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Introduction: Background Context for Research

Romantic love has been, and continues to be, the subject of diverse discussions in a variety of realms, including but not limited to, philosophy, psychology and anthropology. Despite the depth and range of such discussions, as a concept, romantic love remains an enigmatic phenomenon. Love may be knowable and comprehensible to others, as understood in the phrases, "I am in love", "I love you", but it is often felt, most notably by the humanities academic community, that what "love" means in these sentences cannot be analyzed further (Moseley n.pag.). This is because the concept of "love" is perceived to be irreducible; an axiomatic, or self-evident, state of affairs that warrants no further intellectual intrusion. In attempting to define love therefore, we stumble across the philosophical questions of how we may know love, how we may understand it and whether it is possible or plausible to make statements about being in love if love is purely an emotional condition. In light of these concerns it is necessary to assert that there is a difference between the claim that love cannot be examined and the claim that it should not be subject to examination out of a sense of reverence for its mysteriousness, its awesome, divine, or romantic nature (Moseley n.pag.).

It is the former perspective that has stunted a critical analysis of the manner in which love is defined and experienced within Western contemporary society. Romantic love is perceived to be a purely neutral phenomenon, when in fact, it is largely constituted through social forces (Wexman 5). It must be noted however, that an ideological perspective of romantic love is largely limited to disciplines within the humanities. Biological and psychological disciplines have conducted

extensive research on the nature and experience of romantic love. Thus, when attempting to delineate the manner in which the experience of romantic love is socially constructed it is necessary to unpack the notion of love as discourse (Pettman 20). Whether the phenomenon is labeled romance, love, lust, affection, passion, intimacy, eroticism, longing, dependence, desire, or obsession it is clear that we are dealing with a discursive constellation (Pettman 20). Romantic love is constituted through discourse, embedded in the different cultural and historical genealogies of that-which-is-called-love. Hence one of the key questions that arises is: "how can we best think the link between love and textuality?"

In an attempt to investigate this link it is necessary to pay attention to the ways in which narratives about romantic love places us, interpellates us, and projects us in to the libidinal economy. "Love" circulates in our thoughts and our texts. The lover's discourse reveals the willful habit of organizing events according to a specific narrative logic. Questions such as "does she love me?" "Is he sincere when he says that?" is an indication that the lover is locating him or herself in the structure of a love *story*. The lover acts according to the code and uses the narrative as a means of assessing his or her own personal value (Pettman 27).

Roland Barthes sums up the phenomenon of inserting oneself in to constructed narratives with the concept of the "image-repertoire" (Pettman 20). The image repertoire precedes us and this is a fact which led La Rochefoucauld to say, "People would never fall in love if they had not been told about it" (Pettman 20). The image repertoire is the discursive legacy of love stories which we have imbibed and internalized since we were children often through movies but also through

literature, gossip, fairytales and so on. The image repertoire can be considered the world data bank of images of love, with which we construct our own imaginative mise-en-scenes (Pettman 20).

Culturally, contemporary western society organizes itself around the social rituals embodied in the mass media (Wexman 3). For more than a century, Hollywood film has constructed narratives about love. As traditional modes of transmitting values have increasingly declined within contemporary society the narratives contained within these films are instrumental in modeling cultural norms pertaining to love (Wexman 4). Audience members empathize with the visible human presences that movies set before them. The roles enacted by Hollywood stars function as romantic ideals that serve to define and demonstrate socially desirable and undesirable ways of loving (Wexman 1). As Turner illustrates: "When we act in everyday life we do not merely re-act to indicative stimuli, we act in frames we have wrested from the genres of cultural performance" (Wexman 4). This research is therefore primarily concerned with an investigation of how filmic narratives shape and construct ideologies of romantic love.

Purpose Statement

The following research seeks to interrogate the ideologies perpetuated by romantic comedies of the neo-traditional period, that encompass the 1980's to the present, in order to investigate the ways in which such ideologies are instrumental in the creation and maintenance of societal ideals of romantic love. This analysis is

therefore limited to the conventions of mainstream Hollywood cinema featuring English language films and a heteronormative structure.

An interrogation into romantic love is a necessary and valid field of inquiry. It is through the experience of love that people give themselves over to intensely moving experiences. These experiences enable one to achieve a new awareness of the self and others (Smelser 120). As centuries of literature, poetry, song and cinema can attest to, experiences of romantic love can make possible periods of crystallization wherein one makes decisions about what is most important to them. The experience of romantic love inevitably leads to a reformulation of the self and the self's relationship to the world (Smelser 120). It is therefore necessary to interrogate ideologies about love because such beliefs permeate people's hopes for themselves, their evaluations of experiences, and their sense of achievement in the world (Smelser 121).

Research Questions

1. What ideologies are the narratives of neo-traditional romantic comedies instrumental in creating and perpetuating?
2. What truths about romantic love are these ideologies instrumental in creating?

Literature Review

This research seeks to delineate what discourses about romantic love are created through the consistent narratives of the neo-traditional romantic comedy. Concentrating specifically on mainstream films, the following research deals solely

with the portrayal of heterosexual relationships. I recognize that there is a body of gay and lesbian neo-traditional romantic comedies but including them in the forthcoming analysis is beyond the scope of this research. The literature review will therefore provide a foundation for the analysis by expounding upon the multifaceted nature of the following:

- i. Romantic love in contemporary Western society. The literature review will interrogate questions such as: why is a process of definition difficult in the case of romantic love? How has romantic love evolved in to current form? What are the factors involved/instrumental in the development of romantic love? How is romantic love defined in contemporary western society?
- ii. The romantic comedy. How is the romantic comedy defined? What are the elements that comprise the genre of the romantic comedy? What is specific about the romantic comedies': narrative and plot, characters, visual style and iconography? What is the history of the romantic comedy? How is each subgenre defined?
- iii. The neo-traditional romantic comedy. How is the neo-traditional romantic comedy defined? What elements comprise the social context of the neo-traditional romantic comedy?

Romantic Love In Contemporary Western Society

In an attempt to delineate what truths about romantic love are created through the narratives in the neo-traditional comedy it is first necessary to outline the ways in which romantic love is understood and defined in contemporary

Western society. Any attempt to define the nature of romantic love assumes that love does indeed have a "nature," a proposition that may be opposed on numerous grounds. Epistemologists would argue that the epistemology of love is intimately connected to the philosophy of language and theories of emotions (Moseley n.pag.). If love is purely an emotional condition, it is plausible to argue that it remains a private phenomenon incapable of being accessed by others, except through an expression of language. Which is in itself is a flawed indicator as language may not be wholly capable of conveying ones true emotional state for both the listener and the subject.

Emotivists and Phenomenologists would hold that a statement such as "I am in love" is irreducible to other statements because it is a nonpropositional utterance, thus its veracity is beyond examination (Moseley n.pag.). It is possible to assert however, that love is synonymous with certain patterns of behavior, inflections in the voice or manner, and/or through the pursuit and protection of a particular value (Moseley n.pag.). Thus, if love does indeed possesses a nature that is identifiable by some discernible pattern of behavior it can still be asked whether that nature can be defined.

In modern Western societies, couple relationships almost always come in to being through a more or less powerful experience of emotional bonding infused with erotic attraction. Romantic or passionate love has become the basis of domestic and social life as couple relationships are invested with an unprecedented range of meanings. Engaging in a romantic relationship fulfills ones desires for: personal identity, emotional fulfillment, sexual satisfaction and existential security (Langford

1). While “falling in love” remains something of a mystery it is generally understood and experienced as a beneficial and foundational life event. Everything it seems begins when we fall in love and everything it seems depends upon the quality and durability of the resulting emotional attachment. To love romantically and to have such love reciprocated is seen as the means to an ideal end because it enables one to ultimately acquire a form of self-completion (Fung 110).

Romantic love, in its current form, is neither a static nor universal phenomenon and its specificity therefore requires further interrogation. Cultural historians generally agree that the emphasis on romantic love and its association with personal fulfillment first took hold in the 19th century as part of the romantic cult of individualism (Lindholm 15). Prior to the 19th century, romantic love was regarded pejoratively and characterized as an uncontrollable impulse that corrupted individuals and caused them to ignore expectations tied to gender and class (Lindholm 15). According to Rothman (12) in the middle decades of the 19th century romance lost its negative connotations and emerged as an acceptable basis for intimacy between women and men. “Romance was no longer seen as a threat to domestic harmony, rather it was increasingly being viewed as the key to ensuring it” (Lindholm 12). As romantic love became something to celebrate rather than mistrust, “falling in love” became an increasingly normative part of courtship.

