Juškaitė's Facebook post, the bank initiated changing its policy (Sagaitytė, 2024). Their stories indicate very practical difficulties that are caused for same-sex couples by laws and policies based on heterosexuality.

The lack of legal protection reflects the social climate of those countries and contributes to the stigmatization of non-heterosexual and (or) non-cisgender people, which negatively impacts sexual minorities daily. While it cannot be said that implementing laws that protect LGBTI persons or revoking ones that violate human rights would result in quick changes in society, national legislation does send the message of where the country stands in terms of values. Taking Lithuania as an example again, I want to bring attention to homophobic attitudes towards non-heterosexual people. The spring of 2024 has been rich in presidential campaigns and debates before the election. During one of the debates, four out of six presidential candidates said they do not consider a same-sex couple that lives together a family (Narkūnas, 2024), sticking to their misreading of the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania by conflating the definitions of marriage, which "shall be concluded upon the free

mutual consent of man and woman" (art. 38), and family. Back in 2011, The Constitutional Court explained that the Constitutional notion of a family does not derive from marriage and is neutral regarding sex, meaning that two people who live in a partnership together but are not married would be considered a family despite their sexes (Bartulis, 2022), but Lithuanian politicians continue debating the definition to this day. The need to legally regulate same-sex relationships was apparent to all, but the main concern of those candidates with homophobic standpoints was that recognizing same-sex couples as family units would lead to marriage and, eventually, to the adoption of children and result in queers being dehumanized and discussed as legal entities instead of people with human rights. Meanwhile, according to the Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2023) survey on discrimination in the EU, more than half of the population (53%) believes discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is widespread in the country. Yet, 30% of respondents would feel uncomfortable if their co-worker was lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and 67% do not think that lesbian, gay and bisexual people should have the same rights as heterosexual people.

In the Eurobarometer survey results, opinions regarding lesbian, gay and bisexual people in other conservative European countries do not look great either, and they seem to mirror the dynamics seen in the Rainbow Map (ILGA-Europe, 2024). When asked how citizens would feel if the person in the highest political position in their country was lesbian, gay, or bisexual, the percentage of people who said they would be uncomfortable varied from 25% to 59% in Eastern European and Balkan countries like Greece (25%), Slovakia (31%), Poland (26%), Hungary (33%), Lithuania (45%) and Bulgaria (59%). Accordingly, respondents in the same countries would feel even more uncomfortable if their child dated a person of the same sex. While the EU average for the first question was 16% and 24% for the latter. It is truly disappointing that approximately 1 in 3 people in the EU think LGB individuals do not deserve equal rights (28%), and 1 in 4 believe that the relationship between

two people of the same sex is wrong (23%). These numbers, of course, drastically vary between countries. Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Spain, and Ireland, in no particular order, exhibited the most positive attitudes in all parts of the questionnaire. As much as 98% of respondents in the Netherlands said they would be comfortable working with an LBG colleague on a daily basis, and 95% in Sweden said there is nothing wrong with same-sex attraction (European Commission, 2023). These results show that there is a direct correlation between how the law in a country views and treats lesbians and other non-heterosexual people and public opinion on these minorities. Interestingly, despite offering the least legal protection to LGBTI people, Poland was often closer to the EU average than to the worst-scoring country (European Commission, 2023), which indicates that Polish society is ready for legal changes, too.

According to the 2023 wave of a survey on LGBTIQ equality by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 38% of lesbian women (cisgender endosex) said they have been discriminated against because of their sexual orientation in at least one area of life (2024, p. 29). On average, between all LGBTIQ groups, only 11% of incidents when the person felt discriminated against were reported to the authorities (p. 47). For 49% of respondents, the notion that nothing would change after reporting was the reason they did not report the latest incident. 37% said discrimination for being LGBTIQ is just so frequent and 'happens all the time' that it is not worth reporting (p. 51). Consequently, showing affection in public becomes something one is cautious about. 45% of lesbians in the EU often or always avoid holding hands with their partner in public because they fear being assaulted, threatened or harassed. In 2019, the result was 51%, so the number has gone down a bit, it is still almost half of the lesbian population[2] (p. 60). Due to the need to self-censor or being visibly

[2] Lesbians have an advantage here, because 67% of gay men (compared to 45% of lesbians) reported always or often avoiding holding hands with their partner in public. Since 2019, the number has decreased by 5 percentage points (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024, p. 29).

recognizable as a queer person, 30% of lesbian respondents said they avoid certain places or locations (p. 61). FRA called the findings of the repeated survey "a clear red flag" (p. 1). Rightfully so, because it exposes how homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia affect people's experiences going through life as their true selves, often leading to the feeling of hopelessness and suicidal thoughts (p. 23).

What all of the qualitative data and country-specific examples remind of and illuminate is the implications anti-LGBTI ideology continues to have for real-life lesbians. While there cannot be one universal model of "a lesbian experience", experiences of homophobia and witnessing homophobia either on a local or on an international level seem inevitable. Thus, it is important to take into account what meanings are being produced in lesbian period drama films and what existing discourses on same-sex desire they contribute to.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I provide an overview of scholarship on conceptual categories that will inform further analysis. I draw upon Michel Foucault's ideas about power, Norman Fairclough's (2003) work on analyzing discourses, Judith Butler's theory on gender, as well as a psychoanalytic theory by Sigmund Freud to lay the foundation for feminist and queer film theory by B. Ruby Rich, Teresa de Lauretis, Jackie Stacey, Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt. I draw on them to explore how discourses on sexuality can contribute to unequal gender power relations and affect people's (self)identification.

2.1 Discourses, Power, and Identities

Linguist Norman Fairclough, in his book *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (2003), argues that a text, be that a literary piece or articulated in any other medium, does not exist in a vacuum as an isolated unit but part of a complex order of textual chains. Since I will be analyzing films, which are audiovisual texts, it is crucial to understand how texts function and how they can be approached from an analytical perspective. Fairclough proposes that a text has the potential to bring about temporary changes in the material world or long-term effects on people's beliefs, values, and identities. Moreover, texts are always created and read embedded in the context of social events, which means they are interconnected with other texts (p. 9). In this interconnection, a text is always the representation of what counts as reality from a given perspective, "[...] a particular way of representing some part of the (physical, social, psychological) world [...]" (p. 18). The interconnected nature of texts means that each text is articulated out of many different discourses at the same time, and some of them are competing for dominance in how specific social events, processes, relations, and social actors are represented in those texts, what is included, and what is left out (p. 18). A method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) allows us

to analyze these intricacies and read the texts themselves as indexical to the context outside them.

In his work, Fairclough puts emphasis on discourse-specific value systems that shape and gradually form assumptions about "what there is, what is the case, what is possible, what is necessary, what will be the case, and so forth" (2003, p. 59). In other words, value systems define the *status quo* in contrast with what will be considered unfit to exist in society, they set moral boundaries. When a specific value system is put in juxtaposition with other value systems, it creates conditions for political rivalry between the two or more sides in their efforts to overpower and overthrow others. Fairclough indicates that seeking to hegemonize particular meanings and values is the ideological work carried out by texts (p. 59). Texts are tools in this process, and the exploration of the ideological effects of texts is one of the major interests of critical discourse analysis because ideologies "contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation" (p. 11). However, Fairclough points out that ideology imposed with force is not sustainable, so achieving consent is a major part of hegemonic power relations (p. 46).

When it comes to power relations, it is important to go back to Michel Foucault's theory on power, especially keeping in mind that Fairclough was developing his ideas using the Foucauldian framework. In his text "The Subject and Power", Foucault (2020a) explained that what was once a pastoral power exercised by religious institutions, i. e. the Catholic church, throughout more recent history has transformed and integrated into the social body (p. 335). Besides the pastoral and the political powers, now there exist "those of the family, medicine, psychiatry, education, and employers" (p. 335), and this list is not conclusive. These powers are associated with certain institutions, but ultimately, they are exercised by the people who represent them (p. 337). To a large extent, power is exercised "through the production and exchange of signs" (p. 338), including languages and sign systems of

visuality. The one whom power is enacted by is seen as a subject who has the agency to act and whose activity shall be presupposed and contained by establishing power relations (pp. 340–341). In general, Foucault (2020b) sees power as a productive force: “If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it?” (p. 120). In this question alone, the foundation of Fairclough’s previous claim on ideologies needing consent can be seen, for the threat of possible harm and punishment for not acting in accordance with the rules in exchange for some gains “encourages” a level of consent to be dominated, to be subordinate, and that is required to maintain power relations. Though, this does not mean that consensual compliance will always indicate a loss on the subordinate’s side or that a loss experienced will be greater than the gain achieved.

