The Politics of Gender and Comedy in British and American Romantic Comedy Films (Late 1980s to Present)

by

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work which has been done after registration for the degree of PhD at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and has not been previously included in a thesis or dissertation submitted to this or any other institution for a degree, diploma, or other qualification.


_____ Signature

03/03/2025 Date

Abstract

This thesis argues that depictions of gender in British and American mainstream romantic comedy (rom-com) films made between the late 1980s and the present, despite integrating apparently progressive representations of difference, sustain a socially conservative ideological discourse constituted around norms of sex, gender, body type, whiteness, and sexuality through their comedic moments. To pursue this argument, I develop four key thematic areas for critical analysis: the heteronormative basis of gender ideology as found in mainstream rom-coms; the complication of heteronormative rom-com gender ideology through a critique of gender, race, and the tacit whiteness of Hollywood; the objectifying uses of queerness to reinscribe an implicit homonormativity; and finally, how heteronormativity, race, and queerness contribute to gendered body difference as a sign of moral failure in relation to the neoliberal body project. This thesis develops a hybrid methodology to analyse comedic moments as sites of ideological encoding that combines intersectional feminism, Althusser's writing on ideology, theories of comedy, and close reading of selected romantic comedies as case studies. Through these analyses, I examine the ways in which the case study films construct their comedic moments, and on the basis of the analysis I aver that romantic comedies use humour to maintain a perceived status quo, even when superficially satirising hegemonic patriarchal norms. I have selected my case studies based on commercial success, critical acclaim, and the prevalence of the thematic area within the film's plot in order to prioritise films that have contributed to the wider cultural understanding of gender and related issues during this time period. Through this analysis, my project makes an original contribution to feminist film theory by incorporating into sites of current feminist concern an analysis of humour as providing the basis for an ideological critique of the rom-com genre.

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Introduction: The Problem of the Rom-Com

The Romantic Comedy Film and the Problem of Definition

Since the mid-1990s, it has become commonplace for scholars of British and American cinema to observe a lack of rigorous academic writing on rom-com as a genre (Rowe, 1995, p. 19; Abbott and Jermyn, 2009a, p. 2; Bowdre, 2009, p. 106; San Filippo, 2021b, p. 17).[1] Furthermore, the research that does exist often omits or trivialises the function of comedy in the rom-com (Rowe, 1995, p. 100; Abbott and Jermyn, 2009a, p. 2).[2] This thesis addresses the gap within genre scholarship by utilising theories of comedy to analyse how comedy maintains and reproduces the ideological gender norms that underpin romantic comedies released between the late 1980s and the present day.[3] In this way, this thesis asks the following questions: what might be inferred about the state of gender ideology in the UK and USA over the past thirty-five years based on a film's use of jokes and humour? To what extent do rom-coms make the same kinds of jokes across this time period? Or alternatively, in what ways has there been a sense of evolution in the kinds of jokes and plotlines that appear in this genre? And finally, what can be revealed about the complex interplay of gender, race, queerness, and body difference across this time period by carrying out a gender ideology critique of the rom-com's comedic moments that investigates intersectional representation?

As will be discussed in greater detail later in this thesis, there are a number of reasons to consider British and American romantic comedies comparatively within this study. First, there has been and continues to be a huge cross-pollination of British and

[1] In this thesis, I use the term "rom-com" rather than "romcom" or any other variation as a visual reminder that this term is a portmanteau, a term that mixes its roots and thus requires a mixed feminist- and comedy-theory-inspired methodology.

[2] Rowe notes that 'comedy is more often confined to the realm of amusement than to that of high art because of its popular accessibility and its connections with gossip, intrigue, and the everyday, areas of culture tied to the feminine' (1995, p. 100). Abbott and Jermyn similarly contend that 'the perception of comedy per se as inherently frivolous and anti-intellectual has resulted in its critical and cultural marginalisation' (2009a, p. 2).

[3] My understanding of the term "ideological" here stems primarily from the work of Louis Althusser (2001; 2005), but also from Marx (1996) and Žižek (2008), and relates to the manner in which individuals understand themselves in relation to the world around them. The romantic comedy film therefore contributes to this process of self-understanding, since the viewer is hailed as part of a social identity that gets the jokes in a rom-com. Further detail on this understanding of ideology is provided in the first chapter of this thesis.

American creative talent on both sides of the camera lens during this time period.[4] Second, this cross-pollination results in many films in this time period that concern British and American characters negotiating their cultural differences in the plots of rom-coms, as will be seen for example in my analyses of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), and *Love Actually* (2003), which we might see as analogous to the 'Special Relationship' between the two countries both politically, socially, and ideologically. I argue that these romantic comedy films reveal something about the nature of contemporary Western identity formation, which might be overlooked if I were to only consider "British" or "American" rom-coms in isolation. Third, there is a rich precedent for academic studies of romantic comedy that consider UK-US rom-coms together, such as Evans and Deleyto (1998), Abbott and Jermyn (2009), Brickman, Jermyn and Trost (2021), or San Filippo (2021). This thesis draws on this body of British-US scholarship, challenging and nuancing it in places, as will be seen later in the thesis.

Having addressed the need to consider the geographical scope of this thesis, I now turn to discuss the reasons for its temporal scope. On the one hand, the period from the 1980s to the present day has witnessed increased representation of lesbian, gay, and trans characters, interracial love stories, and a wider range of body types seen in romantic roles on-screen. On the other hand, this thesis argues that the mainstream rom-com's comedic moments continue to reinforce "traditional," socially conservative gender (and other) expectations.[5] Consequently, this tension between increased representation and comedy that relies on stereotype to be "accessible" to the film's viewers is at the heart of this thesis. However, before elaborating further on my

[4] That is to say, there are numerous British actors who appear in US-made rom-coms, and American actors who appear in British rom-coms, in addition to writers, producers, and directors who work on both sides of the Atlantic. Moreover, as can be seen in this thesis' Filmography section, there are large number of rom-coms produced as co-productions between British and American companies during this time period. Thus making the division of the Western rom-com landscape into "British rom-com" and "US rom-com" a complex and largely unhelpful one.

[5] This aligns with the widely suggested view that 'the Hollywood romcom is an inherently conservative, didactic vehicle, driven by a desire to promote the heteronormative, bourgeois cultural status quo of Western ideologies' (Jermyn, 2021, p. 301).

central themes, I will first define the object of my inquiry. What, for the purposes of this thesis and its intervention within genre scholarship, is a romantic comedy film?

The rom-com genre is often defined as a film that follows some variation of the plot formula '[b]oy gets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back' (Shumway, 2003, p. 157; see also a variation in Mernit, 2020, p. 15). While such a succinct and gender-based definition is a good starting point for uncovering the gender ideology of the rom-com – betraying as it does the genre's usual heteronormativity – clearly, this definition is partial since it discounts those rom-coms in which the central protagonists do not end up together, as in *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) or *500 Days of Summer* (2009). Shumway and Mernit's definition is also so broad as to apply to action-adventure and sci-fi films such as *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* (1983) or *Avatar* (2009), neither of which are listed as rom-coms on the International Movie Database (IMDb) website nor feature in wider rom-com discourse. Indeed, probing the usefulness of such categorisation reveals that a definition of the romantic comedy is elusive due to its hybrid form.[6] Essentially, many films that are not typically considered rom-coms feature romantic relationships alongside comedy derived from sexual politics, and a large number of rom-coms can equally be described as partially belonging to other genres (King, 2002, p. 51; Abbott and Jermyn, 2009a, p. 3).[7]

Indeed, this problem of definition has yielded a large body of scholarly work that analyses films that are not generally considered romantic comedies through a rom-com lens in order to illuminate the boundaries of genre. For example, Celestino Deleyto (2009) analyses the rom-com credentials of the western *Rio Bravo* (1959), Claire Hines (2009) critiques the action-comedy *Miss Congeniality* (2000) as a queer rom-com, and Yvonne Tasker (2011) interrogates postfeminism and the romantic comedy through an analysis of the Disney musical *Enchanted* (2007). Another approach to the rom-com's breadth is to divide it into subgenres or cycles, such as the cycles of screwball comedy, sex comedy, radical romantic comedy, and neo-traditional

[6] Altman (1999) argues that most Hollywood films are mixes of multiple genres, both in terms of tropes and in their marketing strategies.
[7] For example, *Splash* (1983), *Shallow Hal* (2001), and *Yesterday* (2019) are all fantasy rom-coms.

romantic comedy that McDonald (2007) discusses, or the nine periods of cycles and clusters described by Leger Grindon (2011, pp. 25–66). All of these studies provide useful terminology and thought that are useful for this thesis. However, the purpose of this thesis is neither to apply the rom-com definition to another genre of film as Deleyto, Hines, and Tasker do, nor to divide the period between the late 1980s and present day into cycles or clusters, similar to McDonald and Grindon. Instead, the purpose here is to interrogate the gender ideology at play in the mainstream rom-com itself. Deleyto (2009), Hines (2009), and Tasker (2011) look to move away from a rigid and ideologically determined account of the genre, advocating for a more flexible theory. However, they come to this conclusion through extending the reach of what is typically considered as a rom-com in the first place. Instead, I analyse the genre in relation to a number of its instances, thus deriving what is integral about it from the point of view of its promotion of gender ideology through the use of comedy. By doing this work, I offer an in-depth critique of rom-com from the past thirty-five years, arguing that the genre's social conservatism is at the heart of how its comedic moments make sense to the viewer. Thus, this thesis argues for a rethinking of the ideological function of the romantic comedy film as one that is consistently and routinely structured around a heteronormative, exclusionary gender-based ideology. In order to define the boundaries of the kind of rom-com that I analyse, I use a Wittgensteinian "family of resemblance" (Wittgenstein, 1963) style approach to genre classification that traces the semantic, abstract and thematic similarities between romantic comedy films.[8]

In the definitions of rom-com offered by many of the scholars referenced above the importance of ideology to the genre is often tacitly suggested without being focused upon in the way that I do in this thesis. For example, Tamar Jeffers McDonald offers a definition of the rom-com as 'a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion' (2007, p. 9), which is apposite for a Wittgensteinian approach in

[8] Wittgenstein suggests that in language members of a category or class may not share a set of defining characteristics but are still related through a series of overlapping similarities.

that she emphasises the thematic similarities between rom-coms over their material differences. Furthermore, McDonald succinctly draws together how the rom-com's most common theme is ideological, since ideology concerns the imaginary relations between real-world subjects, and love is a conceptual relationship between people made visible by their words and actions. Moreover, through her use of the word "successful" McDonald suggests the ideological alignment of the character's goal and the viewer's expectation – the idea that viewers understand and recognise themselves in relation to the importance of the protagonists' quest for love – which is then reinforced through the film's narrative conclusion. Indeed, the centrality of the quest for love is the defining rom-com characteristic, according to McDonald, which explains why this thesis includes *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) but not *Avatar* (2009) as a case study. The central quest for love also means that romantic comedies foreground, as Hollywood screenwriting guru Billy Mernit notes, a 'negotiation of gender and heterosexuality' (Mernit, 2020, p. 97). Mernit's use of the term "heterosexuality" instead of simply "sexuality," which might be more inclusive and, indeed, descriptive, reflects the way in which heteronormativity has been made the taken-for-granted norm in discussion of rom-com, and this tacit heteronormativity is at the heart of my argument that the rom-coms reinforce a binary, essentialist view of gender. Indeed, I contend that the rom-com incorporates what gender theorist Judith Butler terms 'naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality [with] their central protagonists: "man" and "woman"' (2007, p. 200). While McDonald and Mernit come from different methodological traditions, they thus both provide insight into the ideological underpinnings at the heart of the rom-com genre. However, a more comprehensive definition is offered by Deleyto, who incorporates an understanding of the rom-com's depiction of sex and gender to theorise that the genre appears at

> the intersection of three, closely interrelated elements: a narrative that articulates historically and culturally specific views of love, desire, sexuality and gender relationships; a space of transformation and fantasy which influences the narrative articulation of those discourses; and humor as the specific perspective from which the fictional characters, their relationships and the

> spectator's response to them are constructed as embodiments of those discourses. (2009, pp. 45–46)

Just as McDonald's definition nuances the formula articulated variously by Shumway and Mernit, and Deleyto nuances McDonald, I build upon each of these theorists' work in a number of key ways. First, my approach to gender is more expansive, since it is impossible to separate out gender's normative relation to other prominent ideological features, including race and body size. Second, I consider Rick Altman's principle that '[t]he first step in understanding the functional role of any Hollywood genre is to isolate the problems for which the genre provides a symbolic solution' (1987, p. 334). Accordingly, I postulate that the romantic comedy film provides an ideological solution to the problems of sex, gender, and sexuality, and ultimately of how Western society is structured around the affluent, tacitly white, heteronormative romantic couple.

The central aim of this thesis is, therefore, to critique the depictions of rom-com couples, both in terms of physical appearance and social dynamics. The appearance of the rom-com couple is important because, as Kathleen Rowe observes, the rom-com 'constructs a world that is meant to appear realistic – with settings, characters, and conflicts that are ordinary rather than extraordinary' (1995, p. 111). In contrast to western, sci-fi, or gangster films, which bear little or no relation to the lives lived by the majority of film watchers, the rom-com – despite its usual focus on affluent, white, able-bodied, heterosexual love – offers a vision of supposedly relatable character transformation. It is my contention that this is a key aspect of the rom-com genre that distinguishes its ideological function from other forms of Hollywood cinema. Where all three-act structure films tend to portray an individual undergoing a quest that they are transformed by, the rom-com offers one of the most directly applicable narrative arcs for the standard viewer, since most viewers will undertake some kind of romantic relationship over the course of their lives. This idea of the relatability of the transformation on display within a rom-com is echoed in Deborah Thomas's (1998) discussion of the difference between the comic and the comedic,

which I now use to further nuance our understanding of the rom-com as a genre in relation to its spectator.

Thomas differentiates the "comic," meaning that which elicits laughter, from the "comedic," which offers the viewer 'a narrative world – or space within it – which feels safe in two ways: in terms of its generosity to those who inhabit it (its characters) and in terms of the sorts of cinematic pleasures it offers us (its viewers)' (1998, p. 58).[9] With respect to romantic comedy specifically, Thomas suggests that the comedic is a safe space for two people, whom she presumes to be heterosexual, to meet and establish a relationship as equals, safe from the realities of gender inequality. While this argument reveals something about compulsory heterosexuality and gender politics in 1998, it requires substantial revision for 2024, and it necessitates a further research question, which this thesis addresses: if the "comedic" in romantic comedy offers a safe comedic space for reciprocal desire, then why is this desire so often heterosexual, white, affluent, young, slim, and able-bodied?

Taxonomically, since all genres 'constitute specific variations of the interplay of codes, discursive structures and drives' (Neale, 1987, p. 48) and genres are instances of 'difference *in* repetition' (p. 50), it is worth drawing out the specific codes, structures, and drives that the romantic comedy genre repeats, as mentioned above. I suggest that, on a basic level, the repeated content of the rom-com genre is romantic interactions (meet-cutes, dates, break-ups, proposals, weddings, etc.) and the form that this takes is the comedic (safe space or idealised world) and comic (instances of jokes) that Thomas describes above. In addition to the basic tropes of romantic interactions, Beatriz Oria, amongst others, notes that romantic comedy continually reproduces the 'ideological pillars of "the One," "love at first sight," and "happily ever after"' (2021, p. 30); this thesis critiques the way in which such ideological pillars are specifically communicated through comedic moments. Indeed, it is my argument that

[9] This further links to the rom-com's literary antecedents in terms of the dream-like spaces of transformation and discovery present in Shakespeare's comedies, which led Northrop Frye to note, 'scenes of discovery and reconciliation [are] […] the tendency of Shakespearean and other types of romantic comedy' (1957, p. 167).

a fundamental aspect of the ideological function of the rom-com genre that distinguishes it from other genres is its use of comedy, which is reliant on the viewer getting the joke to convey meaning around sex, gender, sexuality, and romantic coupling. In other words, the viewers are invited to recognise themselves within the joke, whether they identify with it or not.

At this juncture, I shall introduce the discussion of ideology, which I approach primarily using the writing of Louis Althusser, alongside subsidiary theory from Karl Marx and Slavoj Žižek.[10] Althusser writes that 'what is reflected in the imaginary representation of the world found in an ideology is the conditions of existence of men, i.e. their real world' (2001, p. 149). In this way, ideology distorts or conceals something of the "real world" such that the actual conditions of existence cannot be viewed under ideological constraints; the task of ideology critique concerns the revealing of those distortions. I apply this to the genre of the romantic comedy by supposing that each romantic comedy film can be considered an imaginary representation of the "real" world and of "real-world" interpersonal relations, in relation to which the film viewer is encouraged to recognise themselves. Similarly, Marx states that

> man first sees and recognizes himself in other men. Peter only establishes his own identity as a man by first comparing himself with Paul as being of like kind. And thereby Paul, just as he stands in his Pauline personality, becomes to Peter the type of the genus homo. (1996, p. 63)[11]

[10] It also worth addressing the fact that there is a tension in this thesis insofar as it draws on both feminist scholars, such as Butler, Doane, and Mulvey, and older, male thinkers, such as Aristotle, Althusser, Freud, and Marx, whose work can be critiqued for containing unacknowledged patriarchal elements. It is my argument that the prominence of these theorists in the fields of ideology studies and theories of comedy necessitates their inclusion for my argument. Moreover, many feminist scholars have drawn on and extended the work of these older, male theorists in articulating their own positions. For example, there are clear traces of Althusser's work in Mulvey's own writings, and in a poll for *Film Comment* Mulvey listed two of Althusser's texts as amongst her favourite works (Rosenbaum, 1976, p. 54). Similarly, Sedgwick builds upon Marx's theory of ideology (2016, p. 14), and Butler references Althusser's theory of ideology in their most recent book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (2024, p. 14). In this way, the feminist theory that I am using is already synthesised with the male voices referenced in this thesis in its original context.

[11] While this aspect of Marx's theory of ideology is useful, other aspects of his argument, such as his emphasis on false cognition or class conflict are less helpful for describing the complex, intersectional stories and elements at play in the rom-coms I analyse in this thesis.

I suggest that the film viewer establishes their own identity through comparison with characters in the imaginary world of the rom-com. As I expand upon later, the rom-com thus hails its viewer in relation to binary norms of masculinity and femininity, alongside tacit whiteness, a sense of Western global superiority, aspirational affluence, and heteronormativity. In this way, romantic comedy films serve as 'a repository of both older and contemporary estimations of the rules of romance' through which not only 'the ethical boundaries of everyday life are constructed, revised and maintained' (Dowd and Pallotta, 2000, p. 554) but in relation to which film viewers recognise themselves as subjects.

Where Althusser posits that ideology 'may be not only the *stake*, but also the *site* of class struggle, and often of bitter forms of class struggle' (2001, p. 134), I contend, following the work of Stuart Hall (2021a; 2021b), that the sites of contestation are more complex than he suggests. Indeed, many others have noted that Althusser's description of ideology 'is surely too economistic and "technicist" a model of ideology […]. It leaves no room for non-class ideologies such as racism and sexism; and even in class terms it is drastically reductive' (Eagleton, 2007, p. 148). As such, I complicate his version of ideology in ways he did not necessarily anticipate by introducing a modern understanding of intersectional feminism. This is because gender struggles are not subordinate to class struggle but remain simultaneously distinct yet interrelated.

There is also a point to be made here by complicating Althusser's notion that 'ideology interpellates individuals as subjects' (2001 p. 105). On the one hand, I use this idea by affixing it to theories of spectatorship, such as Laura Mulvey's, by arguing that narrative cinema is ideological because it interpellates viewers as spectators, encouraging them to identify with the on-screen protagonist. However, I also acknowledge the potential for a viewer to actively resist interpellation. This ideological interpellation-spectatorship link is complicated by the work of, for example, bell hooks, who describes the options for a Black woman when confronted with a film that

privileges identities that are not her own. The Black female spectator, hooks writes, 'must imagine herself transformed, turned into the white woman portrayed on screen' (2009, p. 261), or alternatively 'her gaze is the masochistic look of victimization' (p. 261), albeit for some Black women 'cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation' (p. 268). By investigating the granular details of the comedic moments in my case study rom-coms, I explore the spectatorship options for both ideological and ideologically emancipated spectators. Nevertheless, the focus of this work is not on reception theory but on the analysis of the structural elements of the rom-com.

This brings me to a discussion of the method that this thesis will primarily use to conduct an ideology critique of the function of rom-com's comedic moments: qualitative content analysis. There are a number of advantages to this kind of close reading approach to film analysis for the purpose of my research. First, as Newbold, Boyd-Barrett and Van Den Bulk (2002) say, '[i]t exposes the ideological, latent meaning behind the surface of texts, allowing us to grasp the power relations within them' (p. 249). That is to say, the focus of my research is on the gender ideology and power relations at play in romantic comedy films at the granular level of their comedic moments, and so content analysis that focuses on the film as text is apposite for drawing out these latent meanings. Second, by focusing specifically on the comedic moments and elements in rom-coms, I am able to carry out a comparative analysis of a large number of films across a large period of time. This is not to say that there is not a merit in film analyses that interpret content within a discursive context – what Gilbert Ryle (1971) and Clifford Geertz (1973) have termed "thick description", which they both favour over "thin description".[12] Geertz warns that 'the political, economic, stratifcatory realities within which men are everywhere contained' (1973, p. 30) are lost through thin description. However, if this is the criticism of "thin description", then what this thesis does is not thin description at all. This thesis seeks to reveal the political stratifications underlying the rom-com's comedic moments. However, in order to attend to gender ideology in the comedic moments of such a large number of films,

[12] Ryle (1971) and Geertz (1973) draw out the difference between analysis that can be termed "thin description" meaning the content of an item or action and "thick description" meaning the interpretation of content within its context.

I have decided to use a more targeted approach – a "thinner" approach, if you will – that rarely diverts into the path of reception theory or discussion of systems of film production, but which focuses on the mechanisms by which film viewers are psychically hailed by rom-com's comedic structures.[13]

Some, such as Žižek, argue that the '"ideological" is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its existence' (2008, pp. 15–16), which implies that for the rom-com to be ideological it must conceal the knowledge of its ideology from the rom-com viewer. This presents a potential problem for my content analysis approach because, by avoiding discussion of reception, my research does not investigate the non-knowledge of rom-com viewers to the rom-com's ideological gender structure, and thus omits discussion of a key facet of ideology, according to Žižek.[14] However, as Althusser notes, 'ideology […] imposes […] obviousnesses as obviousnesses' (2001, p. 156), and through the rom-com's deployment of easily accessible comedy and other simple pleasures – beautiful people (by Western beauty standards) in beautiful (affluent) places reaching "happy endings" (heterosexual coupledom) – the rom-com draws the viewer into its deeply ideological structure whether they are conscious of – or resistant to – its ideological

[13] Pamela Robertson Wojcik writes of reception theory that '[r]ather than focusing on production or the cinematic text, reception studies take into account a broad range of extra-cinematic materials – including […] social history and audience composition, as well as reviews, commentary, fan discourse, star images or texts, commodity tie-ins, scandal, and other discourses and events that produce the conditions of reading and reception for the film text' (2007, p. 541). As indicated by the breadth of materials that Robertson Wojcik lists here, reception theory offers a rich variety of options for further research. For example, a study might consider the rom-com over the past thirty-five years in connection to audience composition, or the star system, both of which have been changed by the move away from cinema releases towards online streaming. Indeed, I touch upon these topics later on in this thesis where it is important for my close reading of comedic moments. However, as will be further elucidated in Chapter 1, the bulk of such discussion exceeds the focus and delimitation of this thesis.

[14] Although one could argue that such ideological false consciousnesses regarding the rom-com are beginning to be uncovered in wider media discourse, such as in the plethora of articles that retrospectively critique the inequality of gendered power in *Love Actually* (2003) from a more recent perspective (Cosslett, 2019; Williams, 2022; Rufo, 2023). However, rather than simply being either in knowledge or non-knowledge of the rom-com's gender ideology, there are likely a range of individual responses that vary from viewer to viewer. This complicated relationship between rom-com viewer and ideology is evident in the way that rom-coms are often referred to as a 'guilty pleasure' (San Filippo, 2021b, p. 13), or when Kim Akass and Janet McCabe describe *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) as a show in which the protagonists are 'aware of the social constructedness of being female, and educated to know better that Prince Charming is nothing more than a cultural myth, [but] cannot quite shed the false consciousness inspired by patriarchal fantasies' (Akass and McCabe, 2006b, p. 180).

underpinnings or not. Therefore, for the interests of this thesis, the existence of gender ideology in rom-com's comedic moments across such a large number of films and such a large time period is the object of my inquiry regardless of any of the possible reactions that the individual viewer may or may not experience when watching the film.

In conclusion, the central problem that this thesis investigates is that mainstream romantic comedy films since the 1980s continually reproduce the same gender tropes in their comedic moments, despite some tokenistic advances in representation. If romantic comedy films constitute spaces of infinite possibility in which sex, gender, and romantic coupling can be reimagined and played with, why do the majority of romantic comedies continually reproduce the same narrow set of tropes and worldviews? Why are some bodies or identities routinely excluded from the rom-com or mocked when they do appear on screen? And what does this reveal about the way that viewers are invited to recognise themselves in relation to the genre?