Romantic love therefore arises in epochs and cultures where self-identity is subject to debate because traditional roles and relationships are no longer instrumental in the process of identity definition. Such epochs and cultures are defined as risk societies (Lindholm 10). A risk society presumably liberates

individuals from the restraints imposed by kinship, social status and religion but does not serve to offer any alternative points of security. Romantic love can thus be seen as coinciding with the advent of leisure culture, where self-cultivation is not only possible but encouraged. In this context, the romantic dream of bonding to an idealized and unique beloved is understood to serve as a substitute for outmoded loci for identity, offering an experience of self-transformation, personal choice, a meaningful future and sensual expansion (Lindholm 12).

Furthermore, the language of love is consistently spoken at the emotional level raising the question of how the articulation of new romantic codes came to involve such an intense and significant focusing of emotional and sexual energies (Langford 2). Weber argues that erotic love in its modern form came in to being largely as a result of religious change, precipitated in particular by the influence of puritan salvationism. The puritan salvation ethic centered on brotherly love which was universalistic, self-abnegating and valued the community over individual ties (Langford 2). Despite these admirable qualities however, puritan salvationism also involved an overly formal, regulatory, instrumental and sexually repressive approach to everyday life. The rigidity of this structure ultimately served to undermine spirituality as it left individuals with a lack of autonomy and thus meaning in their lives (Langford 3). Weber argued that this over-rationalization led to a reactive eruption of eroticism which took an oppositional form to brotherly love. "The desire to please others and serve God gave way to individualism and self-indulgence, and the quest for spiritual salvation became a search for self-realization

through an irrational, fatalistic, exclusive and erotically charged fusion of souls” (Langford 3).

The explicit sexualization of love however, did not occur until the 20th century. Classified as an intimate culture, sexual attraction increasingly came to be interpreted as a sign of love. In a social context where unifying forces such as kinship, patriarchy and economic dependency were losing their defining power sustained sexual longing and satisfaction came to be the marker of intimate solidarity (Langford 4). This is not to say that couple relationships are no longer structured by economic, religious and social ties but that it is the emotional attachment between sexual partners, formed through falling in love, that has increasingly come to be understood as the basis of the relationship. This is reflected in the changing divorce laws of North America: the advent of a no fault divorce allows a lack of love alone to be a sufficient reason for the dissolution of marriage (Kayser 4). The very meaning of marriage has shifted, once considered a binding contract it can now largely be considered an optional and soluble sign of commitment to someone with whom one has fallen in love (Kayser 4).

As the love bond has become the priority in relation to coupledness, so the couple has become the focus of a greater range of needs and desires. The couple is not only valued for sexual fulfillment and spiritual meaning but for identity, self-expression, companionship and emotional security (Langford 4). Berger and Kellner (19) for example, argue that the ideologies of self-discovery and self-realization through romantic love and sexual expression have come in to being to encourage individuals to enter in to marriage “as a protection against anomie for the

individual.” It is therefore believed that through an ongoing engagement in a romantic relationship the partners discover: “themselves,” “who they really are,” “what they really believe” and “how they really feel” (Berger and Kellner 23). This process of identity construction gives the partners a sense of stability and helps to assuage the existential anxiety that accompanies the somewhat isolated life in the modern world (Langford 3).

It is possible therefore, to see that love does not exist in a fixed or unchanging form. Various historical social processes have contributed to the collective notion that romantic love, as expressed through an attachment to an object of desire is an exalted tendency. The bond created through coupledness is endowed with the power to satisfy an extensive range of human needs and personal wishes. Yet despite the crucial place of romantic love, attempts to realize the new romantic ideal, and their failures, remain little studied and less understood. “Love” remains ill defined, assumed rather than explained, seeming to reflect rather than elucidate a lived experience of something mysterious and impenetrable (Langford 4). An analysis of the multi-faceted nature of romantic love illustrates that the romantic comedy as a genre both reflects and is defined by its societal conceptions of romantic love.

The Romantic Comedy Defined

The romantic comedy has proven to be one of the most enduring cinematic genres. Despite undergoing highs and lows in terms of its popularity throughout the years it has proved to be perennially resilient (Mortimer 1). If box office success is

used as an indicator of popularity it is clear that audiences still enjoy the predictable narrative and plot of the romantic comedy with all of its traditional twists and turns. Since the 1930's, every year has seen the release of new romantic comedies. According to Mortimer (1) "We want to see the same characters, the same situations, the same narrative trajectory, the same setting and dialogue with new stars that speak to new generations yet tell the same story."

Attempts to define the romantic comedy can be problematic, as its main elements are present in most films. Romance and comedy, to a greater or lesser extent are narrative staples in most genre films (Mortimer 2). An American Film Institute 2008 poll defined a romantic comedy as "a genre in which the development of romance leads to comic situations" (Grindon 1). The romantic comedy is therefore recognizable as a hybrid of the romance and comedy genres. Romance because the narratives focus primarily on the initiation and progress of a romantic relationship and comedy because the narrative action is continually punctuated by humorous action and dialogue. The dynamic of the romantic comedy ultimately rests on the central quest, the pursuit of love, and almost always leads to a successful resolution (Mortimer 2).

Film scholars explain that the romantic comedy is a process of orientation, conventions and expectations (Grindon 1). The film industry orients audience members through the titles of the films, advertising, publicity, and by casting stars identified with the genre. Filmmakers adapt conventions from successful films in the genre while simultaneously adding new elements to maintain a contemporary relevance (Grindon 2). Fans select romantic comedies as entertainment to witness

the ways in which their expectations are fulfilled in new and creative ways.

Romantic comedies create a comic climate through a series of cues to the audience: subject matter is treated as trivial, jokes and physical humor make fun of events and characters are protected from harm (Grindon 2). Even though the drama poses serious predicaments, such as choosing a life partner, the process appears lighthearted. Ultimately, the self-deprecating stance of romantic comedies signals the audience to relax and have fun for nothing serious will disturb their pleasure (Grindon 2).

The Elements that Compose the Genre

A romantic comedy has a distinctive heteronormative narrative structure: man meets woman, various obstacles prevent them from being together, coincidences and complications ensue, ultimately leading to the couple's realization that they are meant for each other (Mortimer 4). The narrative concludes with a happy ending signified by the final union of the couple. The dominant theme is the battle of the sexes, which provides the central dynamic of the genre. The narrative hinges around the central couple, who initially are antagonistic towards each other, but who come to recognize their inescapable compatibility in the face of great adversity and often, mutual loathing. Their incompatibility may arise from social status, wealth, conflicting lifestyles, attitudes, or even differing expectations of relationships (Mortimer 4).

Narrative and Plot

The romantic comedy tends to rest on tried and true formulas that can be summed up as follows. One form is the comedy of remarriage: this narrative sees the couple as separated in the initial stages only to be reunited by the end of the film after discovering that they still love each other. Examples include: *His Girl Friday* (1940), *Adam's Rib* (1949) and *Sex and the City* (2008). A second form is love at first sight: the couple fall in love at their very first meeting but are unable to be together due to factors beyond their control. Examples include: *Pretty Woman* (1990) and *The Wedding Planner* (2001). A third significant model is that of unrequited love: One half of the couple realizes their love for the other early on but the other half is slow to recognize and return their love. One or both partners typically have to lose the wrong partner in order to be ready for the right love. Examples include: *My Man Godfrey* (1936), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and *27 Dresses* (2008). The last narrative tendency is that of dispute. The couple that is antagonistic towards each other at the start of the film come to recognize their love for each other as a result of various misunderstandings and complications. This is a fundamental model for many romantic comedies such as: *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Pillow Talk* (1959) and *How To Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003).

The narrative will be composed of a sequence of situations that the audience will recognize. A typical romantic comedy will feature mistaken identity, disguise and masquerade, intimate meals, public humiliation, confiding in friends and the meet-cute (Mortimer 4). The meet-cute is when the couple first encounters each other generally in comic and prophetic circumstances and is one of the defining

moments of the romantic comedies. The situation is used to introduce the two central characters bringing their conflicting personalities in to comic collision and initiating the narrative dynamic. All of these variations have a common impetus towards a happy ending. The audience will approach the film with the expectation that the couple will come together, happily, at the end. They can enjoy the journey towards this goal, within the reassurance provided by the very predictability of the plot. The formulaic nature of the genre is often at the heart of the pleasures experienced by the audience.