At the beginning of the chapter, I introduced the co-constitutive relation between discourses and value systems: discourses both produce and reproduce certain values. According to Foucault (2002), discourses also name and define subjects. For example, medical discourses on melancholia and neurosis, established by institutions in the 19th century, constituted what and who is a psychiatric patient, thus transforming the subject into that who they are said to be (45–47). Likewise, discursive power allows individuals to identify themselves according to the “law of truth” (Foucault, 2020a, p. 331), but before the subjectification can happen, an individual has to recognize this truth that has been already legitimized by others, and that will be affirmed again and again whenever an individual emerges as a social subject.

Judith Butler argued that the concept of gender is embedded in discourse, and gendered identification comes about in reiterating and recognizing already existing “truths”. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993) attempted to correct misreadings of their earlier work *Gender Trouble* (2007), originally published in 1990, by explaining that “[...] gender emerges,

not as a term in a continued relationship of opposition to sex, but as the term which absorbs and displaces "sex" [...]" (p. 5). They suggest that gender predates sex and give an example of "girling" a girl during the ultrasound test before she is even born (p. 7). When the parents find out the sex, it is not the fetus's genital structure but its gender and forthcoming gender expressions they see: appearance, toys, interests, and so on, meaning that there is never just sex or just gender. The mention of gender is not accidental in this analysis as gender is inseparable from sexuality. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (2007) writes: "The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire" (p. 31). To put it differently, heterosexuality is a result of discursive power.

It was lesbian feminist, Adrienne Rich (1980) who first coined the term "compulsory heterosexuality" to describe the heterosexuality that is enforced upon people, especially women, by the patriarchy. In her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", Rich argues that heterosexuality is not a natural given but should be recognized as a political institution which ensures unequal power dynamics between men and women, with men continuously occupying the dominant position (pp. 637–647). Discussing Kathleen Gough's list of expressions of male power, she adds that rape, arranged marriage, psychoanalytic denial of the clitoris as well as the doctrines of frigidity and vaginal orgasm, "feminine" dress codes, prioritizing men's work in any intellectual or creative settings, and providing women with limited access to education are the expressions of male power and the means of maintaining it (pp. 639–640). Examples given by Rich put into perspective how a dominant ideology like heterosexist meaning of gender can shape and organize power relations in society, in this case, men's advancements at the expense of marginalization of women.

Since I have briefly discussed how discourses contribute to establishing and maintaining power and how "sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations" (Butler, 2007, p. 42), I will now move to discuss how the traditional Freudian psychoanalytic theory of human sexuality has been explained and interpreted by some feminist scholars in the field.

2.2 Gender and Melancholia in Psychoanalysis

There are multiple reasons to turn to psychoanalysis in attempts to make sense of lesbian sexuality and its representations. Adrienne Rich (1980) has called out the psychoanalytic denial of women's sexual pleasure as one of the manifestations of patriarchal male power, which contributed to lesbian experiences being "[...] perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent, or simply rendered invisible […]" (p. 632). Luce Irigaray (1987) argued that within a phallocentric psychoanalytic framework, a lesbian's desire is understood as mimicking that of a heterosexual man (p. 103). And finally, feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey (1989), pointed to psychoanalytic theory as a tool for "[...] understanding of the status quo, of the patriarchal order in which we are caught" (p. 15) in the filmic universe of Hollywood. In this section, I will look at some classical Freudian texts that will be foundational for my film analysis in juxtaposition with Judith Butler's (1997), Luce Irigaray's (1991), and Julia Kristeva's (2002) critical readings of Freud's understanding of female homosexuality.

When considering what is perceived as "normal" sexual behavior, Sigmund Freud's theory built on the Oedipus myth is the starting point. Freud used the myth of Oedipus as a framework for his theory of children's early psychosexual development. In the chapter "The Ego and the Super-Ego (Ego Ideal)" in *The Ego and the Id*, Freud (1961) defined the Oedipus complex as a stage in a child's mental development, during which he or she establishes a strong object-cathexis for a parent of the opposite sex. Meanwhile, a strong identification with

a parent of the same sex occurs, and they are perceived to be a rival (pp. 31–32). In an ideal situation, a boy's wish to defeat his father in the battle for the mother's love should be resolved by a greater identification with the father, thus consolidating "[...] the masculinity in a boy's character" (p. 32). Likewise, the positive outcome of the Oedipal stage for a girl should be her established identification with the mother, consolidating her femininity, and an object-cathexis for the father.

The expected result of the Oedipal stage is heterosexuality, but, as Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel explains, it does not mean the same thing for men and for women. In the introduction of her book *Female Sexuality: New Psychoanalytic Views* (1992*)*, she notes that in the Freudian tradition, men's and women's sexualities are approached as polar opposites: "[...] the person who attacks and conquers the object is active, the one who gives himself [sic] to his partner is passive" (p. 17). A woman is the passive one in this relation, conquered and penetrated by a man. It is he who gives and she who gives in, waiting to be conquered. While the sexual aspect is grounded in a man's biological need to actively release sperm in order to impregnate a woman (p. 18), the active/passive dynamics are not restricted by the bedroom walls and are transferred to other areas of life, creating male supremacy that is the patriarchy. This is where the phallus gains a symbolic power that becomes a possession to be protected from disturbances. For Freud, a woman's "genital deficiency" leads her to spend her life trying to fill the void and compensate for penis envy, but she can only truly succeed by giving birth to a son (p. 15).

Nonetheless, according to Freud, all children are initially bisexual, and both feminine and masculine sexual dispositions are present in each child. Due to this ambivalence, the Oedipal stage might result in an identification with the parent of the opposite sex being dominant, and this is especially noticeable in girls who grow up to be neurotic. In such an alternative outcome (negative Oedipus), when a girl has to relinquish her object-cathexis for

her father, she introduces the father, the lost love object, into her ego, and starts identifying with him (1961, pp. 32–33). This means that she takes on her father's ambitions and interests as her own, including his object-choice, women. To add a different perspective, Chasseguet-Smirgel (1992) brings another psychoanalyst, Ernest Jones, into the conversation on female homosexuality. He divided homosexual women into two groups:

> [...] those who still are interested in men but would like to be considered as one of them, and those who are not interested in men but in women — women representing the femininity they themselves have not been able to enjoy directly. [...] The woman of the second group has given up the father as an ob-ject after having identified with him. But in reality her external ob-ject-relation to a woman is simply based on the fact that her part-ner represents her projected femininity which is satisfied by the internal object (the incorporated father, object of her identifica-tion). In the second case, the woman denies her desire for a penis as she attempts to prove that she does possess one. (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1992, p. 39)

The first group is closer to a description of a gay transgender man, but the second one corresponds to Freud's idea that what makes a homosexual woman is her sexual desire for women, which comes from her identification with the father. In other words, she desires another woman from the position of a man, the way her father would desire a woman.

Whether or not homosexual identification for a woman is "normal", continues to be a question of debate in psychoanalysis after Freud. In his essay "On Narcissism", Freud (1957) describes homosexuality as a deviation from the norm: "We have discovered, especially clearly in people whose libidinal development has suffered some disturbance, such as perverts and homosexuals, that in their later choice of love-objects they have taken as a model not their mother but their own selves" (p. 88). He believes that men alone are capable of "complete object-love of the attachment type" (1957, p. 88) in their romantic and sexual

relationships. With this in mind, would it not mean then that if women are not bound to reach complete heterosexuality, their homosexual desires are not a consequence of "some disturbance" but their true nature? Some feminist scholars hold exactly this position. As Luce Irigaray (1991) puts it, "[...] women always stand in an archaic and primal relationship with what is known as homosexuality" (p. 44). She is suggesting that a mother is the girls' first love object too, just like she is for all children for that matter, and making them give up or bury this homosexual identification goes against their nature. Boys, in Irigaray's opinion, are expected to simply replace the mother with another female figure, but girls are put through a more complicated transition – a girl has to forget women altogether and convince herself to desire men (1991, p. 44). Freud (1957) acknowledges that women are faced with socially and culturally determined restrictions regarding their choice of object (p. 89) but did not give much thought to the consequences of this monitoring. Julia Kristeva (2002), on the other hand, also stresses the price of societal expectations: "One cannot overemphasize the tremendous psychic, intellectual, and affective effort a woman must make in order to find the other sex as erotic object" (p. 343). This is not to suggest that a woman's heterosexuality would necessarily be forged, though the repudiation of homosexuality appears to be.