The Central Problem with the Function of Comedy

The questions listed above constitute elements of the central division within academic writing on comedy: specifically, whether comedy subversively challenges or normatively reinforces societal expectations. Some theorists assume the position that 'comedy is uniquely suited to exposing arbitrary qualities of thought and suggesting alternative ways of (re)presenting and (re)structuring reality' (Reid, Stoughton and Smith, 2006, p. 630) or that '[t]he comic space allows the spectator to glimpse a "better world," a world that is not governed by inhibitions and repressions but is instead characterised by a freer, more optimistic expression of love and desire' (Deleyto, 2009, p. 36). Others take the opposing view that comedy regulates society 'by rehearsing and refining the norms that constitute the various cultures and subcultures to which we belong' (Carroll, 2014, p. 115). To illustrate how these two opposing viewpoints illuminate comedic moments from the rom-com genre in particular, I turn to a scene from *Pretty Woman* (1990).[15] Early on in the film, Edward (Richard Gere) struggles to drive a manual car while Vivian (Julia Roberts) waxes lyrical to him about the car's engine and gearbox. Edward then instructs Vivian to drive, which she does with much more ease and much faster than he did (see figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1: Edward (Richard Gere) struggles to drive a manual car while Vivian (Julia Roberts) mocks him from the passenger seat in *Pretty Woman* (1990).

[15] In the opening two chapters I use examples from *Pretty Woman* (1990), as it is a hugely popular romantic comedy film from the period of my study. However, I do not include this as a case study in subsequent chapters, partly because it has been analysed so comprehensively by Mari Ruti in her book *Feminist Film Theory and "Pretty Woman"* (2016).



Figure 2: Later in the same scene, Vivian is much more at home behind the wheel than Edward was.

This scene is clearly coded for comedy with exaggerated sound effects of clanking gears as Edward drives and the roar of the engine when Vivian takes over. Additionally, the camera twice cuts to the roadside view of the car. When Edward drives, the car lurches comically around the street, whereas when Vivian drives, the car zooms past a static camera, indicating speed and proficiency on her part. This comic moment's connection to the performance of gender is reinforced through the dialogue in the scene. Vivian speaks about how close together the car's pedals are, which she suggests probably makes it easier for a woman to drive since they have smaller feet, only then to undercut this assumption comically by revealing that she herself has size 9 feet. What we encounter here is a comic scene in which the comedy reveals something about gender and commonly held gender expectations and can either be read as subversive or regulatory. A subversive reading suggests that this comedic moment challenges the arbitrariness of the connection between men and good driving/women and bad driving. Alternatively, since in order to get the joke this scene requires the viewer to understand the commonly held assumption that men are better drivers than women as the norm, it tacitly reinforces the underlying belief that women are typically worse drivers than men; in this reading the scene's incongruity with this norm is what makes it funny. Of course, just as romantic comedies 'defy categorization as either antifeminist or feminist, for they tend to present an ambiguous mixture of conservative and empowering elements' (Ruti, 2016, p. 6), it is possible to read this comic moment as neither subversive nor regulatory. This is where my intervention comes in: it is not the intention of the thesis to categorically confirm

that the comedy in rom-coms is either sexist or socially progressive; instead, my analysis – as this moment illustrates – is simply to identify how the rom-com reproduces the ideological norm around gendered difference in relation to which the spectator is hailed as a subject.

Consider a contrasting comedic moment from *Pretty Woman* (1990), the opening scene, which takes place at a lavish garden party. A magician entertains guests by pulling a penny from behind the ear of a female guest. Philip (Jason Alexander) walks past and quips, 'a penny for the ear, how much for the rest?' As a joke out of context this can be easily categorised as anti-feminist, since Philip implies that a woman's body can be bought as well as that her ear is only worth a penny, which might indicate that she is "cheap." The reaction from the other characters in the scene – they laugh and smile – confirms the legitimacy and appropriateness of this joke. Of course, unlike the characters in the film, the viewer may not find this remark amusing; equally, some might find it amusing that Philip, a short man with a receding hairline, jokes about an attractive woman wearing expensive clothes and jewellery (see figure 3) and might laugh at him for his poor social skills, rather than with him for his joke. However, whether comic moments such as this are funny is not the object of my inquiry. Rather, I am concerned with what is communicated as an "obviousness" in such moments and how, ideologically speaking, the scene (re)produces gendered subject-object relations: a man is the agent of comedy, whereas the woman is the passive recipient and object of comedic attention. As such, irrespective of reception by the film viewer, the joke reveals a gendered structure within which viewers might recognise themselves as subjects.



Figure 3: In *Pretty Woman* (1990), the character of Philip (Jason Alexander) is first introduced to the viewer when he makes a derogatory joke to a female guest at a dinner party.

Hence, as I argue throughout this thesis, the key to understanding the rom-com's ideological function lies not in 'the false problem of identification [for it] was solved from the beginning, even before it was posed, by the reality of recognition' (Althusser, 2005, p. 150). This is to say that, as Althusser opines when discussing a play by Bertolazzi, the writer's 'explicit intentions are unimportant: what counts, beyond the words, the characters and the actions of the play, is the internal relation of the basic elements of its structure' (Althusser, 2005, p. 141). What is interesting in the scene between Edward and Vivian is not whether the spectator laughs at Edward for being emasculated, at Vivian for being unexpectedly tomboyish, or whether they laugh with both characters for subverting gender expectations. Similarly, this thesis does not intend to prove that Philip's joke at the very start of *Pretty Woman* (1990) is sexist (clearly it is). What this thesis argues is that, as Althusser states, 'before (psychologically) identifying itself with the hero, the spectatorial consciousness recognizes itself in the ideological consciousness of the play [or in this case, film], and in the forms characteristic of this content' (2005, p. 149). With regard to the rom-com specifically, this means that prior to any explicit identification, spectators recognise themselves in relation to the gender ideology that undergirds the romantic comedy film as conveyed in the form of the rom-com's comic moments.

The Rom-Com at the Current Juncture

In her talk *Visual Pleasure at 40* at the BFI, Laura Mulvey described how her relationship with Hollywood cinema fundamentally changed following her exposure to the women's liberation movement of the early 1970s. She explained how she became 'detached from the screen, detached from the story, and that blissful sense of loss-of-self into the world of the cinema, and suddenly became a woman looking at films which [she had] loved and now began to irritate [her]' (BFI, 2015). For me, this thesis reflects a similar journey in my own relationship with mainstream romantic comedy. Where Mulvey's repositioning emerged from the women's liberation movement of the 1970s, mine emerges from the #MeToo movement, Black Lives Matter protests, and intersectional feminism. As such, this thesis takes an intersectional feminist approach that seeks to understand the ideological mechanisms by which a variety of gender identities are encoded or distributed in these films.[16] Therefore, this thesis emerged from a growing awareness of the limitations of thinking about gender as a category independent of other identity markers. This is to say that gender and the tropes of masculinity and femininity are only intelligible when performed by bodies that necessarily also connote meaning through other, interrelated qualities, including age, size, disability (three forms of identity marker that I term body difference), as well as race and sexuality. Moreover, this thesis takes an intersectional approach insofar as it applies theory from feminist literature but also insofar as it is structured around three intersections (race, sexuality, and body type), in relation to which gender is articulated.

The preparation for this thesis began during the first Covid lockdown of 2020, a year in which Ofcom reported that people in the UK 'spent nearly a third of their waking hours watching TV and online video content' (Wakefield, 2021). At the same time, the *New York Times* reported that streaming figures were highest for older content (Koblin, 2021). Thus, while planning and shaping this thesis, I – along with

[16] In her book *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides,* Nicola Rivers argues that a major influence on recent feminism is 'a dawning realization of the social, political, and cultural inequalities still faced by many women' (2017, p. 135). As such, in its intersectionality, my work engages with prominent issues in contemporary feminist debate.

most other people – was often sequestered in relative isolation, unable to experience real-world social interactions but able to escape vicariously through viewing characters on screen. Yet, the worlds of the online content that I and others were choosing to consume were slightly distanced from the culture in which we were experiencing them. This corresponds to a paradox of our time that older content, such as *Friends* (1994–2004) or *The Office* (2005–2013), continue to be viewed in huge numbers while also leaving millennials 'shocked' by 'transphobic, homophobic and sexist' (Kaplan, 2018) storylines.[17] Following the work of Jeremy Gilbert (2019), I read the continuing popularity of older media as further evidence of the far-reaching strength of a neoliberal worldview even in our current, increasingly fractured, post-austerity economic climate.[18] In contrast to the emphasis on individualism, choice, and consumption in the neoliberal era, recent years have seen a renewed focus on collective responsibility in the face of austerity, climate change, and, most recently, the global pandemic. Elizabeth Evans noted in 2015 that the 'normalisation of individualism as a default political ontology makes collective identity or action difficult to adopt, on either a theoretical or practical level' (p. 46), and yet the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements are evidence of just such collective action that have received widespread attention recently. This thesis emerges out of this tension between calls for collective responsibility and the dismantling of systemic inequalities and the consumption of films and TV that promote consumerist individualism. In short, my argument uses close readings of case study films to explore the problem that 'in a context of growing gender equality and feminist awareness, the relationship models proposed by the traditional (or neotraditional) romcom read today as deeply imbalanced or even toxic' (Oria, 2021, p. 30).

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[17] Jeremy Gilbert refers to this as 'the emergence of the culture of the "long 90s", wherein historically unprecedented levels of social liberalism and the experience of living through the internet revolution coincided with a marked decline in popular creativity, and a general sense of cultural stasis that has persisted arguably until the present time' (2019, p. 15).

[18] Harvey conceptualises neoliberalism as 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (2007, p. 2). According to Harvey, neoliberalism has been the dominant political-economic principle in most of the world (certainly in the UK and the USA, and even, to an extent, in China) since the late 1970s and early 1980s, morphing into an all-pervasive ideological discourse that 'seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market' (2007, p. 3).

This research is also born out of the paradoxical increase in discussions around privilege and institutional prejudice at a time when there has also been an increase in retro-sexism and retro-nationalism in both UK and USA politics. For example, on 5th August 2018 Boris Johnson stated, with regard to the burka, that 'it is absolutely ridiculous that people should choose to go around looking like letter boxes' (2018) – less than a year later, on 24th July 2019, he was elected as Conservative Party leader and became prime minister of the UK. Similarly, in the run up to the US election in 2016, a recording resurfaced of Donald Trump making his now infamous 'Grab 'em by the pussy' remark during an interview in 2005 (Makela, 2016), and subsequently at least twenty-six women have made allegations of sexual misconduct against him (Osborne, 2020). In the build-up to the US election in 2016, Trump also famously branded Mexican migrants to the USA as 'rapists' (Gabbatt, 2015). Nevertheless, in November 2016 he was elected president. In both cases, these prominent politicians use aspects of "humour" to further a sexist and nationalist ideological message, and, while US and UK political discourse is clearly not the object of this thesis's inquiry, it nonetheless informs the background against which an analysis of the relationship between comedy and gender ideology has a culturally prominent position.

Indeed, the current focus on the politics of comedy is only one of the contemporary tensions to which this thesis speaks. It is interesting to note that at the time of writing there are numerous newspaper reports expounding the decline in marriage rates and even in relationship rates across the UK and USA (Gill, 2023; Cunliffe, 2023; Mahdawi, 2023), meanwhile, loneliness and depression appear to be on the rise as the technological revolution reduces our face-to-face interactions (Twenge et al., 2021). At the same time there is a 'huge output of boy-meets-girl narratives that Netflix has bought up and pumped out in recent years' (San Filippo, 2021b, p. 6). In other words, people report feeling lonelier and having fewer long-term relationships, yet there is a spike in the production of rom-coms made by streaming services alongside the continued dominance of older relationship-based online content. In light

of this, I argue that audio-visual representations of sex, gender, and relationships are more important than ever for the individual's understanding of their own identity.

The Structure of this Thesis

In each chapter of this thesis, I undertake a broad analysis of the overall landscape of British and American romantic comedy films released between the late 1980s and the present, specifically looking for trends in the depiction of dominant gender ideology, race, queerness, and body difference.[19] From this point on, my key research method is close textual analysis of the selected case study films. This thesis includes limited engagement with the wider discourse around particular films, such as fandom, the star system, or the systems around professional reviews. This is because, as discussed in the section above, the aim of this thesis is a gender ideology critique of the rom-com's comedic moments. By considering rom-com films as historical artefacts, which might be read differently in 2024 in comparison to the reviews that came out at the time of their production, I am interested in how the identification of these anachronisms uncovers something about the original context that differs from our own. That we recognise a text as comic in the present even though it was made in a completely distinct context to our own tells us something about the nature of comic texts – that they retain something that carries over, which we are able to recognise, and that informs us about the worlds they depict and how they differ from our own. A content analysis can therefore operate within a consciousness of historical difference, while treating the object as consistently 'the same' across time: comic then and comic now (even if we do not find it funny today). The merit of a content analysis approach, then, lies in treating the aesthetic qualities of the text – here, the jokes and dramaturgical elements of comedy – as purveyors of ideological meaning, something that might otherwise be overlooked in an analysis that decentres the film text. Therefore, others elsewhere might engage more in the wider discourse around rom-coms, but this current thesis uses content analysis as its primary vehicle for the critique of the film text.

[19] As will be elaborated upon later, I use the term "body difference" to encompass sizeism, ageism, and ableism, or what might otherwise be considered as bodies that challenge mainstream Western beauty standards, specifically as depicted in rom-coms.

In order to further dissect films and comedic moments that might have a wider mainstream cultural impact, I have selected films based on a combination of commercial success, critical success, and their relevance to the themes of my chapters. I focus my close analysis on the comedic moments of the case study films in order to illuminate what these comedic moments reveal about gender ideology as depicted within each film.

The first chapter elaborates this methodology in greater detail. It combines intersectional, contemporary feminism with theories of comedy to develop a distinct theoretical approach to the critical analysis of romantic comedy films as texts. The chapter provides an overview of the development of contemporary feminism and comedy theories and in turn leads to a discussion of how I combine them within a mixed methodological approach in order to highlight the gender ideology in the rom-com's comedic moments. My strategy for exposing these underlying ideologies is to use Althusser's theory of ideology as 'an imaginary relation to real relations' (2001, p. 151). I consider how comedy theories such as superiority theory (Gruner, 1997), incongruity theory (Koestler, 1989), and tension-release theory (Freud, 2002) can reveal further meaning in the implied relationship between spectator and film in any given comedic moment. Each of these theories assumes that there is some kind of social status quo that is disrupted or contradicted by moments of comedy, and all of these theories assume that for the comedic moment to be intelligible to the spectator there must be some shared knowledge or understanding from which the comedic moment makes sense. My research works backwards from such comedic moments as a site of contradiction in order to establish the existence of the taken-for-granted status quo in relation to sex, gender, and sexuality. As discussed earlier in this introduction, my aim here is not to interrogate reception theory or identification but rather to uncover the mechanism of "recognition" (Althusser, 2005). In this way, I propose comedy as a mechanism of ideology that exposes how subjects recognise themselves in relation to dominant gender narratives.

The second chapter uncovers the gender ideology of the mainstream rom-com, which is then critiqued through the thematic analyses of the later chapters. In order to draw out this ideology, I conduct close reading analyses of *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989), *Love Actually* (2003), *Sex and the City 2* (2010), and *Trainwreck* (2015), four prominent but varied romantic comedy films from across the time period spanning the late 1980s to the present day. Through these analyses, I assert that the mainstream rom-com repurposes feminist themes in order to hail a feminist spectator but that the structure and comedic moments in these rom-coms consistently assign value to traditional, heterosexual monogamy and traditional binary gender roles. In this chapter I advance a reading of the paradox at the heart of the mainstream rom-com, namely that the real state of romance in Western society has been fragmented and warped by thirty years of significant societal changes but the imaginary representation of sex, gender, and sexuality in mainstream rom-com maintains the traditional view that (heterosexual, white, able-bodied) men are valued for their wealth and power, whereas (heterosexual, white, able-bodied) women are valued for their physical appearance.

The focus of analysis for the third chapter explores how race intersects with and complicates the gender ideology of British and American rom-coms. This chapter uses the theory of Hall (2021a; 2021b) and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), along with Lisa Marie Cacho's (2012) theory of social death, to analyse *Coming to America* (1988), *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), *The Big Sick* (2017), *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Yesterday* (2019), and *Love Hard* (2021). Through this, I argue that mainstream romantic comedies assume white spectatorship as a default position, thereby reproducing an ideological connection between Otherness and primitiveness. As such, the gender ideology within mainstream rom-coms presupposes the structure of whiteness as an implicit norm, even in the absence of white characters, and represents whiteness as an affective condition that belongs to the imagined "better time." I nuance Hall's notion of 'the "absent" but imperializing "white eye"' (2021b, p. 107), revising his theory to include a diasporic eye, particularly in the case of *Coming to America* (1988), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), *The Big Sick* (2017), and *Crazy Rich*

Asians (2018). By "diasporic eye" I mean that, just as Hall once wrote that 'Black stand-up comics still ape their ambiguous incorporation into British entertainment by being the first to tell a racist joke' (2021b, p. 110), so, in order to cement their position within the Hollywood film industry, the writers, producers, and directors of rom-coms are encouraged to make the cultures of their heritage visible by satirising them for an implicitly white spectator.

The fourth chapter presents the argument that even mainstream rom-coms featuring gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans characters reproduce a gender ideology predicated on heterosexuality, hailing their spectator as heterosexual. I apply the work of Halberstam (2005) and Muñoz (2009) on queer time and queer potentiality to reason that the representation of queer characters and queer love in mainstream British and American rom-coms does not constitute a queering of the genre but rather a defanging of the disruptive power of queerness. I observe how, between the 1980s and the 2010s, mainstream romantic comedy films featuring queer characters or queer moments reproduce what Adrienne Rich terms "compulsory heterosexuality" (1980) as the expected norm. This compulsory heterosexuality is reproduced in three forms: in *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) the potential for queer characters is excluded and denied; in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) the few gay characters' tragic otherness and positioning outside the heteropatriarchal normativity of the central romantic couple facilitates a heterosexual spectatorship; and in *The Birdcage* (1996) and *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) the gay characters serve as comedic support whose otherness provides comic relief against which the "seriousness" of heterosexual romance is foregrounded. I also observe how, since the 2010s, these tropes (lack of LGBT+ representation, LGBT comedic supporting roles, and the link between queerness and tragedy) have changed in the wake of the huge increase in the number of romantic comedies featuring LGBT characters. [20] I seek to expose this distinction through my

[20] I use the term "LGBT" here because I have found lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender supporting characters but not characters who would be indicated by the + (for example, intersex, pansexual, demisexual, or polyamorous characters). I have tried to be precise with my deployment of the terms "queer," indicating that which showcases 'the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing' (Halberstam, 2005, p. 2); "LGBT," referring specifically to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans characters; and the more generalised term, "LGBT+".

close readings of *Love, Simon* (2018), *Happiest Season* (2020), *Single All the Way* (2021), *Anything's Possible* (2022), and *Bros* (2022). I conclude that these more recent films signal a change in representation but largely still place lesbian, gay, and trans characters into the normative rom-com structure and thus retain a commitment to Lisa Duggan's apt notion of "homonormativity" (2004).[21]

The final case study chapter analyses the representation of gendered bodies in rom-coms in relation to neoliberal individualism as described by David Harvey (2007) and Michel Foucault's (1988b) concept of "technologies of the self." It is my argument that the rom-coms perpetuate the ideology of neoliberalism and hail subjects as self-investing entrepreneurs responsible for their own self-care. My reading of *Tall Girl* (2019) reveals the neoliberal problem of the non-conforming (tall) female body that challenges the conventional archetype of the small, petite, feminine body, which is reconciled through consumerist manipulation of the female form and juxtaposition with portrayals of dominant masculinity. I also scrutinise how *Shallow Hal* (2001) and *Isn't It Romantic* (2019) use elements of fantasy and fat-centric moments of slapstick comedy to undermine the romantic credibility of their fat protagonists and further reinforce the ideological link between fatness and moral failure. Similarly, *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) and *Ticket to Paradise* (2022) highlight the ageing body as emblematic of a deficiency of self-care. In each of these films, a prevailing message is that fat, tall, or ageing bodies can only be reconciled with Western standards of beauty through individual self-improvement akin to Foucault's conception of technologies of the self (1988b). However, I conclude that disabled or diseased bodies are incongruent with the fundamental aim of the rom-com genre, which is to hail the spectator in a relationship based on simple pleasures and a sense of positivity. Instead, when prominent romantic films integrate characters with disabilities or illness in leading roles, these films are typically depicted as romantic tragedies, as evident in *Forrest*

[21] Duggan defines "homonormativity" as 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption' (2004, p. 50).

Gump (1994), *Love & Other Drugs* (2010), and *Me Before You* (2016). Given the neoliberal perception of the body as a project, failure to achieve the body-project thus equates to either a morally condemnable shortcoming, in cases of ageing and fatness, or a tragedy, in the case of disability and illness. This is achieved by mocking those who exhibit signs of ageing or fatness and excluding from comedic moments those whose bodies exhibit signs of disability or disease. As a genre associated with light-hearted gratification and idyllic resolutions, the omission of disease and disability in rom-coms indicates that, in contrast to fatness, tallness, or old age, diseased and disabled bodies connote unjust suffering and distress in a manner incompatible with the rom-com's film-spectator relationship.

Criteria for Selection of the Case Study Films and Summary of the Potential for New Knowledge

The core of the arguments in this thesis regarding the application of comedy theory to the decoding of gender ideology are contained within the four case study chapters. As explained above, I selected films that respond to gender, race, queerness, and body difference, the four thematic areas of investigation for this thesis. In addition, a set of four secondary criteria were used to refine film selection: 1) adherence to the widely accepted tropes of the rom-com genre; 2) the time period and country in which they were produced; 3) the financial success they achieved at the global box office; and finally, 4) their critical success as indicated in the form of reviews and review aggregation.

The most influential of these criteria was a film's adherence to the widely accepted tropes of the rom-com genre. As mentioned earlier in this introduction, that means that the narrative is driven by a central romantic relationship presented in a light-hearted or comedic manner. The only exceptions to this were the romantic dramas *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Love & Other Drugs* (2010), and *Me Before You* (2016). The decision to include these films is discussed in detail in Chapter 5, which forms a core part of my argument that the disabled or diseased body poses a challenge to the light-hearted or utopian manner in which the romantic comedy film hails its spectator. Otherwise, each of the films contains a central plot in which the viewer is invited to ask, 'will these two people end up in a romantic relationship at the end of the film?' and each presents this plot in a comedic manner.

With regard to the time period and country in which the films were produced, I selected romantic comedy films produced in the UK and USA between the late 1980s and the present day. Others elsewhere have written about representations of the 'strikingly close political, economic, diplomatic and military alliance between the two nations' (Brickman, Jermyn and Trost, 2021a, p. 1; see also Brickman, Jermyn and Trost, 2021b), often referred to as the "special relationship," and how this might be reflected in British and American films. This thesis focuses more on the US's and the

UK's rom-coms as allied and interconnected variations of global "Western-ness" in the current global neoliberal age. While there may be subtle differences – others have postulated that, for example, 'while Americans offer the pleasures of the romantic comedy, the British provide the depth of "high art"' (Bamber, 2021, p. 162), perhaps because 'English nationalism tends to be romantic and located in visions of a past tinged with imperial nostalgia' (Ewen, 2021, p. 264) – this thesis is more concerned with how both British and American examples of the Western rom-com hail their spectator along exclusive lines in terms of race, queerness, and body type. Consequently, each chapter of this thesis analyses a mixture of British and American films produced across the range of this time period in order to be able to draw conclusions as to how the inscription of gender in the rom-com genre across the era of neoliberalism and its breakdown tacitly assumes heterosexual, white, slim, abled-bodied spectatorship.

Since this thesis investigates how romantic comedies reflect shifting mainstream attitudes to gender, I largely focus on films that originally performed relatively well at the box office. To collate this information, I trawled the IMDb website and boxofficemojo.com for global box office revenue figures for romantic comedies. Of the case study films selected, the vast majority are reported to have taken at least $50 million in global box office sales for their cinema releases, and each chapter includes films that took hundreds of millions of dollars (see Table 1 in the appendix). Notable exceptions to this are *Tall Girl* (2019), *Happiest Season* (2020), *Single All the Way* (2021), *Bros* (2022), and *Anything's Possible* (2022). These films were all released onto streaming sites and may have had only short cinema runs for which little data is available. It is also worth noting that, bar *Tall Girl,* all of these low-revenue films feature lesbian, gay, or trans protagonists, which further reveals the exclusion of LGBT+ love stories from mainstream cinema. Nevertheless, these films all employed major Hollywood talent and achieved significant cultural returns via their views on

streaming platforms.[22] As such, I argue that all the case study films are worthy of consideration as prominent and salient examples of the rom-com genre.

