

A Gender Perspective Analysis of Modern Western Double Female Lead Film Culture

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Abstract

This study aims to explore gender awareness and representation in Modern Western Double Female Lead Film Culture through analyzing story settings, shooting angles, characterizations and themes in *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), *Carol* (2015), and *Ammonite* (2020). The study adopts a qualitative approach with content analysis, including shooting analysis and theme analysis. The results of this study indicate that dual-female-themed films have begun to reflect a richer portrayal of women's strengths, the needs of the LGBTQ population, and the emotional links between the genders, through the thematic settings, characterizations, and even character dialogues, thus showing women's thinking and growth. To conclude, the Western film industry was once considered a male-dominated industry, where the basic needs of minorities were rarely seen. However, with the development of the movie market, more and more directors choose to use the artistic language of movies to show the audience the problems existing in society, introduce the relationships and needs of different gender groups to call for people's attention and thinking, which is a manifestation of social progress.

Keywords

Film industry, Gender awareness, LGBTQ, Double Female Lead Film Culture.

1. Introduction

Since the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the film industry as a moving image has gradually developed from a mass spectacle to one of the most critical tools of mass media, communication, and entertainment. With the movie's development, people's demand for more subjects and perspectives of what they watch has also developed. At the same time, feminism emerged in the eighteenth century, particularly in the reform movements of the nineteenth century, with the first feminist convention of 1848 (the Seneca Falls Convention) as an essential landmark element. Under the influence of multiple social and economic factors, the two flourishing lines gradually met and intertwined, thus giving birth to a new type of film narrative perspective - a female perspective as the protagonist of the film subject and the "double female lead film" is an integral part of it.

In 1991, Polish director Kieslowski directed the hugely successful "The Double Life of Veronique," which tells the story of two girls named Veronica in Poland and France who share the same name, appearance, and talent - singing and both suffer from heart disease. The movie established the "double female lead" film as a new type of film narrative, with women as the main characters. From then on, the narrative mode of the two-woman film began its widespread development.

In this kind of movie, the director usually focuses on female characters and interprets issues such as female emotions, social obstacles, and gender relations differently to express more insights into women's diverse states of mind at other times. According to the literature review, few existing materials focus on the gender culture behind the Western double female lead films. Still, the author believes that by analyzing the classic double female lead films in different time

stages, people can better understand the problems encountered by individual women in Western modernization and the development of the gender atmosphere in society. This study will use *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), *Carol* (2015), and *Ammonite* (2020) as examples, to find out the gender relationship, the situation of LGBTQ groups, and the social factors these films want to convey, in conjunction with classic theories of film narrative.

2. Methodology

This thesis will begin with a definition of the "double-female lead film" and start with a historical background of the development of this genre. Then, the author will use *The Double Life of Veronique* in 1991, *Carol* in 2015, and *Ammonite* in 2020 as examples, representing one double-female movie in each decade. The qualitative research method will be used to analyze the film's narrative perspective, the protagonist's characterization, the effects of the filming, and the core theme of the film. Then, the author will explore the bi-heroine emotion, the embodiment of female power, the influence of social factors, the shaping of gender relations, and the expression of LGBTQ people from that. Finally, the author will analyze the study's limitations and ways to improve it. In the case of movie themes, which are more oriented to the viewer's feelings as feedback, it is more reasonable to use the qualitative research method to complete the social construction with theories than relying on quantitative research data to conclude the cultural products in human society.

3. Theories

3.1. The Auteur theory

An auteur is an expression with a distinctive approach with unbounded and personal filmmaking control.

3.2. The Screen theory

Screen theory considers filmic images as signifiers that do not only encode meanings but also mirrors in which viewers accede to subjectivity.

3.3. The Queer theory

Queer theory is the perspective that questions the perception that cisgender and heterosexual identities are in any sense 'standard.'

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Definition of Double Female Lead Film Culture

The so-called "double female lead" movie is a film in which the main characters are between two female characters with equal roles and a symmetrical structure. This kind of movie focuses on the friendship, competition, and destiny between the two women, who are independent of each other and mirror each other. In the author's preliminary movie survey phase, the subject matter of this type of movie is divided into four major categories. In the first category, the two protagonists are two individuals who do not know each other, and the film focuses on the process of their emotional connection after meeting each other by chance. In the second category, two women have a family or friendship relationship, and the movie will focus on their cooperation or emotional sublimation. The third category is about two individuals who don't know each other but are linked in a marvelous way, such as having a similar life or appearance, and usually end up in a self-exploration of identity questioning. The last category is the expression of the different personalities of a female protagonist, with various forms of correspondence between them.