Characters

The central couple is characterized by a paradox; they are objects of desire yet they remain incomplete until they are united with each other and experience the transformative power of romantic love. The couple, consisting of the male and female protagonists, typically demonstrate conflicting character traits that create an initial antagonism between them and this conflict serves to drive the narrative.

Through the course of the film, these traits come become an asset to each member of the couple by helping them attain: greater self-knowledge, fulfillment and happiness (Mortimer 7). In terms of appearance, the male and female protagonists offer an image of gender perfection to the audience that is often enhanced by the star persona of the actor (Mortimer 7).

Stock characters play a key role in the narrative of the romantic comedy. The first of these are the initial romantic partners of the male and female protagonists who are rejected in favor of their true love (Mortimer 8). The stock characters

exemplify undesirable attributes or traits that help to emphasize the compatibility of the protagonist couple. Best friends to the protagonists also play a crucial role. The best friend is a source of advice, someone who comments on the relationship, and someone who is a repository for the confidences of the couple. The necessity of the best friend in the romantic comedy has been a phenomenon of the romantic comedy since the Woody Allen films of the late 1970's. According to McDonald, this trend suggests the increased emphasis on friendship as a mechanism for filling the void left by fragmented families and communities in the modern world (Mortimer 8). In addition to the best friend the neo-traditional romantic comedy (1980's to the present) surrounds a central character with a family of friends. Films such as *Notting Hill* (1999) and *Bridget Jones* (2001) use this device to provide a comic chorus of characters who not only provide a commentary on the central characters' love life but also represent an extension of their personality thereby endorsing the protagonists' popularity through the affection they inspire (Mortimer 8).

Family members are noticeably absent from the narrative of the neo-traditional romantic comedy. This is largely because the best friends fulfill what would otherwise be familial roles providing love, guidance and support. When family members are included it is typically to add a problematic dimension as their presence signifies complications and oppositions to the romantic relationship. Parents, particularly fathers, represent the established order. Their reasoned judgment serves as a counterpoint to the instinctual passion of the lovers within the romantic comedy (Grindon 4). The older generation calls on social tradition and the bonds of family to guide impetuous youth toward a proper and stable union. The

couples in romantic comedies however, are guided by attraction and the force of their feeling (Grindon 4).

Rather than portraying subservience and respect to older generations the romantic comedy prefers to mock fathers or mothers as rigid tyrants who stand in the way of change. The neo-traditional romantic comedy, the current form of the genre, still finds this convention compelling. In *Meet The Parents* (2000) Greg Focker (Ben Stiller) must endure the torments of his girlfriend's family before he can propose to his girlfriend. In *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) Toula Portokalos (Nia Vardalos) must cope with her father's ethnic pride in their Greek heritage when she introduces her Anglo Saxon fiancée (Grindon 4). Romantic comedy expresses its subversive stance through the recognition that the couple will be reunited at the end of the film despite the protests of parental figures. Furthermore, this tendency is complimented by the eventual reconciliation of the feuding parties and the creation of a new family (Grindon 4).

Visual Style and Iconography:

A key area of genre analysis is the identification of the visual imagery, the iconography that characterizes the genre (Mortimer 9). The romantic comedy is not as immediately recognizable in this respect as are some other genres. These include the western and the gangster film for example. These latter genres provide a clear genre specific setting as is exemplified by the setting, props and costume. The romantic comedy is more vague in this regard. The recognizable features of the romantic comedy therefore, include urban settings, domestic spaces, desirable

apartments, restaurants and numerous other social spaces (Mortimer 9). Moreover, it is important to note that the romantic comedy requires a setting in which the pair have the luxury to be together. The natural setting for this is a flexible environment whereby the protagonists have the freedom to act upon their whims, where work can be postponed without fear of loss and where there are no individuals who are deeply dependent on either the male or female protagonists.

The History of the Romantic Comedy

Specific phases have been identified in the evolution of the romantic comedy. These different phases of the genre reflect the social, economic, and institutional climate of the time, yet the generic formula is clearly identifiable (Mortimer 10). The screwball comedy has its origins in the marital comedies of the 1910's and 1920's. Exemplified by the films of Cecil B. De Mille, the screwball romantic comedy placed a warring couple in the centre of the narrative. The couple was then responsible for the madcap escapades, chaos, slapstick and witty fast paced dialogue that marked the progress of their explosive relationship (Mortimer 11). The film also served to reaffirm the intrinsic value of romance and marriage and this reaffirmation exemplified a new conservatism signaled by traditional gender roles and an emphasis on family values.

The social context of the screwball comedy is key in understanding its appeal, its representations and its themes. America was in the midst of the Great Depression and as a result the vast majority of the population was suffering from enormous privation and economic misery (Mortimer 11). The screwball comedy

offered energy, fun, playfulness, and a world where despite the overt presence of chaos it resulted in happiness and hope for its male protagonist and female protagonist. Thus the screwball comedy offered an exhilarating sense of escapism and optimism for the audience who craved the presence of a happy ending.

The Sex Comedy

The romantic comedy lost its impetus from the 1940's until the mid 1950's. When it re-emerged it signaled a greater emphasis on the importance of female desire and sexual pleasure seen in films such as *The Tender Trap* (1955) and *Pillow Talk* (1959). In the same manner as the screwball comedy, the sex comedy mirrored the social context of the time in which it was produced. The 1960's was marked by the sexual revolution which included: the introduction of the Pill, the publication of the Kinsey reports as well as a challenging of traditional, conservative values and a movement towards hedonism and liberal values (Mortimer 148). All of these changes were symptomatic of the changes in attitudes towards sex. The romantic comedies of this era revolved around the narrative of both the man and the woman wanting sex. The woman however, would not have sex unless she was married and the idea of marriage for a man was unappealing because it was perceived as a threat to his freedom (Mortimer 17). The crucial difference between the sex comedy and the screwball comedy then was that romance and courtship became increasingly displaced by an emphasis on sex and seduction (Mortimer 17).

The Radical Romantic Comedy

The radical romantic comedy is most exemplified by the films of Woody Allen such as *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Manhattan* (1979). These films reflected the angst and world-weariness of the period. Within the radical romantic comedy there is no longer any certainty about relationships and identity, and happy endings are rejected in favor of greater realism (Mortimer 19). Typically these films do not offer easy pleasures for mass audiences as they constantly refer to art works, obscure films and psychoanalysis. With this, the formula of the romantic comedy is disrupted and ultimately rejected, as the central characters seek to make some sense out of existence and relationships (Mortimer 19). Marriage is no longer an important goal and sex has become a central force in the forging of relationships. Lastly, a powerful sense of nostalgia is evoked as the characters strive to form meaningful and lasting relationships which, in an ephemeral society, have increasingly come to be regarded as mythical and unrealistic (Mortimer 19).

The Neo-Traditional Romantic Comedy

The late 1980's saw a resurgence in the popularity of romantic comedies within mainstream cinema, and this is a popularity which shows little sign of abating (McDonald 85). Films such as *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) and *How To Lose a Guy in Ten Days* (2003) have been labeled as belonging to the neo-traditional romance comedy genre. This is because the neo-traditional romantic comedy represents a return to a notional form of romantic comedy that is assumed to have existed. The works the neo-traditional romantic comedy references however, come

not from the ranks of screwball or sex comedies but from romantic dramas and it is from this type of film that the newer romantic comedy draws its increased emphasis on the importance of one's true love (McDonald 85).

According to McDonald (85), the neo-traditional romantic comedy is not so much a significant subgenre as the dominant current form of the genre. It has defied the roughly decade long supremacy which each of the other types of the romantic comedy enjoyed and has been the major form for nearly twenty years. The neo-traditional romantic comedy is also significant in not representing a forward development or evolution of the previous form. While each manifestation inflected the conventions of the previous subgenre in pursuit of its own preoccupations, the neo-traditional romantic comedy does not take up and twist the concerns of the previous subgenres films. The neo-traditional romantic comedy elects to ignore the films that have ended with lovers apart, or together but possibly only temporarily (McDonald 86). "The neo-traditional romcom reasserts the old boy meets, loses, regains girl structure, emphasizing the couple will be heterosexual, will form a lasting relationship, and that their story will end as soon as they do" (McDonald 86). The new form of the romantic comedy references such ideas as big city alienation, the prevalence of divorce and the inevitability of disappointment, but it does so only to confound them with the perfect romance it then produces for its protagonists (McDonald 86).

