

Battle of the Lesbian Period film:

The successful elements in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

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From the very first paying audience in France, 1985, to the global subscribers of video streaming platforms today, motion pictures have fascinated, inspired, and connected audiences (*A very short history of cinema*, 2020). Film as a medium represents life and experiences in a multidimensional way of simultaneously perceiving image, movement, and audio which bring a viewer into the world and story of a film; connecting with an audience's senses of sight and sound, and if created effectively, emotion. As film technologies and techniques have evolved with time, so have the audience's expectations for the quality and type of content that they consume. There is intense competition within the film industry to create new, original projects constantly, and with this constant creation of content, a phenomenon occurs every so often when two films are released around the same time out of differing production studios but are incredibly similar in story or theme. This observance, while in need of formal research, has been titled the twin film phenomenon as the two similar films are conceptual 'twins'. This paper will compare the very similar films *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) and *Ammonite* (2020) in order to evaluate how their elemental differences influenced audience connections to each film and ultimately determined the global success of each film. To best analyze these films from a perspective of production and filmmaking, specific theater and film elements will be used to highlight the creative variations in these twin films; those elements being the particular direction and use of sound, mise en scene, cinematography, and narrative. These films were chosen because of their similarities in genre both being lesbian period films, and because of their international origins, and drastic contrast in ultimate commercial success. While surface level similarities among these media objects are apparent, their differences in connecting with audiences can be seen in analyzing each film's distinct creative direction. The creative direction of the film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) has set it apart from that of the competing twin film

Ammonite (2020) both commercially and critically as the use of audio, mise en scene, cinematography, and narrative elements in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* connected greater with global target audiences.

Since mainstream filmmaking began, there has only been increased competition and has become a constant battle to draw audience attention and acclaim. This battle only intensifies when a film is competing with another of great similarity. Twin films can be identified across all types of film media and while some occurrences are the result of logical trends in popular culture, most instances are seen by screenwriters as the product of nothing more than random occurrence and prove difficult to intentionally avoid (Rossio, 2016). When any similar (twin) films are released around the same time they are seen and reviewed by viewers as personal competitors, and often “one film will likely succeed greatly past the other in terms of both critical and commercial acclaim” (McIntosh, 2018). Among the films compared in this analysis, the French film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, titled originally in french as *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, earned around \$3.7 million in the U.S. box offices, and more than \$23 million globally while the British film *Ammonite* earned a worldwide box office total of around \$1.4 million (Lee, 2020). While *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* did have a leg up on the competition being that it was released a few months prior to the release of *Ammonite*, *Ammonite* also had some conceivable advantages as it was in English and had noteworthy stars in its cast including American-Irish actress Saoirse Ronan and English *Titanic* (1997) actress Kate Winslet. *Ammonite* being in English allowed for easier global reach, travel, and reception of the film in other English speaking countries, and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*’s entirely French spoken dialogue constricted audiences to French speakers, and non-French speakers who would read translated subtitles to follow the story of film.

In order to determine which elements of film were appropriate for the most direct comparison of these films, many factors had to be considered. In the realm of video media production, there is no one instruction manual or direction on how to properly make and produce a film. In this way, film can be creative and yet extremely subjective and thus the success of a particular film's production becomes difficult to quantify. One way to think about breaking down filmmaking is in two sections the technical side, which is comprised of elements like lighting and sound, and the esthetic side which is comprised of elements such as palette and mise en scene, which act as the relationship between the things you see on screen or know to be in the presented environment (Bobker, 1974). Others think about film differently in terms of only technical elements but often include too specific elements to analyze on a large film scale such as shots, camera angle, and editing (Sarfaraz, 2021). In researching these elements of film, a common notion of a "big five" or "big four elements" became apparent across many searches and sources. In one such source from the visual creative academy, VisualisThink classifies its "big four" as "mise en scene, cinematography, editing, and sound" (2021). While the element of editing is difficult to independently consider in this film comparison, the elements in this article of mise en scene, cinematography, and sound will be used to compare the films along with an analysis of the overall narrative differences between them. It is the job of a movie's director to consider these elements and use them to assist in the desired presentation of the narrative to an audience; the creative direction is what best distinguishes stories with similar narratives. Though each of these elements is treated and viewed differently, they all aid in the expression of the film to viewers, and if used effectively will reach and connect with the eyes, ears, thoughts, and emotions of its audience. Film provides audiences with a brief disruption of the sign and sound in their world, bringing the viewer into the senses of a different environment. In a 2008 study on the

psychological effects of movies and film, researchers found that film as a therapeutic tool promoted discussions of difficult topics, and saw that film watching “contributed to heightened self-esteem and social skills among participants”, and connected participants with experienced “feelings of mastery”, “shifts in perspective that contributed to them altering negative attribution patterns”, and “lowered feelings of depression” (Johnson & Alderson, p.18).