4.2. Background- The development of Double Female Lead Film Culture

4.2.1. The development of film industry

Since the 1890s, the movie has appeared in the world as a technical device and has since evolved into a new form of entertainment and a new artistic medium. According to surveys, the first stage of the development of films is generally considered to be twofold: the early 1920s is known as the first stage of the "pure cinema" era, which was characterized by the German avant-garde cinema of 1918, with its staid and boring theatrical style. The second stage was followed by Dadaism and Surrealism in the mid-to-late 1920s, which challenged the traditional view of cinema art by presenting abstract objects, human emotions, and intuition as the main content of expression. Since then, the film industry has begun to develop rapidly, forming a variety of film styles and expressions of film themes based on the traditional use of works to view the nature of history and reality and further expanding the choice of films on this basis.

4.2.2. The development of feminism

Feminism is generally recognized as having three stages of development: liberal feminism, radical feminism, and post-structuralist feminism. Its germination appeared in the eighteenth century and mainly occurred in the reform movements of the nineteenth century, with the first feminist convention of 1848 (the Seneca Falls Convention) as an essential landmark element. The rights of sexual minorities are an important part of feminist studies, so as feminism develops, more and more LGBTQ groups are expanding their voices to promote and fight for their place in society.

4.3. Analysis

4.3.1. Analysis from film perspective

The Double Life of Veronique (1991)

Story setting. The story, set in France and Poland, tells the story of two girls who look exactly alike, are musically gifted, and even have a heart condition, but whose seemingly separate yet closely related connections lead one of the heroines on a quest to discover what life is all about. The movie adopts a simple narrative approach but simultaneously uses this temporal pattern to realize the overlapping sense of double parallel time and space.

Shooting analysis. The visual theme of the movie is one of duality. The director's compositions, such as the upside-down sky and earth at the film's beginning and the world floating in a transparent ball, allude to the duality of Veronica's life. In addition, this duality is reflected in the viewer's interaction with the movie, an extended reflection on the so-called "discovery of oneself in the work of the movie."

The film's consistent use of yellow-green filters imbues the images with an autumnal glow, a color choice that Kieslowski claims is a matter of visual contrast dictated by the predominant grays of the locations where the film is set. Meanwhile, the opposite filter color transcends any apparent discrepancy. When Veronica receives the mysterious phone call, we see a reenactment of Veronica's death, a blurred image of an amorphous body through reddish-brown light or liquid, the contrasting hues heightening the viewer's impression.

Overall, even though the cinematography is merely bland shots of the environment and close-ups of the characters, this large swathe of white space gives the viewer room for deeper contemplation in the interplay of the dual narrative structure.

Characterization. The two female protagonists are set up as typical young girls, vibrant and energetic. However, this seemingly ordinary and classic image is profound because of the consistency in the story setting. As ordinary people, the two Veronicas are both sexualized and de-sexualized. They are sexually active, yet their truly intense ecstasy comes in the context of non-sexuality. Whether it's the joy of being in the rain or the pleasure of waking up after a reading, the social constructs are nevertheless pregnant with the purest sense of girliness.

On the other hand, the father figure in the movie embodies the authority possessed by the older male, thus restricting and even manipulating the lives of the two female protagonists.

Core theme. The film is characterized by an uncertain realism that aims to give the viewer a sense of intimacy. The expression of the theme exists as a feeling. It wants to show the audience that "trying to explain what happened and the logic behind it" is meaningless through the two female protagonists' exploration of life, and thus lead the audience to think about their own lives.

Carol (2015)

Story setting. This movie represents the film queer theory in its narrative way. Carol's story is set in mid-fifties America, about the emotional link between a wealthy married woman and a young girl and their journey to identity. Haynes is a compassionate filmmaker. He knows the story from the inside and understands what it meant to be queer in the 1950s when people with this "nature" could lose their children and jobs. Bohemia barely tolerated them, let alone the upper-class culture from which Hager was born. The country-city, rich-poor, heterosexual-cool dichotomy marks this movie everywhere. Even Carol and Theresa are divided by their differences, contributing to their chemistry and desire.

Shooting analysis. The film was shot with a grainy 16mm lens, evident from the beginning of the movie, even under the credits (a sewer grate that fills the screen with more darkness than light). Film stock to reveal the extreme range of its expressive possibilities. Viewing the film becomes a powerful experience, primarily because it focuses the film's central dramatic element on the composition of the performances and images. Beyond this, the film textures of Carol melt flesh into light, unifying skin and fabric into a relentless churning. These abstract, self-dissolving images are less metaphors for the characters' psychological states than Haynes's view of the agony and ecstasy of romance, his proud and artistic commentary on relationships on screen. Haynes's images depict Theresa and Carol and touch the heart of what happens between them.

The performances of the two actresses convey a warlike, tense control, an emotion that trembles as passion erupts nervously beneath the surface- a surface of behavior, manners, and skin. This results from Haynes's use of Lachmann's grainy images to capture the performance, which gives the illusion of trembling to the actor's dramatized immobility.