Context of the Neo-Traditional Romantic Comedy

The neo-traditional romantic comedy has lasted beyond the usual decade that bracketed the earlier subgenres. Films in the now-dominant form have persisted since the end of the 1980's until the present time, thus spanning over fifteen years, three American Presidencies and their various varying historical and social contexts. These fifteen years have seen the full emergence of the AIDS crisis, the reassertion of "family values" the rise of the religious right and a corresponding emphasis on sexual caution, monogamy and abstinence (McDonald 88).

Despite the different production contexts existing over this period, the films are all incredibly similar to each other, each one following the same narrative trajectory. This is a clear indication that the films are not influenced, either willfully or by accident, by the social context in which they exist. The neo-traditional romantic comedy favors a more generalized, undifferentiated feeling. McDonald (88) speculates that this very obliviousness to contemporary specificities has enabled the neo-traditional romantic comedy to exist for so long. Whereas the previous subgenres were defined by their continual reference to the social context in which they existed, the neo-traditional romantic comedy prefers to reference popular culture and consumer products rather than political or historical events.

The neo-traditional romantic comedy unilaterally aligns itself with the urban milieu. The presence of the city is a warranty for the successful love story. Films that shun the big city, such as *50 First Dates* (2004) and *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002), are both rare and read as rather unconvincing (McDonald 89). The neo-traditional romantic comedy is typically set in New York. Prior to the 1980's, New York was

routinely employed in films across genres as a locale whose idiosyncrasies signaled danger rather than romance. Comedies like *The Out of Towners* (1999) gleefully detailed the miseries that unwary visitors could expect (McDonald 89). The neo-traditional romantic comedy signaled a major change in the cinematic portrayal of New York. No longer a place of crime and alienation, New York has now become the penultimate location for romance. Through a selection of easily recognizable landmarks, the types of buildings, bridges and shops on any tourist's itinerary, the city's mere presence in a romantic comedy acts as a generic guarantee. New York is where romantic love happens across all odds and this includes Cinderella-style cross-class love, blue-collar love, black love and even lesbian love (McDonald 90).

Methodology:

In the 1970's under the influence of French Marxist Louis Althusser, many film scholars practiced ideological criticism (Grindon 77). Ideological criticism is a method that seeks to investigate the textual politics of films with the intention of revealing underlying values. In particular, scholars sought to uncover the false consciousness that exploited viewers for the benefit of the ruling elite. A conviction arose therefore, that genres carried a pre-determined but implicit political significance that either supported or subverted the status quo (Grindon 78). The following analysis seeks to investigate the ideological perspective promoted by the Hollywood genre of the romantic comedy during the neo-traditional period. These ideological perspectives include but are not limited to:

- i. The necessity of a happy ending

- ii. A de-emphasis on the importance of sex
- iii. A female protagonist who is required to make a choice between her career and her love life
- iv. The representation of a romantic relationship as enabling the completion of the self.

The analysis of each one of these perspectives will be organized as an integrative literature review. The integrative literature review is a form of research that reviews, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated (Torraco 356). Literature reviews are an important part of the development of any given field. They offer the opportunity to synthesize and reflect on previous theoretical work, thus providing secure grounding for the advancement of knowledge (Webster and Watson 20).

The integrative literature review is a well-suited method for the purposes of this analysis. This is because the research about romantic love and the neo-traditional romantic comedy has been conducted in a diverse array of academic fields. These academic disciplines include but are not limited to: communications, cultural studies, philosophy and film studies. Despite the fact that the information generated from these fields is continually overlapping they are rarely integrated. This analysis will seek to use the diverse array of research in order to prompt new avenues of inquiry that perhaps would not have been accessible if the analysis was limited to solely one discipline.

Narrative Tendencies of the Neo-Traditional Romantic Comedy and the Ideologies they Produce.

Romantic comedies from classics such as *Trouble In Paradise* (1932) to recent films such as *Friends with Benefits* (2011) have been a cornerstone of Hollywood entertainment since the coming of sound (Grindon 1). In spite of them being popular movies with a long and continuous history of production, romantic comedies have received little critical attention. Shumway (157) tellingly notes the habitual neglect such texts receive: "The love story is so familiar in our culture that we rarely give it a second thought...Boy gets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back is exhibit A of standard plots." Shumway's comment indicates what is perceived by critics to be a basic problem with the Hollywood romantic comedy: the storyline it employs is formulaic and the films are thus an over-familiar product.

These reasons have provided the rationale for the romantic comedy to be overlooked and underappreciated by academics and critics. Ironically, this is this very reason that both warrants and demands further academic inquiry. The romantic comedy has proved to be one of the most enduring cinematic genres. (Mortimer 1). As box office sales consistently illustrate, audiences still enjoy the blueprint of the romantic comedy, with all of its traditional ingredients. As Mortimer (1) indicates audiences' still derive pleasure from the familiar narrative trajectory of the romantic comedy. It should be noted that while the romantic comedy is a genre that is popular with audiences and reproduced within national cinemas around the world, the object of the analysis contained herein is to examine the Western neo-traditional romantic comedy; exploring the conventions of the romantic comedy as

they are established and modulated within mainstream Western cinema (McDonald 3). Sobchak (1)

The following analysis therefore, seeks to dispute the beliefs held by academics and audience members alike. This belief is that romantic comedies simplistic and provide easy and uncomplicated pleasures and are therefore unworthy of greater attention. On the contrary, the romantic comedy is a persistent force in contemporary Western culture. They intimately elucidate the numerous ways in which individuals define, experience and understand romantic love. The effect of romantic comedies on individuals is thus a great deal more involved.

The typical audience member in contemporary Western society inhabits a conflicted position wherein the pulls of realism and fantasy are in constant operation (McDonald 8). Sobchak (1) among numerous other theorists attribute this phenomenon to the prevalent presence of, and sheer saturation with, forms of media. It is not an exaggeration to claim that we are all a part of moving image culture and that we live lives intimately connected to the media. Furthermore, it is not an exaggeration to claim that none of us can escape daily encounters, both direct and indirect, with the phenomena of motion picture technologies and the texts that they produce (Sobchak 2). Consequently, in a socially pervasive, and yet, personal way, these encounters have transformed the population as subjects. That is, these technologies have had an impact upon the ways in which individuals make sense of the various co-ordinates that radically inform and orient social, individual and bodily existences (Sobchak 2). Ultimately, filmic technologies can, and have, altered our perceptual orientation in and toward ourselves, and others (Sobchak 4). Its

cultural pervasiveness comes to inform the manner in which we live our daily lives (Sobchak 4).

According to Galcian (10) we come to know what love is through exposure to media portrayals of love. The mass media disseminate messages that serve to simultaneously inform us, entertain us and persuade us. As Heidegger reminds us: "The essence of technology is nothing technological" (Feenberg 295). That is, technology never comes to its particular material specificity and function in a neutral context for a neutral effect. Rather, it is always historically informed not only by its materiality but also by its political, economic and social context, and thus always co-constitutes and expresses cultural values (Sobchak 4). Correlatively, technology is never merely used, never merely instrumental. It is always also incorporated and lived by the human being who engages with it. Within a cultural structure of meanings and metaphors therefore, subject-object relations are co-operative, co-constitutive dynamic and reversible (Sobchak 7).

It is no accident, for example, that in our largely cinematic culture many human beings describe and understand their bodies in terms of filmic and cinematic portrayals. Several writers have suggested that it is precisely as a story or narrative that "real" love is understood. Pearce and Stacey (12) suggest that the narrativity of romance... crosses the common sense boundaries of "fact and fiction," "representations and lived experience," "fantasy and reality." Stevi Jackson (12), similarly argues that "we can identify with love stories not because they record some pre-existing emotion, but because our cultural tradition supplies us with the narrative forms... through which we can learn what love is." Love may be

compellingly real, but it is nevertheless socially ordered, linguistically mediated and culturally specific. We often enter in to relationships with (unconsciously known) ideal story plots with slots waiting to be filled. So while falling in love may arise upon a certain predisposition, something more than this is required: the articulation of emotion in relation to a particular narrative structure. The following analysis seeks to elucidate the narrative structure of the neo-traditional romantic comedy in order to delineate what ideologies about romantic love are produced.