Judith Butler in their book *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997) approaches gender as a melancholic identification determined by a series of prohibitions. They argue that masculine and feminine are accomplishments and not dispositions, as Freud believes, and in a traditional sense, they ought to "emerge in tandem with the achievement of heterosexuality" (p. 135). Butler demonstrates that this is done through the repudiation of homosexuality, which preempts the possibility of a homosexual attachment because the girl, first and foremost, has to "[...] renounce love for her mother, and renounce it in such a way that both the aim and the object are foreclosed. She must not transfer that homosexual love onto a substitute feminine figure but renounce the possibility of homosexual attachment

itself" (pp. 136–137). This induces the fear of homosexual desire, which might manifest in the form of panic and anxiety about one's compliance with the standards of femininity, fearing that by losing femininity she will not be whole as a woman (p. 136). The prohibition of homosexuality results in a feeling of ungrieved loss that cannot be identified, it is "a mourning for unlived possibilities" (p. 139). Mourning and melancholia do not seem to have a clear distinction in Butler's work: a woman is mourning what she has never been and what she cannot be or do but is not aware of it to be able to grieve, resulting in the impoverished ego, indicating a melancholic state.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that understanding how the discourse of traditional Freudian psychoanalysis authorizes male supremacy can be beneficial for identifying this ideology in films. It can also help to notice when phallocentrism is missing or criticized in narratives leaning towards Butler's (1997) and Irigaray's (1991) ideas on female homosexuality and questioning the connection between natural and normal. The notion that the repressiveness of patriarchy goes against women's nature, i. e. against materializing their innate homosexual desires, is somewhat radical and essentializing, because it suggests sameness between all people who were assigned female at birth. Still, in the part of film analysis, we will come to see how it can be utilized for the benefit of lesbian representation.

2.3 Lesbianism in New Queer Cinema

In this next part, I look at what, according to feminist and queer film critics, makes a lesbian movie and how lesbianism is constructed in comparison to mainstream portrayals of heterosexuality.

Teresa de Lauretis defined cinema as a system of signs, drawing on its similarities with language as both of them are "imaginary-symbolic productions of subjectivity" (1984, p. 17). She argued that cinema produces and reproduces "meanings, values, and ideology" (1984, p. 37), so it should be regarded as a signifying practice and, as such, imbricated in

relations of power. This practice constructs subjects and their realities as much as it represents them. However, as another feminist film theorist, Jackie Stacey (2022) highlighted the question of "how to find a language for desire between women in the context of its historical erasure" (p. 292) has been at the center of feminist debates for decades. Lesbian desire has been absent from film as much as from other arts, and there is no blueprint for representing it, so artists have to invent the language which would have the potential to do justice to lesbian desire without falling into the pattern of heteronormative tropes.

In her essay "New Queer Cinema and Lesbian Films", Anat Pick (2004) noted that lesbian films are united by "[...] a strong sense of a female community with sexuality as a major component; and aesthetically, a level of cinematic literacy coupled with formal audaciousness. [...] Lesbianism at the movies means, conversely, an opening up of aesthetic, political, fictional and psychological horizons that extend traditional narrative boundaries" (New Queer Cinema, p. 104). What those boundaries are is well explained by Mulvey (1989) in her critical 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which she employed psychoanalysis to explain the male gaze in cinema. According to her, phallocentrism manifests in film as a passive castrated woman figure who becomes an object of male spectatorship. He, both on the screen and in the audience, is the active one, the one that does the thinking, the creating, and the looking (pp. 14–19). Theresa de Lauretis describes a woman's position in traditional cinema as devoid of a possibility to represent herself or be represented, leaving her set up in a fixed ideology-bound identification (1984, pp. 8–15). Mulvey acknowledges that breaking out of these dominant ideological concepts Hollywood thrives on "[...] provides a space for the birth of a cinema which is radical in both a political and an aesthetic sense and challenges the basic assumptions of the mainstream film" (1989, p. 15). While she did not explicitly name lesbian films as alternatives, the consistency of what is understood to be the normal traditional allows to come to these conclusions. This means that a

lesbian film should subvert the masculinist point of view, the male gaze, and more accurately depicting experiences of women, be that their self-identification, sexual and romantic desires, or other aspects of their lives, and, hopefully, offering a critique of patriarchal power structures.

Desire and pleasure are distinctive features of lesbian period drama films, and not because these affective states are not portrayed elsewhere but because of how they are constructed. Schoonover and Galt (2016) notice that the intent in lesbian cinema generally is to avoid the male gaze: the absence of voyeuristic distance does not create the distinct roles of the desired and the desiring in the moments of intimacy. Instead, the camera is positioned in close proximity to lesbian subjects, capturing close-up shots of intricate and intimate details such as skin texture, as if the audience was seeing it from the other participant's perspective (p. 234). In her analysis of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Stacey (2022) argues that attention to detail and ever-fluctuating roles of the spectator and the desired produce a sense of equality between lovers and challenge "the normativities of scriptwriting and filmmaking that have relied on inequality for erotic narrativization" (p. 296). That is why she described Céline Sciamma's filmography as an attempt to create a lesbian imaginary and not a lesbian love story (p. 289). Blurred lines between homoeroticism and female social relations, in Stacey's opinion, speak to lesbian feminist ideas of "wider commitment to female solidarity" (or a lesbian continuum as proposed by Adrienne Rich), and contribute to creating lesbian imaginary that queer female audiences have been craving (p. 294).

As I mentioned when characterizing the genre of lesbian period dramas, rural, pastoral locations are significant for this proximity to come about. But why does it take an isolated space for lesbian desire to become visible in film? Schoonover and Galt (2016) think that the function of pastoral settings for visualizing sapphic relationships is twofold: they become spaces that shelter lesbians from the scrutiny of traditional, often cruel and unfair society, and

they call into question the naturalization of culture (or naturalization of heterosexuality). Engagement with the past uncovers painful truths of the historical wrongdoings that inevitably provoke reactions on today's politics of difference, thus constituting homosexual desire as a catalyst for political change (pp. 229–247). Because "sensuality is attached to lesbian awakening and to feminist consciousness" (p. 240), lesbianism is tied to an aesthetic in which personal is political always. In contrast, the narrative in some lesbian period dramas is set in a time before the concept of homosexuality and modern identity categories was even developed[3]. Stacey (2022) pointed out that the pre-lesbian historical timeframe helps to avoid reducing desires to a social phenomenon (p. 292). Thus, the setting allows to explore the intricacies of the development of the connection between two women: without the pronounced labels that would define the characters' sexual orientation, the political aspect is not lost, but the story does more than just offer a political statement regarding the recognition of lesbian desire.

I have articulated a rather consistent filmic portrayal of lesbian experiences, but it is important to approach these tropes with caution as they entail certain risks. A "[...] demand for visibility shares some commonality with an intersectionalist claim on the essential experience of marginalized subjects [...]" (Schoonover, Galt, 2016, p. 70), so opposing heteronormative uniformity might fall into the same pattern of universalizing experiences and identities of white women-loving-women. And, of course, it is worth mentioning that even though the historical setting for sapphic audiences "[...] might be romantically exotic, while also offering the middlebrow pleasures of the historical drama" (p. 231), a heterosexual romance might remain the blueprint for a "desirable cinematic experience" (p. 222).

[3] Focault (1978) argued that psychiatric discourses in the 19th century, i. e. the medicalization of homosexuality, which at the same time is a categorization of same-sex and opposite-sex desires, was significant for modern sexual identity categories as we know them today. Before any categorizing took place, "homosexuality" was not constituted as such (pp. 41–44).

Consequently, I agree with Stacey (2022) who contends that more visibility is not always a sign of progress (p. 181).

Another important aspect to mention when talking about the construction of lesbianism in film is the spectator's role in it. Jackie Stacey in her essay "Feminine Fascinations: Forms of Identification in Star-Audience Relations" (1999) pointed out that feminist film theory around the 1980s was reliant on textual analysis and ignored the role of the audience in the production of meaning (p. 146). That is why she used the female viewer's letters she received after publishing an advertisement in a magazine to research spectatorship and women's identification with the 1940s-1950s female film stars. For her, readings of the films are based outside the cinema and "[...] outside mainstream culture itself, and within a subculture which reverses and parodies dominant meanings" (p. 148). Stacey found that in some cases, the viewer first identifies with the camera, but the secondary identification is with a character on screen, and it provides an opportunity to substitute or misrecognize the self (p. 151). However, in other circumstances, the woman on screen can be perceived as a perfect unattainable standard for femininity or a role model for independence and rebellion. All these aspects of representation Stacey classifies as identificatory fantasies (pp. 151–157). Stemming from different types of identifications, the extra-cinematic practices can vary from pretending to be the film star to trying to resemble it to imitating to copying (pp. 157–160). What this tells us is that "spectator" as a category is not homogeneous, and identifications with the same character will differ depending on the actual viewing person's social and cultural environment and identity markers other than just sexuality when thinking about lesbian audiences of lesbian period drama films.