The film is most precise in its portrayal of moments of stillness: the camera and the actors don't move, but the images are given an inner movement through the editing and the cinematographic thinking it implies, in scenes where Carol and Theresa are simply facing each other across a table, looking at each other. The overwhelming wave of immersive enthusiasm generated in these moments testifies to a critical point in film theory: the classic pattern of shot and reverse shot, interspersed between characters who are looking at and talking to each other, does not have to be merely a means of securing coverage of a conversational scene, but rather it can be a deliberate compositional device as tense and intricately expression.

The director also shoots scenes from the point of view of a mirror, which, borrowing from screen theory, allows for a mediated and framed relationship between the two female protagonists. At the same time, the emotional expression of the two protagonists in the mirrors connects the viewer's thoughts and guides them to establish the subject in the film's narrative.

The primary visual rhetoric of the film is the image of the obscured figure seen through the glass of car and apartment windows, which are splattered with raindrops, reflecting the light of the sky and the reflections of street lamps, darkened by fog and hazy by condensation. Because the figures are hidden behind these complex tricks of ordinary optics, their view of the world looking outward is similarly obscured. The image of Carol wraps the two women in a visual envelope that brings them closer together because it separates them from all others and everyone else.

Haynes' movie invokes all the metaphors of Hayes' code-era films. Based on the way that lesbian expression is referred to indirectly, he chooses to use old referents to cut through to express desire between lesbians. For example, one shot of the movie utilizes a portrait of desire revealed by a look between the female protagonists, a meaning-filled gesture, and a small piece of dialogue that creates sexual innuendo and need between the women. Haynes lets the camera linger on how Carol and Theresa look at each other. Their shots are sometimes wordless, but how these two actors communicate with their bodies and faces is compelling. Haynes outlines the scene through a door or window, squinting at Carol and Theresa as if he (and the audience) can only see them through the lens of the dominant culture, distorted until they are entirely together. His camera follows the narrative, moving closer and placing them entirely together in two photographs as they become physically closer.

Characterization. Carol's setting in the movie is wild. She's rich, full of maturity, boldly flirting with her loved one, oblivious to what her family and the outside world think of her. However, her only concern is for her daughter, who still embodies a solid maternal light. But Carol is a paradox: she possesses a primal vulnerability but resists denying her desires and packages herself as powerful and unapproachable to protect her instincts.

Theresa can be described as Carol's opposite. She is young, gentle, and filled with the youthful innocence of a newcomer to society. Theresa's world has been filled with obedience for so long that Carol appears like a stone thrown into a lake, bringing her into a new world. Interestingly, Theresa is a photographer, a familiar figure in lesbian narratives (many of the characters in early lesbian theater were photographers, from Jane Chamber's heroine in *Typical Image* to many others). Haynes kept his films from the male gaze, and Theresa sees Carol only through her lens as part of shaping her own story.

There is another characterization in the movie: Carol's husband. He is well aware of Carol's awakening to her sexuality, yet still stubbornly holds on to the marriage, even going so far as to threaten Carol with compromise by demanding her daughter. In the context of the time, his approach is more about protecting his face and defending himself against multiple discourses of superiority, such as being a "rich, heterosexual white man," than about his love for Carol. His tense emotional connection with Carol is also a profound reflection of the rigidity of the gender system in American society in the 1950s.

Core theme. The movie focuses on the pure love between the two heroines. The director's portrayal of life and revelations about people further emphasize the clear, brutal, institutional, and unjust barriers that sexual minorities face in their pursuit of love. Therefore, the film wants to express the sublime of the ordinary. While satirizing the social environment, the law, and the construction of morality that turns shared love between people of the same sex into an act of bravery and defiance, it emphasizes the connection between oppression and injustice. It issues an appeal to the powerlessness of social reality.

Ammonite (2020)

Story setting. Set in the 1840s and based on the true story of a paleontologist from England, *The Ammonite* tells the story of Mary, a strong, independent, isolated woman, and Charlotte, a young, gentle woman who grows to love each other. The movie is relatively small in scope and is more about the heartfelt connection between two women who lead strikingly different lives. Rather than portraying the intense ambivalence of social opinion towards homosexual love outside of marriage, the movie focuses more on depicting the emotional changes between the two female protagonists, thus reflecting the purity of love between the queer. The most realistic part of the entire movie's plot is its ending setting. Frances Lee's choice of abandoning the colorful ending full of tragedy, realistically revealing the innate differences between women, and choosing to let one of the female protagonists make the decision of love by herself is remarkable in its own right.