Ideal Love And The Necessity of a Happy Ending

One of the most prominent features of the neo-traditional romantic comedy is its emphasis on the happy ending, marked by the commitment of love the leading couple make to each other at the film's conclusion. Each subgenre of the romantic comedy is affected by the social context in which it exists and the genre that immediately preceded it. The neo-traditional romantic comedy exemplifies this assertion as it rebels against the ideologies of the radical romantic comedy, while simultaneously seeking to embody its key visual aspects. The radical romantic comedy is defined by a mood of uncertainty pertaining specifically to romantic relationship. The radical romantic comedy favored realism and thus sought to express the inevitable fears and doubts experienced during the courtship process and during a romantic relationship. Conversely, the neo-traditional romantic comedy recycles the visual and musical heritage of the radical romantic comedy, notable through the inevitable use of the cityscape and the inclusion of romantic scores from composers such as Gershwin and Porter, while simultaneously rejecting

the edgier qualities of the radical romantic comedy (McDonald 92). The neo-traditional romantic comedy does not merely ignore the advances in the genre that radical romantic comedies represent: they reject them outright. In the neo-traditional romantic comedy, the willingness to leave a vaguely open ending has totally gone; instead there must be no ambiguity about the reunion of the couple, it must be overtly displayed even if there remain real doubts about their suitability together (McDonald 92).

The creators of neo-traditional romantic comedies seem afraid of the freedom offered by a more open ending and react against this landmark of the radical romantic comedy by presenting the formation of couples despite seemingly insurmountable barriers to their union. These barriers include but are not limited to: geographical (*Sleepless in Seattle* 1993), emotional (*Sweet Home Alabama* 2002), chronological (*Kate and Leopold* 2001), and even mortal (*Just Like Heaven* 2005) (McDonald 91). In rejecting the freedoms offered by the radical romantic comedies' endings, the neo-traditional romantic comedy, as the new form of the genre, reveals societal anxiety over the possibility of lasting love in contemporary society. The guarantee of a happy ending in every neo-traditional romantic comedy seems to betray its own lack of faith in such an outcome (McDonald 90).

Within *How To Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003), Andie (Kate Hudson) and Ben (Mathew McConaughey) enter in to a romantic relationship under false pretenses. Andie pursues Ben as research. She writes the "How To" column for "Composure" magazine and is assigned to write an article on "How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days." Ben is an advertising executive and bets that he can make a woman fall in love with him

in 10 days in order to win a big campaign. Near the end of the film, Andie and Ben develop legitimate feelings for each other but their reunion as a couple is stalled by the revelation that each entered in to the relationship with ulterior motives. Even though they have deceived each other for the vast majority of their relationship and Andie receives a job offer in another state more aligned with her writing goals, the couple reconciles before the end of the film. Ben chases Andie's taxi as she leaves the city catching up with her on the Manhattan Bridge. Andie insists she wants to leave but Ben invoking a game they played earlier exclaims "Bullshit!" And with this sweeping romantic gesture, the pair forget all previous deceit and future goals and are reunited as a happy couple.

The reunion of the couple at the culmination of each neo-traditional romantic comedy signifies to the audience that love can conquer all. In so doing, audience members are thoroughly acquainted with what can adequately be called the mantra of the neo-traditional romantic comedy. The neo-traditional romantic comedy has the ability to censor any real world pressures that pose a threat to the vitality of the relationship. In the narratives of the romantic comedy, work can be postponed without fear of loss, a lack of funds never serves as a restraint and future plans never conflict with present desires. Furthermore, the characters have the means to perform sweeping gestures of romantic love without a significant fear of consequences (Wexman 115). Within these narratives, differences are easily overcome because romantic love takes precedent over all other concerns.

The happy ending signifies the ideology of ideal love in contemporary Western society. In ideal love, the beloved's value is profound in the sense that the

beloved provides the meaning for the lover's life (Ben-Ze'ev and Goussinsky 7). Moreover, ideal love creates a whole new meaningful world for the couple in love. Hence statements such as: "The world has changed," "everything is different now," "my whole being expands in to unprecedented realms" are common among lovers (Ben-Ze'ev and Goussinsky 7). Ideal love ultimately equates love with life. Identifying love with life gives firm grounds to the overused and highly clichéd notion that all you need is love.

A central feature of ideal love therefore, is its ability to overcome various difficulties. Hollywood films portray genuine love as the culmination of a difficult journey. Love in this sense must be earned or proved often by enduring the pain of separation. It is the struggle that authenticates love as true. "Obstacles become tests that the lovers must endure and successfully pass, for love is proven in the defiance of external forces and constraints, which are merely attempts to shatter it" (Ben-Ze'ev and Goussinsky 7). As the portrayals in romantic comedies illustrate, love can cope with all obstacles, not merely in the sense that it can solve all difficulties, but in the more profound sense that these difficulties even if they continue to exist, are of lesser importance (Ben-Ze'ev and Goussinsky 8).

Claiming that love is all there is to life enhances and thus exaggerates the importance of love. The necessary distinction being that ideal love is not identical to a meaningful life nor is it a sufficient condition for such a life (Ben-Ze'ev and Goussinsky 7). Ideal love is expected to fulfill a whole range of needs such as: psychological support, emotional intimacy, sexual satisfaction, social companionship, intellectual curiosity and spiritual fulfillment (Ben-Ze'ev and

Goussinsky 7). The assumption intrinsic to an ideology of romantic love is that these needs should be fulfilled in the optimal manner by the beloved. Through this process the responsibility for one's individual happiness is displaced on to one's beloved, instituting a relationship of dependence. An ideology of ideal love is thus problematic because it gives no weight to changing personal and contextual features that cause the foundation of a relationship to be uncertain and fragile.

De-emphasis On The Importance Of Sex

The neo-traditional romantic comedy exhibits a markedly different attitude to sex from any of its subgenre forerunners. One of the forerunners was the screwball comedy, a genre that derived much of its energy from erotic tensions between the male and female protagonists (McDonald 93). The 1950's sex comedy took advantage of changes in the production code and in public awareness of female sexuality to discuss sex more overtly. In the 1970's radical romantic comedies made a realistic awareness of the importance of fulfilled sexuality to both partners one of their central tenets (McDonald 93). The current form of the romantic comedy, by contrast, greatly de-emphasizes sexuality. This provides a real problem for the contemporary film since it is frequently devoted to depicting modern dating habits that often include sex. This sense of sexuality being vital to the individual's maturity and growth has vanished from the neo-traditional romantic comedy. Instead of sexual experience being a route to self-discovery, sex is either cast in a pejorative light or sexual abstinence is posited as the responsible choice until the "right" person comes along (McDonald 94).

The neo-traditional romantic comedy can encounter difficulties in trying to reconcile a surface realism about contemporary dating habits and sexual mores with this larger project of insisting that sex is only meaningful within a committed relationship (McDonald 98). *How To Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003), for example, attempts to provide a realistic portrayal by exposing how routinely a dinner date turns in to sexual encounter. However, because Ben's hidden agenda is to make Andie fall in love with him, he holds back from sex assuming that it will be romantic if they abstain in this regard.

Even in *A Lot Like Love* (2005), which more realistically portrays sexual relations there is a distinct hesitance when pointing out the importance of sex in a meaningful romantic relationship. The couple in *A Lot Like Love* (2005) engages in a heady sexual encounter when they first meet and on numerous occasions after that. As the film advances in yearly chapters, the pair come closer together emotionally but attain this closeness at the expense of their sexual relationship (McDonald 98). Though they kiss at the end of the film there is no sense of recapturing their initial sexual delight. Rapturous sex is portrayed as something immature and irresponsible and thus is incapable of comprising the foundation of a meaningful romantic relationship, which the film implies is based more on shared conversation, disappointments and compromises rather than heady physical pleasure (McDonald 98).

The lack of sex within the narratives of neo-traditional romantic comedies serves to emphasize a highly mythologized notion of love for audience members. Mythology, according to Campbell (6), "is a system of images that endows the mind

with a sense of participation in a field of meaning." From a romantic perspective therefore, mythology determines the need for love, rituals and behaviors for obtaining and maintaining love and what forms of love are acceptable within one's culture (Griffin 12). The mythology espoused by neo-traditional romantic comedies stresses a conception of romantic love as more akin to a religious experience wherein the other is a unique, transcendent and transformative being who is capable of transforming and completing one's life.

True romantic love is not motivated by the desire to reproduce, or by sexual desire. The beloved other should be cherished for who they are and not for what they offer. Any calculated appraisal of the other as a potential mate or as a vehicle for sexual enjoyment is therefore conceived of as a sin against the very nature of romantic love (Lindholm 15). According to the philosophy of the neo-traditional romantic comedy, to love for a reason is not to love at all, especially if that reason is sexual enjoyment.