As well as financial success, the case study films are also culturally significant for their critical acclaim. Of the twenty-seven case study films, twenty-two have aggregated scores on IMDb of 6.0 or higher, and nineteen have aggregated scores on rottentomatoes.com of 60% or higher. The lowest-scoring films are *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), *Sex and the City 2* (2010), and *Tall Girl* (2019), with *Sex and the City 2* scoring far lower than the other two films on both websites (see Table 1 for further detail). I considered omitting *Sex and the City 2* from the thesis due to its poor reviews making it a slight anomaly, but its global box office takings were amongst the highest on the list, and its estimated budget of $95 million is the highest budget of any of the films studied. Following consideration of this and the film's prominent position within the rom-com cultural landscape as part of the *Sex and the City* franchise, the decision was made that this film was worth consideration as part of this thesis.

All the case study films provide useful evidence as to how gender is inscribed in the mainstream rom-com genre, and the breadth and scale of this research represents a significant analysis of British and American rom-coms between the late 1980s and the present day. This analytic approach of considering comedic moments with regard to ideological recognition constitutes an original contribution to the field of film criticism. In this way my research contributes to the fields of film studies and the study of comedy, which are rarely studied simultaneously. One academic who does this work is Kathleen Rowe Karlyn (2011), who suggests that comedy is a site of transgression for "unruly" women who can weaponise comedy to challenge social normativities. This

[22] *Single All the Way* (2021) was directed by Tony Award winner Michael Mayer, and the cast included Golden Globe Award winner Jennifer Coolidge. *Anything's Possible* (2022) was directed by Tony, Emmy, and Grammy Award winner Billy Porter and featured Tony and Grammy Award winner Renée Elise Goldsberry. *Happiest Season* (2020) featured Kristen Stewart in a lead role alongside other Hollywood stars, including Alison Brie, Aubrey Plaza, and Dan Levy. *Bros* (2022) was written by and stars Emmy Award nominee Billy Eichner alongside performances from Ben Stiller, Kristen Chenoweth, Bowen Yang, Kenan Thompson, and Seth Meyers.

thesis directly challenges this assumption, countering that comedic moments presuppose and thereby reinforce social norms in the moment of their articulation.

I have chosen to use romantic comedy films as historical artefacts documenting the shifting discourse around gender, sexuality, and relationships against the political/cultural backdrop of the rise and collapse of neoliberalism because it is the culture and time period in which I am immersed. My research contributes to discussions around contemporary rom-com filmmaking practice, suggesting that the specific conjuncture that produced the neoliberal romantic comedy films spanning these earlier four decades has ended with persistent austerity cuts, the increasing awareness of the environmental costs of fast-fashion-style consumerism, the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, and the slow death of neoliberalism. As such, my research also contributes to discussions around the politics and cultural shifts of the period between the late 1980s and present day.

Chapter 1: A Hybrid Methodology for Analysing Comedic Moments as Instances of the Encoding of Gender Ideology

1.1 Opening Remarks

So far, the introduction has established the object of inquiry for this thesis (the comedic moments in romantic comedy films), the scope (mainstream rom-com films produced in the UK and USA between the late 1980s and the present day), and the aim of the thesis (to conduct an ideology critique of the function of rom-com's comedic moments). This chapter outlines the methodological approach that the subsequent chapters use in this inquiry as a means of providing a contribution of new knowledge: namely, by using a combination of theories of comedy and feminist film theory to analyse a film's comedic moments specifically, which has not previously been attempted in and of itself. This thesis discloses the complex play of intersections through which gender ideology is articulated in the rom-coms of the past thirty-five years by focusing on the rom-com as text. There is some inclusion of historical context where the analysis of the film specifically requires it, such as the Black Lives Matter Movement and the #MeToo Movement, for example, but in general this thesis focuses on the rom-com film as text as its object of inquiry. As the rom-com is a film genre that has the negotiation of gender and gender expectations at its heart, I outline the feminist film theory that informs my content analysis. Subsequently, I argue that gender is inherently ideological and I elaborate further upon how this thesis combines various theories of comedy, and on specific descriptive terms from scholarly discourse on comedy in general, to form the basis of a critical vocabulary with which to describe and critique the comic moments in romantic comedy films. However, far from solely considering the gender ideology of these comedic moments in abstract isolation, I also use theories of narrative arcs to investigate within the case study films whether the combination of these comedic moments, as units of film discourse, add to the production of a seemingly cohesive gender ideology at the level of each film's narratological discourse.[23] I include the analysis of narrative in my methodology because narrative comprises a total discourse of the film in which comic moments sit

[23] Ruti, in her book *Feminist Film Theory and "Pretty Woman",* concludes that part of the success of *Pretty Woman* (1990) is that it 'skilfully negotiates *seemingly contrasting* attitudes' (2016, p. 177, my emphasis) regarding gender, so that feminist and postfeminist viewers alike can all find something that appeals to them.

as particular articulations, which is to say that to ignore the relation of the moment to the discursive whole is to misrepresent the moment.[24]

[24] Christian Metz argues that 'the traditional film is presented as story, and not as discourse. And yet it is discourse, if we refer it back to the film-maker's intentions, the influence [the film-maker] wields over the general public, etc.' (1985, p. 544). Therefore, when I refer to a film's comedic moments as units of film discourse, I refer to the way in which comedic moments are individual units that the director combines to achieve a cumulative effect on the spectator.

1.2 Gender as Inherently Ideological

A central argument of this thesis is that gender (that is to say, the socially conditioned codification and performance of biological sex) is inherently ideological. My understanding is grounded in the work of feminist scholars such as Judith Butler and Angela McRobbie. For example, Butler notes that 'what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body' (2007, p. xv), and so this chapter investigates the relationship between rom-com characters' actions and the gendered stylisation of their bodies.[25] McRobbie, building upon Butler's work, describes gender as a set of 'boundary-marking practices ensuring the perpetuation of heterosexual masculine domination, while also confirming male bodies as in a binary relation with their female counterparts' (2020, p. 1).[26] Further to this, my work critiques how romantic comedy films use comedy to mark the boundaries of what kinds of bodies are expected and which are marked as comic precisely because they disrupt these boundaries.

In this way, my close reading of the imaginary world of the rom-com reveals something about the reality underpinning the illusory representation of sex, gender, and sexuality against which spectators might recognise themselves. This echoes Althusser's assertion that ideologies 'make allusion to reality, and that they need only be "interpreted" to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world (ideology = illusion/allusion)' (2001, p. 147). One aspect of gender representation that I investigate is the degree of agency that rom-com characters appear to exert over their narrative trajectories.[27] Gendered agency is

[25] This line of feminist discourse finds its antecedents in historical works of feminism such as Simone de Beauvoir's famous argument that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (1984, 295); Janet McCabe notes that '[t]he socio-cultural construct of femininity, long discussed by women thinkers dating back to Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97), was identified as the primary source of female political oppression, economic subordination and historical invisibility' (2004, p. 2).

[26] McRobbie views femininity 'as a series of historically embedded and institutionally endorsed crafting processes, which take shape and are realized in a wide range of textual and visual practices. These bestow, in ritualistic fashion, modes of recognition on bodies that come to be marked, in their conduct and behaviour as well as appearance, as female' (2020, p. 1).

[27] My definition of gendered agency is developed from scriptwriting theorists Dancyger and Rush's dramaturgical definition of 'agency as the ability of a character to act on [their] own, to exhibit will, to change the direction of the story' (2013, p. 307). Dancyger and Rush also note that in addition to this

consequently the extent to which the ability of a character to act on their own to change the direction of the story is presented as an effect of their gender identity. In line with the notion that agency has become 'the pre-eminent factor in contemporary Western feminist analysis' (Rivers, 2017, p. 93), gendered agency is also central to my study of gender ideology in this chapter.

Furthermore, through their depictions of what success and failure look like for male and female characters, I argue that romantic comedies continually reinscribe the subject of female agency within the limits prescribed by neoliberal ideology. Catherine Rottenberg understands neoliberal ideology as 'a dominant political rationality or normative form of reason that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, recasting individuals as capital-enhancing agents' (2018, p. 7). I suggest that the relationships in romantic comedies are presented as capital enhancing due to their intertwinement with consumerism and affluence, and so this emphasis on "doing" and "initiating" is particularly important in relation to the depiction of female success narratives. As McRobbie puts it, the modern ideal for women is to be someone who 'can "do it all" even if she cannot quite "have it all"' (2020, p. 32), and certainly the period between the late 1980s and the present day has been marked by many perceived advances in lifestyle and consumer choice that give the appearance of greater agency for at least some women.[28] Of course, this does not

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first definition of agency, which they term "action agency," a spectator's perception of a film is also influenced by what they call "reflective agency," which is 'a form of subjectivity in which a character does not directly affect the action line, but rather one in which [their] reaction shapes the viewer's understanding of the scene' (pp. 307–308). While Dancyger and Rush's text is part of the economy of filmmaking that I am examining, their theoretical approach to agency in film is a useful basis for my research.

[28] In the 1980s, the UK had its first female prime minister (Margaret Thatcher), meanwhile the US saw its first female presidential candidate to secure the ballot in all fifty states (Dr Lenora Fulani in 1988). Advances in gender politics were not limited to women in symbolic positions of power such as this, however. The USA's Civil Rights Act of 1964 was amended in 1978 to include protections against discrimination based on pregnancy and childbirth, and the UK's Equality Act 2010 made it illegal for an employer to discriminate against employees or candidates based on their sex. Meanwhile, across a similar timeframe there have also been advances in the rights of marginalised groups of women, such as lesbians. In the UK, same-sex couples have legally been allowed to adopt since 2002, and in 2017 same-sex adoption became legal in all fifty US states. Similarly, marriage between gay and lesbian couples was legalised in the UK in 2014 and in the USA in 2015. Thus, at least superficially, cisgender women of all sexual orientations have seen rapid and significant advances in their rights and opportunities in this time period.

address the full extent to which women's rights translate to advances in agency, since the rights conferred on individuals and the ability of those individuals to exploit those rights to bring about effective change are not the same thing. Indeed, these advances in the public sphere have merely added to the domestic, care, and emotional work that women disproportionately continue to do in the private sphere. Even within the world of work, Cornut-Gentille notes a contradiction in which, at least in the 1980s, 'as workers, women are expected to comply with traditional female stereotypes. If they conform to these pre-ordained, male assumptions, they tend not to be taken seriously, if they don't, they are seen as a threat to organisational stability' (1998, p. 115). In short, even 'within such "empowering" discourses the burden of change is still placed upon women who are encouraged to look internally for a solution to prevailing currents of sexism' (Rivers, 2017, p. 63).

These kinds of contradictions in gender dynamics have led numerous feminist writers – including those with significant privilege, such as Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg (2012) and US Director of Policy Planning Anne-Marie Slaughter (2012) – to lament that many women cannot "have it all" in the twenty-first century. McRobbie has gone one step further by arguing that 'the expression "having it all" also has an aggressive intent: it is a boundary-marking exercise designed to ward off and belittle those for whom it cannot possibly apply' (2020, p. 50). Furthermore, her idea that 'cultural intelligibility as a young woman is now tilted towards the achievement of "affluent, middle-class maternity" with its many accoutrements, in particular a spectacularly slim body, and well-groomed and manicured appearance' (p. 32), which excludes those to whom this does not apply, can be seen in the casting of stars who embody slim, middle-class femininity in many of the most commercially successful rom-coms of this period.[29] As such, the representation of gender in romantic comedy

[29] Of course, an exhaustive list of such casting decisions is impossible, but there are prominent examples of slim, white women cast repeatedly in romantic comedy films, such as Meg Ryan in *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989), *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), and *You've Got Mail* (1998); Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* (1990), *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *Notting Hill* (1999), and *Ticket to Paradise* (2022); Sandra Bullock in *While You Were Sleeping* (1995), *Two Weeks' Notice* (2002), and *The Proposal* (2009); or more recently Emma Stone in *Easy A* (2010), *Crazy, Stupid, Love* (2011), *La La Land* (2016); and Lily James in *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again* (2018), *Yesterday* (2019), and *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (2022).

is always inherently ideological since it conveys illusory power dynamics that relate to the spectator's material conditions of existence and the structuring of wider society.

1.3 Feminist Film Theory and the Rom-Com

The way that gender dynamics are represented in mainstream rom-com is most often via a central heterosexual relationship between a man and a woman. In order to critique the manner in which a rom-com film's comedic moments reveal its underlying gender ideology, I utilise concepts from a wealth of feminist film theory. I particularly use the work of Mary Ann Doane (1988) on "women's films" and Mulvey's (1988) concepts of scopophilia, narcissism, and the "male gaze," as well as considering how these ideas might be complicated by hooks's (2009) "oppositional gaze," Paula Marantz Cohen's (2010) "female gaze," and Mari Ruti's (2016) "surveillance gaze," as outlined in this section.

Doane (1988) approaches ideology psychoanalytically, studying the so-called "women's films" of the mid-twentieth century. My methodology is grounded in both her understanding of the inscription of gendered subjectivity and her theorising of the association between femininity and commodification. She selects case study films 'by their tendencies to activate the specifically cinematic structures of subjectivity – primarily the voice-over, point-of-view shots, and the marking of certain sequences as dreams, hallucinations, or flashback-memories – in relation to a female character' (Doane, 1988, pp. 34–35). My thesis uses the same cinematic structures of subjectivity to analyse whether the case study films produce a male- or female-presenting perspective. If, as Doane writes, 'the woman's film, in its obsessive attempt to circumscribe a place for the female spectator, is so crucial to a feminist analysis' (p. 37), then one aspect of this thesis is to interrogate the ways in which the rom-com can really be described as a gynocentric genre. Of course, Doane clarifies that a film

> cannot produce a coherent "I". An "I" may occur in the dialogue but it is not the "I" of the film, properly speaking. Subjectivity is inscribed in the cinema in various ways – through voice-over, point of view structures, etc. – but it is always localized. (p. 10)

However, if in, say, *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), the inscription of subjectivity through the voice-over and camera angles consistently marks the "I" of the film as its female protagonist, then the film can be said to have a female-centric subjectivity. Thus, the question when interrogating the representation of gender in this film is 'how is "femininity" constructed and reflected by the film's comedic moments?' Alternatively, a film such as *The Big Sick* (2017) consistently uses the same techniques to suggest that the "I" of the film is its male protagonist. Here the question when analysing this film is 'how is "masculinity" constructed in its comedic moments?' Finally, there are, of course, films which are less consistent in their inscription of subjectivity, such as the multi-protagonist *Love Actually* (2003). One step in my method of film analysis is therefore an analysis of the inscription of subjectivity in relation to gender through critiquing the voice-over, camera angles, and other point-of-view structures.

Doane further writes that the underlying gender ideology 'produce[s] a desire for the image/commodity which is all the more insistent as it fails to differentiate between the image/commodity as object and the spectator as desiring subject' (1988, p. 177), and as such 'the woman's objectification, her susceptibility to processes of fetishization, display, profit and loss, the production of surplus value, all situate her in a relation of resemblance to the commodity form' (p. 22). In this way, she argues that films aimed at women promote capitalist consumerism and self-objectification as a route to narrative fulfilment. Consequently, Doane suggests that 'the tropes of female spectatorship are not empowering' (p. 9). However, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker suggest that the neoliberal version of femininity within romantic comedies is subliminally coded as privileged and empowered, since they contain

> a preoccupation with self-fashioning and the makeover; women's seeming "choice" not to occupy high-status public roles; the celebration of sexual expression and affluent femininities – [which] are enabled by the optimism and opportunity of prosperity (or the perception of it). (2014, p. 1)

In my research, I seek to complicate Doane's as well as Negra and Tasker's conclusions by considering the class, race, sexuality, and body type of the female protagonists – for example, as Dodd and Fradley note, during the 2000s Jennifer Lopez's rom-coms 'mobilise stereotypes about Latin ethnic "toughness" to underscore the authenticity of Lopez' onscreen personae' (2009, p. 193).

In addition to Doane's theories, I also apply Mulvey's psychoanalytic concepts of scopophilia, narcissism, and the male gaze to romantic comedies produced since the late 1980s. These three key terms all refer to ways in which the viewer might be positioned as a spectator by the film. Nowell-Smith notes that 'psychoanalysis is crucially concerned with the intersubjectivity of the construction of meaning […]. The spectating subject requires the relation to another in order to situate itself, and somewhere the film must provide it with that other' (1985, p. 553). As I detail below, Mulvey maintains that in narrative cinema the male position in this intersubjective relation is always produced through an identification with the male gaze. Mulvey describes two pleasures for the spectator in the cinema: 'the first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen' (1988, p. 61). Where Mulvey concludes that, historically at least, 'pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female' (p. 62), I analyse the moments in my case study rom-coms where one character takes pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight and note the intersectional gender identity of the spectator and the object of their gaze. I also critique the protagonist and the extent to which the audience is encouraged to adopt a gendered mentality akin to the protagonist. Mulvey describes the way in which a gaze is constructed by the filmmaker as follows:

> Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. (p. 67)

This means that a film manipulates the sense of perspective that the spectator has in order to create a sense of identification, which, to the immersed spectator, is undetected. I consequently analyse the editing and narrative choices on a film-by-film basis to nuance my understanding of the desire engineered within each film, uncovering a heteropatriarchal ideology within films made much later on in my period, even in this supposedly female-orientated genre. Even in the rom-coms of the 1990s and 2000s, dominated by so-called power and choice feminism, I hypothesise that in their comedic moments, femininity is coded for sexual passivity and masculinity is coded for pleasure.[30]

While many subsequent feminists, including Mulvey herself, have critiqued her seminal essay for its exclusion of race and sexuality, the notions of scopophilia and narcissism remain useful for feminist film analysis, and my work seeks to avoid the universalising generalisations and the omitting of minoritarian perspectives that Mulvey has been critiqued for by documenting the characters' identities in greater detail than Mulvey did. Since I am analysing comedy as an ideological construct, I also adapt Mulvey's discussion of the female protagonist as a passive object 'coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness'* (1988, p. 62) to discuss the extent to which male and female protagonists are coded for comedic impact in romantic comedies and whether the active/passive dichotomy is upheld in comedic pleasure as well as visual pleasure. In other words, in the second chapter of this thesis especially, I ask, 'to what extent do the female-presenting characters constitute a source of visual pleasure while the male-presenting characters drive the comedic moments?' Of course, these are deliberately broad and provocative questions, and Chapters 3, 4, and 5 look to nuance these ideas greatly.

In contrast to Mulvey's work, which assumes identification with the male protagonist, my work assumes the premise that a variety of modes of spectator

[30] As will be discussed later, this means that female characters are associated with sexual agency when they are also coded for masculinity, as with the characters of Samantha (Kim Cattrall) in *Sex and the City 2* (2010) and Amy (Amy Schumer) in *Trainwreck* (2015).

identification are simultaneously in play when watching a romantic comedy film, inspired by the work of bell hooks. As introduced earlier, hooks articulates the idea of 'oppositional gaze' as 'the pleasure of interrogation' (2009, p. 268). Building upon Mulvey's earlier work, hooks describes three modes of spectatorship: identification with the protagonist regardless of the similarities between the viewer and this character; identification with a supporting character because of a shared similarity between the viewer and this character; and a deliberate choice not to identify with any of the characters on-screen. This is not to say that the pleasure derived from each of these three modes of spectatorship are equal; she writes of 'that added delight if one happens, in the process of interrogation, to come across a narrative that invites the black female spectator to engage the text with no threat of violation' (p. 268). My work aims to critically investigate the opportunities for identification for minoritarian viewers and the ways in which those opportunities are delimited, detailing the multifaceted identities of the central characters in each case study film. I do this through documenting race, gender, sexuality, disability, class, and any other aspect of a character that is highlighted through the film. Thus, a core objective for this thesis is not only to document the traditional homogeneity of protagonists but also the potential of 'Hollywood cinema as a space of knowledge production that has enormous power' (hooks, 2009, p. 271) to 'not simply offer diverse representations, [but] imagine new transgressive possibilities for the formulation of identity' (p. 274). hooks' form of spectatorship attributes more agency to the part of the viewer than this thesis can examine using content analysis, since my focus is on the spectator as hailed subject, but nevertheless a useful thread from her work that is apposite for my analysis is found by following not just how the spectator is being hailed but with whom they are invited to identity, and, importantly, who is not being represented on screen.

Also positioning herself in direct opposition to Mulvey, Cohen (2010) proposes that the rom-com genre is actually engineered towards a female gaze. Cohen emphasises the importance of materialism in rom-coms, since 'romantic comedies engage with material things in a particular way: they glory in them and glorify them; they make them an expression and an extension of the self' (2010, p. 79), meaning

that ‘spectacle becomes central, and plot, secondary’ (p. 80). This ethos of style over substance informs both the costume and dialogue of romantic comedies so that ‘emphatic language and the silly, over-the-top outfits form an expressive idea that can serve as permission to women to be themselves – to look and talk in outlandish and idiosyncratic ways’ (p. 85). Cohen’s reading of the primacy of spectacle is neither wholly negative nor unambiguously positive, since she states that this can either result in ‘another means of manipulating women into dependence on a consumer culture’ or an empowerment to be ‘present and artful in every choice regarding the self’ (p. 87). Either way, there is a link between the underlying structure of romantic comedies and material success. To avoid confusion with the heterosexual female gaze (through which the spectator is invited to objectify the male characters), Cohen’s theory might be renamed as the “material gaze.” This distinction also serves to avoid any misreading of Cohen, as she does not argue that there is anything essentially female about this desire to gaze materially but that romantic comedies ‘appeal to the “material girl” in viewers (male and female alike)’ (p. 79). Utilising Cohen’s essay, I discuss the material elements of romantic comedies to chart the ways in which agency, race, queerness, and body image have been commodified in romantic comedies between the late 1980s and the present day.

Further to this notion of the materialism within romantic comedies, Ruti reiterates this notion that romantic comedies present ‘sexual self-objectification [as] women’s fastest route to success’ (2016, p. 12).[31] This provides female leads with agency, but only when they perform a ‘femininity [that] has over the centuries been molded in ways that are designed to meet male needs more than vice versa’ (p. 34). Ruti concludes that ‘third-wave feminism, through its celebration of gender performativity, participated in the escalation of commercialized forms of hyperfemininity’ (p. 67) that led to what Ruti describes as ‘a surveillance gaze [that] is relentlessly self-critical, engaged in a continual comparison between one’s appearance and that of other women, and anxiously worried about one’s desirability to men’ (p.

[31] In turn, this can be seen as an extension of de Beauvoir’s argument that ‘the “true woman” is required to make herself object, to be the Other’ (1984, p. 291).

88). This leads me to question how comedy interacts with the racialisation of commercialised hyperfemininity that the genre appears to promote, and how this might have shifted during fourth-wave feminism.

In summary, there are numerous different tools and concepts from feminist film theory that can be applied to the romantic comedy in order to analyse the gender politics at play within the genre. These theories provide valuable insight into the manner in which men and women have been portrayed as distinct categories in mainstream narrative cinema in order to reinforce the structures of heteropatriarchal hegemony. However, as is explored in subsequent chapters, there is also an implicit whiteness, heterosexuality, and focus on Western beauty standards at work in a lot of this writing. Nevertheless, this work forms one of the axes of my research, which I seek to complicate with additional writing on race, queerness, and body difference in order to achieve the aim of critiquing the gender ideology inherent in the mainstream rom-com genre. Therefore, in the following section, I take theories of ideology and evaluate how they might be applied to a methodological approach.

1.4 Theories of Ideology and the Rom-Com

It is often noted that 'film [and by extension the rom-com as a subset of film] enacts ideological meanings through its form' (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, 2017, p. 60), and that '[e]xposing the tools used by a particular romcom can help the examination of the underlying ideology the film reflects' (McDonald, 2007, p. 15). This thesis proposes examining the rom-com's comedic forms to shed light on how jokes and humour reinscribe ideology. For example, at the end of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), Charles (Hugh Grant) and Carrie (Andie MacDowell) kiss (see figure 4) and the camera then pans to a bolt of lightning in the sky above them (see figure 5). What this reveals is an ideological link between human romantic relationships, as depicted by the kiss, and a sense of fate or the sublime, as indicated by the flash of lightning. The film does not reveal a fundamental truth about these characters and the real relations in which they live, but it purports to do exactly this. It seems to suggest that this is a moment in which the characters realise they are "in love," even though this is an imaginary relation of these individuals, bolstered by the tropes of the romantic comedy genre.



Figure 4: Charles (Hugh Grant) and Carrie (Andie MacDowell) kiss at the end of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994).



Figure 5: The camera then pans to a bolt of lightning in the sky above them, implying a sense of the sublime or fate in connection to their kiss.