Chapter 3: Representations of Lesbian Experiences in Lesbian Period Drama Films

In this chapter, I provide my analysis of the films *Carol* (Haynes, 2015), *Lizzie* (Macneill, 2018), *Tell It to the Bees*, (Jankel, 2018) and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma, 2019), all of which are independent from the major film production companies. I have decided to approach the three types of relationships portrayed in the films, first starting with the sapphic characters' relationships to their surroundings, then moving to their intimate relationships, and finishing with their relationships to themselves. This sequence will allow me to identify and situate the dominant discourses on lesbian experiences within existing literature and research.

3.1 Representations of Lesbian Characters' Relationships to their Surroundings

For my analysis, the most important relationships are the ones that impact the protagonists' lesbian experiences, and it so happens that the vast majority of them are concerning men in some way. "When a man comes back in the frame, it's a jump scare," commented Céline Sciamma, (Pollard, 2020), the director of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma, 2019). And, certainly, it is not so simply because of his gender – it is due to the patriarchy he represents. In 1981, lesbian feminist writer and activist Cheryl Clarke wrote that being openly lesbian in a patriarchal system is a dangerous way of living because it exposes one to a "direct and constant confrontation with heterosexual presumption, privilege, and oppression" (pp. 127–128). Patriarchy takes away, intervenes, polices, and punishes. It is the patriarchal structures and relationships with men within which sapphic characters emerge, and which are highly decisive in their lives. For this reason, I start the analysis by looking at them.

Todd Haynes' *Carol* (2015) is a rare occasion of a lesbian film reaching mainstream popularity and recognition that goes well beyond non-heterosexual audiences. In the film, an aspiring photographer, Therese Belivet (Rooney Mara) is pursued by Carol Aird (Cate

Blanchett), a much older woman in a divorce process with her husband Harge (Kyle Chandler) with whom she shares a daughter, Rindy. In 1950s New York, the romance between the two women has to develop in secret. As subtle as they are, the forthcoming relationship does not go undetected by Harge, when, without notice, he comes to pick up their daughter for holidays earlier than agreed and attempts to win Carol back, while Therese is left alone in a different room. Following this event, Harge files for sole custody of Rindy on the grounds of a morality clause, implying Carol's inappropriate romantic and sexual relationships with women. He pays a private detective to spy on Carol and Therese on their road trip, which ultimately results in Carol choosing her child over a love interest, bringing the slow-burning love story to an end for the time being. Harge's use of his paternal status as a tool to control Carol presents the power dynamic of hegemonic masculinity of the time.

According to R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt (2005), the model of hegemonic masculinity is not a static concept that transcends time and space. For them, it is contextual and ever-changing: "Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting" (p. 836). What would be considered hegemonic among one social group on a local or a global level at a historic moment, for example, high-ranking corporate employees like Harge, would not necessarily meet the criteria of another. Moreover, within a specific group, hegemonic masculinity often does not correspond to the lived experiences of the members of that group due to their "[...] widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires" (p. 838). The ideal standards men measure themselves and fellow men against are the result of a collective imagination, which makes very few actual individuals, if any, eligible for the sought status.

The plot of *Carol* (Haynes, 2015) takes place in the United States of America in the mid-1950s when American society was approaching the post-war peak of the nuclear family

trend. In the manner of this model, the wife's place was, indeed, in the kitchen or in the maternity ward of a hospital, and the husband was the breadwinning head of the household (Friedan, 2007, pp. 270–271). Harge does have a successful corporate career that allowed him to afford a mansion on the outskirts of New York City, a stunning unemployed wife, a daughter, and a good reputation amongst the city's socialites. When his wife with lesbian desires is unsatisfied with their marriage and wants a divorce, his reality is shaken up. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) highlighted that hegemonic masculinity is bound to provide guidelines for gender relations and managing any tensions between them. "A given pattern of hegemonic masculinity is hegemonic to the extent that it provides a solution to these tensions, tending to stabilize patriarchal power or reconstitute it in new conditions," they write (p. 853). Ideally, Harge would have maintained patriarchal power, but the image of a perfect family gets severely disrupted. According to masculinities scholar Michael Scott Kimmel, hegemonic manhood defines "[...] a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power" (1994, p. 125). What is more, he notes that it is not the power over a woman *per se* that is essential here, but having other men witness your power: "Women become a kind of currency that men use to improve their ranking on the masculine social scale." (p. 129). Having the wife in his possession alongside a white-collar career was the capital marking Harge's value as a man, but by acting on her needs, Carol de-objectified herself in relation to Harge and robbed him off his masculinity. Harge's neurotic demeanor and a forceful attempt to convince Carol to "fix" the family are understandable as he is balancing on a line between his current social status and a disgraceful downfall. Carol is, on one hand, his desired object, and, on the other hand, a rival who is threatening his image, and their daughter is the only remaining factor he can use against her.

Similarly, a separated husband sets off to punish his wife by isolating their child when her lesbian relationship is found out in the other movie, *Tell It to the Bees* (Jankel, 2018). The

plot is also set in the 1950s but this time a small town in Scotland. Lydia (Holliday Grainger), barely making ends meet with her blue-collar salary, is left to raise her 10-year-old son Charlie alone after her World War II veteran husband, Robert abandons them without filing for divorce. Charlie's visit to the new town's medical doctor Jean (Anna Paquin) leads to their unexpected friendship over the doctor's bees. Jean and Lydia meet, and their feelings start developing. After Lydia and Charlie's eviction due to unpaid taxes, the two move in with Jean to her late father's house. Soon, the word about their relationship starts spreading around the small town. The rumors are affecting Jean's work as people do not want to come to her anymore, and Lydia's relationship with family members. That is the moment when Robert inserts himself back into Lydia's life as a decision-maker, believing he has the ability and the right to control her. This suddenly regained interest in Lydia can be interpreted as his attempt to deal with the shame she brought onto him, because "[...] women's shame is the family's shame, the nation's shame, the man's shame" (Nagel, 1998, p. 254), and the wife's homosexual behavior does not go too well with his war medals, which should signify the epitome of his masculinity. It becomes Robert's goal to take Charlie away from his wife.

Charlie's reaction to his mother being sexual with a woman is the most heart-wrenching one, and much easier to sympathize with. The boy is torn by his parents' separation and lost in ambivalence towards Jean's presence in his life while he is happy to have this new caring person whom he can rely on and learn from. On the other hand, Charlie does not understand what is happening between his mom and the doctor, the truth is withheld, and he has a best friend sharing that Jean used to be "a dirty dyke" (44:48) back in the day. The comfort Jean provides clashes with a feeling of abandonment and the general understanding that whatever is happening between her and Lydia is frowned upon. So, when Charlie unexpectedly comes across them having sex, he can only base his reaction on the dominant knowledge he has accumulated, shouting "You're dirty dykes!" (1:09:15).

However, Lydia fights for her right to be with Jean and puts tremendous effort to reconcile with Charlie without losing one or the other, but her success prompts the final act of violence from Robert. He confronts her in person, asking "Is she man enough for you?" (1:28:32) while having Lydia pressed against the bedroom door so that she could not leave. In this scene, it is shown how when the figurative phallus is threatened, disturbed, or disregarded, the re-establishment of power circles back to the employment of the referent. Once Lydia states that Jean is more of a man than Robert ever was, he attempts to rape her, instructing her to stay still. At that moment, Robert is trying to screw her back into submission. Here, I use the word "screw" intentionally to emphasize how a penis is utilized as a tool to achieve something else than sexual pleasure. In *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Andrea Dworkin (1989) emphasized that a man is thought to be an active and superior subject in relation to a woman within patriarchy, and his superiority becomes especially visible in pornographic depiction of sexual acts: "He is, he takes; she is not, she is taken" (p. 26). These dynamics being so vivid in pornography is to be taken into account, because the genre of pornography, in Dworkin's view, painted women as subordinate in relation to men and dehumanized them as sexual objects "who experience sexual pleasure in being raped" (xxxiii). While her radical belief that pornography is "the DNA of male dominance" (xxxix) could and has been argued, Dworkin did make a rigorous observation about the role of rape in men's establishment of power, which can be seen in *Tell It to the Bees* (Jankel, 2018). "You're still my wife" (1:30:07), says Robert, implying that she has her "marital duties" to fulfill. In his mind, Lydia is to answer to him forever, and Robert's entitlement is unconditional; it is not undermined by him carelessly removing himself from her life a while ago. Drawing a comparison between Lydia's relation to Robert and Carol's to Harge, a certain theme starts to develop: in these films, a woman-loving-woman a woman

first and foremost, and her position as a woman in society clashes with her expression of lesbian desire.