In so doing, the neo-traditional romantic comedy is instrumental in reviving a spiritual ideal of romantic love. The spiritual ideal of romantic love emerged in the Victorian period, 1830-1890 (Jackson and Scott 227). In this regard, romantic love refers primarily to a spiritual affinity and spiritual companionship and is thus thought to comprise a long-lasting and monogamous romantic relationship. Within the spiritual model of romantic love the antagonism between sex and love becomes clear. The power and beneficial qualities of sex is affirmed as an expected and healthy part of a long lasting relationship. Yet, sex is a carnal act; engaging in intercourse prioritizes the physical over the mental and allows for the experience of

unfiltered and often extreme pleasure. Intercourse, therefore, threatens to destroy the spiritual essence of marriage by engulfing it in a sea of lust (Jackson and Scott 227). Through the numerous portrayals of sexual relationships, the neo-traditional romantic comedy urges the desexualization of love and the desensualisation of sex, emphasizing a model of romantic love that places rapturous sex and romantic love as antithetical rather than complimentary.

A Female Protagonist Who Is Required To Make A Choice Or Undergo A Transformation

The neo-traditional romantic comedy is being produced in a post-feminist environment, wherein, the general public takes the successes of the feminist movement for granted (Senda-Cook 18). The product is a society that seems to support feminist tenets while simultaneously oppressing women. The narratives of the neo-traditional romantic comedy appear to advance the tenets of feminism while actually supporting oppressive social structures. The female protagonist is always positioned as beginning the film with a thriving career, but at a decisive point in the narrative she is required to either make a choice between a heterosexual relationship and her career or undergo a personal transformation in order to embody ideal femininity (Senda- Cook 18). In erasing the more radical parts of feminism and retaining the presumption of equality for women, the neo-traditional romantic comedy embodies a post-feminist stance. By perpetuating an ideology of choice and an ideology of transformation the neo-traditional romantic

comedy perpetuates limited choices for women. Moreover, the financial success of these films demonstrates the degree to which this logic remains popular.

The first trend prominent within the narrative of the neo-traditional romantic comedy is that of an ideology of choice. Ultimately, there is a tension in the representations of women who are presented in neo-traditional romantic comedies. The female protagonist of the neo-traditional romantic comedy has not moved on from the representations within generic antecedents. There is a sense of panic in many of the representations of women who are struggling to “have it all.” These women start the film as powerful figures, they work hard and party hard seemingly living in a post-feminist dream. Yet, at a decisive point in the narrative, their values are overturned and it is clear that they can no longer find happiness in their former lifestyle (Mortimer 30). The neo-traditional female protagonist begins the film with a thriving career but is ultimately resituated as a love interest. By the closure of the filmic narrative, when confronted with the decision of whether to remain single and successful or monogamous with a questionable career path, in every case the women choose the latter.

Tess (Katherine Heigl), the female protagonist in *27 Dresses (2008)*, is exemplary in this regard. She is intelligent, a hard worker, and clearly earns a good income from her job. The only apparent downside to her career is that she is in love with her boss, feelings that he is completely unaware of and does not share. Later in the film, she meets Kevin (James Marsden), a charming reporter. Through their relationship Kevin effectively rescues Tess from her Cinderella existence and a life devoted to looking after the needs of others. When she realizes her love for Kevin

she immediately quits her job, the only goal being to be with him. Her existence as an independent working woman is represented as superfluous to her real destiny, to be a bride for the right man (Mortimer 33). Similarly, at the end of the *Wedding Planner* (2001), Mary (Jennifer Lopez) has not only broken the cardinal rule of wedding planning, she has fallen in love with the groom, but she has also acted on it, thus jeopardizing the promotion that she has worked so hard for. Despite this, the climax of the film is not based on a precarious career situation but rather on a precarious romantic situation (Senda-Cook 19): will Mary end up in a relationship with Steve (Matthew McConaughey)?

The second trend displayed within the neo-traditional romantic comedy is that of transformation. Within the narrative of the neo-traditional romantic comedy women who are in a position of power by virtue of their career are perceived as lacking in one essential way: they do not conform to physical ideals of hegemonic femininity. The female protagonist is therefore required to undergo a physical transformation before she can fall in love. Furthermore engaging in a romantic relationship after the transformation is seen as strengthening the female protagonist's career.

Miss Congeniality (2000) provides the most stereotypical representation of a woman in a position of intelligence and power. Gracie (Sandra Bullock) is a police officer who is excellent and passionate about her job. On a sting mission however, she ignores her boss's direct orders and is thus confined to deskwork. Eric (Benjamin Bratt) the lead crewmember of the next mission convinces their boss to let Gracie go undercover in the pageant. This is despite her masculine walk, style of

eating, manner of persuasion, fighting ability and type of dress. Gracie's career success therefore, depends on her ability to feminize herself in every aspect. The audience is shown exactly what this process involves as Gracie is worked on by a manicurist, pedicurist, hairstylist, makeup artist, waxer and is placed in a tanning bed. Furthermore, she is given new clothes, is placed on a limited diet and is taught how walk and behave like a lady. The reward for this new Gracie is symbolized at the end of the film where she not only solves the investigation but also garners the affections of Eric (Senda-Cook 22).

By directly asserting the importance of appearance the neo-traditional romantic comedy suggests that without a heterosexual relationship women are incomplete. These films place the protagonist in positions of professional power, but consistently illuminate upon the feelings of inadequacy that the female protagonist feels. Feelings of loneliness often plague the female protagonist and as a result she starts to question her the value of success. Thus, social and professional successes are predicated on physical and mental transformations. Rhetorically this is important because if the women were changing only their physical appearances, it would be easier to write the films off as outdated or antithetical to feminism (Senda-Cook 21). However, because the women's physical transformations fuel mental transformations such as gaining confidence and grace, the changes can be couched in a larger discourse about becoming a better person rather than one associated with pursuing a man (Senda-Cook 21).

Ultimately, the neo-traditional romantic comedy superficially speaks to the concerns of the modern woman while simultaneously instructing them to ignore the

political implications of choosing a male partner over a career. In neo-traditional romantic comedies, audiences are perpetually confronted with a lead female protagonist who comes to embrace the romantic dream and is whisked off her feet by the right man, realizing that love conquers all. Films (and the arguments they make about an appropriate lifestyle) function enthymematically, relying on the audience to supply a missing piece of the argument (Senda-Cook 18). In this way, the films do not make overt claims; they subtly invite a dominant reading that favors romantic love over a career. Favors is a key word, because neo-traditional romantic comedies do not claim that gaining success in both relationships and work is impossible, but they do subtly contend that one is more important than the other.

The Representation Of A Romantic Relationship As Enabling The Completion Of The Self.

The last feature of neo-traditional romantic comedy under scrutiny is the tendency for the male protagonist and female protagonist to be characterized by a central paradox. They are objects of desire and yet they remain incomplete until they are coupled with a significant other (McDonald 86). When the protagonists initially meet they often demonstrate conflicting character traits. For example: one is a free spirit while the other is a rigorous planner. These conflicts comprise the exposition of the film and are thus used to drive the narrative forward. At a decisive point in the narrative however, the conflicting character traits soon become an aid to the two central protagonists. Their antithetical natures help them attain greater

self-knowledge, fulfillment and happiness. This serves to emphasize the unity of the couple in a world of difference (Pennington 95).

This paradox is definitively illustrated in *You've Got Mail* (1998) a neo-traditional romantic comedy starring Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks. Within the film, Joe (Hanks) is the owner of a large bookstore chain. When he opens a store near Kathleen's (Ryan) small and independent bookstore, it threatens to put her out of business and eventually succeeds in doing so (Mortimer 52). The pair's business relationship is understandably the cause of a great deal of antagonism. Their attitudes towards the function and purpose of a business is used as a platform to highlight their essential differences. Kathleen believes in the power of local businesses to create relationships and a sense of community among patrons, whereas Joe is portrayed as a crass businessman who believes that a business should be run with the sole objective of earning a profit. What the two are unaware of however is that they have been corresponding with each other anonymously over e-mail for quite some time. Online, the advantage of their supremely different natures becomes clear. In this online relationship, advice is offered from alternative perspectives, horizons are broadened and anecdotal stories are shared. The film thus ends with Kathleen and Joe coming together realizing that they have found their complimentary opposite.