An individual who believes in the rom-com ideology of "true love" might conclude that in this moment – since 'what is reflected in the imaginary representation of the world found in an ideology is the conditions of existence of men, i.e. their real world' (Althusser, 2001, 149) – there is evidence that "true love" does exist. This is not to suggest that fans of romantic comedy necessarily believe that what they are watching is real. As Althusser states, 'the individual *is interpellated as a (free) subject in*

order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection' (p. 164, emphasis in original). In the same way, I contend that the spectator is interpellated by the rom-com as a believer in love in order that they freely accept this subjection to the ideological tenets of love as defined in the rom-com genre, such as monogamy, heterosexuality, and domestic coupledom. The capitalised "Subject" for the rom-com is Love, so that Althusser's line, 'caught in this quadruple system of interpellation as subjects, of subjection to the Subject, of universal recognition and of absolute guarantee, the subjects "work," they "work by themselves" in the vast majority of cases' (p. 163), becomes: 'caught in this quadruple system of interpellation as believers in Love, of subjection to Love, of universal recognition and of absolute guarantee (that Love exists and can be achieved as shown in the rom-com), the spectator works at achieving this idealised version of love in their own life, and they work on this by themselves.' Of course, this requires an explanation of what "Love" denotes in this context. It is both an illusion and a set of material practices; it is something that is idealised and shot through with contradiction. It is, in the final analysis, the ideology of the individual, of individual self-realisation through the acquirement of the desired other, and in this sense, of course, it also therefore alludes to capitalism and modes of desire and possession.

Additionally, a rom-com film's comedic moments do not exist in a vacuum, nor are they traditionally experienced by the spectator out of context. Consequently, I here outline my approach to analysis of the rom-com's narrative structure. Narrative analysis provides useful descriptive tools that aid in my critique of the case study films to reveal the gendered nature of recurrent male and female rom-com narrative arcs. In the sense that ideology is 'the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life' (Eagleton, 2007, p. 1), it is possible to view this kind of analysis as ideological decoding. Furthermore, because the rom-com is structured as a comedy, there is the added layer of meaning in which the plot is incongruous with our expectations of the world. For example, the plot of *Pretty Woman* (1990) is incongruous because we might not expect a wealthy businessperson to form a committed romantic relationship with a sex worker. It is notable that in *Pretty Woman* the wealthy businessperson is male and

the sex worker is female, and to the extent that to study ideology 'is to study the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination' (Thompson, 1984, p. 4), it can be said that this film supports a gender ideology wherein women's bodies are objectified by men and men provide financially for the women they desire. Thus, it is possible to use this kind of narrative analysis to agree with Steve Neale that, in the period post *Pretty Woman*, 'the emergence of the new romance [from the mid-1980s onwards] […] constituted the revival not just of an "old-fashioned" genre, but also of an ideology of "old-fashioned" heterosexual romance and hence of the rituals, signs and wishes that mark it' (2007, p. 271).

Since all of my case studies adhere to a three-act structure, I now turn to highlight some of Dancyger and Rush's ideas about how this narrative arrangement relates to the notion of a film's underlying ideology. Dancyger and Rush state that 'the first act is concerned with setup, the second act with confrontation, and the third act with resolution' (2013, p. 18). This is ideological in an Althusserian sense because the plot structure of the film positions the "norm" that is being restored as relevant to the spectator. If 'ideology "acts" or "functions" in such a way that it "recruits" subjects among the individuals […] by that very precise operation […] interpellation' (Althusser, 2001, p. 157), then narrative films are ideological because they "recruit" the viewer by interpellating them into the form of the narrative through the cinematic techniques of imagery and sound and the narrative meanings that are produced through (among other things) montage. The ideology to which the viewer is recruited is then discernible through analysis of the film's imagery, sound, and narrative meaning, that is, it forms a narrative discourse.

Due to the connotation of 'the third act with resolution' (Dancyger and Rush, 2013, p. 18), Dancyger and Rush describe these films as having a 'restorative three-act structure' (p. 17), which builds 'the plot so that self-realization can come before external payback' (p. 21). The key question for my analysis of plot is then 'what is so important to the world of this film that the entire plot centres around its restoration?' To continue the analysis of *Pretty Woman* (1990), the driving narrative question is, as

with all rom-coms, 'will these two people become a romantic couple?' Thus, the film's spectator cannot avoid the ideological message: in this film it is important whether Edward (Richard Gere) and Vivian (Julia Roberts) become a couple or not. This can then be extended to an underlying ideological message: heteronormative coupling is important. According to Dancyger and Rush, three-act structures 'are about the intersection of a particular action and a particular character so that the working out of the action is a simultaneous working out of the character' (2013, p. 19), and so the moment that Edward and Vivian realise (in this film Edward has the realisation alone) that they need to become a couple (the goal of the action), they learn something about themselves as characters. Dancyger and Rush further attribute a "positivity" or an "optimism" to this narrative arrangement insofar as the 'restorative three-act structure gives characters maximum opportunity for redemption and restoration' (p. 29). Here, they intend "positivity" to mean that the protagonist achieves their goals despite numerous obstacles, which leads the immersed spectator to feel a positive sense of catharsis and potentially to infer that they should also pursue the same goal as the protagonist – and that if they do so, despite obstacles, they may succeed.

In the case of *Pretty Woman,* Edward wants financial and career success, since his business is in the process of acquiring, dismantling, and selling-off a family-run ship-building firm. Of course, it is not coincidental that the business he is demolishing signifies nostalgia and family values, since these are key aspects of the monogamous, heterosexual couple. As such, his want is individualistic and financially driven, but his "need" for Vivian is about companionship. The point that Dancyger and Rush note is that because the "need" to prioritise traditional social values is played out over the course of an entire, feature-length film, there is room for Edward to consistently make the wrong choice between his want and his need before his moment of redemption, where he saves the family-run business and then "saves" Vivian by driving to her instead of the airport at the end of the film. The term "need" here also implies an underlying sense of truth. Eagleton notes that in studies of ideology, some thinkers, such as Hegel and Marx, are 'preoccupied with ideas of true and false cognition, with ideology as illusion' (2007, p. 3). In the literature around filmmaking there is a sense

that what a character wants similarly represents false cognition and that the realisation of their "need" is the moment that the character realises the folly of falling for an ideological illusion. This implies a value judgment wherein the "need" of a protagonist is presented as true and the want as false. Conversely, '[f]or Althusser, one can speak of descriptions or representations of the world as being either true or false; but ideology is not for him at root a matter of such descriptions at all, and criteria of truth and falsehood are thus largely irrelevant to it' (Eagleton, 2007, p. 18). Similarly, I contend that the false cognition (Edward's individualistic want) that is lifted for the protagonist at the end of the film in favour of their "true" need (Edward's need to be with Vivian) within the world of the film reveals something about the privileging of heterosexual coupling that is key to the rom-com, but whether the viewer is immersed in either the same "false cognition" or enlightened by the same "truth" is largely irrelevant to this thesis.

Instead, it is more revealing to consider the ubiquity of the redemptive three-act structure as 'sets of ideas by which [people] posit, explain and justify ends and means of organised social action, and specifically political action, irrespective of whether such action aims to preserve, amend, uproot or rebuild a given social order' (Seliger, 1976, p. 11). In this line of thinking, the rom-com's structure preserves the social order, in which society is organised around the heterosexual couple because the economy is driven by human consumption, which is dependent (among other things) on childbearing to drive supply for both labour demand and product/service demand.[32] It is hence unsurprising that rom-coms made in a culture that prizes monogamous commitment so largely present the acts of coupling and recoupling as their positive, redemptive conclusion. Therefore, the rom-com can be (and has been) critiqued as 'a story with a clear violation [(the couple breaks up/encounters obstacles)] followed by recognition and redemption [(the couple get back together), which] seems like a moral tale, a reaffirmation of a preexisting, commonly understood ethics' (Dancyger and Rush, 2013, p. 32). Of course, this is an oversimplification, and

[32] See also the way that capital relies on reproductive labour carried out by women as articulated by Silvia Federici (2004) and Nancy Fraser (1989).

later chapters explore the ways in which a film such as *The Birdcage* (1996) or *Love, Simon* (2018) has the potential to be read as a disruption, or at least as a complication, of pre-existing social norms. In this way, most rom-coms can be critiqued simply as ideological marriage/heterosexual monogamy propaganda in terms of their plot structure. And even those that disrupt this ideology in their final act with a less "positive" conclusion, still affirm the prevalence of the couple by centring their guiding question around it. This kind of analysis is not what Dancyger and Rush do in their work, but the analytic and dramaturgical tools they provide for breaking a plot down into its three acts serves as the foundation onto which an ideological analysis can be mapped.

So, it is my argument that that the 'slavishly formulaic' (Abbott and Jermyn, 2009a, p. 2) predictability of the rom-com structure may in fact be a strength when viewed in terms of its ideological function. One potential reason for why we accept gender stereotyping within films is that 'conventional depictions reassure us that our society's interpretation of the world is correct' (Ruti, 2016, p. 31), combined with an understanding of the ideology of comedy that argues that the incongruous '"misrepetition" of gender presupposes – and in some ways reinforces – the hegemonic codes of gender it opposes' (p. 65). In the case of the rom-com, when viewed by a heterosexual viewer, the character who finds romance as part of a heterosexual couple potentially acts as a means of reassurance while simultaneously hailing the viewer as a subject in an Althusserian sense. More than this, it is my contention that the spectator that is hailed by the mainstream romantic comedy film produced in the US and UK since the late 1980s is not only gendered but implicitly white, heteronormative, slim, young, and able-bodied. Through their focus on individual agency irrespective of the intersections of race, queerness, and body difference, the films also reproduce the sense that '[n]eoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse', which has 'pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world' (Harvey, 2007, p. 3).

In summary, it is my argument that not only does the mainstream romantic comedy film use signs and signifiers to convey ideology to its viewer in particular moments but that the three-act narrative arc of the mainstream film is in itself an inherently ideological structure. As a structure that focuses on the actions of one or two active protagonists who overcome narrative obstacles and, often, achieve their goals, the mainstream three-act structure privileges entrepreneurial self-investment and individualism over alternatives such as class struggle or group action. As the rom-com is a subset of mainstream cinema that focuses on the protagonist as a gendered agent in pursuit of romantic coupling, analysis of the plot structures of the case study films reveals how depictions of gender vary between male and female protagonists as well as what kinds of obstacles are reproduced as barriers to romantic coupling. Finally, this thesis also explores how race, gender, and queerness complicate and challenge the gendering of these narrative tropes.

1.5 Comedy as the Overlooked Component of the Romantic Comedy Film

Even within the foremost edited collections that focus on the rom-com (Evans and Deleyto, 1998; Abbott and Jermyn, 2009b; San Filippo, 2021a), there is a notable scarcity of chapters that focus on the specific function of comedy in the rom-com. McDonald suggests that one explanation of why rom-coms are overlooked in academic analyses is because they provide pleasures, such as comedy, that are often viewed as '"guilty pleasures"' (2007, p. 7). Yet, as I discussed in my definition of the rom-com in the introduction to this thesis, the feature that distinguishes the romantic comedy from the women's films that Doane (1988) studied, or the dramas that Mulvey (1988) critiqued, is the omnipresence of a comedic sensibility. The foremost theories of comedy broadly agree that comedy is dependent on mutually held knowledge about the world in the minds of the comedy-instigator and the comedy-recipient, which the joke then challenges. In other words, '[a]udience uptake of a specimen of humour then demands that the humorist and the appreciative audience both share the norms in question, at least imaginatively' (Carroll, 2014, p. 81). Comedic moments consequently rely on shared information in order for the viewer to get the joke, and my research works backwards from the joke to reveal the underlying shared "knowledge" or ideological obviousness upon which the joke hinges.[33] Thus it is my contention that, despite the perception of the rom-com genre as 'inherently trite or lightweight' (Abbott and Jermyn, 2009a, p. 2), the underlying ideological messaging around sex, gender, sexuality, and intersectional identities – the kind of messaging that contemporary feminism has alerted us to – is missed if we neglect to take rom-com's comedic moments seriously. In order to analyse these moments, I now continue the discussion, begun in the introduction, of the theories of comedy that form a core part of this thesis's methodological approach.

My work seeks to redress the absence of rom-com comedy analysis by probing the superiority theory as described by Aristotle (1996), the tension-release theory of

[33] Indeed, it is only to be expected that romance and comedy are so often combined, since, as Carroll writes, 'sex and sexual behaviour are freighted with so many norms and stereotypes' that it makes them 'a natural breeding ground for humour' (2014, p. 27).

comedy as described by Freud (2002), and the incongruity theory of comedy as described by Koestler (1989).[34] Each of these theorists, of course, can be critiqued as male-centric and narrow in their applicability given the themes of the thesis. Therefore, I supplement these foundational comedy theories with more recent work on comedy and representation, including other, less-cited comedy theories – such as those in Halpern, Close, and Johnson (1994), Double (2014), Rowe (1995), and Rowe Karlyn (2011) – to create a comprehensive vocabulary for describing comedic moments.

The first theory of comedy that I shall investigate for its usefulness with regard to rom-coms is the superiority theory. This is a theory that can be found in a number of contexts dating back in history; for example, Thomas Hobbes summarises it in *Leviathan*, first published in 1651, as follows:

> the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them, or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. (1981, p. 125)

Writing in the fourth century BC, Aristotle similarly condenses the superiority theory by stating that 'comedy is […] an imitation of inferior people' because of 'an error or disgrace that does not involve pain or destruction' (1996, p. 9). In other words, the spectator witnesses a character behaving foolishly, and experiencing minor discomfort as a result, and laughs because they feel superior to the character in this situation. In my research, an analysis of gender-based comedic moments using superiority theory reveals which gender identities are given superior status relative to one another within the frame of a specific ideological film discourse. However, the section of Aristotle's *Poetics* that deals with comedy is remarkably short and does not elaborate on how one

[34] The thesis also mobilises Bergson's (1913) theory of comedy as the rendering of the human body as an object in relation to the comedic representation of fatness on screen in the final chapter, but this relates most specifically to the dehumanising use of comedy to ridicule body failure and is less applicable to wider rom-com.

person might be judged as “inferior” or “superior” to another. The language of the superiority theory assumes a hierarchical relation of people to other people in the highly stratified social world of ancient Athens, which does not account for the status dynamics at play in most modern-day romantic comedies. Moreover, even if we were to infer the meanings of “inferiority” and “superiority” based on the plays that Aristotle describes in *Poetics*, the application of these terms to contemporary films would be a folly because these terms are culturally relative and the culture of the UK and USA today is not the same as the one in which Aristotle wrote. Furthermore, these terms ignore the possibility of *laughing with* the character in question.

At the end of *Pretty Woman* (1990), Edward Lewis (Richard Gere) comically overcomes his fear of heights to climb the fire escape and get to Vivian Ward (Julia Roberts). He trembles and clutches onto the railing as he does so, even though he is only one storey above the ground (see figure 6). He, a successful businessperson, is dressed in a tailored suit with perfectly coiffed hair and gets a supportive smile from his limousine driver below. As such, he can hardly be described as an inferior person in this moment, since his appearance in many ways signifies success in terms of wealth and prestige. His actions are also far from pitiable, since he holds red roses and is climbing up to speak to the woman he has shown attraction towards for the entire preceding film, who has equally shown attraction towards him. He is overcoming his fear in order to achieve the reward of coupledom, which in the context of the rom-com narrative means overall success.[35] We may be laughing at him – a confident, wealthy businessman with a fear of heights – because his fear of heights makes him vulnerable and we would not expect this of his character. We may find it amusing because the level of fear he shows is incongruous with the danger we perceive of the situation. However, he is also climbing the fire escape to tell Vivian that he loves her, which, in the rom-com discourse, is framed as the commendable thing to do. As such, Aristotelian superiority theory is inadequate for critiquing the comedy in this moment.

[35] While it is not success in terms of the earlier “want” Edward pursued (the corporate takeover), it is success in terms of the “need” he realises at the film’s narrative conclusion. The balcony scene is also underscored with operatic music that crescendos as Edward and Vivian climb towards each other, further signalling this as a successful moment for these characters.

Furthermore, the comedic moment that ends this sequence comes when Vivian declares that after a princess is rescued by the prince, 'she rescues him right back.' This is a subversion of the princess-rescued-from-a-tower trope from fairy tales and is certainly a witty, comedic moment, but neither character can be said to be "inferior" here. Hence, while Aristotle's notions of superiority and inferiority may be useful in some circumstances – such as slapstick or silent comedy, often based on social distinction – they are limited in their usages for this thesis, as they do not cover the nuances of relationships in modern romantic comedy films.



Figure 6: Edward (Richard Gere) looks frightened as he climbs a fire escape to get to Vivian (Julia Roberts) at the end of *Pretty Woman* (1990).

One aspect of comedy that is not covered by superiority theory is the sense in which there is a reversal or release of tension in the moment of comic articulation. This idea can be noted in Kant's assertion that '[l]aughter is an affection arising from sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing' (1911, p. 54), or when 'Herbert Spencer regarded laughter as a discharge of nervous energy which occurs when the mind, taken unawares, is led from the consciousness of something large (grave or at least serious) to something small (silly or trivial)' (Carroll, 2014, p. 38). However, this notion of relief is most famously articulated in tension-release theory, as

discussed by Freud in 1912, for whom tension is built and then released in the moment of comedy, which serves a psychic or cathartic purpose socially. For Freud, the most prominent proponent of tension-release theory, jokes are 'ways of restoring old freedoms and of disburdening us from the compulsion of our intellectual education' (2002, p. 124).[36] According to Freud, we expend mental energy repressing our sexual and violent desires in order to fit into a co-operative, civilised society. In this way, Freud understands comedy as acting rather like a valve that releases the pressure that builds up when we repress our violent and sexual urges. He categorises jokes into a number of types, including 'a *hostile* joke (used for aggression, satire, defence)' or 'an obscene joke (used to strip one naked)' (p. 94, emphasis in original), and certainly it is possible to describe comic moments from romantic comedies in these terms. Freud states that 'the pleasure comes from a saving […] regaining from the activity of the psyche a pleasure which in fact was lost only with the development of that activity' (p. 228). Thus, in the example of climbing the fire escape at the end of *Pretty Woman*, the comedy stems from a violent desire to see Edward fall or an anticipation that he is climbing the fire escape in order to have physical relations with Vivian. Of course, one issue with Freud's work on comedy is that it presupposes that there are universal impulses towards sex and violence. It also assumes heteronormativity, as seen, for example, when he states that '[b]awdy talk, then, is in origin directed at women and is to be regarded as the equivalent of an attempt at seduction' (p. 94).

Carroll critiques Freud's conception of comedy as having 'the liability of presupposing hydraulic views of the mind which are highly dubious' (2014, p. 38). Where the hydraulic metaphor might have more value is in the relationship between setup and punchline. As for why sexual urges and violent urges might link to comedy more often, I think this can be explained insofar as sexual and violent acts are incongruous with polite, co-operative conversation. These are relatively universally avoided across cultures and historical time periods, and so comedy that uses sex and violence is commonplace because it is widely understood as incongruous. However,

[36] Freud was not the first to develop a relief-based theory of humour; the first is thought to be Lord Shaftesbury's *An Essay on Freedom of Wit and Humour* (1709).

returning to the fire-escape scene from *Pretty Woman*, Edward has been set up as one of the two protagonists of the film, and through camera angles (we see his vertigo-inducing view from the fire escape) we are encouraged to identify with his perspective. In this way, a primal desire to see him fall would be a rather masochistic one. In addition to this, the opening shots of the film included close-up shots of Vivian's body as she got dressed (see figure 7), and we have seen both of these characters take a bath together earlier in the film (see figure 8), so it seems unlikely that the spectator is expending psychic energy repressing a sexual desire in this scene where both characters are fully clothed and clutching onto a fire escape. Once again, it seems that the tension-release theory is inadequate for fully describing the comedy in this scene.



Figure 7: The first time that Vivian (Julia Roberts) appears on screen in *Pretty Woman* (1990), it is in a close-up shot of her bottom that repreoduces Mulvey's (1988) concept of the male gaze.



Figure 8: The comedy at the end of *Pretty Woman* (1990) is unrelated to a build-up of sexual tension, since the spectator has already seen Edward (Richard Gere) and Vivian (Julia Roberts) in sexual situations earlier in the film.

Instead, the central theory of comedy that I scaffold my methodology around is the incongruity theory; indeed as Carroll points out, '[t]o date […] the incongruity theory of humour has attracted the largest allegiance among philosophers and psychologists' (2014, p. 17), including Kant (1911), Schopenhauer (1907) and Kierkegaard (1941). Carroll cites Hutcheson (1750) as the earliest theorist to convey the sense of 'what has become to be known as the *incongruity theory* of humour' (Carroll, 2014, p. 16, emphasis in original). Incongruity theory is mechanised through "bisociation," explained by Arthur Koestler as 'the perceiving of a situation or Idea L in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference' (1989, p. 35). This theory works most obviously with puns. However, I argue that this principle is employed in *Pretty Woman*, as Edward's status as a confident, successful

businessperson and his extreme fear of relatively small heights seem habitually incompatible. Adding to this, a fire escape and a declaration of love also seem habitually incompatible, as indeed do many of Edward and Vivian's behaviours: he is a business person, she is a street sex worker; he is generally restrained in his demeanour, she speaks her mind freely. As exemplified here, this thesis, through a combination of sources of comedy theory but predominantly using incongruity theory as the most widely applicable, charts what situations each film asserts as incompatible as a way of reading shifting gender norms.

The incongruity theory, tension-release theory, and superiority theory all either overlook the relationship between gender and comedy, or presuppose traditional, heteronormative gendered uses of comedy (in the case of tension-release theory). In terms of the identity of the theorists I am using, one critique is that the proponents of these theories (Aristotle, Freud, Kant, Kierkegaard, Lord Shaftesbury ,Schopenhauer) are all male, European, and writing well before the time period in which the case study films were being made. While, of course, this does not mean that their theories and terms are ineffective in describing comedic moments from a later historical period, or comedic moments aimed at a female-identifying audience, there is a value in appropriating theories of comedy from a wider array of sources.[37] Consequently, I also deploy a number of terms discussed in non-academic writings produced during the period of my study as constitutive of comedy theory. As such, my methodology includes writings on stand-up comedy and improv, which are part of the wider comedy discourse, and I utilise descriptive concepts from these works in my film analysis. These dramaturgical texts directly feed the sources of production, and so I understand them as both "professional" codification of comedy and also as part of the general

[37] McDonald notes that there is a widespread 'assumption that romantic comedies are films made for and enjoyed by women audience members' (2007, p. 1). The first half of this assumption is certainly not reflected in the case study films – of the thirty films, six are directed by women, eight are written by women or all-female writing teams, and six more are written by mixed-gender writing teams. The second part of the assumption is far harder to quantify, but Annette Kuhn suggests that so-called female-orientated genres, such as the rom-com, 'at least raise the possibility of female desire and female point-of-view' (1994, p. 348).

field of theory applied to filmmaking practice, in which ideological effects are produced.

For example, Halpern, Close, and Johnson describe what is commonly known as a “call-back” when they say that ‘the most effective, satisfying laughs usually come from an actor making a connection to something that has gone before. […] A laugh resulting from a connection is a classic example of a moment when “you had to be there”’ (1994, p. 26). This links to Carroll’s notion that ‘humour functions to build and consolidate communities’ (2014, p. 84), as ‘[a]udience uptake of a specimen of humour then demands that the humorist and the appreciative audience both share the norms in question, at least imaginatively’ (p. 81). These norms or expectations can be pre-existing beliefs that the comedy-instigator and comedy-recipient already have before their interaction begins, which is largely assumed in the older writings on comedy, but the “call-back” is a useful term for describing when a norm is introduced earlier in a film, play, or routine so that it is mutually accessible to the instigator and recipient in their subsequent comedic interaction.

The notion that shared norms are strengthened in a comedic moment relies on the logic that incongruous punchlines presuppose a commonly held understanding of normativity or “common sense.” Thus, those who find the same piece of comedy amusing share ‘significantly, common standards of virtue and vice and of right and of wrong – mutually acknowledged criteria of appropriateness and inappropriateness, especially regarding human thought and action’ (Carroll, 2014, p. 83). This has led some to conclude that ‘[i]t is a failure of manners not to get a joke; it breaches the social contract. Society is harsh on those who don’t collaborate with mirth’ (Jacobson, 1997, p. 140). In other words, by labelling a piece of behaviour or an idea as incongruous, the comedy-instigator suggests that it is inappropriate, and in understanding the comedy – in getting the joke – the comedy-recipient accepts the idea or behaviour as incongruous and thus aligns to the comedy-instigator’s worldview. In this manner, the notion of incongruity presupposed by the incongruity theory can initially be described as a problematisation of sense insofar as comedy

provides the spectator with information with which they can make sense of the world around them.

The second point that I wish to make about call-backs is that they function by providing the comedy-recipient with the means to understand later jokes. Rather than presuming congruities or norms, the call-back generates congruities and norms through repetition within a unified piece of comedy. Thus, there is a higher likelihood that the spectator makes the connection, and therefore there is a higher likelihood that they assimilate into the comedy-instigator's worldview. In short, it levels the playing field so that all spectators, regardless of their lived experience or preconceptions, have access to the comedy because they recognise the norm from its earlier introduction in a routine (or film). The idea that recognition is in itself pleasurable links to Freud's assertion that 'recognition, by relieving our psychical expenditure, is in itself pleasurable' (2002, p. 119). In this context, the recognition of something we have witnessed before saves the effort of processing this phenomenon as a new one, and this saving results in pleasure. Where Halpern, Close, and Johnson imply that 'making a connection' involves a greater mental effort but one that flatters the spectator, Freud suggests that it invokes a pleasurable shortcut. In other words, it is a process of subjective identification in which what the subject already knows, believes, thinks, values, etc. is reaffirmed and reproduced. In this respect, the call-back might be read in the structure of ideological recognition. The call-back also fits with incongruity theory insofar as bisociation works on an initial association being made. Moreover, perhaps the most successful way to achieve a sense of shared history is to introduce an idea early in a film and then reference this later on in the same film, guaranteeing that the spectator gets the reference.