A slightly different example of the negative impact of hegemonic masculinity can be seen in *Lizzie* (Macneill, 2018). While in *Carol* (Haynes, 2015) and *Tell It to the Bees* (Jankel, 2018) it is the husband who feels threatened by a woman's independence, in *Lizzie* (Macneill, 2018) the audience is introduced to a wealthy father trying to get every woman in the house under his control in the late 1800s Massachusetts. Bridget Sullivan (Kristen Stewart) joins the Borden household as a servant and forms an intimate connection with the younger daughter, Lizzie (Chloë Sevigny). Soon after her arrival, Andrew, the father, approaches Bridget in the garden and tells her to keep her bedroom door open during the night to "let the air circulate" (17:12). That evening, he comes into Bridget's room and rapes her for the first time. Bridget is too intimidated to tell anyone, and the stepmother, even though she is aware of her husband's actions, does nothing. Bridget is there for Andrew to take, and she knows, dare she refuse, he will fire her and make finding another placement impossible. Unlike in pornographic images that Dworkin discusses, Andrew's abuse is not celebrated in the film: everything about him is curated to be received with abjection by the viewers. We also see the melancholic state that the abuse puts Bridget in as she hides in the barn to deal with emotional distress in secret the next morning. In the 19th century America, white women had little to no parental, property or any other legal rights (women of color were in an even more invidious position), they were withheld from positions of power and professions requiring a higher level of education like lawyers or medical doctors (Eisenberg, Ruthsdotter, n.d.). This meant financial dependency, so women from colonial families were dependent on their male relatives, and poor women – on their employers. With limited agency, women were rather possessions and not subjects. In *Lizzie* (Macneill, 2018), Andrew appears to view Bridget as his property he can treat as he wishes, she has no agency, and his power over her is absolute.

The patriarch's attitude towards his daughters, while different in approach, is no less controlling. Andrew has been receiving mysterious threats, so he decides to leave a will in case anything happens to him. Lizzie overhears Andrew's conversation with her uncle and learns that Andrew is not going to leave anything to his daughters. Instead, he will entrust his deceased wife's brother to take care of them and their finances. Andrew says: "They know nothing of the matters of the world. Especially Lizzie" (26:39), suggesting that Lizzie's poor mental health including melancholia, occasional seizures, and breakdowns are the reason for her dependency. Contrary to this statement, Lizzie has been shown to be educated and independent from the beginning of the film, often challenging the father's authority, and offering her input on how to deal with the unhappy farmers who were suspected of threatening the family. In naming his daughters unequipped, incapable of thinking for themselves, the father takes away their means of survival and makes them vulnerable to the world. At the same time, Andrew imagines himself in the noble position of a caring savior, who is concerned with their daughter's well-being in the future.

Another important moment in Andrew's relationship with Lizzie is presented when, enraged by her father's decision, Lizzie sells her stepmother, Abby's jewelry to a local pawnbroker. With the local authorities involved, she is found out the same evening and Andrew punishes Lizzie by killing her pet pigeons and having them prepared for dinner. Here too, he exercises the power to take (or, in this case, to take away), and intentionally inflicts emotional torture on Lizzie. Met with resistance, he slaps Lizzie after she calls him a coward (34:18). In accordance with Kimmel's (1994) criticism, this is a moment when: "Men's feelings are not the feelings of the powerful but of those who see themselves as powerless" (p. 136). The confrontation at the dinner table illustrates this feeling of "powerlessness". Just like Harge in *Carol* (Haynes, 2015) and Robert in *Tell It to the Bees*, (Jankel, 2018) Andrew wants to be rather than is "[...] a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power" (Kimmel,

1994, p. 125), and therefore he creates situations which would allow him to be in charge at least momentarily.

When contested or threatened, Andrew responds with rage and force, and this applies to his reaction to the lesbian relationship happening under his roof as well. He accidentally comes upon Lizzie and Bridget having sex in the barn, with Bridget being on the giving end. Because it is up to a man to deal with his woman's shame, Andrew approaches Bridget first. He does so at night by catching her alone and having the woman in a strong grip to instill fear. "Nothing but an Irish whore, aren't ya?" (58:17), he says, and makes her repeat it. Andrew tries to be less forceful with Lizzie and informs her that Bridget will be let go, and that their relationship has become inappropriate, but eventually calls her "an abomination" (59:37). Seeing his daughter and the servant together humiliates him: for him it comes across as an act of disregarding his superiority over both women. In response, both women become his enemies. Bridget, because she voluntarily gave to Lizzie what he had to take by force and involved her in an inappropriate sexual act/relationship. Lizzie, because, for one, she brought shame upon his name by partaking in lesbian sex, and second, because Bridget "chose" her instead of him. He finds himself in an unusual "love" triangle, in which the rival happens to be not only a woman, but his own daughter and such an indirectly incestuous position must be demeaning for a respectable wealthy man.

At this point of the analysis, Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick's (2016) theory of a male homosocial desire becomes particularly important – it substantiates the idea that patriarchy is based on men's relations to other men, and a woman is a variable in that equation. Sedgwick draws on Rene Girard's idea of an erotic triangle, in which the bond between the rivals is stronger than between any one of the rivals and their desired love object (p. 21). Perfect examples would be *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997) or *The Great Gatsby* (Luhrmann, 2013) as the main storylines of both films are about two men fighting over a woman. But how does this

triangle work in lesbian period drama films? In a way, it is inverted, and the fact that there are now women on two corners of the triangle is not the reason. The sapphic characters have de-centered the man in their lives as much as their circumstances allow, they are not competing between themselves, they are each other's love interest, and neither has any intention of robbing the other of the man's attention. On the contrary, they already have his full undivided attention and are trying to escape, shield from it, for example, in the barn in *Lizzie* (Macneill, 2018), or on a road trip in *Carol* (Haynes, 2015). Male-male-female erotic triangle is not applicable to inter-character relations, but the plots do not escape this scheme because the "large-scale social structures" (Sedgwick, 2016, p. 25) remain rooted in them. Sedgwick writes:

> We can go further than that, to say that in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence. (Sedgwick, 2016, p. 25)

This means that the world the lesbian relationships are embedded in is based on male homosocial relations and will continue to impact lesbian experiences regardless if there is a clear male supervillain in the story or not. The male character can be eliminated, but his presence will never truly disappear.

Céline Sciamma made sure to present the overseeing power of patriarchy in her film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma, 2019) without having male leading or supporting roles. This feature alone makes the film distinct from many other lesbian period dramas. In the late 1700s France, Marianne (Noémie Merlant) is hired to paint a portrait of Héloïse (Adèle Haenel) in secret. Héloïse is constrained by tradition and has to live out her dead sister's destiny: the portrait is meant to be sent to her future husband in Italy and will help determine whether he finds her beautiful enough to become his wife. She does not want to be married

off to a foreign stranger, so refusing to pose is Héloïse's act of rebellion against the arranged marriage. Marianne is disguised as a walking companion and waits until the painting is done to disclose the true purpose of her visit. Criticized by Héloïse, Marienne destroys the portrait with the promise to paint a new one, and with Héloïse agreeing to pose, the two get another week together, but a fulfilling connection does not change the course of the planned marriage and the film ends with a poetic separation.

Men are barely in the picture, but their absence only highlights how phallocentrism penetrates and spoils women's experiences. The tone of struggle, loneliness, and melancholy is set from the very beginning when Marianne, entering the metadiegetic level of the narrative, recalls the story behind her painting of a woman in a burning dress. Marianne and her equipment get drenched on the way to the island, and with no help from the oarsmen, she has to hike up the hills to reach the destination of her next job alone. If she wants to achieve anything, she will have to do it by herself. She is a single female painter in a time when this was unheard of. Although ladies could have been educated in the arts to an extent, they were withheld from pursuing a professional career by either having to fulfill family duties, which is the case for Héloïse, or being rejected opportunities of learning and working. When Marianne shares with Héloïse that she has to learn to paint men's anatomy in private settings, she adds that prohibiting women artists from painting naked male bodies stops them from entering the market: "Without any notion of male anatomy, the major subject escapes us" (1:08:41). Nevertheless, Marianne dismisses what is considered proper for women, and goes underground to perfect her techniques. As shown in one of the final scenes, Marianne submits her interpretation of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in her father's name and gets to attend a prestigious Parisian Salon. Not only does she paint men in secret, she paints as a man in secret, meaning that she submits her works to auctions and exhibitions under a man's name due to the probability of being rejected otherwise. It is Marianne's work, but her name stays

in the shadow of a man. Marianne's lifestyle and occupation are very much what is associated with "masculinity" for that historical period, showcasing that masculinity is associated with freedom of choice and power, while femininity, taking Héloïse as an example, equals restriction and punishment.