According to Johnson (1), within Western contemporary culture, romantic love has supplanted religion as the arena in which men and women seek meaning, transcendence, wholeness and ecstasy. Neo-traditional romantic comedies perpetuate the belief that the ultimate meaning of life can be found in another

human being. The uniqueness of love manifests itself by depicting the two lovers as a single entity and "The lovers form a profound union as if they were two faces of the same coin" (Ben-Ze'ev and Goussinsky 11). When individuals fall in love they believe that they have found the ultimate meaning of life represented in another human being. They feel completed and that they have found the missing part of themselves. This unique feeling of wholeness signifies true love (Ben-Ze'ev and Goussinsky 11). In accordance with the sense of unity in neo-traditional romantic comedies lovers are often described as soul mates and ultimately, fate has a way of bringing couples together who are truly meant for each other. This type of pre-determined connection strengthens the belief in the rightness of the romantic relationship.

It is necessary to note however, that the narrative of the neo-traditional romantic comedy focuses solely on the courting process. Much like traditional fairy tales, the story ends when the two protagonists are established as a loving couple. By completing the narrative at this decisive point the neo-traditional romantic comedy is capable of effectively upholding the ideology of romantic love as equaling self-completion. This ideology is problematic because the constant search for the perfect union or the belief in the existence of such a union is likely to pose a major obstacle to a loving relationship. The neo-traditional romantic comedy emphasizes a perfect union model of love wherein the female protagonist's strengths compensate wholly for the male protagonist's lacks and vice versa. The narrative does not account for the fact that life is dynamic and people regularly change their attitudes and wishes. What can be considered a perfect union at one point in time may not

stand at a latter date. Through the portrayal of the perfect union, the neo-traditional romantic comedy effectively prioritizes self-completion over compatibility in a romantic relationship.

Conclusion

This research sought to interrogate the ideologies perpetuated through the narratives within neo-traditional romantic comedies and furthermore, sought to investigate the manner in which the ideologies of the neo-traditional romantic comedy are instrumental in the creation and maintenance of societal ideals of romantic love. This was accomplished through the literature review and through an analysis of the narrative tendencies of the neo-traditional romantic comedy as expressed in contemporary Western mainstream films.

The purpose of the literature review was to provide a foundation for the forthcoming analysis. This necessitated an interrogation in to the romantic comedy as a genre, a time line of the subgenres within the genre of the romantic comedy, an illustration of the nature of the neo-traditional romantic comedy and an interrogation in to the nature of love in contemporary Western society.

Firstly, my literature review sought to define the romantic comedy genre as a whole. The romantic comedy is a genre in which the development of romance leads to comic situations. The genre is defined through its distinctive heteronormative structure: man meets woman, various obstacles prevent them from being together, complications ensue, and ultimately this leads to the couple's realization that they are meant for each other (Mortimer 4). The narrative concludes with a happy

ending signified by the final union of the couple. The romantic comedy has evolved since its emergence in the 1930's. The different phases of the genre reflect the social, economic and institutional climate of the time in which they were created. The screwball comedy of the 1930's placed a warring couple in the centre of the narrative. The couple was responsible for the madcap escapades that marked the progress of their explosive relationship (Mortimer 11). The film also served to reaffirm the intrinsic value of romance and marriage that exemplified a new conservatism. The sex comedy of the 1960's was defined by a move from the emphasis on courtship with the goal of realizing a romantic relationship towards an emphasis on sex and seduction. The radical romantic comedy of the 1970's rejected happy endings in favor of greater realism, as the main couple in the film are reflexive about their doubts and uncertainties pertaining to romantic love.

The neo-traditional romantic comedy in particular required further investigation not only because of its contemporary relevance but also because it has lasted beyond the usual decade that bracketed the earlier subgenres of the romantic comedy. The neo-traditional romantic comedy is thus the dominant current form of the genre. Beginning in the 1980's and continuing until the present the neo-traditional romantic comedy is defined by its emphasis on conservative and traditional values. It is thus significant in not representing a forward development or evolution of the subgenre that preceded it.

As I also discussed in my literature review, the nature of love in contemporary Western society has become the basis of couple relationships. Individuals describe falling and being in love as a powerful experience of emotional

bonding infused with erotic attraction. Furthermore, to fall romantically in love is seen as a means to an ideal end because it enables one to ultimately acquire a form of self-completion. It is equally important to note that romantic love, in its current form, is neither a static nor universal phenomenon. Various historical social processes have contributed to the collective notion that romantic love, as expressed through an attachment to an object of desire, is an exalted tendency. Yet despite the crucial place and role of romantic love, it has not been subject to rigorous scholarly inquiry and criticism within the social sciences and humanities. This is largely because the concept of “love” is perceived to be irreducible and thus an axiomatic, or self-evident, state of affairs that warrants no further intellectual intrusion. In attempting to define love therefore, academics are stunted by the perception that it is not possible to interrogate romantic love because love is purely an emotional condition.

The analysis component of this research was therefore grounded in a contrary belief: the belief that romantic love is largely socially constructed through the narratives promulgated by the media. For over half a century, Western film has constructed narratives about love. The narratives contained within these films are instrumental in modeling cultural norms pertaining to love (Wexman 4). The roles enacted by Western stars function as romantic ideals that serve to define and demonstrate socially desirable and undesirable ways of loving (Wexman 1). This research was therefore concerned with two primary questions: Firstly, what ideologies are the narratives of neo-traditional romantic comedies instrumental in creating and perpetuating? And secondly, what dominant socio-cultural beliefs about

romantic love are these ideologies instrumental in creating? The narratives under investigation included: the necessity of a happy ending; a de-emphasis on the importance of sex; a female protagonist who is required to make a choice between her career and her love life; and the representation of a romantic relationship as enabling the completion of the self.

The neo-traditional romantic comedy's emphasis on the happy ending is marked by the commitment of love the leading couple make to each other at the film's conclusion. The happy ending illustrates that love can conquer all and this serves to signify the ideology of ideal love in contemporary Western society. In ideal love the beloved provides the meaning for the lover's life essentially legitimizing the highly clichéd notion that all you need is love. A central feature of ideal love therefore, is its ability to overcome various difficulties. Love can cope with all obstacles, not merely in the sense that it can solve all difficulties, but in the more profound sense that these difficulties even if they continue to exist, are of lesser importance (Ben-Ze'ev and Goussinsky 8). Furthermore, ideal love is expected to fulfill a whole range of needs such as: psychological support, emotional intimacy, social companionship and intellectual curiosity (Ben-Ze'ev and Goussinsky 7). Through this process the responsibility for one's individual happiness is displaced on to another, one's beloved, thereby instituting a relationship of dependence. An ideology of ideal love is thus problematic because it gives no weight to changing personal and contextual features that cause the foundation of a relationship to be fragile.

The neo-traditional romantic comedy exhibits a markedly different attitude to sex from any of its subgenre forerunners. The current form of the romantic comedy greatly de-emphasizes sexuality. Instead of sexual experience being a route to self-discovery, sex is either cast in a pejorative light or sexual abstinence is posited as the responsible choice until the "right" partner comes along (McDonald 94). The lack of sex within the narratives of neo-traditional romantic comedy stresses a conception of romantic love as more akin to a religious experience wherein the beloved is a unique, transcendent and transformative being who is capable of transforming and completing one's life. In so doing, the neo-traditional romantic comedy effectively revives a spiritual ideal of romantic love. In this regard, romantic love refers primarily to a spiritual companionship. The unbridled pleasure associated with intercourse is thought to antagonize the presence of a spiritual connection. Ultimately, intercourse threatens to destroy the spiritual essence of marriage or a long-term relationship by engulfing it in a sea of lust (Jackson and Scott 227). Through the numerous portrayals of sexual relationships, the neo-traditional romantic comedy, urges the desexualization of love and the desensualisation of sex, which in turn emphasizes a model of romantic love that places rapturous sex and romantic love as antithetical rather than complimentary.