For example, in *Pretty Woman*, Edward has already mentioned that he has a fear of heights earlier in the film (see figure 9), so that when he reaches Vivian's apartment at the film's climax and looks up to her window (see figure 6), the spectator already has 'the perceiving of a situation or Idea L in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference' (Koestler, 1989, p. 35). In this example, the two

incompatible frames are ‘Edward wants/needs to go up to speak to Vivian’ and ‘Edward cannot climb up to her because of his fear of heights,’ which are two habitually incongruous situations that are perceived simultaneously. If we had not already been introduced to the idea that Edward is afraid of heights, then there would be no incongruity because we would perceive that he could climb up to speak to her without difficulty.



Figure 9: Midway through *Pretty Woman* (1990), Edward (Richard Gere) reveals his fear of heights to Vivian (Julia Roberts) when he refuses to join her on their hotel balcony. This is set up as an expectation for the film viewer to have at the end of the film when he must climb the fire escape to reunite with her.

Accordingly, in the way that in observational stand-up comedy through ‘routines about shared history and a well-judged set of references […] the comedian is defined as an insider, very much part of the community of the audience’ (Double, 2014, p. 244), the same feeling of recognition is engineered when a film references a shared history or set of references with the spectator. Carroll might describe this in terms of ‘[w]hen we laugh together, we are in effect acknowledging our membership in a community – a community bound together by the norms presumed by the humour at hand’ (2014, p. 77). Althusser talks about the way that ideology ‘imposes […] obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot *fail to recognize*’ (2001, p. 156, emphasis in original), and the repetition of information in jokes engineers recognition

from the spectator. The repetition of information in jokes interpellates the spectator as a subject in the rom-com ideology, which is to say that it interpellates them into a particular subject position in the field of social practices. To apply Double's stand-up theory to film, the spectre of the filmmaker, though not usually present on-screen, stands in for the comedian, often through the medium of the film's protagonist. The idea that 'some comedians play it safe by using very broad references, dealing with subjects familiar to audiences across many different cultural boundaries' (Double, 2014, p. 221) may put into context the reoccurrence of New York or London as settings for romantic comedies, since they are cities with high residential populations, large tourism industries, and, crucially, they are cosmopolitan, neoliberal, global cities, meaning that spectators are more likely to get references to these cities. In short, they provide recognisable contexts in which ideological structures can be performed without being explicitly stated. Indeed, there are so many films and television shows set in these cities that it may be that spectators have a shared connection to these cities via intertextual references more than lived experience. Of course, this also means that if rom-coms are set in these cities, they deploy the ideological forms that undergird cosmopolitan capitalism and its modes of identification.

One additional reason that comedy has been overlooked in analyses of the rom-com genre is the misperception, often stemming from work on silent comedy and slapstick, that comedy functions as a reprieve from the narrative thrust of a film. For example, Crafton argues that gags and narrative work against each other, as narrative is 'a system for providing the spectator with sufficient knowledge to make causal links between represented events' but 'slapstick misdirects the viewer's attention, and obfuscates the linearity of cause-effect relations' (1995, p. 119). While this argument might fit for comedies 'that use narrative as only a loose excuse for holding together moments of comic business (as in a Marx Brothers' film)' (Horton, 1991, p. 7), I contend that the majority of romantic comedy films use comedy for narrative purposes. As Deleyto points out, 'humour […] in most cases, far from subverting narrative development, contributes crucially to it by providing the perspective from which the narrative actually makes sense' (2009, p. 22). Further discussion of the

relationship between comedy and the believability of specific rom-coms features in the final chapter of this thesis, which examines how extreme use of slapstick and other fantasy elements undermines the believability of the rom-coms *Shallow Hal* (2001) and *Isn't It Romantic* (2019), which I suggest is evidence of an ideological tension regarding female fatness and genuine romantic desirability in the gender ideology of the mainstream rom-com.

However, in the vast majority of the case studies in this thesis, rather than using jokes to make the spectator aware of the fictionality of the film, the in-world comedy is ideologically sutured, by which I mean that it presents an image of the world that does not break our structure of identification with it. For example, in *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989), during one scene Harry (Billy Crystal) tells Sally (Meg Ryan) a joke about being surprised that there was food served when he went to an Ethiopian restaurant, which is a culturally insensitive joke about famine in Ethiopia. If this joke appeared outside of the context of a conversation between Harry and Sally, the offence may be more prominent. However, earlier in the film, Harry has provocatively stated that he has a 'dark side' and made a number of confrontational statements in his flirtations with Sally. In this context, the racist joke provides insight into Harry and Sally's developing relationship, as her reaction is amusement rather than shock or disapproval (see figure 10). This also reveals a problem of how to analyse comedy that is embedded in practices that are often tacit and therefore not obvious. The spectator might focus more on the flirtation between Harry and Sally than the 'imperializing "white eye"' (Hall, 2021b, p. 107) implicit within this joke.[38] This film is one of the case study films featured in the following chapter, but I have chosen to include this particular example here because it is also evidence of how this thesis can contribute new knowledge by applying a modern lens to analysis of comedic moments from older rom-coms in order to reveal their tacit ideologies.

[38] Hall describes 'the "absent" but imperializing "white eye"' as 'the unmarked position from which all these "observations" [of a racist ideology] are made and from which, alone, they make sense' (2021b, p. 107). Further discussion of Hall's writing and how his ideas might shed light on specific comedic moments feature in the second chapter.



Figure 10: In one scene in *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989), Sally (Meg Ryan) laughs at the joke that Harry (Billy Crystal) tells about an Ethiopian restaurant. Her reaction legitimises the validity of this comedic moment and tacitly hails the spectator as white.

Regarding the social function of comedy in the rom-com, I repurpose and adapt Double's description of stand-up, when he says that it has

> two diametrically opposed opinions. Stand-up comedy is subversive or conservative, with or against the majority perspective. […] There are certainly some comedians who legitimise our anxieties about people who are different, building careers out of mocking minority groups and people less powerful than themselves – thus reinforcing social hierarchies. On the other hand, there are those […] who legitimise people who are different and invite us to embrace the outsider; or […] who mocked the powerful. (2014, pp. 257–258)

Indeed, the two diametrically opposed views of comedy, found in both the rom-com and stand-up, can be described as "punching up," meaning 'to target a person who is privileged or entitled or, in one obnoxious way or another, just asking for it' (Schwarz, 2016, p. 134), and "punching down," which describes a situation in which a person of higher perceived privilege makes a joke about someone of a lesser level of perceived privilege. These two modes of comedic identification can both reinforce the ideology

of the rom-com. For example, from a modern perspective we are likely to identify with a character who punches-up and to disidentify with a character who punches down, unless – in the example of Harry making the joke about Ethiopian restaurants – we are encouraged by his repeated poor-taste jokes in Sally's company to infer that Harry makes these jokes out of social ineptitude, in which case we may identify with this flaw and find it endearing, if playing along with the patriarchal norm. Of course, this assumes a perspective of whiteness or at least a Western bias.[39] So, regardless of whether we are supposed to find this joke in poor-taste or not, the presentation of it, and Sally's half-hearted response, represent a tacitly white, Western-centric ideology in this comedic moment of the film.

A further idea that clarifies how *When Harry Met Sally…* codes this racist joke as permissible is that it forms part of the 'game of the scene' (Halpern, Close, and Johnson, 1994, p. 97). Halpern, Close, and Johnson, discussing improvised comedy, refer to the game of the scene as the engine of a comedic moment, which they say 'provides the structure needed to solve the problem of the scene' (p. 58), often developed through a 'progress and heighten' (p. 97) strategy, in which the intensity, emotional stakes, or absurdity of an action are increased with each repetition. They further relate this structure to film by stating that '[f]ilm and television comedy are filled with scenic games. The Marx Brothers' "Stateroom Scene" from *A Night at the Opera* is really a game of "How Many People Can We Cram Into This Tiny Room?"' (p. 59), and they suggest another example of a game might be 'one-upmanship, where each player tries topping the other with every sentence (and of course, the opposite – continuing to lower one's own status – is equally valid)' (p. 85). Thus, if an idea is presented multiple times within a progress-and-heighten arc, I posit that the idea is presented in a 'ritual practice of ideological recognition' (Althusser, 2001, p. 156) as comedic. Returning to the case of the example of the racist joke from *When Harry Met*

[39] In this thesis I use the capitalised terms "Black" and "Brown" to refer to race as 'historically created racial identities' (Appiah, 2020), but I use the uncapitalised "white" to avoid reproduction of the terms of white supremacy. Of course, there is 'no objectively correct answer to the question of whether to capitalize *black* and *white*' (Appiah, 2020), but since my research examines how identity and identification might be constructed, it seems appropriate to use a convention that reminds the reader of the constructedness of race.

Sally…, I suggest that this is structurally coded as comedic because one of the "games" in the interactions between Harry and Sally is the exchange of shocking statements. Earlier on in the film, Harry stated that men and women cannot be friends because sex gets in the way; a little later on, Harry said that Sally might never have had good sex; later, Sally simulated an orgasm in front of Harry in order to prove a point. Consequently, this outrageous joke from Harry is structured as part of their "game" of shocking each other, and its severity is justified by its position towards the end of the film.

A final aspect of comedy theory that the thesis seeks to critique is Rowe Karlyn's (1995; 2011) assertion that comedy as a narrative and performative mode is a key site for examining the transgressive power of female unruliness. Instead, I contend that moments of comedic rebellion presuppose and thereby reproduce a commonly accepted norm against which their unruliness can be recognised. While, like my own work, Rowe Karlyn directly links the function of comedy within romantic comedy with the genre's gender ideology, her conclusion that we should consider 'comedy as a genre sympathetic to female unruliness' (2011, p. 22) is overly simplistic. First, it assumes that the rom-com challenges female oppression simply by placing an unruly female character at its centre. This ignores male-led romantic comedies or the nuances of exactly how the laughter is achieved, which I counter in my analysis of male-focused romantic comedies such as *Coming to America* (1988) and *Shallow Hal* (2001). Second, there are numerous examples of female-focused romantic comedy films, such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), in which the comedic moments reproduce the male gaze, as we see in a scene when Bridget (Renée Zellweger) presents a news segment on a TV show and slides down a firefighters' pole, only for the image on-screen to become an increasingly close-up view of her backside. A Rowe-Karlyn-inspired reading of this moment suggests a disruption of the historic privileging of male characters in the cinema by presenting a flawed, relatable, and – importantly – unruly female protagonist. Bridget is an unruly female character because she drinks, smokes, gets ahead at work by dressing in a sexually provocative manner, and delights in having two men fight over her. However, I counter that this moment also hinges on the

scopophilic pleasure of seeing the image of a young, conventionally attractive woman's behind in a close-up. Comedic moments may be moments of transgression, but what is being transgressed is not necessarily 'the ways the institution of (hetero)sexuality maintains unequal social power' (Rowe Karlyn, 2011, p. 9), as Rowe Karlyn suggests. Instead, I nuance this point by investigating how individual romantic comedy films can be read as transgressing a range of societal expectations through their comedic moments, but also how these moments actually entail and thereby reaffirm the gender norms that they supposedly transgress.

In this way, this thesis takes elements of the superiority, tension-release, and incongruity theories of comedy alongside lesser-known theories of comedy to analyse the comedic moments from mainstream romantic comedies in order to reveal the underlying gender ideology at play in the case study films. By combining theories in order to analyse both individual moments of comedy within a film and the film's larger narrative structure, this thesis can then shed light onto the way in which the film hails the spectator through comedy. Again, it is worth asserting that the reactions of individual viewers to a particular instance of humour is not the focus of this thesis, rather I am asking what is at stake in the rom-com's punchlines in terms of the psychic interpellation of the spectator. The question is not simply: (why) is this joke (not) funny? The questions are: what are the conditions under which this moment is recognisable as comedic? And subsequently, what does this joke reveal about the underlying gender politics in the time and place of its production?

1.6 Closing Remarks

In summary, this chapter has outlined the methodological approach that the rest of this thesis will use to contribute new knowledge to rom-com genre scholarship by conducting an ideology critique of the rom-com focussing specifically on the (ideological) function of its comedic moments. Since the core intervention of this research is to foreground the role of comedy in the rom-com, an area of film studies that is often overlooked, and ask what the rom-com's jokes reveal about the shifting nature of how gender is articulated in relation to other identity characteristics over the past thirty-five years, this thesis requires a mixed methodology that draws upon distinct areas of scholarship: comedy studies, feminist theory, and theories of ideology.

In writing this methodological chapter, I was struck by a thematic link between all three of these areas of scholarship that I draw upon (comedy studies, feminist theory, and ideology): notions of reflection and recognition, and the idea that we recognise ourselves in the reflections of humanity we encounter. Reflection and recognition also appear quite clearly in the echoes that reverberate between Mulvey's discussion of filmic image in relation to 'the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror' (1988, p. 63), and Althusser's argument that 'the performance is, fundamentally, the occasion for a cultural and ideological recognition' (2005, p. 149). However, the link between reflection and recognition is also found in the idea that comedy provides the reflection of society, within which comedy-recipients can recognise themselves. Comedy is in a symbiotic relationship with individuals, being both a product of the society in which it was created but also influencing our collective understanding of ourselves and how we fit into the world around us. Comedy's reflective yet regulatory social function is effectively summarised in Carroll's observation that 'much of the positive value that humour accrues is due to the social function that it performs, by rehearsing and refining the norms that constitute the various cultures and subcultures to which we belong' (2014, p. 115). In this way, all of the scholarship that I have discussed in this chapter is concerned in some way with the image of society being presented to viewers, and in relation to which those viewers,

through structures of ideological recognition, come to understand themselves. Following such an explication of the reflection-recognition relationship between viewer and comedic moment, the central question of this thesis, which the four subsequent case study chapter will seek to investigate, can be reformulated as: if 'textual pleasure is produced primarily through processes of recognition and misrecognition' (Doane, 1988, p. 180) and 'we all desire recognition' (Kondo, 2018, p. 12), then which gender(ed) identities are available for (mis)recognition in the mainstream rom-com's comedic moments?

Chapter 2: Gender Ideology in Mainstream Rom-Com

2.1 Opening Remarks

The introduction and first chapter of this thesis have been concerned with theoretical approaches to understanding gender and comedy as constituent elements of the rom-com cinema genre. In this and the subsequent three chapters, I apply this framework to films which act as case studies at a more granular level in order to reveal what rom-com's comedic moments say about the manner in which the genre hails its spectators, and how this has changed (or not changed) over this time period. The thesis makes an intervention in rom-com genre scholarship by foregrounding the comedic moments in the British and American rom-com films produced between the late 1980s and the present day in a way that has not been attempted before. Each chapter contains case study films that were produced between the late 1980s and the present day in order to critique the evolution of the rom-com genre across this time period and its relation to the rise and current crisis of neoliberalism.[40] This first case study chapter analyses *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989), *Love Actually* (2003), *Sex and the City 2* (2010), and *Trainwreck* (2015) as case studies reflecting the cultural shifts that have taken place in mainstream gender ideology in the UK and the USA between the late 1980s and the present day. This chapter mobilises a number of feminist theories, such as Butler's (2007) writing on gender or McRobbie's (2020) understanding of the contemporary cultural dispositifs of the feminine-perfect and the feminine-imperfect, to critique the idea of a mainstream gender ideology as structured in the romantic comedy genre's comedic moments. Specifically, I look at the ideological link between sexual agency and masculinity and the idea that women seek emotional commitment and relationships whereas men primarily pursue sexual satisfaction. Consequently, in the heteronormative narrative of each film, men are valued for strength, wealth, and power, while women are valued primarily for their physical appearance.

[40] Overall, this thesis aims to avoid the use of the terms "second-," "third-," and "fourth-wave feminism" as 'rigid definitions of feminist waves serve to reinforce the pretence of a generational divide, contributing to the sense that feminist subjects hold a static position assigned to them by the arbitrary factor of their age, rather than allowing feminists to occupy various positions spanning various waves, or having conflicting opinions based on political differences' (Rivers, 2017, p. 29).

2.2 Gender Ideology in the Case Study Films

In the book *Gender Trouble*, Butler notes that a 'normative account [of gender] seeks to answer the question of which expressions of gender are acceptable, and which are not' (2007, p. xxii). With regard to romantic comedy as a genre specifically, I argue that romantic comedy discourse provides a picture of which gender identities are allowed to partake in romance on screen and how they are permitted to act before being marked as comedic and thereby transgressive. The mainstream gender ideology that I uncover in this chapter through close analysis of the four case study films is one that sanctions boys and men to prioritise their own sexual desires without fear of judgment or serious rebuke. In contrast, girls and women are compelled to navigate and accommodate the sexual needs of boys and men in order to secure a portion of the privileges offered to them. This framework requires girls and women to suppress or downplay their own sexual desires, to hope to be chosen by the "right man," and to regard their sexuality as a tradable commodity.[41]

In short, the rom-com genre's mainstream gender ideology continues to legitimise expressions of gender that are realised in relation to the hegemonic structure of heterosexual marriage and relationships which resemble heterosexual marriage (see figures 11–14 for examples). This is implicitly ideological, since, for Althusser, ideology '*expresses a will* (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary)*,* a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality' (2005, p. 234, emphasis in original) and the rom-com genre's focus on the institution of marriage conveys a sense of nostalgia and (false) hope for the viewer in comparison to the dwindling marriage rates within the UK and USA populations and those countries' increasing secularism.[42] Instead, the rom-com genre upholds the key tenets of

[41] This description of mainstream gender ideology also broadly aligns with the findings of Kim et al. (2007), which identified a heterosexual script of gendered behaviours and codes found in television.
[42] In 1989, the year *When Harry Met Sally…* was released, the marriage rate among unmarried men in England and Wales was 44.8 per thousand and among unmarried women it was 38.1 per thousand; in 2015, when *Trainwreck* was released, these figures were 21.7 for men and 19.8 for women (Office for National Statistics, 2018). In the USA over the same period, marriage rates per thousand people were 9.8 in 1990, 7.7 in 2003, 6.8 in 2010, and 6.9 in 2015 (Statista Research Department, 2022). Of course, these figures do not account for differences within different ethnic or religious groups, nor do they account for other variables, such as the age of those marrying or whether these were first marriages or

marriage: monogamy, cohabitation, long-term commitment, and "gender complementarity," meaning the sense that men need women and women need men because they are fundamentally different beings with distinct needs and complementary skillsets. For example, in *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989), Harry and Sally are superficially marked as equals, both pursuing a version of the American Dream as they meet at the start of the film when they carshare from Chicago to New York after finishing their respective college degrees.[43] However, as the film follows the interactions between these characters over a number of years, much of the dialogue concerns the fundamental differences between men and women before the two protagonists finally marry at the end of the film. Thus, thematically, the film contributes to the wider public discourse around the taken-for-granted differences in what men and women look for in a (heterosexual) partner. In its plot, the film reflects what Ruti notes in her analysis of *Pretty Woman* (1990) as the connecting of 'mutual rescue' with 'the message of gender equality' (2016, p. 139). This is to say that, since Harry and Sally "save" each other, they have different but equally valuable gendered skillsets. Sally helps Harry become more sensitive and 'confront his feelings', and Harry encourages Sally to become more self-assured and 'assert her orgasm' (Saraiya, 2019). In this way, the film reinscribes heteronormative gender complementarity through its plot structure as well as within individual comedic moments.

subsequent marriages. This has led some theorists to make claims such as J. Jack Halberstam's that 'institutions like marriage are […] taking on water and slowly sinking into the morass of spoiled intimacies and forced nuclearity – fewer people are married by their late twenties than ever before in history' (2012, p. 67). In the USA, belief in God has decreased by 10 per cent in the past 60 years (Mastroianni and Dana, 2022), and in the UK those who identify as confident atheists has grown from 10 per cent of the population in 1998 to 26 per cent of the population in 2018 (Curtice et al., 2019).

[43] This echoes Jermyn's reading of the film when she argues that 'the onset of the protagonists' personal journeys and the narrative trajectory towards finding romance is specifically signalled by the film's shift in location to New York' (2009, p. 13), a space that represents the idea that 'anything can happen here for *anyone*; and it is this belief that ties the history of immigration, the optimism embodied within it, and the dreams of the romantic comedy, together in New York' (p. 17, emphasis in original).



Figure 11: In *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989), Harry (Billy Crystal) and Sally (Meg Ryan) serve as best man and maid of honour at their friends' wedding.

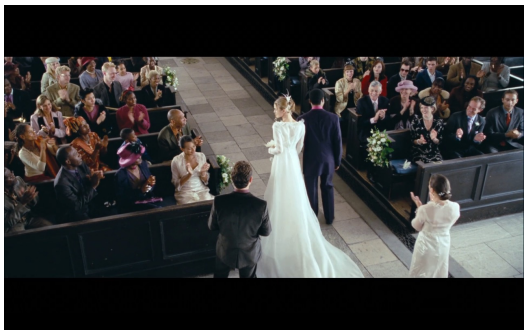


Figure 12: Love Actually (2003) features a church wedding between two of its characters, Peter (Chiwetel Ejiofor) and Juliet (Kiera Knightley).



Figure 13: In *Sex and the City 2* (2010), Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) attends a wedding, serving as best man and wearing a tuxedo. Big (Chris Noth) also proposes to her later on in the film.



Figure 14: While *Trainwreck* (2015) is the only case study film that does not feature a wedding, early on it does have a scene in which Steven (John Cena) tells Amy (Amy Schumer) that he was planning on proposing to her until he found out she was still sleeping with other people.

The marriage and marriage-adjacent relationships in romantic comedies can also be said to hark back to a separation of men and women into public and private spheres of influence, respectively, in terms of the way they construct their gender complementarity – namely, men earn money or display physical strength to "comfort" and "honour" women, and women perform caregiving or display physical signs synonymous with fecundity to "serve" and "keep" men.[44] For example, despite the multi-plot structure of the second case study film, British rom-com *Love Actually* (2003), lending itself to the showcasing of a variety of gender identities, the film is tacitly structured around multiple iterations of the white, affluent heterosexual couple in which the male is valued for his strength or status and the woman is valued for her visual appearance. Indeed, the couple with the most screentime in the film is the white British prime minister, David (Hugh Grant), and his younger white staff member,

[44] These terms are no longer used in modern Christian marriage services but appear in historical editions of *The Book of Common Prayer* (Baskerville, 1753) and have cultural significance in the twenty-first century such that, in 2011, *The Guardian* published an article entitled 'Kate Middleton will not promise to "obey" in royal wedding service' (Bates, 2011).

Natalie (Martine McCutcheon), and it is Hugh Grant who provides the film's opening voice-over. This gendered approach to romantic value is, I contend, a further sense in which the narratives of rom-coms can be said to be ideologically nostalgic. For, as gender studies scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, building upon Marx, states: 'one important structure of ideology is an idealizing appeal to the outdated values of an earlier system, in defence of a later system that in practice undermines the material basis of those values' (Sedgwick, 2016, p. 14). Indeed, it is my contention that both *When Harry Met Sally…* and *Love Actually* superficially reproduce a sense of gender equality by focusing on both male and female protagonists but appeal to the outdated gender values of earlier systems that primarily assign power and agency to male characters.

Central to my analysis of the representation of gender in rom-coms are the images of the "feminine-perfect" and the "feminine-imperfect," as described by McRobbie (2020). McRobbie describes the feminine-perfect as a dispositif that 'carries violent intent not just in its racial and class-based exclusionary effect but also in its acts of inclusion […] [since] aspirational young women are encouraged to feel they ought to be even better' (2020, p. 52) than they are; I argue that within the rom-com the exclusionary, impossibly perfect image of the feminine-perfect is encapsulated in the image of the bride. McRobbie then describes the feminine-imperfect as that which 'acknowledges the damage done by the perfect, but which looks to repair and recovery through the idea of resilience' (p. 45). Such a symbol of female imperfection is found in the protagonists of *Sex and the City 2* (2010): Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall), Charlotte York (Kristin Davis), and Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon).[45] In the film, the four American women escape their personal

[45] *Sex and the City 2* (2010) is the sequel to the popular *Sex and the City* TV series (1998–2004) and the first film adaptation, *Sex and the City* (2008). The original TV series ground-breakingly positioned 'women as subjects and men [were] left to foreground their to-be-looked-at-ness' (Akass and McCabe, 2006a, p. 7) at a time when most sitcoms either had male protagonists, like *Seinfeld* (1989–1998) or *Frasier* (1993–2004), or were gang shows that focused on a mixed gender group of friends, such as *Friends* (1994–2004) or *Will & Grace* (1998–2006). Consequently, scholars have regarded the show as 'an object of "serious" academic interest, given the undoubted status it holds as a cultural marker of our times' (Jermyn, 2006, p. 203). For example, Akass and McCabe discuss the role of comedy in the show, which challenges the traditional Freudian view of woman as topic or recipient of male-initiated humour. They conclude that the female protagonists in the show are 'prepared to be the joker, butt and listener

and professional challenges at home – Carrie and Charlotte each have marriage issues, Miranda is not being taken seriously at work, and Samantha simply appears to be bored – by taking a luxurious trip to Abu Dhabi. In this way, and as I will later analyse further, the feminine-imperfect or the transgression of expected femininity accounts for many of the rom-com's comedic moments in the middle of the film. However, after Samantha is arrested for public indecency, the women escape Abu Dhabi, and the film concludes with Carrie's husband re-proposing to her back in New York. Just as McRobbie suggests that these interwoven feminine-perfect/feminine-imperfect pathologies 'function simultaneously: they are the means by which young female subjects recognize themselves' (2020, p. 53), it is my argument that the female viewer is permitted to recognise herself as a subject in relation to either the feminine-imperfect figure of the women in the middle of the film or the feminine-perfect image of the re-made bride at the end. However, the narrative arc of the film implies that the "correct" choice is the latter.