There is no single man or men to fight, for the patriarchal rules are set in form of traditions, and one can either choose to object or follow them. Héloïse's complicated situation shows that the choice is conditional because it is intertwined with the lives of family members. Given the historical period in question, being a woman would have meant an arranged marriage for a daughter in a wealthy family. Héloïse meets this idea with abjection even though her mother wholeheartedly believes she has found a suitable and respectable man for her. The bride-to be knows, or rather, feels, that she will lose something by getting married, similarly to her sister, whose despair led up to her suicide. One of the sacrifices will be her romance with Marianne, and, possibly, other women, which means that her circumstances do not allow for long-term lesbian relationships.

An important aspect of representations of lesbianism that unveils through the protagonists' interactions with their surroundings in these period drama movies is that lesbian desires are seen as abnormal. Dworkin (1989) wrote that a man "[..] defines femininity and when she does not conform, he names her deviant, sick [...]" (p. 18). We learn that it is men who determine what sexuality will or will not be acceptable to the women around them. If he cannot have her or have power over her with her conditioned consent, i. e. her conforming to the rules of the patriarchy, he will name her deviant to rob her of whatever comfort she had in her life. The most active homophobia in lesbian period drama films comes from male figures, they become the bearers of bad news, the villains of sapphic love stories, but they are merely representatives of a system which says that lesbianism is dirty and filthy (*Tell It to the Bees* (Jankel, 2018)), abominable (*Lizzie* (Macneill, 2018)), a mental illness (*Carol* (Haynes,

2015)), or even impossible in the sense of unnamed, like in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma, 2019). When Carol and Harge sit down together with their lawyers to solve the disagreement over Rindy's custody without going to court, Carol's lawyer advocates for her by presenting a psychotherapist's evaluation which has shown that Carol's "aberrant behavior" (1:40:01) during the "events of the winter" (13:39:39) was induced by Harge's actions. He attempts to interpret her lesbianism as a consequence of psychological distress as if it was a stage or an accident in her life, and not a conscious desire followed by actions. Not only that, the lawyer finds the words to talk about Carol's affair with Therese without calling it what it really was: a romantic and sexual relationship between two women, a lesbian relationship. This signals just how inappropriate and wrong they are suggesting that connection was. By going around the matter and not naming her homosexual desire, it is rendered invisible, preempting the possibility of it actually being real and valid. It is so mainly because Western societies are centered around heterosexual men and the previously mentioned symbolic power of the phallus, which grants them the authority to name and to decide what will be the *status quo*. When the *status quo* is set, male presence is no longer needed to maintain the power structures as seen in *Portrait* (Sciamma, 2019).

3.2 Representations of Intimate Lesbian Relationships

While the sapphic protagonists' relationships with their surroundings, be that men, communities, or legal matters, are a constant fight with no prospects, their intimate sexual relationships are the opposite and are based on mutual trust and respect. Sheila Jefferys (2018) has pointed out that, with the emergence of lesbian feminism, lesbians started rejecting any type of role-playing in their intimate/sexual relationships because (gender) roles were accepted as male constructs for establishing power over women. This turn, in her opinion, reflected evolving understanding about gender roles in heterosexual relationships (pp. 372–

376). Interestingly, despite portraying much earlier times, lesbian period dramas attempt to depict an absence of such roles too, some more successfully than others.

When Marianne and Héloïse go on their first walk in *Portrait* (Sciamma, 2019), Héloïse walks ahead leading the way. She sets off running towards the cliff and stops at the edge, stating she has "dreamt of that for years" (20:00). With prior knowledge that her sister killed herself in this manner, Marrianne's immediate reaction is interpreting the wish as a wish to die, and she directly asks whether that is the truth. In confronting Héloïse with the first-ever exchange of words between them, she demonstrates curiosity which would not be acceptable in a master-servant relation; after all, Marianne is presenting as a hired walking companion. When the cover is blown and their romance progresses, Marianne assumes that as a painter she does the looking, hence she is in a position of power, but is quickly corrected by Héloïse pointing out that they are equally under each other's magnifying glass. "If you look at me, who do I look at?", she asks after commanding Marianne to look at the easel from the posing model's perspective. Both women are active participants in their relationship with the roles of a submissive and of a dominant one always changing and fluctuating between them. This dynamic intensifies their mutual desire and challenges Freud's idea that a homosexual woman is desiring from the perspective of a man. If he was correct, a lesbian would desire a submissive woman and would not be desired back because her love object would indeed be a heterosexual woman striving to be looked at by a man. The couple in *Portrait* (Sciamma, 2019), on the contrary, constantly seek each other and their love does not resemble heterosexual love.

The "SNL" skit (2021), while obviously a satire, did quite accurately point out the ways in which lesbian period dramas tend to be uniform, and the act of looking, or "Academy Award-winning glance choreography" as they put it (1:12), plays a big part. In general, looking is employed to accurately portray desire. If "[...] while men privilege the relation with

the world and the object, women privilege interpersonal relations [...]" (Whitford, Ed., 1991, p. 5), lesbian relationships are built on a mutual belief that the other one is a subject, not an object, so they see each other as equals, the voyeuristic distance is not created. Unlike through the lens of a male gaze, the looking done by the camera when capturing women-loving-women is much more delicate, attentive. The camera catches small breaths, skin texture, hand and lip movements, emotions in the women's faces and eyes. The director of *Portrait* (Sciamma, 2019) did an incredible job capturing these small moments that add up to create a picture of intimacy between two women, their desire and pleasure. Attention to detail and sensibility is consistent throughout the film, but it is of utmost importance in depictions of sexual activities. The sex scenes are slow, getting in and out of focus while the camera glides from one close-up shot of one body part to another, capturing skin folds, moles, strings of saliva between the lovers' lips still connecting them after a kiss. Stacey (2022) notices that when Héloïse's typically blue eyes are shown dark after the use of a hallucinogenic plant, the two almost merge because Héloïse now has Marianne's eyes. The drug with the ability to extend time contributes to "phantasmatic quality of this moment" (pp. 887–889). The time stretches, and there is no rush. It shows that pleasure is much more nuanced than a culmination of the sexual act – a man's ejaculation – and that women experience it in many different ways, and in high intensity, too. *Tell It to the Bees* (Jankel, 2018) cannot compare in terms of the technical execution, of the cinematography, but even there we get scenes like Jean gently blowing the bees off Lydia's neck that display the workings of sapphic love, and the way they do it speaks to Kristeva's (2002) and Irigaray's (1991) points on how natural and effortless the relation between two women is when no one is interrupting it.

On the other side of the spectrum of lesbian intimacy representations, there is a mediation between the male gaze and the lesbian gaze, if not a completely heteronormative depiction of sex acts. *Tell It to the Bees* (Jankel, 2018) and *Carol* (Haynes, 2015), granted

their differences in aesthetic appeal, both include wider shots of semi-naked women's silhouettes and display them undressing each other, showing special interest in the partner's breasts. As for *Lizzie* (Macneill, 2018), during the barn sex scene, Adrew brings a lot of discomfort to the audience as we can see him creeping from behind the window. His spectatorship creates distance and makes the sex scene appear more graphic and much less tender in comparison to *Portrait* (Sciamma, 2019). Nonetheless, in terms of bringing an idea to its cinematic form, it is a creative decision to represent lesbian sex with a sole act of digital penetration, which acts as a substitute for a penis in Freudian logic. I do not include *Ammonite* (Lee, 2020) in the analysis, but the sex scene between palaeontologist Mary Anning (Kate Winslet) and her melancholic walking companion Charlotte Murchison (Saoirse Ronan) can act as a prime example of a lesbian sex scene imagined in accordance with voyeuristic masculinist tradition. Given the film's attempt at artistic cinematography, one would expect the same pace and tenderness in the moments of passion. Instead, what happens is "[...] a sex scene so graphic, you'll think, 'Oh, right. A man directed this'" ("Saturday Night Live", 2021). And it does not mean that a "two kisses and down to business" scenario could not take place in real life. The question is: Was it created under the assumption that lesbian audiences will recognize their experiences in it?