Prior to comparing the use of these elements in the films, it is first necessary to provide a baseline of content of each movie. The French film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* takes place along the British channel in 1770. The film begins by following the happenings of Marianne, a painter, as she travels over sea for a job to paint a portrait of a woman for her potential husband. Upon arriving Marianne is told about Heloise, a woman of stature who has just left the convent and refuses to sit for a portrait to be done out of her reluctance to marry. Marianne is instructed to pose as a handmaiden and to go out on walks with Heloise, in order to observe her and complete the portrait in secrecy. As the women become more familiar and comfortable with each other their relationship evolves into one of romantic feeling. Marianne connects with Heloise through their discussion of music, and one night as they attend a ceremony on the beach Heloise’s dress catches fire but is soon put out by a woman nearby. The film continues as Marianne completes the portrait and there is an acknowledgment of their relationship needing to end given societal norms and expectations. After years have passed Marianne is seen displaying her work in a gallery where she spots a painting of Heloise and a young girl, quite clearly her daughter and is reminded of their time together. The film ends with Marianne seeing Heloise a final time as she sits down in a theater and notices Heloise sitting alone on the opposite side. As the music plays there is a slow zoom on Heloise as she watches the orchestra- so affected by the music that as it plays, it brings her to tears.

The film *Ammonite* follows a fictional representation of real-life paleontologist Mary Anning as her life is interrupted by the arrival of depressed socialite Charlotte Murchison and her husband. While visiting the area Charlotte becomes more ill and must be cared for by Mary as she unwillingly becomes Mary's responsibility. Mary has an initial disdain for Charlotte but upon attending an event with her becomes jealous and her romantic feelings for Charlotte are revealed. Charlotte helps Mary in her work and even encourages her to take bigger risks resulting in Mary slowly opening up from her off-put demeanor. Charlotte's husband sends for her to return home to London and shortly afterward, Mary's only family (her mother) dies suddenly.

One of the most overlooked elements within a film is sound. Sound includes dialogue as well as natural sounds of an environment and any additional post-production or music that may be added for the desired effect. Often, sound in film has a "subliminal role, working on its audience subconsciously" as a viewer is likely hearing more than one distinct sound but in this way, sound can "easily produce 'a willing suspension of disbelief' in the audience" (Holman, 2010). Both of these films use similar sounds in establishing the audio of their environments such as waves crashing, fire crackling, wind, birds, strokes of writing on paper, and idle indistinct background chatter when in occupied spaces. The most significant differences in sound design between these two films can be seen in how each film uses music. Both films have similar music in terms of it being of the era and in both films music is first introduced when the women are together and one begins to play piano. For most of each film, the music used is also occurring within the reality of the film rather than for the audience's benefit. The exception to this can be seen in the use of music in *Ammonite*. The entire film is filled with periods of silence when we see Mary gathering ammonite or completing chores around her town and home. It isn't until Charlotte leaves Mary that music begins to play for the presentation of Mary's emotional state.

Music is heard again as Mary decides to leave for a visit to London and a final time as she sees her fossil on display in a museum. The music choice in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* differs as we only hear it when the women are together. In this way, the audience associates the raw ‘live’ music with the relationship between them rather than how one character is feeling. Music can function in various ways in film but serves as a way to suggest to the audience “how to feel, from moment to moment: soaring strings mean one thing, a single snare drum, another” (Holman, 2010). While the music placement in *Ammonite* helps convey Mary’s typically concealed emotions to the audience in times of personal change, the direction of music in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* functions as a representation of Heloise and Marianne’s love, passion, and connection each other.

The element of *mise en scene*, while directly defined in french as ‘putting on stage’, is extended in film to “suggest the control the director has over the visual elements within the film image” and is inclusive of a film’s directed “setting, costume, lighting and movement of figures” (Lathrop & Sutton, 2014). In terms of this film element, the films are similar in terms of setting, and costume construction representing the time period. Both *Ammonite* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* are set along the British channel and include similar sub-settings on the beach, near large rocks, in the ocean, in bed, and in a candle-lit house. A significant difference in the direction of *mise en scene* in these films is how each uses space in terms of timing and position. Movement within *Ammonite* was rapid and sharp as the audience follows the rigid routined actions of Mary as she works. An example of this can be seen in the first seven establishing minutes of the film. The camera moves to follow her actions with sharpness and movement rather than cuts allow the audience to follow her in a more ‘real’ feeling way that is uninterrupted and quick. Mary moves from task to task with a purpose and yet quiet tension. In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* the use of