A similar focus on the image of the feminine-imperfect is offered by *Trainwreck* (2015), which follows the life of Amy (Amy Schumer), a commitment-averse writer for a men's magazine who enjoys a carefree lifestyle. As with the older films, the film concludes by positioning Amy inside a committed, white, affluent, heterosexual relationship with doctor Aaron (Bill Hader). Where this film differs from the older films is in its representation of what Calvente and Smicker (2019) describe as "crisis subjectivities" through its comedic moments. They argue that '[i]n the face of constant crisis, individuals become responsible for ameliorating the ever-present and dispersed looming sense of disaster' (p. 152), in which '[p]ossibilities of collective action and struggle are reduced to the spheres of the personal and the ethical. Hence there is a demand for a return to redemptive entrepreneurialism and the normative couple – and ideally both at once' (p. 151). In *Trainwreck*, the inefficiency of collective feminist action is seen throughout the film, such as when Amy shouts, 'You're going to lose us

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of the joke as they laugh at themselves for being taken in by the patriarchal fiction and daring to speak out about the uncertainty and problems it inspires for them' (2006b, p. 185) and that in this process there is a 'solidarity in the joke-telling relationship, in which all the women participate in the comedic process' (p. 187).

the right to vote,' at a group of cheerleaders to no avail whatsoever. Since in this scene Amy's political outcry goes unnoticed by the cheerleaders, and by the end of the film Amy reverts from her feminist position by learning a cheerleading routine in order to show Aaron that she cares for him, I suggest that this comedic moment hails viewers who recognise themselves in relation to the kind of post-austerity political futility that is absent from the more light-hearted earlier films.[46]

In this way, there is a notable change in the gendered power dynamics between the three older case study films and *Trainwreck*. For example, although *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989) does not feature any comedic moments that focus on nudity or semi-nudity as the object of sexual desire, the film does famously have a comedic scene in which Sally (Meg Ryan) makes herself the object of sexual attention in a diner when she loudly fakes an orgasm, which is discussed further later in this chapter. In doing so the film reproduces the image of men (and women) staring at a sexualised woman. At the start of the 2000s, we can see the same dynamic in *Love Actually* (2003), which features a number of comedic moments centred upon sexualised nudity or semi-nudity of the female body, thus again focusing the cinematic gaze on female nudity, according to the logic of male scopic desire (for example, see figure 15). By contrast, however, *Sex and the City 2* (2010) and *Trainwreck* (2015) reverse these expected gendered behaviours for comedic effect in that female characters focus their attention on the sexualised naked male form (see figures 16 and 17). What is noteworthy in these moments is how the male form is admired for its muscularity, which in turn implies a sense of male agency in that the desirable masculine form is defined by action in the form of physical exercise.

[46] Furthermore, what Gilbert describes as 'the growing perception that persistent austerity was undermining the life-chances of young adults even from affluent professional backgrounds' (2019, p. 21) in recent years is reflected throughout the film, such as in Amy's dissatisfaction with her job and the financial stress of caring for her ageing father.



Figure 15: One of the romantic plotlines in *Love Actually* (2003) concerns two actors, Judy (Joanna Page) and John (Martin Freeman), who get to know each other while filming a sex scene for a movie. In these scenes it is Judy's body that features more prominently and it is John who asks her out, thereby reinforcing the message that men are attracted to female nudity.

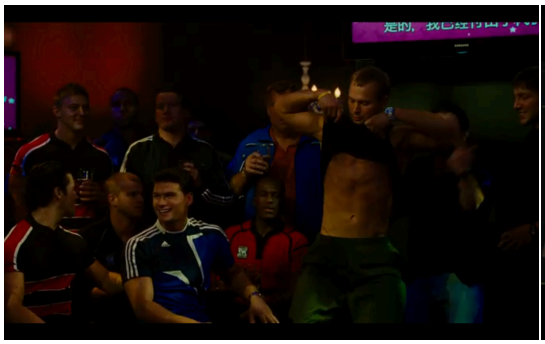


Figure 16: When the main characters in *Sex and the City 2* (2010) sing karaoke, they elicit positive responses from the audience – mainly in the form of smiles and cheers – but one man in the audience flashes his muscular torso at them, which the main characters smile and point at.



Figure 17: In *Trainwreck* (2015), after Steven (John Cena) and Amy (Amy Schumer) have sex, Amy watches Steven go to the bathroom and have a drink. He covers his semi-erect penis with a towel, which demonstrates it has a size and strength to hold up a towel without him using his hand, while the lighting from above in the otherwise dark room accentuates his muscular frame.

In other words, the comedic moments in *Sex and the City 2* and *Trainwreck* are intelligible to a spectator as comedic insofar as they invert the male gaze reproduced in the two older films but while retaining a commitment to gendered body dimorphism. What this suggests is that romantic comedy films do the same work that McRobbie avers that perfect-imperfect-resilient female archetypes perform in that they provide 'a vocabulary which addresses current issues that stem from women's historic subjugation without aiming to dismantle or even profoundly disrupt the prevailing gender regime' (2020, p. 56). The more recent films address the issue of female sexual objectification by inverting the genders of who does the objectifying and who gets objectified without disrupting the gender system in which men are valued for strength and power while women are valued for petiteness. While it is the intention of

this thesis not to over-emphasise the importance of the ending of a film in conveying ideological messaging, it is nonetheless also worth noting that in *Sex and the City 2* and *Trainwreck* the sexualised male bodies do not belong to the men that the female leads finish the films in romantic relationships with, but that the sexualised female bodies – notably Judy (Joanna Page) and Aurelia (Lúcia Moniz) – belong to women who are both engaged by the end of *Love Actually.* This further reinforces the sense conveyed in these films that women can pursue sexual pleasure in rom-coms, but when they do, it is primarily associated with the imperfect/single woman in the beginning or middle of the film and not with the perfect/settled bride figure at the end of the film.

The next three sections interrogate three of the pillars of this gender ideology, specifically the ideas that men are valued for their strength, wealth, and power, while women are valued primarily for their physical appearance; men are permitted to pursue sexual urges, whereas women are conditioned to withhold sex; and finally, that women want or need emotional relationships, whereas men want or need independence.

2.2.1 Men are valued for their strength, wealth, and power; women are valued primarily for their physical appearance

Butler lists two common mainstream gender norms as 'ideal dimorphism [and] heterosexual complementarity of bodies' (2007, p. xxiv). This separation of distinct but complementary roles for men and women enacted by visually distinct bodies can be seen writ large across mainstream rom-com and is evidenced in all four of the case studies. It is my contention in this section that each case study reproduces to some degree the idea that rom-com spectators recognise themselves in relation to "normative" body types as a form of the ideological encoding of gender difference. In such a system, traditionally, when looking for a life partner, men have been valued for their potential ability to go out into the public world and earn money, indicated by their physical strength, their wealth, and their status within the local community. Meanwhile, women have been valued for their potential ability to give birth to and care for children, indicated by their youth and their ability to care for themselves as reflected in their clothes, hair, makeup, and general physical appearance.

For example, many of the comedic moments in *When Harry Met Sally…* stem from generalisations about the inherent differences between men and women that reinforce the idea that binary male and female gender identities are in essence different.[47] This is to say that binarisation is a form of essentialism – an ontological claim that naturalises the sexual difference between men and women and which supports the social power relations in which women assume a subordinate position with respect to male achievement. Since Harry utters the majority of the generalisations about gender as observations that go unchallenged, this positions Harry, in the film, as the active teacher figure, while Sally is more often placed in the subordinate position of student. This teacher/student-role positioning, I suggest, develops the longstanding trope of older male characters instructing younger female characters in how to be women, which can be seen going back to the 1930s, such as in

[47] For example, early in the film Sally generalises that all 'women are very practical' in what they look for in a man, and later Harry wonders if thirty seconds is long enough to hold a woman after sex, similarly generalising that 'all men think that.'

It Happened One Night (1934) and *My Fair Lady* (1964). The casting of Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan as characters of the same age, despite Billy Crystal being thirteen years older, further emphasises this superordinate (masculine)/subordinate (feminine) status dynamic while also implying that youth and beauty are more important characteristics for heterosexual women than men. What is reproduced here, in the words of Butler, is the assumption that 'reason and mind are associated with masculinity and agency, while the body and nature are considered to be the mute facticity of the feminine, awaiting signification from an opposing masculine subject' (2007, p. 50), reinforced by Billy Crystal's age, Harry's high-status occupation as a political consultant, and the way that Harry positions Sally as a woman through his comments to her. Concurrently, McRobbie's notion of ideologically gendered form appears in the film with Ryan's 'cultural intelligibility as a young woman […] now tilted towards the achievement of "affluent, middle-class maternity" with its many accoutrements [including …] an equally attractive baby and husband' (McRobbie, 2020, p. 32). This is explicitly affirmed in Sally's argument that she would rather have a 'passionless marriage' and be the First Lady of Czechoslovakia than live 'in Casablanca, married to a man who runs a bar.'

Furthermore, in *When Harry Met Sally…,* Sally's clothing appears to become less formal and more revealing over the course of the film (see figures 18 and 19), indicating her gradual acceptance of the idea that, as Ruti notes as commonplace amongst romantic comedy films, 'sexual self-objectification is women's fastest route to success' (2016, p. 12). There is also in Sally's transformation a sense that her metamorphosis echoes the film's ambiguous position at the threshold of the shift in the 1990s away from so-called second-wave feminism to the commencement of third-wave feminism. The film reflects the way that early postfeminists decried the second-wave feminist as 'masculine, unattractive to men, prudish, humourless, and badly dressed: in short she is a lesbian' (Hemmings, 2011, p. 8). At the outset, Sally is not a viable partner for Harry; she becomes viable only later in their relationship when she begins to wear skirts and dresses, symbolising her embracing of femininity.




Figure 18: The first two outfits that Sally (Meg Ryan) wears in *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989) are prim and proper outfits that do not reveal her body. On the left is the first outfit she wears: she wears shorts and long socks, which could be described as boyish rather than overtly feminine. On the right, she next appears in formal business-wear.

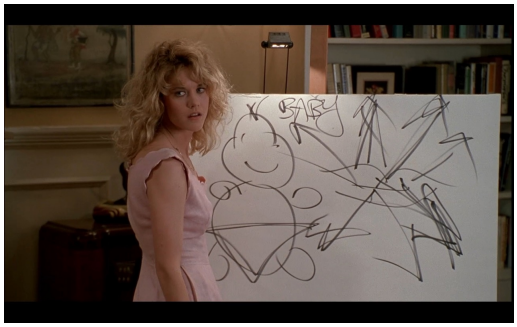



Figure 19: In later scenes of *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989), Sally (Meg Ryan) wears dresses that reveal more of her body and emphasise her femininity.

To underscore this idea that men typically take the lead in pursuing romantic relationships, while women rely on their appearance to win the affection of men, *When Harry Met Sally…* features a number of interview scenes with older, heterosexual couples telling the stories of how they met which also reproduce this dynamic. In four of the interviews the men praise the women's physical beauty, but in none of the interviews do the women ever praise the men's appearances. Thus, the interviews also reinforce the ideological assumption that, as Mulvey notes of films from earlier in the twentieth century, '[i]n their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*' (1988, p. 62), but that the same is not true of men. Moreover, the gender imbalance in the narration echoes the gender imbalance in the interview stories' contents. In five stories, the man either approaches the woman to instigate their relationship or the man otherwise escalates their relationship. Where Mulvey (1988) writes about the male gaze in films that hail their spectator as male, I suggest that the reproduction of

the same basic messages in the rom-com genre, as a genre that has historically been associated with female viewers, sanitises and further legitimises this aspect of gender ideology.[48]

There is a similar dynamic of men being associated with power and women with beauty in *Love Actually.* For example, there is a huge difference in the statuses of the prime minister, David (Hugh Grant), and his love interest, a new member of his household staff, Natalie (Martine McCutcheon), which is again mirrored in the age difference of the actors: Hugh Grant was forty-three at the time of the film's release, Martine McCutcheon was twenty-seven.[49] This status imbalance is also seen in the level of control David exerts over their relationship. For example, David's press conference speech uses the thinly veiled metaphor of protecting 'Britain's interests' as 'a direct response to the [US] president's sexually predatory behaviour' (Honess Roe, 2009, p. 85) after David sees the US president flirt with Natalie. This appeal to an outmoded distribution of power in relationships is also echoed in David's enlisting his security personnel to search door-to-door for Natalie, much as the high-status prince character sends his soldiers out in search of the younger, lower-status Cinderella after he has met her at the ball, which also underlines the modern rom-com's tendency to lean on fairy-tale tropes.[50]

Love Actually further reproduces the ideological link between youth and beauty for women insofar as the female characters who end *Love Actually* unhappily are the two (slightly) older women, Sarah (Laura Linney) and Karen (Emma Thompson), as

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[48] Maria San Filippo similarly concludes that *When Harry Met Sally…* paved the way for 'the neotraditional romcoms that flourished in Hollywood in the 1990s and 2000s […] [that] reverted to the genre's atavistic, idealizing strategies for representing romance' (2021b, p. 16).

[49] The age and status difference between male and female leads is also typical of the rom-com genre, as seen in *Coming to America* (1988), *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), which all feature relationships between upper-class men and lower- or middle-class women. When those films were released, Eddie Murphy was 27 and Shari Headley was 24, Richard Gere was 41 and Julia Roberts was 23, Jennifer Lopez was 33 and Ralph Fiennes was 40, and Constance Wu was 36 and Henry Golding 31, suggesting that Hollywood has only recently started casting younger men alongside older women.

[50] Examples of other rom-coms that use fairy-tale language or imagery during this time period include *The Princess Bride* (1987), *Coming to America* (1988), *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), *A Cinderella Story* (2004), *Enchanted* (2007), and *A Christmas Prince* (2017).

American journalist and cultural critic A. O. Scott (2003) notes. The film also reproduces the idea that these women are unable to prioritise their own romantic interests due to their duties of care to their families. For example, when Sarah eventually takes her love interest, Karl (Rodrigo Santoro), home to have sex, she stops their sexual encounter to take a phone call from her brother. Since the scene ends there, we assume that Sarah and Karl's relationship does not progress any further. While Sarah does not actively end their relationship, she chooses to answer the phone call and to tell her brother that she is not busy, so she prioritises the roles of sister and caregiver over that of sexual partner. In short, Sarah is punished for prioritising her caring role over her sexuality. Similarly, the end of *Love Actually* is presented as tragic for Karen as she discovers that her husband has bought an expensive piece of jewellery for his employee, Mia (Heike Makatsch), with the obvious implication that he is having an affair. Instead of leaving him, Karen prioritises the wellbeing of her family, which mirrors her caregiving in various earlier scenes, such as when she makes costumes for her children's school play or consoles her friend Daniel (Liam Neeson) after the death of his wife. Thus, not only does *Love Actually* reproduce the message that women are valued for their physical appearance but it nuances this by reproducing the message that younger women are valued for their appearance whereas older women are valued as caregivers.

While *Love Actually* thus treats its older women as non-sexual caregivers, *Sex and the City 2* repeats the idea that for women in romantic comedies of all ages sexual self-objectification is a core tenet of "successful" femininity. The threat to these women's sexuality is not age or care responsibilities but the threat of Abu Dhabi's attitude towards women. Local women, dressed in burkas, wordlessly beckon the protagonists down an alley, and, away from the men on the street, reveal designer dresses underneath their burkas, confessing, 'we love the fashion' (see figure 20). In this moment, '[a]gainst the autonomy and control associated with the Americans' couture, functional clothing such as the hijab marks Muslim women as mere bearers of patriarchal design' and 'hidden fashion shows the covered women's knowledge of and

appetite for self-design' (Kane, 2017, p. 113). The message seems to be that the link between femininity and materialism is ubiquitous globally.



Figure 20: Towards the end of *Sex and the City 2* (2010), there is a scene in which a number of local women remove their burkas to show the more revealing, more ostentatious Western clothing they have on underneath. This implies that women's interest in consumer fashion and physical appearance is universal and also that the American women are somehow more liberated because they can wear fashionable clothing without having to cover up their bodies in public.

Another universal message in the film is the idea that men are strongly affected by the presence of attractive women, which is seen when Carrie flags down a taxi using the same trick of revealing her bare leg that she (and the spectator) has seen when she watched *It Happened One Night* (1934) earlier in the film (see figure 21). A taxi driver (unseen, presumably male) slams on the brakes. The tacit and underlying message in this comedic moment is the implication that Abu Dhabi in 2010 is similar to the USA in the 1930s. One postfeminist reading might therefore suggest that 'feminism pertains only to an elsewhere that is stuck in the past' (Kane, 2017, p. 113) and that the USA has somehow developed further, or quicker, than the rest of the world, which is reflected in lines such as those offered by Samantha when she describes Abu Dhabi as 'backward when it comes to sex.' Sexual liberation is not the be all and end all of feminism, but it becomes its de facto realisation and consumption in the world of *Sex and the City 2.* In short, the film suggests that female objectification was once an issue in America and remains an issue in Abu Dhabi in the present, but not in contemporary USA insofar as women have been sexually "emancipated." Of course, it may be that the reaction of male taxi drivers in Abu Dhabi is here represented as no different from the reaction of men elsewhere, suggesting that women's legs invoke the same universal reaction globally, which implies that heterosexuality, in which men instinctively objectify women, is human nature regardless of culture, according to mainstream rom-com gender ideology.



Figure 21: Early on in *Sex and the City 2* (2010), Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) watches *It Happened One Night* (1934), specifically noting that it was 'shocking' for the 1930s that a woman get the attention of a male driver using her bare leg. Later in *Sex and the City 2*, Carrie uses the same trick to get the attention of a male taxi driver in Abu Dhabi, indicating either that Abu Dhabi in the 2010s had a similar attitude towards sex and sexuality as the USA in the 1930s or otherwise playing on the ubiquity of heterosexuality globally.

In contrast to the two older films just discussed, *Trainwreck* (2015) initially appears to challenge the assumption that women are primarily valued for their aesthetic appearance insofar as the first time that Aaron (Bill Hader) and Amy (Amy Schumer) meet, it is in a professional capacity in which he tests her physical fitness. She runs, out-of-breath, on a treadmill, sweats, and goofs around with the machinery while Aaron notes that she is medically unfit without making any comment about her aesthetic appearance. Instead, Aaron appears to initially value Amy for her wit and intelligence. However, by the end of the film Amy wins Aaron back with a grand romantic gesture when she joins a group of cheerleaders and dances with them to Aaron's favourite song, which is a clear embrace of the image of normative femininity (see figure 22).

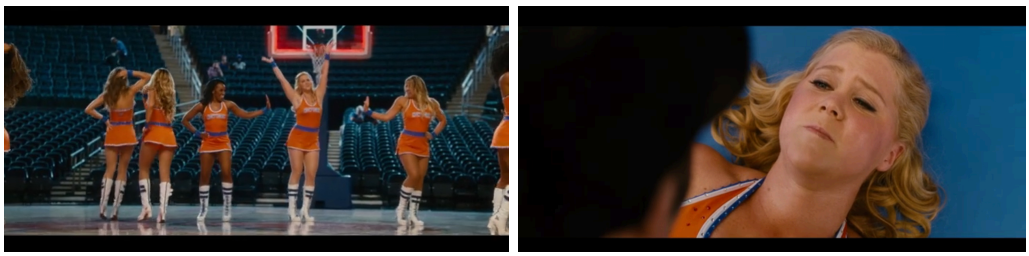


Figure 22: The final moments of *Trainwreck* (2015) show Amy (Amy Schumer) dancing along to Billy Joel's 'Uptown Girl' in a grand romantic gesture to win over Aaron (Bill Hader). She has mocked cheerleaders earlier in the film, and this moment symbolises her commitment to change herself in order to have a successful romantic relationship with Aaron. There is a comedic moment when she attempts a somersault and falls down on a crash mat, at which point Aaron runs over to help her. In this way, the film reproduces what McRobbie (2020) discusses in terms of female resilience instead of the image of either female perfection or female imperfection. Nevertheless, I suggest that the central image presented to the viewer here is that of a (slim, relatively young, white, blonde) woman dancing in a cheerleading outfit in order to win the affection of a high-status (relatively young, white) man. Therefore, the film contributes to the existing mainstream gender discourse in the romantic comedy genre.

Moreover, *Trainwreck* also positions Aaron's attractiveness to Amy in relation to his status and power given his job as an award-winning sports doctor. However, a turning point in the film in terms of Aaron and Amy's relationship comes after Aaron administers stiches to Amy's father after he suffers a headwound (see figure 23), following which Amy and Aaron have their first sober kiss of the film. This is a turning point because before this Amy had embraced the image of the hard-drinking, promiscuous feminine-imperfect, but following this she embraces a more measured and "feminine-perfect" role. In this way, Aaron's technical skill as a doctor and the power that his career affords him in his interactions with Amy's father correlate with Amy's turn towards the kind of self-regulation and self-improvement that McRobbie terms the feminine-perfect (2020, p. 52). In this film, gender ideology is more knowing, however beneath the surface gender ideology is still in play, only adapted to new circumstances, as indicated by how the film explicitly frames the female imperfect as a form of comic realism which must be overcome for the romantic relationship to emerge. While Aaron does not explicitly value Amy for her physical appearance in their initial exchanges, he does comment on her appearance when she gets changed for the awards dinner and also in the final cheerleader dance number. This suggests that even in 2015 the same male tendency to value women for their physical appearance is reproduced in rom-com but is not reinforced so explicitly as in the earlier films.



Figure 23: A turning point in *Trainwreck* (2015) comes when Aaron (Bill Hader) treats Amy's father's injury. While it can be argued that the tenderness and care that Aaron exhibits in this moment are traditionally feminine traits, I suggest that his high-status job as a doctor – particularly one who works with celebrities and receives awards – reinforces the ideological message that men are valued for their status and power.

In conclusion, despite *Trainwreck*'s initial commitment to the feminine-imperfect, all four of the case study films here assume that spectators recognise themselves in relation to a gender system based on the 'ideal dimorphism [and] heterosexual complementarity of bodies' (Butler, 2007, p. xxiv) and in which women, especially younger women, are valued primarily for their physical appearance and men are valued for their status and power. When women are unable to care for their own physical appearance or when they otherwise fail to resemble the normative view of petite, youthful femininity, they are punished within mainstream rom-com narrative logic. By contrast, the majority of the male protagonists in these films do not adhere to masculine body ideals but are successful in their romantic goals due to their power, status, and agency.

2.2.2 Men pursue sex; good girls withhold

The second pillar of the nostalgic mainstream gender ideology found in romantic comedy films in this period is the idea that women are traditionally valued for withholding sex, whereas men are typically rewarded for pursuing sex. Once again, I maintain this constitutes a form of ideological nostalgia in terms of reproducing older systems whose values are no longer relevant to the contemporary context in which the films are made. The genre also reproduces the notion that '[a]n active/passive heterosexual division of labor has similarly controlled dramatic structure' (Mulvey, 1988, p. 63) in narrative cinema, which is nostalgic given that it is an observation of films made in the middle of the twentieth century.

Exemplifying this, in both *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989) and *Love Actually* (2003) masculine characters are rewarded for actively pursuing sex and feminine characters are rewarded for performing the "good girl" role of withholding sex. Since, according to Althusser, 'the "ideas" of a human subject exist in his actions' (2001, p. 152), this often leads to the central assumption of the rom-com that the masculine character, who actively initiates sexual interactions, is positioned as the subject, since their ideas and actions are made apparent. Conversely, for the feminine character whose action is passive, resistance is not granted the status of subjecthood because she does not appear to be performing an action. For example, as discussed in the previous section, in *When Harry Met Sally…* Harry (Billy Crystal) makes numerous comments to Sally (Meg Ryan) about her appearance, which reinforce the ideological belief, as identified by Mulvey, that

> [w]oman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (1988, p. 58)

Whether Harry's actions are intended to satirise men's constant sexual urges is unclear, but nevertheless the film presents Harry's comments about Sally's appearance as existing within the ideological world of the film, and the film accordingly legitimates the patriarchal order behind it. In other words, Harry's constant flirting with Sally, even when she is in a relationship with someone else, affirms the ideology that in narrative cinema woman is 'isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualized' (Mulvey, 1988, p. 64) rather than interacted with by men as equals. Sally's passive resistance to Harry's flirting gives her little space for agency other than the agency to set sexual limits, refusing Harry's advances for the majority of the film.