Coming back to the refusal of role-playing, the four movies achieve it to different degrees. That is because intersecting aspects of the protagonists' identities such as age or social class usually create questionable power dynamics, nonetheless. Bridget in *Lizzie* (Macneill, 2018) is in a subordinate position in relation to Lizzie from the start. She joins the household as an illiterate immigrant servant, meaning she does not have relatives to support her financially, and her inability to read and write limits her ability to learn about the world around her. It is Lizzie who enthusiastically teaches her these skills, which builds her image as an authoritative figure in Bridget's life, so when Lizzie decides to kill her father and

stepmother, she drags Bridget into the ordeal rather easily. When the time comes for Bridget to smash Andrew's head with an axe, she stands over him but cannot force herself to swing the weapon, exposing that she does not see this murder as the right thing to do. It was Lizzie's plan all along and Bridget, being under her lover's influence, followed it. Though at the end, during Lizzie's trial, the roles reverse as Lizzie is the one whose freedom in those circumstances is restricted more, which allows Bridget to make a decision to leave for and by herself.

In a letter that Carol asks Abby to give Therese, she writes: "Please don't be angry when I tell you that you seek resolutions and explanations because you're young. But you will understand this one day" (Haynes, 2015, 1:58:28). Carol is much older than Therese, who has just come out of her teenage years, and has a more diverse range of life experiences, including having a child, going through a divorce process, and already having had her first lesbian experiences. In this context, Carol's letter does have a patronizing tint to it, because she assumes that Therese, due to her young age, will not be able to fully understand Carol's decision to leave in order to still have a chance at winning the battle for Rindy's custody. Since the first time they met, all interactions were based on mutual interest and consent, but Carol has always had an upper hand as her personal matters were dictating the course of their relationship, while Therese was happily following her around. Patricia White (2015) indicated that the behavioral pattern of them as a couple resembles that of a mother and daughter: "[...] Carol inscribes lesbianism within a textual and reception history, informed by such dated and delicious tropes as the predatory lesbian and female homosexuality as a perversion of mother/daughter love" (pp. 10–11). This parent/child dynamic with the age difference in mind would be deemed problematic in the heterosexual realm, especially adding the aspect of financial inequality to the mix, but the standards for ethical and fair relationships seem yet to be established in lesbian dating culture.

David Halperin (2012) has pointed out that what is labeled as "gay culture" is a set of practices (performing as drag queens, listening to certain pop music artists, etc.), but not everyone who partakes in them is gay, and not everyone who is gay indulges in gay culture (pp. 33–35). Lesbian culture has been more disagreed upon than male gay culture. Historically, some scholars have rendered it impossible, "for gender identity and sexual desires are patriarchally constructed" (Ferguson, 1991, p. 338), others have provided different takes. If we were to ask what phenomena can be attributed to lesbian culture today, it would definitely include close friendships between ex-lovers (Allen, Goldberg, 2020, pp. 18–23). In an interview for VICE Digital, Céline Sciamma expressed her belief that close friendships between lesbian ex-lovers are a way of breaking the patriarchal restrictions on relationships:

> We have another political programme for love. For example, lesbians, they are friends with their exes. You can have a different life. Why do we want to fit into those 'happy endings,' that are more propaganda for a lifestyle? We can depart from that. We are more free. (Lott-Lavigna, 2020)

Although stereotypical and not applicable to all, encountering ex-lovers as best friends or having one yourself is not unusual in lesbian circles, and *Carol* (Haynes, 2015) provides an account of women-loving-women transforming their romantic relationship into an unconditional friendship. Their intimate past is coded in a dialogue between Carol and Harge before the audience is introduced to her friend Abby Gerhard. At the beginning of the film, Carol says she cannot join him and their daughter on a trip, and Rindy discloses that Carol has plans involving Aunt Abby. Harge asks whether she has been "seeing a lot of Aunt Abby lately" (17:32). He fixes his stare on Carol, and she immediately looks down, indicating that perhaps her relationship with Abby, who is Rindy's godmother and has no blood connection to anyone in Carol's family, is something she should feel guilty about. His animosity towards Abby is only confirmed later when he mumbles "There's always Abby" (29:49), as if she has

always been the third person in their marriage, and she is who Harge has to compete against for Carol's love and attention.

Abby is a life-long friend with whom Carol had an affair years ago, but they remained each other's most trusted friends when the romance stage ended. Her sexuality is never explicitly defined; however, she openly tells Carol about her new female crush after picking Carol up from her date with Therese. There is no mention of a prominent male presence in Abby's life, which suggests that she most likely is a lesbian. As good of friends as they are, Abby acknowledges how her proximity to Carol might influence Harge's assumptions about them. In an essay "Loading Up the U-Haul: Traveling the Spaces Between Friends and Lovers" (2012), Tammie M. Kennedy (2012) wrote that "Exes occupy the spaces between friend and lover. [...] The love between us expands into infinite extensions of our lives, accommodating and limiting each of us in the expanse" (p. 55). The limitations caused by Carol's and Abby's past mostly reflect in Carol's relation to Harge, but they are conquered by the freedom these women find in the friendship. They trust each other with information that cannot be shared with anyone else: they talk freely about their sex lives with no shame or uncertainty and support each other in their lesbian journeys. Not only does Abby not tell Harge about Carol's whereabouts knowing she is on a road trip with a woman, but when Carol is forced to cut the trip short, Abby travels across the country to pick up Therese and bring her home safely. This gesture shows just how deeply Carol and Abby care for each other, considering Abby is essentially helping her ex assure her new lover, Therese, that she is cared for. Their relationship shows that exes can remain friends and also have fulfilling romantic connections with new people without sacrificing what they have created with each other[4].

[4] The appearance of an ex-lover in *Ammonite* (Lee, 2020) deserves an honorable mention. When Mary goes to get a bottle of salve for Charlotte, she visits an herbalist, Elizabeth (Fiona Shaw), who is an older

3.3 Representation of the Sapphic Characters' Relationships to Themselves

In this section I move to discuss what the lesbian characters' erotic relationships and relationships to patriarchy (or the men that represent it) tell about the sapphic characters' relationships to themselves and their self-identification. Simultaneously, I will discuss melancholia's role in the filmic portrayals of lesbian experiences under patriarchy.

The motif of a sapphic daughter's identification with her father is almost comically literal in three out of four films analyzed in this thesis. As already mentioned, in *Tell It to the Bees* (Jankel, 2018), Jean is a medical doctor who took over her father's clinic in her hometown, and "inherited" a hobby of beekeeping, too. In *Lizzie* (Macneill, 2018), Lizzie herself exhibits a level of independence that certainly is not feminine according to the era's standards, she shows an enormous interest in her father's affairs and sees herself as capable in administering the family's assets as her father. Lizzie can be seen wearing a broach of a violet flower on her collar, and for more a more acute viewer this lesbian symbol gives a clue of her already being familiar with her lesbian desire prior to meeting Bridget. In *Portrait* (Sciamma, 2019), Marianne is another example of "like father, like daughter", because her father was a painter whom she learned the craft from before taking over the business. The choice to submit paintings under a man's name is justifiable by discrimination against female painters, and her established father's name can contribute to raising the probability of being approved, but it also signifies how strong her identification with the father is. Was it the other way around, she could have chosen to disassociate herself from him and sign with a different name.

woman. Elizabeth. greets her with great familiarity and pleasure complimenting Mary's appearance, while Mary appears tense, agitated and reluctant to engage in small talk or make any eye contact. Their interaction is awkward with no justification why, alluding to their intimate past. Later in the film, Mary can be seen befriending Charlotte during a recital in town, which sparks envy in Mary and causes her to go home early. Eventually, Elizabeth comforts Mary after her mother's death, and that is when their separation is addressed for the first time. She is always close to Elizabeth: closer than a friend, but not a lover either. However, always ready to be there for her.

It could be theorized that these sapphic characters take on the masculine identification or start identifying with their father so that they can achieve what in Freudian psychoanalysis would be a complete object-love (only accessible to men), but I want to argue that they reach satisfaction precisely because they go into the relationship as women. The lesbian relationships we see portrayed in the three films have a similar template of one woman being more content, and the other drowning in melancholia until she is brought into her true self by the dyke lover. In *Tell It to the Bees* (Jankel, 2018), Jean heals Lydia's anxiety about her crumbling marriage by loving and comforting her, showing her that there is an alternative to the *status quo*. Before Jean comes into Lydia's life, Lydia is depressed about her husband, who may or may not have fallen into alcoholism, leaving her and the boy, and wants him back despite his unwarranted behavior. Following Butler, it can be said that the question underlying Lydia's melancholia is concerning her femininity. Is she not woman enough for her husband to want to stay with her? All concerns regarding the preservation of an image of a perfect family disappear once she discovers her homosexual desires she likely was trying to avoid by excelling on a heterosexual value scale. As a rule, neither Jean and Lydia, nor Marianne and Héloïse get a happy ending as a couple, but the relationship does not lose the element of fulfillment: the present was enriching enough, and they did not have to wait, plan or "hunt" for marriage, give birth to a son (which Lydia has done, but it did not satisfy her needs indefinitely) or be-child the husband (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1992, p. 15) to reach satisfaction. The end of a lesbian relationship also does not send the previously depressed women back into that emotional state, because the reasons for grieving have been worked out.