Shooting analysis. The movie's first few scenes are tranquil, slow-moving, and almost dialogue-free. In the second half, the camera focuses on the love scene between the two women. It presents the audience with a very realistic portrayal of sex that is so authentic, honest, realistic, and empathetic that it avoids the longstanding visualization and objectification of "lesbian sex." Francis Lee's raw, visual narrative style creates a strong sense of physicality throughout the film, and his camera focuses on Mary's hands in particular, showing viewers unimaginable roughness, a way of life constructed by manual labor.

Characterization. The characterizations of Mary and Charlotte contain strong contrasts, with one being a withdrawn but intelligent paleontologist and the other a gentle, young wife. However, these two seemingly disparate individuals share a strong bond of souls; before they meet, they are full on the outside but lonely on the inside.

Core theme. In addition to focusing on the intimate and quiet emotional relationships between the queer, the movie makes essential points about the intellectual achievements of women and the way they have been historically ignored and even erased by men. In the film, some of Mary's most striking discoveries are displayed in museums under a man's name in recognition that women have often been denied the honor of their work. In addition to this, the various contradictory points set up in the movie portray the plight of sexual minorities in society and the social phenomenon of gender inequality. Most importantly, Lee's work emphasizes women's sense of self as individuals in the community. The real reason that threatens Mary and Charlotte from the beginning to the end is Mary's self-control over letting others into her carefully managed life. She realizes the independence of the subject by strongly considering the future between herself and Charlotte. Through this movie, Frances Lee wants to express the importance of "connection," the director's vision of a woman free to make her own choices in the Victorian era.

4.3.2. Analysis from gender perspective (Comparative analysis of the three films)

LGBTQ Situation

In two of the three films studied, the theme focuses on the emotional development between the two female protagonists. In fact, throughout the double female lead films, most of the articles of the movie revolve around the love between women. There is a clear class gap between the female protagonists in *Carol* and *Ammonite*, yet the passionate desire for love still rises. The directors want to express the same: the multiple factors under the social construction, class, race, gender, and other seemingly unbridgeable boundaries should be discarded in the face of true love, and therefore, the emotional pursuit of LGBTQ people needs to be respected and recognized by the public.

Female Power

All three films reflect the unique power of women in one way or another. Whether it is Mary's talent in paleontology and Charlotte's meticulous observations in geology in *Ammonite*, the rich and powerful melody and the gentle but tough-minded photographer Theresa in *Carol*, the soft voices of the two Veronicas in *The double life of Veronique* and their excellent dancing figures, these are the appearance of the power of women in different fields. In addition, the main female characters in these films ultimately adhere to their own choices when encountering either setbacks in life or emotional obstacles. Instead of focusing all the plot honors on men, the double-female film genre chooses to highlight the unique flashes of different women, which is an essential reflection of the progress of gender in the film industry.

The Relationship between Male and Female

The three films chosen have one thing in common: their female protagonists all have regular heterosexual mates, but the characterizations of the three films are very different. In *Ammonite*, the male characters appear for two purposes: one is to reflect the state of gender inequality in society, and the other is to promote the love life of the two female leads. In *Carol*, the original

partner of Carol is a classic bourgeois affluent white man, which vividly portrays the living conditions of the privileged people in America in the fifties, contrasting with the social problems of the sexual minorities and the poor class. In Veronique's double life, the male characters' existence plays a role in facilitating the female protagonist's exploration of her perception. Therefore, there is no apparent consistency in the embodiment of male-female relationships in the double female lead films.

5. Limitations

Due to the richness of theories and perspectives covered by the film industry, the analytical methods used in this study are not sufficiently comprehensive. In addition, due to the sheer number of films with two female leads, the three examples chosen for this study are not representative of the genre. Lastly, because cinema is a highly subjective and perceptive work, although the author has tried to be objective in the analysis process, there may still be some biased results.

Based on the above limitations, the author will choose a more significant number of works, skillfully apply various film theories, and ask for the opinions of more moviegoers to compare and analyze the rich expressions of the dual female lead genre in the subsequent research process.

6. Conclusion

By analyzing three films, *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), *Carol* (2015), and *Ammonite* (2020), the author found that dual-female-themed films have begun to reflect a richer portrayal of women's strengths, the needs of the LGBTQ population, and the emotional links between the genders, through the thematic settings, characterizations, and even character dialogues, thus showing women's thinking and growth.

Although there are differences in the narrative angles, shooting techniques, and creative intentions of different directors in making films with two female leads, almost all of them ultimately open up the audience's perception of sexual minorities, thus playing a profound role in promoting the transformation of gender awareness.

In short, a male perspective no longer dominates the film industry, and the needs of more women and sexual minorities are being expressed - the film has become a more prosperous and more advanced form of cognitive expression, which to a certain extent reflects and even influences the advancement of gender consciousness in the West.

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