The neo-traditional romantic comedy portrays the female protagonist as having to make a choice between her career and love or as having to undergo a transformation in order to better conform to an ideal of hegemonic femininity. In the first of these scenarios the neo-traditional protagonist begins the film with a thriving career but is ultimately resituated as a love interest. And as I indicated in

my analysis of these films, when confronted with the decision of whether to remain single while maintaining a thriving career or to choose a relationship that destabilizes their career, the female protagonists continually choose the latter without hesitation. In the second of these scenarios women who are in a position of power by virtue of their career are perceived as lacking in one essential way: they do not conform to physical ideals of hegemonic femininity. The female protagonist is therefore required to undergo a physical transformation before she can fall in love. The neo-traditional romantic comedy suggests that without a heterosexual relationship women are incomplete. Ultimately, the neo-traditional romantic comedy superficially speaks to the concerns of the modern woman while simultaneously instructing her to ignore the political implications of choosing a male partner over a career. The neo-traditional romantic comedy subtly invites a dominant reading that favors romantic love over a career. According to Hall, a dominant reading is when the viewer decodes the message of a film wholly in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded thereby accepting the hegemonic position of the images (Garner 570). "Favors" is therefore a key word, because neo-traditional romantic comedies do not claim that gaining success in both relationships and work is impossible, but they do subtly contend that one is more important than the other.

The last feature of neo-traditional romantic comedy I analyzed was the tendency for the main protagonists to be characterized by a central paradox. They are objects of desire and yet they remain incomplete until they are coupled with a significant other. When the protagonists initially meet they often demonstrate

conflicting character traits. At a decisive point in the narrative their antithetical natures help them attain greater self-knowledge, fulfillment and happiness. Neo-traditional romantic comedies perpetuate the belief that the ultimate meaning of life can be found in another human being. In so doing, the neo-traditional romantic comedy is capable of upholding the ideology of romantic love as equaling self-completion. This ideology is problematic because it encourages the constant search for the perfect union or the belief in the existence of such a union and this search is likely to pose a major obstacle to a "real" loving relationship. The neo-traditional romantic comedy emphasizes a perfect union model of love wherein the female protagonist's strengths compensate wholly for the male protagonist's lacks and vice versa. The narrative does not account for the fact that life is dynamic and people regularly change their attitudes and wishes. Through the portrayal of the perfect union, the neo-traditional romantic comedy effectively prioritizes self-completion over compatibility in a romantic relationship.

Overall, this research illustrated that the narratives of the happy ending, the de-emphasis on sex, the female protagonist as having to make a choice between her career and love or as having to undergo a transformation in order to better conform to an ideal of hegemonic femininity and the portrayal incomplete protagonists reveal numerous ideologies about romantic love. These ideologies include but aren't limited to the following ideas. First, ideal love has the ability to overcome any difficulties posed during the courtship phase of a romantic relationship and serves to equate love with life itself. Second, a vicarious sexual relationship poses a threat to the spiritual ideal of romantic love wherein romantic love is more akin to

spiritual experience. Third, a romantic relationship requires sacrifice and is the only true source of happiness and fulfillment; and lastly, romantic love is a conduit for the completion of the self.

Further Research

I recognize that this research is limited to the mainstream neo-traditional romantic comedy and note some other avenues of inquiry that were beyond the scope of this research. Two recent developments include the emergence of the bromance and the indie romantic comedy. These two subgenres can be classified as offshoots that maintain some key components of the neo-traditional romantic comedy while eschewing others.

The bromance is a male-centered romantic comedy and thus serves to move the narrative away from the female perspective to embrace a male perspective (Mortimer 134). Films such as *Superbad* (2007) and *I Love You Man* (2009) have adapted the neo-traditional romantic comedy to cater to a male audience. In so doing the bromance deviates from the blueprint of the neo-traditional romantic comedy that has been the focus of this MRP. The bromance centers on the relationship between male characters, following a similar trajectory to the heterosexual relationship that is central to the romantic comedy. It is important to note however, that these films are careful to make absolutely clear that its two central characters are not gay by pointing out their status as heterosexual males throughout the film. When interrogating the ideologies of romantic love, the bromance opens new territory and is therefore valuable for the provision of the

male perspective within a romantic relationship, and within an in-depth and developed male friendship. and for their portrayal of masculinity in a post-feminist environment.

Most notably, the narrative trajectory of the bromance clearly revives the relevance of Sedgwick's 1985 analysis within *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Sedgwick illustrates that males exchange women in order to bind themselves to each other in relationships of reciprocity and kinship (Fraiman 67). Women are thus circulated for the sole purpose of organizing and extending masculinity. Luce Irigaray further comments: "women exist only as an occasion for mediation, transaction, transition, transference, between man and his fellow man" (Fraiman 67). The exchange of women may involve male rivalries, disputes or diplomacy. The role of women in the narrative however, is limited to their role as fostering positive conjunctions between men; bringing them together as friends, allies or economic partners.

The indie romantic comedy strays even further from the mainstream neo-traditional romantic comedy. Although indie is now synonymous with smaller budgets for both production and marketing, lesser known talents in front of and behind the camera and less of an adherence to mainstream Hollywood style it is debatable whether there is much of an independent film sector in existence (Mortimer 136). This is because the most significant indie companies have now become subsidiaries of huge media conglomerates. Nevertheless, there continues to be a significant number of releases, beyond the mainstream Hollywood product, from studios such as Fox Searchlight and Lions Gate Films (Mortimer 136). For the

neo-traditional romantic comedy, the independent sector provides the opportunity for something that can be different and innovative and can even subvert the genre. Examples include *Juno (2007)* and *500 Days of Summer (2009)*. Further interrogation in to the indie romantic comedy would be valuable because of their alternative stance. In the spirit of the radical romantic comedy, the indie romantic comedy does not shy away from clever wit and obscure cultural references. It strives to challenge the audience as opposed to aligning itself with the predictable narrative tropes of the mainstream genre. In relation to romantic love, the indie romantic comedy focuses on the complexity of relationships and serves to question the assumptions at the heart of the romantic comedy, specifically regarding love as a conduit to happiness (Mortimer 136).

Furthermore, the research in this MRP was unable to elaborate upon the manner in which the subject position in the neo-traditional romantic comedy is severely limited. According to the logic of the neo-traditional romantic comedy, the experience of romantic love is limited to white and heterosexual couples. For the neo-traditional romantic comedy and the romantic comedy as a whole, love remains white with few notable efforts to deviate from this norm. When ethnic minorities are visible within the narrative of the neo-traditional romantic comedy they appear to echo the reductive racial stereotypes that can be found throughout the history of Hollywood as is illustrated in *Two Can Play That Game (2001)* and *Bend It Like Beckham (2002)* (Mortimer 139). Mixed race coupling does occur in the neo-traditional romantic comedy but primarily through either the Latin/White relationship in films such as *Maid in Manhattan (2002)* or the Latin/Black

relationship in films such as *Hitch* (2005) coupling indicating that a Black and White coupling is still largely considered taboo. In the limited examples where a Black and White coupling has occurred the difference between the two races becomes the ordering principle of the narrative as is clearly illustrated in *Something New* (2006).

There has been greater flexibility when it comes to portraying women of color in neo-traditional romantic comedies. The presence of Black and Latin actresses has steadily increased yet these representations are limited in significant ways as well. The women of color who have starred in this genre are always light skinned women with Caucasian features and thin, toned bodies who serve to reflect the dominant imagery of beauty in contemporary popular culture (Mortimer 140). Furthermore, women of color are perpetually positioned as needing saving from any number of circumstances. When they are saved it is always by the privileged white male protagonist.

With regards to sexuality it is also abundantly clear that the neo-traditional romantic comedy is reluctant to tackle relationships beyond the heteronormative. Ewan Kirkland in his study of the heterosexuality of the romantic comedy notes that gay and lesbian characters do not fare well within a genre almost exclusively geared towards male/female union (Mortimer 142). The gay best friend is the closest the genre comfortably gets to acknowledging the gay community. Often however, even this representation only serves to reinforce certain stereotypes as a comic device. In the independent sector however, away from mainstream Hollywood, there has been the emergence of the lesbian romantic comedy with the release of films such as *Go*

Fish (1994) and *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001) that provide alternative modes of loving and would benefit from further interrogation (Mortimer 142).

Ironically, the critical disdain for the romantic comedy is an indicator of the continuing significance and relevance of the cinematic genre. Critics and commentators despair at the simplicity and regressive nature of the representations and yet the genre continues to thrive. It is possible to speculate therefore, that the films are valued for their very simplicity, in that they offer the message that true love is possible for all of us. What remains as problematic however, is the linearity of the romantic love portrayed. By privileging particular subjects and particular modes of loving, the neo-traditional romantic comedy delegitimizes the value of alternative experiences. If our experiences of romantic love play such an integral part in the formulation of the self the severity of this trend in the representations of romantic comedies becomes all the more pronounced. The supposed simplicity of the neo-traditional romantic comedy should therefore not detract from further interrogation of the ideologies that the body of films are instrumental in creating and maintaining.

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