What does not get resolved so easily is the melancholic aura surrounding lesbian lives, "melancholic air" (Sarkar, 2021) so to say, reminding that there is always an entity bigger than them or any other person lurking somewhere close, it is watching them and preparing to strike. It comes to the attention from the experience-based knowledge that their love is not

welcome, that life for them will be turbulent either way: fighting against what one is or fighting for what one is, and there is no promise of winning, but some of them try. *Carol* (Haynes, 2015) offers an ending that suggests that taking a risk might offer hope. During the legal meeting with her ex-husband, Carol cuts off her lawyer trying to write off her lesbian identity as a misunderstanding and confidently states that their conversation "May as well be on the record" (1:40:20), because she is not ashamed of her relationship with Therese and will not deny it. "But what use am I to her, to us, if I'm living against my own grain?" (1:42:08), Carol asks, implying she would be a worse mother for denying her needs and living a lie. She makes a conscious decision to give up some of her heterosexual privileges, the unlimited access to her daughter at all times, to not have to hide her love life in plain sight anymore. There remains an element of loss and grief, but it is outweighed by the freedom this step grants her.

When she settles her family matters, Carol reaches out to Therese and offers her to live together in a newly rented two-bedroom apartment. She initially declines the offer and goes to a house party with her male friend who interrupted the meeting with Carol. There, she walks around looking for familiar faces when she finds herself in the doorway: in one room, there is her guy friend cuddling with a woman and watching television, but in the room behind Therese's back, she sees a woman wearing red lipstick, Carol's signature color. She keeps standing there, not moving one direction or the other, even when people start bumping into her, Therese finds herself between two distinctly different futures and is hesitant to decide which one she should choose, but eventually she is shown chatting to the woman, and later goes to the location Carol said she would be at. The film ends with the two women staring at each other across the dining hall, with their eyes saying, "I love you".

The audience is left to wonder how their story ends. However, this ending creates hope of the possibility of two women getting together for good. Whether they stay together or not,

it is clear that if they go their separate ways, the decision will be determined by external factors, because their sexuality and love they are sure about.

Conclusions

Starting this thesis, I made it my goal to analyze the discourses on lesbian experiences in lesbian period drama films by looking into how these experiences are portrayed through the sapphic characters' relationships to their surroundings, to each other, and to themselves. I set my research direction to examine whether, and if yes, then how, patriarchy manifests in directorial choices when depicting said relationships and how these representations of lesbian experiences might translate to contemporary lesbian audiences. The four films I have chosen are *Carol* (Haynes, 2015), *Lizzie* (Macneill, 2018), *Tell It to the Bees* (Jankel, 2018), and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma, 2019).

Analyzing the protagonists' relationships with their surroundings in the four films has shown that lesbianism and queerness, in general, are likely to be portrayed as something that cannot coexist with hegemonic power relations of infinite male authority without clashing. Women with lesbian desires stand in the middle of the conflict of natural versus normal, inviting to question whether what is considered normal is natural or are these two concepts equated to maintain the dominance of men in society. While the women are comfortable in their homosexual desires, they do not feel filthy or like sexual deviants, the world, mostly embodied by male anti-heroes who are in close proximity to the protagonists in *Carol* (Haynes, 2015), *Lizzie* (Macneill, 2018), and *Tell It to the Bees*, (Jankel, 2018), keeps telling them that is exactly what they are. In *Portrait* (Sciamma, 2019), the world is quiet, but only because the mechanisms to keep homosexuality ultimately constrained are in place and sturdy enough in the shape of traditions or institutions. At once, the stories illustrate how a lesbian way of living inevitably becomes a rebellion against these structures (Clarke, 1981, p 126). As Céline Sciamma told Vox: "These stories are really dangerous for patriarchy. That's why the male gaze is obsessed with representing lesbians, for instance. It's a way to control it. Our stories are powerful because they are dangerous. We are dangerous" (St. James, 2020).

Lesbian period drama films, when produced with an intent to do so, can provide women-loving-women with representation and create a lesbian imaginary (Stacey, 2022, p. 289) that the audiences have been deprived of. In all four films, rural settings and closed spaces of the plots leave room for a more attentive portrayal of the development of desire and adoration between two women. Lesbian desire comes effortlessly and most naturally to the protagonists, exposing that their melancholic state has been caused by compulsory heterosexuality and different forms of oppression employed to achieve it. When they become free of it in an isolated space and for a short amount of time, the sapphic characters get to create their own ways of desiring, feeling and seeing, which are realized through cinematography. Instead of following the Hollywood tradition of the voyeuristic and distant male gaze, the camera pays attention to details such as skin texture, hand movements, fabrics of the costumes, emotions in the faces and eyes, and so on. Focusing on delicate features helps to refuse the hierarchical order within a couple, especially in the scenes of sexual intimacy, creating a sense of equality.

However, I have observed that these directorial decisions are not consistent throughout the films I have analyzed, and there are several aspects that remain quite stereotypical and normalized. First, some presence of unequal power dynamics is hardly avoidable. *Portrait* (Sciamma, 2019) and *Tell It to the Bees* (Jankel, 2018) are the two films in which the roles of desired/desiring and the submissive/dominant are constantly being reversed, thus preempting any continuous dominant dispositions, objective financial or social advantages one character has over the other notwithstanding. In the remaining two movies, social class or age, or the intersection of both, position one woman as superior, even if the final choice ends up falling into the hands of a more submissive partner. Carol in *Carol* (Haynes, 2015) and Lizzie in *Lizzie* (Macneill, 2018) have an upper hand in the decision making that concerns the flow of the events in their lesbian relationships. This dynamic in which one partner leads and the

other one is willfully led is not problematized. On the contrary, it is romanticized despite clear coherence with the Freudian idea of a girl desiring her mother (White, 2015, p. 15). Subsequently, the sex scenes in these films are tailored more to the male gaze than what could be characterized as a lesbian gaze, although *Tell It to the Bees* (Jankel, 2018) also fails to refuse the heteronormative template for portraying moments of passion.

Another prevailing discourse I have identified as significant is the temporality of lesbian relationships. The depiction of intimate relationships, as fulfilling as they might have been, rarely gives hope for a happy ending. The sapphic characters themselves are not killed off, but their relationships are, suggesting that they were historically impossible or a phase with no possibility of longevity. *Carol* (Haynes, 2015) is the only film with an open-ended plot that leaves the viewer wondering if Therese and Carol do eventually get back together. The idea that a romantic relationship does not have to last forever to be satisfactory, and that the separation does not necessarily have to be tragic (as seen in *Tell It to the Bees* (Jankel, 2018) and *Portrait* (Sciamma, 2019)), is worthy of being developed and materialized in cinema, too. Yet, when it falls into a pattern of short-term relationships and becomes the default for the genre, it raises a question whether lesbian relationships are portrayed as a fantasy rather than a possibility.

Besides the obvious lesbian desire, I sought to detect more possible points of identification in the lesbian period drama films for contemporary sapphic audiences. In the beginning of my thesis, I used multiple indexes, surveys, and individual cases to outline the social and political context of LGBTI persons' realities in the EU. The data showed that homophobia is still widespread and affects lesbian lives on multiple levels: with the severity varying from country to country, lesbians are not always protected by laws, public discourses denounce their same-sex desire as deviant and harmful to the society, they experience hate crimes and are afraid to show public displays of affection. At the core, these are the same

experiences portrayed in the movies I have analyzed. Drawing on Jackie Stacey's proposed types of identifications (1999, pp. 151–157), I want to suggest that retrospective portrayal of lesbian experiences can act as an inspirational recourse for activism and rebellion against patriarchal oppression today and a medium for mourning, because the world is not yet at the point where LGBTI people do not have to fight for their right to exist anymore. Also, they can become an opportunity to contest prevailing homophobic discourses.

Due to the gap in scholarship, lesbian period dramas released within the last decade have not been analyzed as a genre. Instead, several separate films have attracted scholars' attention and became objects of analyses. The majority of comparisons were offered by pop culture, hence their entertainment-oriented nature and surface-level readings of the narratives. I believe that a more extensive comparative analysis of lesbian period drama films can offer a reflection on modern values and point out the clichés in lesbian cinema that are yet to be rewritten.

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