The fact that in moments of pain Sally cries and Harry utilises humour as a defence mechanism mirrors Doane's observation that 'the idea of feminine overidentification "prevails" nowhere if not in the popular imagination, in the signifying structures which ground genres labelled "weepies" and "tearjerkers"' (1988, p. 9). Thus, both characters show a "need" for a partner, but this "need" manifests itself differently: in sadness for Sally and through wit for Harry. The persistence Harry shows in the sequence where he leaves a string of increasingly ridiculous messages for Sally on her answering-machine after she ignores him (see figure 24) is then repaid narratively when Sally eventually picks up the phone. Comedically, these three, increasingly desperate phone calls follow a rule-of-three – essentially the idea that 'things are funnier when they happen three times' (Halpern, Close, and Johnson, 1994, p. 89) – and each repetition follows a 'progress and heighten' (p. 97) strategy, whereby the intensity, emotional stakes, or absurdity of the action increases with each repetition. In short, in this comedic moment, Harry actively pursues Sally despite her withholding. This action, which might otherwise constitute harassment or emotional manipulation, is made pleasurable for the spectator by its inscription within a conventional comedic format and consolidates the idea that this film encodes its ideology through comedic moments. If 'the job of popular culture is to feed off a repertoire of familiar and accommodating vocabularies, introducing a twist here and there, making some changes in line with what is going on in the social world so as to

appear current' (McRobbie, 2020, p. 67), then romantic comedies make problematic moments such as this palatable for their spectator.

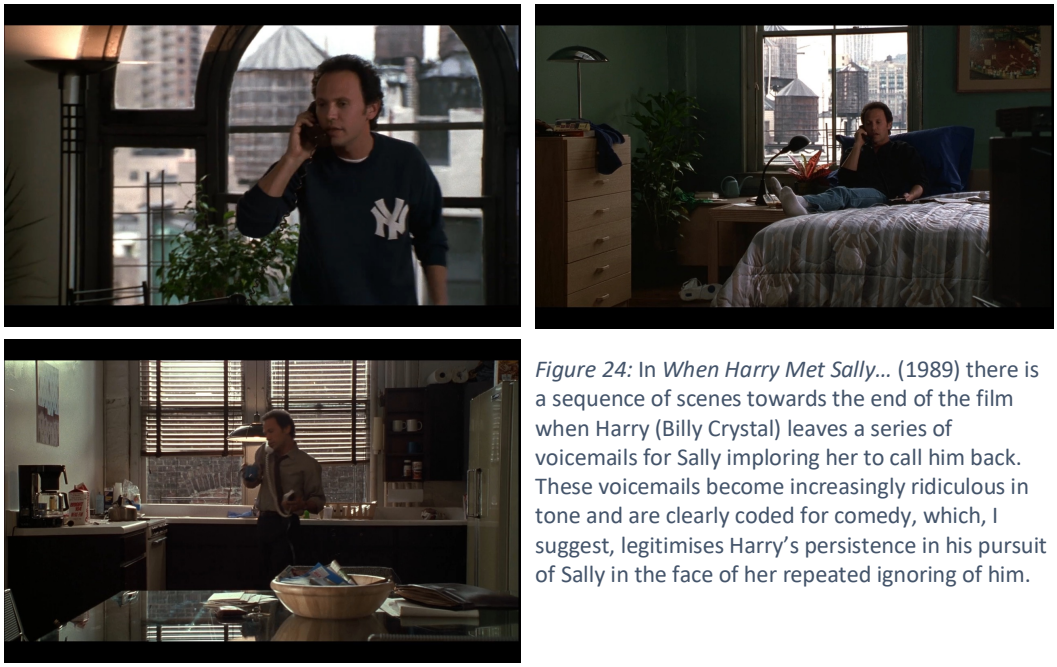


Figure 24: In *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989) there is a sequence of scenes towards the end of the film when Harry (Billy Crystal) leaves a series of voicemails for Sally imploring her to call him back. These voicemails become increasingly ridiculous in tone and are clearly coded for comedy, which, I suggest, legitimises Harry's persistence in his pursuit of Sally in the face of her repeated ignoring of him.

In her review of *Love Actually*, Williams describes a scene in which Juliet (Keira Knightley) watches her wedding video and notices that it is exclusively close-up shots of herself (see figure 25), as 'an almost comically blatant example of the male gaze in cinema. […] [Mark]'s cropping her, containing her, imposing limits on the terrifying object of desire' (2022). I disagree, however, with the idea that this is a comical scene in the film. This scene is presented as tragic because it is presented from the perspective of Mark (Andrew Lincoln). Subsequently, the camera follows Mark, making him the subject of this sequence, and so this scene cannot be said to be comedic – rather, the spectator experiences Mark's heartbreak with him.



Figure 25: In one scene in *Love Actually* (2003), Mark (Andrew Lincoln) watches Juliet (Kiera Knightley) view the wedding video that he made for her and her husband, Peter, which is exclusively close-up shots of Juliet. In my view, the focus on this creepy moment from Mark's perspective, along with the slow extradiegetic music playing on the film's soundtrack in this scene indicate that the viewer is meant to feel sorry for Mark in this moment. The anguish on Mark's face and his closed body position make his discomfort clear to the viewer, and so this moment is evidently not coded for comedy. Furthermore, immediately following this scene, the camera follows Mark out onto the street so that his emotional reaction is presented to the viewer but Juliet's emotional reaction is unseen.

In *Love Actually*, the character who most represents the idea that men are consumed with the urge to pursue sex is that of Colin (Kris Marshall), who travels all the way to America in pursuit of – to use his words – 'babes' (see figures 26–28). Furthermore, his use of the word "babes" echoes what Rowe Karlyn notes as 'the habit of addressing or considering women as girls [which] reflect[s] patriarchy's desire to deny them the status of adults' (Rowe Karlyn, 2011, p. 34). Colin's use of this word within mainstream rom-com suggests that the patriarchal desire to deny women the status of adult subject was still acceptable within mainstream public discourse in 2003. The other character who displays a pro-active attitude towards sex in *Love Actually* is Mia (Heike Makatsch). However, in contrast to Colin, Mia is literally presented as a devilish character at the office Christmas party (see figure 29). Where Colin's scenes are full of comedic dialogue, Mia's scenes are portrayed as tragic. In this way, inappropriate male sexual agency is presented as a benign threat to the status quo and female sexual agency is presented simply as a threat.



Figure 26: Part-way through *Love Actually* (2003), Colin (Kris Marshall) visits the USA and meets four beautiful women who invite him to stay with them during his trip.



Figure 27: When Colin (Kris Marshall) goes back to the women's house, the viewer sees a shot from outside the house showing the silhouettes of one man – presumably Colin – and four women taking their clothes off.



Figure 28: At the end of Love Actually (2003), Colin (Kris Marshall) returns to the UK accompanied by a tanned woman with long blonde hair and bright white teeth.



Figure 29: In *Love Actually* (2003), Mia (Heike Makatsch) reproduces the message that (slim, white) younger women are a threat to older, married men in that she pursues a relationship with her married boss Harry (Alan Rickman) and – to make the imagery abundantly clear – she attends their office Christmas party dressed as a devil.

In contrast to the comedically inflected male obsession with the female body in *When Harry Met Sally…* and *Love Actually*, in *Sex and the City 2* (2010) and *Trainwreck* (2015) there are numerous close-up shots that objectify male bodies as seen from the perspective of the female leads (see figure 30). In this way, men are presented as sexual objects to be looked at and enjoyed by the female characters, which appears to constitute an inversion of the male gaze that Mulvey (1988) describes as prevalent in older films. As Jean Kane notes, *Sex and the City 2* 'represents the American women's freedom as sexual agency expressed primarily through appearance and acquisition. The power to exhibit self-designed bodies, without unwanted consequences, acts as the index of female agency' (2017, p. 114). A further inversion of the ideologically gendered regime of cinematic "visual pleasure" occurs every time that Samantha and Amy have sex, with much more flesh being shown by their male partners, so that the spectator is encouraged to take a scopophilic pleasure from looking at them and potentially a narcissistic pleasure in identifying with Samantha and Amy. According to

the codification I am using, Samantha and Amy exhibit a proactive approach to sex that has typically been associated with masculinity insofar as they initiate sex, are preoccupied with men's bodies, and talk openly about their sexual desires and experiences. However, looking at the stills from the films in figure 30, even as the male body is displayed most prominently, the images are those of male muscularity and male sexual domination.



Figure 30: In both *Sex and the City 2* (2010) (left) and *Trainwreck* (2015) (right), when the characters have sex, the majority of the women's bodies is covered by their male lovers, and the naked bottoms and muscular backs of the men are more prominent for the viewer than the women's bodies.

Thus, across this time period, there *appears* to be a change that took place in the mid-noughties where men stopped being the only characters who pursue their sexual urges in mainstream rom-coms. However, I read this as evidence that the gender ideology has adapted itself to changing social conditions by acknowledging the purchasing power inherent to female consumption/hedonism under neoliberal capitalism while nevertheless retaining its power to determine how men and women are represented. It is noteworthy that initially the female characters who pursued sex were side characters, as in *Love Actually*, where Mia, who actively pursues sex, is the antagonist who threatens the institution of marriage. By contrast, in *Sex and the City 2*, Samantha, one of the protagonists, actively pursues sex outside of a relationship, and her exploits are presented as largely comedic.[51] By the time of *Trainwreck*, the sexually active female character has even graduated to the position of sole protagonist. However, all four films also contain moments in which female characters are judged

[51] At least, they are presented as comedic to the Western spectator but as a threat in the context of the characters' trip to Abu Dhabi, as it is her actions that get their trip cut short and their funding removed.

for their sexuality, and as such all four films reflect the “perfect,” “good girl” archetype.

The most obvious moments in which women are judged for their sexual conduct in *When Harry Met Sally…* are in the film’s diner scenes. In the first diner scene, Sally exclaims ‘it just so happens that I have had plenty of good sex’ before then pausing, embarrassed at noting how the other diners stare at her (see figure 31). Her pause indicates that she is uncomfortable talking about sex in public and affirms the idea that ‘[t]he woman’s objectification, her susceptibility to processes of fetishization, display, profit and loss, the production of surplus value, all situate her in a relation of resemblance to the commodity form’ (Doane, 1988, p. 22) and that the value of a woman as a commodity deteriorates when ‘women are judged by their sexual conduct’ (Kim et al., 2007, p. 152). By contrast, in the second diner scene of the film (see figure 32), Sally fakes an orgasm, and we encounter her increased confidence in taking agency over her own sexuality; her satisfied look after she has completed this action, in defiance of the social norms of dining (and thus the diners around her), blatantly contradicts Sedgwick’s assertion that historically female characters ‘enter into sexuality, not as an avenue to pleasure but as the only avenue to power; and emerge from it, far more abject and denuded of power, retroactively identified as embodiments of sexuality itself’ (2016, p. 159). Rather, I suggest this scene contains the message that in flaunting her sexuality Sally experiences a sense of joy – and power. Sally actively creates the tension that structures this comedic moment, before releasing it literally after she performs a fake climax and resumes eating as if nothing untoward had happened. Here, the film provides a double pleasure for viewers: the scopophilic pleasure in watching Sally simulate an orgasm, which aligns with Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze; but also a second pleasure that appears to contradict the first, the female-empowering pleasure of discovering her superiority over Harry. In this moment, Sally comedically challenges what it means to perform a “good girl” identity, but I would suggest that this is another example in which the exception proves the rule. Sally’s act of subversion is presented as an aberration, which reinforces the assumption that this is not behaviour that we (the spectator) expect Sally to exhibit or

normally endorse in actual life. Indeed, the existence of fake orgasms that Sally demonstrates in this central comedic moment of the film reveals something about the (mis)performance of sex under patriarchal conditions of dominance in heterosexual relationships, as Cook ironically noted in 1989: '[w]hy fake orgasms should even exist is the awkward question lurking beneath the film's light-hearted veneer' (p. 377).



Figure 31: In *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989), the other diners when they overhear Sally claim that she has had good sex before. Her facial expression indicates that she is uncomfortable with this attention. Three of the four diners who turn and stare at her in this shot appear to be male, which further reinforces the sense of the male gaze as described by Mulvey wherein women are the object of men's looks.



Figure 32: By contrast, in a later diner scene, Sally (Meg Ryan) fakes an orgasm during an argument with Harry (Billy Crystal). This is an even more overt public display of female sexuality, but this time the majority of the onlookers are female and one woman even utters the famous line, 'I'll have what she's having,' at the end of this sequence, indicating jealousy from onlookers rather than judgment.

Similarly to the first diner scene in *When Harry Met Sally…* described above, *Love Actually* also reinforces the idea that women are judged according to their sexual conduct. This occurs not only in the film's depiction of Mia as the villain in her plotline with Harry and Karen but also in the David-Natalie romance plot which forms the spine of the film. Furthermore, in contrast to the other films surveyed in this chapter, which all feature female protagonists, I argue that in the central David-Natalie plotline, it is David's perspective that is foregrounded, so that in every scene Natalie fulfils what Mulvey has previously described as 'the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning' (1988, p. 58). For example, when the US president (Billie Bob Thornton) steps towards Natalie and places his hand in her hair, the spectator only sees this interaction for a second as David walks in on them (see figures 33 and 34). In essence, Natalie is harassed at work, and David subsequently moves Natalie to another department. This is not framed explicitly as a punishment, but effectively that is what it is.



Figure 33: In one scene from *Love Actually* (2003), the camera shows David (Hugh Grant) walking into an office.



Figure 34: The camera then cuts to the American president (Billy Bob Thornton) close to David's staff member and love interest, Natalie (Martine McCutcheon), as seen from the doorway that David has just walked into. Therefore, in this moment, the spectator is encouraged to view the scene from David's perspective.

Likewise, *Sex and the City 2* contains numerous scenes in which women are judged by their sexual conduct, such as when Samantha is arrested for having sex with Rikard (Max Ryan) on a beach. Notably, we do not see Rikard punished for his actions. In the final shot of the film, where – having returned to the USA – they successfully have sex in public, we see that Samantha wears an ankle tag, the camera lingering over this detail to make it clear to the viewer. By contrast, a wide shot in this scene shows that Rikard's ankles appear to be tag-free (see figure 35). Similarly, in *Trainwreck* Amy is judged for her sexual conduct in a way that none of the male characters in the film are, although in the most obvious example of this the situation is that she has had sex with a sixteen-year-old for which she is fired. Since sixteen is below the legal age of consent in New York, what this reflects is the notably darker, bleaker tone of the film in comparison to the earlier films – a tone that reflects the "crisis subjectivity" of the mid-2010s (Calvente and Smicker, 2019).

In conclusion, all four case study films reproduce the idea that men actively pursue sex and that women tend to withhold sex from men, although to varying degrees across the four films. Indeed, there appears to be a change that occurs during the 2000s or 2010s insofar as women who pursue sex are increasingly depicted as protagonists and they are less likely to be judged for their sexual behaviour. Nevertheless, as I have shown through these analyses, the figure of the woman who actively pursues sex in the rom-com remains coded as an outlier, a comedic

transgression that reinforces the ideological message that “good girls” and women withhold sex.



Figure 35: In the final moments of *Sex and the City 2* (2010), Samantha (Kim Cattrall) and Rikard (Max Ryan) have sex on the bonnet of a car as fireworks go off in the background and as the voiceover talks about their return to the ‘land of the free.’ Samantha appears to wear an ankle tag but Rikard does not, which I suggest reveals that the “land of the free” is more free for men who have casual sex than it is for women.

2.2.3 Women want/need relationships; men want/need sex

The third pillar of mainstream gender ideology that my reading of the case studies reveals is the message that women want or need emotional relationships, whereas men want or need sex. This third aspect of mainstream gender ideology is seen most prominently in the two earlier films but less so in the later films, although all four films present characters who are either primarily driven by their pursuit of sex (like Harry in *When Harry Met Sally…* or Samantha in *Sex and the City 2*) or who prioritise pursuing a relationship (such as Sally in *When Harry Met Sally…* or Aaron in *Trainwreck*). I suggest that this aspect of ideology is formulated in one of two ways in the rom-com: characters are either positioned in a feminine role and thus invest their efforts in pursuing the ideal of a romantic relationship, or they are positioned in a masculine role and desire no-strings-attached sex.

In the oldest of the case study films, this delineation is reproduced across the traditional gender binary. Narratively, both Harry and Sally initiate turning points in their relationship at various stages in the story; however, when Sally initiates them, they are non-comedic and relate to emotional intimacy, and when Harry initiates them, they are humorous and often relate to sex. For example, when Sally asks Harry out to dinner the offer is made without any hint of humour and is coded as more genuine than Harry's earlier suggestion of staying at a motel, which conveys seedier, more sexual undertones. Harry's use of humour also allows him to retain emotional distance from the action of asking Sally out, using humour as a defence mechanism, such as in the scene where he puts on an accent when he asks Sally out. In this way, Harry maintains the façade of independence and an unwillingness to fully commit to their relationship.

By contrast, in *Love Actually*, the character of Billy Mack (Bill Nighy), an aging rockstar, typifies mainstream-accepted misogyny and desire for sex. He continually claims to want sexual pleasure without commitment, and he frequently discusses women's bodies in openly expressing his sexual thoughts, fantasies, urges, and experiences. There is an aggression in all of the humour that Billy employs in the film,

even after he has realised that his want (to be at a showbusiness party surrounded by attractive, younger women – see figure 36) is not his need (to spend Christmas with his male friend and manager, Joe – see figure 37). The dialogue still features a lot of humour that punches down. Billy and Joe's relationship is a homophobic but thoroughly homosocial one, in which they bond through quips made at the expense of women and gay men and then decide to spend Christmas watching (presumably heterosexual, female-objectifying) pornography. This echoes Sedgwick's assertion that 'any ideological purchase on the male homosocial spectrum – a (perhaps necessarily arbitrary) set of discriminations for defining, controlling, and manipulating these male bonds – will be a disproportionately powerful instrument of social control' (2016, p. 86). Without the inclusion of the final comedic moment when Billy suggests they 'get pissed and watch porn,' there is a queer potential in their expression of love, and I suggest that the inclusion of the mention of porn reaffirms the idea that men bond over their shared power over women. I therefore surmise that, while an assessment of the ideological message of the narrative arcs connected to Billy and Joe which focuses primarily on their "happy ending" might imply that their story promotes male friendship, they only achieve an emotional homosocial connection through their shared pursuit of hedonistic pleasure, which includes the objectification of women.



Figure 36: In the middle of *Love Actually* (2003), Billy Mac (Bill Nighy) shoots a music video for his Christmas song surrounded by slim, white, young women in short dresses and high heels. This image represents the kind of love that Billy thinks he wants, while at the end of the film he celebrates Christmas with his (male) manager, Joe. In this way, if we read a film's ideological message primarily from its ending, then his plot arc is one that promotes platonic love. However, in this thesis I argue that the prominence of this sequence in the middle of the film nevertheless reproduces the image of love (or at least lust) between older, high-status men and younger, lower-status, slim, blonde women.



Figure 37: At the end of *Love Actually* (2003), there is an awkward embrace between Billy Mac (Bill Nighy) and his manager, Joe (Gregor Fisher). This comes after a declaration of love, and the incongruity of this comedic moment plays off of the unlikely friendship between these two characters. I suggest that the ordering of this sequence – where they verbalise their connection before embracing – implies that they are more comfortable with words than physical intimacy between men, as the former leads to the latter. A potential queer reading of this moment is then somewhat quashed by Billy's suggestion that they watch porn, as – based on the repeated objectification of women by Billy earlier in the film – it is implied that they will watch heterosexual pornography.

Since *Sex and the City 2* only features male characters as side characters, whose wants and needs are not fully expressed, the film does not offer a comment as to what men want or need, but it does present Samantha as a character who wants/needs independence and who prefers sexual fulfilment over sexual intimacy. The lack of character depth to Samantha in the film risks what Butler describes as 'subversive performances [that] always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where "subversion" carries market value' (2007, p. xxii–xxiii). By contrast, the opening of *Trainwreck* once more shows a male figure teaching a female character: Amy's father explains to his two daughters that 'monogamy is not realistic,' which is a mantra he gets them to repeat. Clearly, this instruction has an impact on the young Amy as shown by her promiscuity and aversion to commitment in subsequent scenes; as Cobb and Negra note, 'Amy displays many of the supposed traits of the commitment-phobic male' (2017, p. 758). Where *Sex and the City 2* opens by holding up the celebration of (gay) weddings and the monotonous reality of (heterosexual) marriage, and *Love*

Actually has the opening airport sequence that reifies various forms of love, the tone of *Trainwreck*'s opening questions the idea that female characters want emotional intimacy. This behaviour is repeated throughout the first half of the film. While the agency is split relatively evenly between Amy and Aaron, 'various tropes previously associated with the rom com heroine are displaced onto the men in the film' (Cobb and Negra, 2017, p. 759), and vice versa. In this way Amy and Aaron perform the reverse of the Harry-Sally gender dynamic found in *When Harry Met Sally…*. Nevertheless, Amy assimilates herself to the commitment to monogamy and "good girl" femininity by the end of the film. As such, *Trainwreck* 'notably conclude[s] that playing the "male" role of sexual adventurer […] generates new conundrums and unsatisfying emotional lives' (Cobb and Negra, 2017, p. 758).

Conversely, Amy and Aaron's gender-reversed approaches to their relationship are maintained in their conversations with their friends. The scene in which Amy and Aaron debate whether they should date or not directly contrasts with the messages of love-at-first-sight or fate that are featured throughout most traditional and neotraditional rom-coms, with *Love Actually* as the most prominent example in this chapter. Instead, Aaron is presented as a character who wants/needs a relationship, but not in the obsessive, illogical way that Mark does in *Love Actually*; he does so in a logical, reasoned way. Amy also needs a relationship, but she only realises this at the second act turning point of the film, which can be read as the realisation that she must embrace a more feminine attitude to sex, rather than pursuing the destructive, more masculine approach to sex which has informed her actions and tactics thus far in the film.

When Harry Met Sally… ends with Harry and Sally married, and *Love Actually* concludes with almost all its characters in relationships, except Mia, Karl, Sarah, and Mark. As *Sex and the City 2* finishes with all of the central female characters in some form of relationship, the implication is that, according to this film, these women do want/need relationships. Since all of the women present as heterosexual, there is also the implied message that women need boyfriends or husbands – or at least, in

Samantha's case, men with whom they can regularly have sex. Finally, *Trainwreck* ends with Amy and Aaron together. Hence, the common gender ideology in these mainstream rom-coms reproduces gender complementarity, assumed heterosexuality, and pro-monogamy. In broad terms, as I have illustrated in this analysis, the first two films reproduce the notion that 'pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female' (Mulvey, 1988, p. 62). Conversely, the latter two films reproduce the idea that from the second decade of the twenty-first century, at least in the US, women gain pleasure in looking at eroticised (muscular) male bodies. Nevertheless, because all four films treat the visual pleasure that their gendered protagonists experience differently, all four films reaffirm a binary view of gender. Despite the increasing number of 'gender inversions that supposedly have come to structure the post-epitaph [read: post 1978] chick flick, [these] prove flimsy, rhetorical and often subject to correction through conservative denouements' (Cobb and Negra, 2017, p. 761). In other words, the mainstream romantic comedy film of this period divides actions and traits into binary categories of masculine and feminine regardless of who occupies these positions, subverting our expectations of these in their comedic moments, but ultimately reaffirming them in their plots through the dialectic of gender complementarity that structures the ideology of the rom-com.

2.3 Closing Remarks

In the closing remarks to Chapter 1 I asked which identities are available for (mis)recognition by the rom-com viewer in the period between the late 1980's and the present day. The answer that has been found through analysis of the comedic moments in *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989), *Love Actually* (2003), *Sex and the City 2* (2010), and *Trainwreck* (2015) is as follows: these mainstream films broadly appear to naturalise a binary, heteronormative gender structure. Over the past thirty-five years, the identities which are made available for (mis)recognition in mainstream rom-com continue to naturalise a gender structure that associates maleness (biological sex) with masculinity (as a way of performing gender) and heterosexuality, and femaleness with femininity and heterosexuality. Consequently, those who "mis-perform" this gender ideology in any way – females who "mis-perform" femininity, males who "mis-perform" masculinity, and any queer or non-binary folk – are either excluded or comedically mocked within the genre.