movement and position is more consistent throughout the film. The positioning of Marianne and Heloise in relation to each other began as uncomfortably far when they didn't know each other and remained far from each other even following their revealed interest in each other as to not attract attention to their relationship. The movement of them being close together is always slow as they feed off of each other's energy only moving faster or slower in relation to one another (Sciamma, 2019, 1:22:30-1:25:00). The motions within each shot are also more fluid than those in *Ammonite* which can be seen in the juxtaposition of Marianne's work painting Heloise's portrait in gentle strokes and Mary's work chipping at stones to reveal the fossil. The creative direction of mise en scene allows a director to manipulate the behavior of an actor "in a way that supports a particular thematic element of the film" (Lathrop & Sutton, 2014). The direction of this in *Ammonite* emphasized Mary's drive and determination for her craft and the direction of mise en scene in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* created almost a dance for the audience between the characters representing a dynamic push and pull to their relationship.

By next looking at the element of cinematography the recurring colors, imagery, and filming styles help distinguish the films visually. Potentially the most important segment of cinematography is that of continuity as "good continuity encourages the viewer to become absorbed in the story-telling, without bothersome distractions" and "the prime purpose of a motion picture...is to capture and hold audience attention – from opening shot to final fade-out" (Mascelli, 1965). While there are some similarities between the films in terms of cinematography such as the elements of the setting, and shot position, there are far more differences among them. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* consisted of recurring imagery of paintings, fires, and white dresses with an accompanying color palette. At the beginning *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, before flashing back, we see a full portrait in Marianne's studio of Heloise with her dress on fire, which is the

very image Marianne sees occur of Heloise at the ceremony. There is also a moment between these two when Marianne begins a painting of Heloise only to find it unworthy as she brings a candle to its edge, igniting and destroying the first attempted portrait.

- Mary wore same blue checkered piece until she did the risky thing of leaving for London when she wore a “fancy” red coat and hat for the journey (mundane and plain to bright and distinct)

The stronger the motive for using a close-up, the more the close-up can help make the story-telling truly effective!

- Similarities: location, angled shots
 - Example: on beach together
 - Example: in bed together
- Ammonite: color palette is dull until the end
- Portrait: color palette more saturated; pushes and pulls creating more distinction of the two.
 - The lesbian gaze in close up shots
- Significance:
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- Narrative details (location, basic plot, basic characters) Both abandoned by the men of their lives sorta
- Same sorta awkwardness of Ammonite makes the film more analytical rather than romantic or greater than appearing

In general:

- There have long been period dramas created, and a public interest in them, following the immense success of the British public media series *Downton Abbey*. Audiences are drawn to “nostalgia for the period trappings of elegant clothes and manners”, and the juxtaposition of “fantasies of the past” being largely determined by “the needs of the present” (Boym as cited in Taddeo, 2019).

But in terms of queerness and connecting through identity:

Gay shit: (general success of this trope of film) (Richards, 2016)

- “Many of the highest-grossing films, instead of embracing present-day realities, are set during periods where they are “idealizing the past and making the experience of watching gay content easier for mainstream audiences in the sense that it feels more like a history lesson than a participation in gay cinema” (Kneigt 75). (1) This past, however, is often an adverse environment for these characters. By making these narratives accessible to mainstream audiences, this nostalgia places “homosexuality in the conservative Utopia of these challenged contexts” (75). Writing about Jake and Ennis from *Brokeback Mountain*, shepherders in 1960s Wyoming, Snyder says”

- “ Because these characters are placed in environments where queer sexuality is abnormal and socially undesirable, it is easier for these narratives to be consumed by a wider audience.”

9Conclusion/ overall creative direction

- How is this potentially based on gender? (Dalton, 2019)
 - Simply put, stories told in a conventional, masculine form are generally linear, hero-driven tales about conquest, whereas stories told with a more circular and sometimes collective feminine structure are often about overcoming obstacles in order to find connection. That connection may be internal, may involve other individuals or groups, or may even relate to larger communities. I do not mean this in an essentialist or reductive sense; men might tell some stories with a feminine structure, and women working in commercial Hollywood most often tell conventionally masculine stories.
- The way in which elements of film were used in ammonite overwhelmingly supported a notion of missed moments and personal growth while portrait was a notion of lost love, artistic and romanticized

While ammonite may classify as a lesbian period drama, the take away is that portrait is a lesbian love story

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