This stands in contrast to Brian Henderson's famous prediction in 1978 that '[i]t seems that when the new self pulls itself together, it is away from the ground of full sexual dialectic. To argue this is to argue the death of romantic comedy' (p. 19). Instead, I rather agree with Maria San Filippo who concludes that 'after a period of turbulence in the 70s and 80s generated by the women's movement's critique of romantic myths, romcom came back strong in the 1990s and 2000s' (2021b, p. 8). Moreover, I suggest that the key to the success of the romantic comedy film is precisely the disconnect between the rom-com's imaginary, nostalgic depiction of gender – Henderson's supposedly "full sexual dialectic". The simplicity of the rom-com's gender politics stands in contrast to the more complicated and confusing "real" state of romance in Western society, which has been fragmented and warped by societal changes (divorce rates; children born outside of marriage; the erosion of

traditional, essentialist, binary gender roles; the emergence of new gender identities) over the past thirty-five years.[52]

Thus, this chapter made a key intervention in rom-com genre scholarship by presenting the argument that mainstream rom-coms over the past thirty years retain a commitment to a gender system scaffolded around comedic moments that reproduce three ideological pillars: men are valued for their strength, wealth, and power, while women are primarily valued for their appearance; men pursue sex, whereas women withhold sex; women want or need relationships, and men want or need sex. These pillars represent taken-for-granted masculine and feminine approaches to relationships, and even when a woman enacts a masculine approach to sex, as Samantha does in *Sex and the City 2* or Amy does in *Trainwreck*, this is coded as a comedic incongruity and thus tacitly reinforces the status quo. Moreover, a gender structure that has binary (male and female) iterations of each structuring behaviour implicitly aligns with the heteronormative idea of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1980), which will be discussed in Chapter 4. In short, when viewed from the lens of looking back at these films from 2024, the mainstream romantic comedies of this time period offer a 'relapse into an ostensibly outmoded desire for romantic fulfilment as a reassuring escape from the contradictions between feminist ideals and the realities of the labor and mating markets' (San Filippo, 2021b, p. 8).

This is not to ignore the incremental advances in the representation of gender ideology that are also apparent in this chapter. In 1995, Rowe observed that '[m]ost often, the conventions of both popular culture and high art represent women as objects rather than subjects of laughter' (p. 3). While this assertion can be argued as true to some extent in *When Harry Met Sally…* and *Love Actually*, it is certainly not

[52] This aligns with Beatriz Oria's view that '[i]n these times of uncertainty, the individual's romantic life gains unprecedented significance, as s/he turns to love in search of answers, idealising it as a source of security and self-identity. […] In a world devoid of the old certainties which gave a sense of security to the individual, she – and some of her viewers – take refuge in romantic love' (2012, [no pagination]).

supported by my analysis of *Sex and the City 2* or *Trainwreck.*[53] Further to this, Rowe argues that '[w]hen women make jokes about men, they invert – momentarily – the social hierarchy' (1995, p. 19) and yet 'transgression is not absolute and static, but relational and historically contingent' (p. 217). Indeed, regarding the content analysis featured in this chapter, I would suggest that the frequent instances of comedic transgression that I read in Samantha and Amy's characters in the latter two films are arguably made possible by their relation to more isolated comedic moments of female-centred comedy such as the second diner scene in *When Harry Met Sally….*

The question remains, however, of how the gender ideology of the mainstream rom-com is complicated by queerness, race, and other bodies that are not adequately represented in these four films. Rather, each of these case study films are focused primarily on white, heterosexual, able-bodied, slim protagonists, and so the refuge offered for the spectator has appealed to this particular identity, presented as though it were a universal norm. In the next three chapters I challenge the mainstream gender ideology expounded here with films that speak to each of these areas of representation, arguing that pre-2015 representation of intersectional gender identities in rom-coms largely served as comedic relief that otherwise reaffirmed the ideological norm that is embodied in heterosexual, white, slim, able-bodied romance. Moreover, post 2015 and in the wake of the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, there is an increasing drive towards representing previously othered gender identities as privileged characters, which challenges the hegemony of the mainstream gender ideology developed in this first case study chapter.

[53] Indeed, as the only one of these films produced prior to Rowe's book, *When Harry Met Sally…* is one of the films she discusses in this light when remarking that 'it is Harry (Billy Crystal), not Sally (Meg Ryan), whose thoughts are shared with the audience through the film's only voiceover' (1995, p. 197).

Chapter 3: Tacit Whiteness in the Mainstream Rom-Com

3.1 Opening Remarks

The previous chapter identified the existence of a mainstream gender ideology in both the plots and jokes of British and American romantic comedy films, as found in four rom-coms that predominantly focus on white protagonists. This chapter contributes new knowledge to contemporary rom-com scholarship by exploring how race intersects with and complicates the representation of gender in the rom-com's comedic moments, before I look at how queerness and body difference do the same, and in their own way produce complications, in the following two chapters. This chapter argues that the comedic moments in mainstream romantic comedies from Chapter 2 assume white spectatorship as the default structure of a tacitly racialised cinematic gaze due to the foregrounding of white-presenting characters whose racial identity does not affect their interactions with other in-world characters. For example, a viewer may watch *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989) knowing that Billy Crystal, as an actor who exists outside of the film, is Jewish, but Harry's screentime does not bear any trace of explicit Jewishness.[54] Because of this, the spectator is not invited to consider race in *When Harry Met Sally….* It is my contention in this chapter that this constitutes a reproduction of what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva terms "color-blind racism," which he determines as 'the new dominant racial discourse in America' (2022, p. xxi). This is to say that British and American rom-coms superficially adopt a colour-blindness, in which the unmarked character (of normative racialised identity) is presumed to be white, and express as "common sense" the interests and viewpoints of hegemonic whiteness.

This assumption of white spectatorship finds its analogy in Hall's discussion of 'the "absent" but imperializing "white eye"; the unmarked position from which all these "observations" are made and from which, alone, they make sense' (2021b, p. 107). It has long been presented as an obviousness that most British and American rom-coms tend to feature white protagonists, engaging in the rom-com's "serious" plot-driven moment. Where racialised characters appear, they are present only as

[54] For a similar reading see Jermyn (2009, p. 21).

supporting characters, providing comic relief that solidifies the hegemonic position of the white protagonist. In more recent romantic comedy examples, such as *The Big Sick* (2017) or *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), racialised protagonists achieve rom-com success and happiness via assimilation into white or Western culture. In summary, I read mainstream rom-com culture as hegemonically white but by no means preventing other cultural forms from existing; rather, what mainstream rom-com does – very successfully – is assimilate or co-opt minoritarian cultural forms through comedic othering and ridicule, tacitly reaffirming the apparent "naturalness" of ways of being that have been historically associated with the social construction of whiteness.[55]

[55] As Alana Lentin notes, in racialised ideology '[a]ssimilation into what is portrayed as a superior white culture, whose ability to shift and accommodate difference is portrayed as its strength over others' (2020, p. 91).

3.2 Race, Racialisation, Racism, and Whiteness

The argument of this chapter is scaffolded around the following key terms: "race"/"racialisation," "overt" and "inferential" racism, and "whiteness." This thesis follows the line of argument set out by numerous scholars (including Bonilla-Silva, 2022; Hall, 2021a; Hall, 2021b; Lentin, 2020; Meghji, 2022) that race is produced as a socially and historically constructed discourse, as well as a social phenomenon. This is to say that the modern, Western concept of race emerged in relation to the historically situated need of Europeans and those of European ancestry to understand 'fixed relations of subordination and domination' based on 'stereotypes […] grouped around the poles of "superior" and "inferior" natural species' (Hall 2021b, p. 107) to justify slavery, colonial conquest, economic exploitation, and imperialism.[56] A racial ideology therefore falsely contends that humans can be differentiated into "naturally occurring" groups based on inherited phenotypical attributes found in various parts of the world and on behaviours and values commonly associated with these physical attributes.[57] Since ideology is always inherently nostalgic for a time that never existed exactly as the ideology suggests, it is worth remembering James Baldwin's statement, originally published in 1984, that 'Americans became white – the people who, as they claim, "settled" the country – became white – because of the necessity of denying the Black presence, and justifying the Black subjugation' (2011, p. 136); much has been written about how once negatively racialised groups, such as Jewish or Irish people, "became white" in US society, in processes through which they were positively counterposed to Black and Indigenous people (Brodkin, 1999; Ignatiev, 2015). In summary, not only

[56] This is also echoed by Homi Bhabha who writes that '[t]he objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction' (1992, p. 316).

[57] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva refers to the idea that there are biological differences between people of different races as '[n]aturalization, [which] is a frame that allows Whites to explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences' (2022, p. 82). He describes the behaviours and values associated with these phenotypical attributes as '[c]ultural racism, [which] is a frame that relies on culturally based arguments such as "Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education" or "Blacks have too many babies" to explain the standing of people of color in society' (p. 82).

does an ideology of race falsely stress the "naturalness" of racial difference, but it assigns positive or negative value to racial signifiers based on political rationale.[58]

In this way, power dynamics are a key feature of racialisation, and the racialised (non-white) Other has long been positioned in mainstream culture as the antithesis of the (white) British or American self. Indeed, a racial ideology not only reinforces white privilege but it tacitly 'casts the white, the western, and the European – each co-constitutive of each other – as neutral and universal' (Lentin, 2020, p. 7). Over time, this produces a systemic belief that subjecthood and whiteness are mutually inclusive. This is what Sylvia Wynter writes about when she says that 'what it means to be both human and North American [in the eyes of the police is] […] to be White, of Euromerican culture and descent, middle-class, college educated and suburban' (1994, p. 43). It is this understanding of whiteness that I use in my discussion in this chapter.

For this reason, I map these descriptors – "of Euromerican culture and descent," "middle class," and "affluent" – as the descriptors of whiteness in mainstream rom-com of the past thirty-five years. Whiteness is not simply a family of phenotypical resemblance including pale skin, freckles, blue or green eyes, and straight blonde or red hair. It is also cultural and intensely ideological, and it centres around how 'our contemporary world is built on this fundamental, enduring binary of human/other' (Emejulu, 2022, p. 3). With regards to how the contemporary world structures race, Emejulu cites George Yancy's statement that 'Whiteness, by its very nature, is binary and hierarchical. Whiteness is the thesis […] and "racialised" groups that are not white are deemed "different," "deviant," that is, the antithesis' (Peters, 2019, p. 663–664 cited in Emejulu, 2022, p. 24). My intervention in this discussion is to interrogate who is made the dehumanising object of racial humour in the mainstream rom-com and who is the humanising subject making the jokes, and how this has changed between the late 1980s and present day. Specifically, this chapter comprises

[58] As Peter Wade notes when he gives the example of 'a Puerto Rican, used to not being classed as black in Puerto Rico,' who 'when she moves to the mainland US, may find herself suddenly identified as a black person' (2010, p. 13).

close readings of *Coming to America* (1988), *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), *The Big Sick* (2017), *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Yesterday* (2019), and *Love Hard* (2021). Regarding the increasing numbers of people of colour cast as leads in rom-coms post 2015, I ask whether this constitutes, to borrow from Crenshaw, a form of '[t]okenistic, objectifying, voyeuristic inclusion,' which 'is at least as disempowering as complete exclusion' (1991, p. 1261), or whether there is an active engagement with the lived experiences of people of colour in current rom-coms.

To explain this further, I use Hall's distinction between overt racism and inferential racism:

> By *overt racism*, I mean those many occasions when open and favourable coverage is given to arguments, positions and spokespersons who are in the business of elaborating an openly racist argument or advancing a racist policy or view. […] By *inferential racism* I mean those apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether "factual" or "fictional," which have racist premisses and propositions inscribed in them as a set of *unquestioned assumptions*. (2021b, p. 105)

Inferential racism, which informs my reading of many of the films in this chapter, is already evident in the films discussed in Chapter 2. *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989) and *Love Actually* (2003) present largely white versions of New York and London, respectively, and are therefore not love-letters to the "real" New York and London but to the "imaginary" white New York and London continually (re)made within rom-com ideology (to use Althusser's terms). *When Harry Met Sally…* excludes non-white characters entirely, whereas *Love Actually* engages in a more tokenistic, objectifying, and voyeuristic representation through racialised supporting characters that either aid the stories of their white counterparts, as with Peter (Chiwitel Ejiofor), Tony (Abdul Salis), and Annie (Nina Sosanya), or are objects of desire seen from the viewpoints of white characters, as with Olivia (Joanna Anderson), Aurelia (Lúcia Moniz), and Karl (Rodrigo Santoro) (see figures 38–41). This further reflects the "colour-blind," liberal

investment of the film in multiculturalism without any commitment to the politics of representation. Furthermore, I contend there is a colourism evident insofar as the three supporting characters are played by Black actors, whereas two of the racialised characters who serve as the objects of white desire are played by actors of southern European heritage. This privileging of European-heritage alterity over African-heritage otherness reproduces a simplistic racial hierarchy with white characters most privileged, Black characters least privileged, and Brown characters occupying a space somewhere between these two extremes.



Figure 38: Abdul Salis plays Tony, who is a friend of Colin (Kris Marshall) and works on the same film set as Jack (Martin Freeman) and Judy (Joanna Page) but appears in fewer scenes than those characters, has fewer lines than them, and does not have a romantic arc of his own in *Love Actually* (2003).



Figure 39: In *Love Actually* (2003) Chiwetel Ejiofor plays Peter, who marries Juliet (Kiera Knightley), but more screentime is taken up by his best friend Mark (Andrew Lincoln) whose unrequited love for Juliet features much more prominently than Peter and Juliet's relationship.



Figure 40: In *Love Actually* (2003), Karl (Rodrigo Santoro) is the object of Sarah's (Laura Linney) workplace infatuation. He has few lines in the film but is the object of Sarah's gaze, and his muscular physique is displayed for the film's viewer in the scene in which they almost have sex.



Figure 41: Similarly to Karl, Aurelia (Lúcia Moniz) has few lines but serves as the object of Jamie's (Colin Firth) attraction in one of *Love Actually's* (2003) many other plotlines.

Most obviously, the entire plot of *Sex and the City 2* (2010) is based upon an inferentially racist assumption that the USA is less sexist than, and consequently superior to, Abu Dhabi. In short, I read the film as a rom-com version of Rivers's

assertion that '[o]n the global stage, the promotion of feminism's apparent success in the Western media can in part be related to the project of (re)affirming the notion of Western superiority over cultures seen as "other"' (2017, p. 24). Of course, the ideological message of Western, liberated superiority is reinforced in the film through depictions of Arab women wearing designer clothes under their burkas, as previously noted, and the white protagonists having their passports confiscated, meetings cancelled, and funding cut after Samantha is caught having sex in public. Thus, the film unquestioningly assumes that Abu Dhabi is a dangerous place for liberated Western women and is inferentially racist since this racist premise is not only unquestioned by the characters in their dialogue but is also indeed confirmed by the plot – namely, they have to flee Abu Dhabi in disguise.

Turning to overt racism, *When Harry Met Sally…* once again largely omits discussion of race but features one example of overt racism, already discussed in Chapter 1, in which Harry jokes about being surprised there was food in an Ethiopian restaurant. Using Hall's terms, Harry is open in his expression of a racist argument, and this joke is uttered as part of his successful attempt to build a relationship with Sally, which constitutes favourable coverage for this viewpoint. Similarly, in *Sex and the City 2*, the protagonists clearly articulate openly racist views which are also framed positively, thus representing a further use of overt racism, in Hall's terms. There is also a climate of fear created in the film, as shown when Charlotte does not give her husband's Jewish surname when travelling to the Middle East. The overt racism in the film creates comedic moments by exaggerating the primitive attitudes of Abu Dhabi in comparison to the supposedly sophisticated milieu inhabited by the American characters, such as when Samantha asks if anyone has any spare rubies to tip their drivers or when Gaurau, their hotel attendant, obediently does not go home until he is dismissed. In terms of overt racism, *Love Actually* does not touch upon race particularly directly, although I read the depiction of Aurelia's family – the numerous jokes about her sister's weight, her father dressed only in a vest on his top half – as presenting Portugal as a country of relative squalor, in contrast to the opulence of white, turtle-necked, middle-class London in the rest of the film (see figure 42). As

such, I suggest that all three of these older rom-coms reproduce overt and inferential racism through their comedic moments and therefore interpolate a white spectator who is presumed to belong to the hegemonic group for whom the joke makes sense.



Figure 42: Clockwise from top-left: The shabby house in Portugal that Aurelia's family live in with peeling paint on the doorframe and her father stood in the doorway wearing only a white vest on his top half; one of the opening shots of the film depicting an affluent London street; an interior shot of Daniel's (Liam Neeson) house showing a large kitchen/diner with a Waitrose shopping bag in the foreground, indicating his middle-class status; finally, a shot of David (Hugh Grant) posing in a smart suit outside 10 Downing Street. As such, I argue that *Love Actually* (2003) contrasts the "squalor" of Portugal with the wealth and luxury of London and thus reinforces a sense of British superiority over the rest of Europe.

By contrast, in *Trainwreck* (2015), Amy is self-consciously anti-racist. For example, she insists that she has Black friends in her first meeting with Aaron. However, her father, Gordon, exhibits overt racism, such as when he is in hospital and remarks to a Black nurse with an African accent that he will let them know if he is invaded by 'evil spirits.' Nevertheless, according to Hall's definition, this is not overt racism because the character who espouses the racist viewpoint receives unfavourable coverage insofar as none of the other characters in the scene laugh or show approval in any other way. Moreover, Gordon is fundamentally presented as an unhappy, flawed character in the film, and so I read this comedic moment as centring upon the incongruity between Gordon's bigotry and the dearth of favourable coverage it receives. *Trainwreck* is also the first of the case study films discussed so far to feature a

Black character in a prominent role. LeBron James, played by real-life basketball star and celebrity investor LeBron James, contradicts stereotypical historical Hollywood portrayals of Black masculinity. For example, in contrast to the majority of the Black male characters in *Coming to America* (1988) who fixate on sex, James's character demonstrates an old-fashioned decorous manner when he asks Amy what her 'intentions' are with Aaron, and in another scene he asks Aaron not if he and Amy have had sex but if they have 'made love.' The depiction of LeBron as a sensitive friend and mentor for Aaron marks progress from the more limited depictions of characters of colour in *When Harry Met Sally…*, *Love Actually*, and *Sex and the City 2*. However, LeBron's character still lacks his own dramatic goals and, notably, lacks the flaws that would make him "three-dimensional." This places LeBron in the category of Black best friend to a white protagonist, of which there is a rich history in the romantic comedies produced between the 1980s and 2015.[59] The lack of individual agency for LeBron, outside of helping Aaron, offers a trace of what Hall describes as a staple of early US cinema, 'the familiar slave-figure [who is] dependable, loving in a simple, childlike way' (2021b, p. 108). This is not to say that *Trainwreck* fully rearticulates the "familiar slave figure" as a modern-day "Black best friend." Nor does this analysis suggest that white protagonists should not have Black friends in rom-coms. Rather, the regular positioning of white protagonists alongside Black supporting characters whose only narrative goal is to aid their white friend reproduces an ideological message that assumes whiteness as the norm and pays lip-service to a politics of multiculturalism without fully engaging with it. By contrast, in this chapter I focus upon films that feature race and racialisation more prominently than the case study films from Chapter 2.[60]

[59] For example, Dionne (Stacey Dash) in *Clueless* (1995), Kevin (Dave Chappelle) in *You've Got Mail* (1998), Jay (Romany Malco) in *The 40 Year-Old Virgin* (2005), and Lillian (Maya Rudolph) in *Bridesmaids* (2011).

[60] Of course, this period has also been marked by the Black Lives Matter movement, which began in 2013 and grew in stature from 2014 after the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and the #MeToo movement, which came to prominence in October 2017 in the wake of sexual abuse allegations against Harvey Weinstein.

3.3 How Rom-Coms Have Represented Race (Late 1980s–2015)

I have identified two key ways in which romantic comedies engage with race for the majority of the time period I am studying: first, the use of racialised Others in comedic supporting roles, such as in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), which features numerous racialised characters who provide comic relief to the main romantic plot; second, the presentation of interracial or inter-cultural romance in which a non-white character overcomes the obstacles provided by their Otherness in order to pursue a white love interest, as in *Coming to America* (1988) and *Maid in Manhattan* (2002). In my reading of these last two films, I argue that they present their non-Western characters alongside fairy-tale tropes that ascribe the meaning 'happy ending' to the signifier of 'assimilating the other into Western culture via a romantic relationship with someone who presents as culturally Western.' I shall unpack what I mean here towards the end of this section.

3.3.1 The ethnic Other as comic relief in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002)

The opening of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) references the otherness that the lead character, Toula (Nia Vardalos), experiences when viewing her body through an inherently white lens. In her opening voiceover, she remarks that 'when I was growing up, I knew I was different. The other girls were blonde and delicate, and I was a swarthy six-year-old with sideburns.' In short, the audience is introduced to Toula via the idea that her ethnicity prevents her from performing the feminine ideal that she perceives as desirable.[61] It is my reading that this is one of the ways that *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* comedically depicts European immigrants' lived experiences for a wider US cinema audience – a dynamic replicated in the initial meeting between Toula and her white American love interest, Ian (John Corbett), where she says, 'here I am, standing here, your own private Greek statue.'

Toula undergoes two transformative processes in the film that remedy this initial otherness: her physical makeover, and her return to school, the latter of which enables her to stop working in her family's restaurant. During the physical makeover, she tries contact lenses, restyles her hair, and wears more makeup. In this way she masks physical indicators of her ethnic otherness, and she also displays signifiers of consumerism. This has led Anagnostou to remark that the film reaffirms the message that '[t]he embodiment of the immigrant into white ethnicity requires every element of the beauty industry (makeup, permed hair, fashionable clothes, etc.) to bring about an extreme makeover, framing the new self as beautiful and desirable' (2012, p. 147). However, more extreme than this initial makeover is the scene on the morning of Toula's wedding when all of the female guests undergo a simultaneous makeover, including her sister who has shaving foam over her top lip (see figure 43). While in reality women of all ethnic backgrounds might dye, pluck, straighten, or curl their hair and body hair to achieve a desired look, this film reproduces the message that racialised women especially must work for a desirable aesthetic. Similarly, Toula's

[61] Yiorgos Anagnostou, a Greek and American ethnic studies scholar, similarly concludes that '[b]ecause Toula looks at her body through the lens of whiteness, she rejects it in an act of self-erasure' (2012, p. 146).

return to adult education contributes to her assimilation into middle-class American femininity. Tzanelli describes this as a moment in the film in which 'Toula seeks social recognition through her non-recognition as a working-class woman […] [because] when the label of "working class" is applied to women, it signifies dangerousness, dirt and lack of value' (2004, p. 45). I extend Tzanelli's point here to argue that Toula's working-classness is tied to her ethnic Greekness by her father's insistence that she does not need an education because her job is to get married. In this way, Toula eschews her working-class family status through her pursuit of education and the implied expense of her makeover as an assimilation into the white, aspirational, middle-class femininity that is hegemonic in the US.



Figure 43: On the morning of Toula's (Nia Vardalos) wedding, all of the women in her family appear in a group makeover scene in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002).

Through her father's assertion that women do not need education, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* undermines the experience of the majority of Greek Americans, as 'the percent[age] of Greek Americans who graduate from college is consistently among the highest of all ethnic groups in America' (Georgakas, 2003, p. 37). Indeed, the film's writer, Nia Vardalos, attended Ryerson University before developing the script from her semi-autobiographical experiences. Similarly, Georgakas notes that '[t]he major plot element, the cultural shock of outmarriage, is actually now the cultural norm as

more than seventy percent of all Greek Americans outmarry' (p. 37). Thereby, there is something factually outdated in the representation of Toula's family, where they serve the film comedically but not truthfully, as they do not reflect common practice for Greek Americans in 2002. This further reinforces the sense that the construction of racialised reality in the film is nostalgic for a time or racial system that differs from 2000s USA, and indeed one that may not have ever existed outside of media constructions but which reaffirms a sense of white superiority with regard to the ethnic Other.

Similarly, when romantic comedies feature non-white characters, they often function as supporting characters providing stereotyped comedic relief in contrast to the more serious white romantic leads.[62] Toula assimilates into whiteness in order to pursue a "serious" romantic relationship, and to avoid the second way that mainstream rom-com engages with ideas of race and racialisation: ethnic mockery. Returning to the incongruity theory of comedy, I frame this as the ideological message that affluent, middle-class whiteness is the underlying assumption for romantic comedies, so that when non-white characters appear in the rom-com, they are presented comedically as a benign threat or incongruity within the context of the status quo. Throughout *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, Toula's otherness and the otherness of her family are coded for comic effect as well as providing obstacles for her to overcome in her relationship with Ian. As such the conflict in the film stems from a tension between Toula and her family as well as the incongruity between modern American dating and the actions and attitudes of Toula's Greek family. In this way, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is another example of a film in which '[m]arginalized or stigmatized groups in a society have often been demeaned in movies by presenting them as caricatures' (Cobb, 2021, p. 849). Indeed, I suggest that all of Toula's family

[62] It has been noted by Belinda Edmondson that '[i]t is a truism of critical race scholarship that black people have a history of being used to showcase white romance' (2007, p. 195). Edmondson cites Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) as a character depicted with 'precisely the attributes that are meant to reflect more vividly the opposite qualities in the white heroine, Scarlett O'Hara', in contrast to the 'demonic sexuality, presented as evidence of the essentially primitive and violent nature of Africans' (p. 195) in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).

are caricatures in some sense, and their depiction is always linked to something quite primitive. As Anagnostou writes, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*'s

> portrayal of immigrants as primitives in our midst reanimates a stock of images common to Hollywood and ethnographic cinema in general: the infantilization, debasement, and exoticization of the other, cast as an aboriginal who embodies a way of life that is bygone in the spectator's culture. (2012, p. 140)

This association between ethnic Others and primitivity is evident in the comedic moments in which Toula's brother threatens Ian with physical violence if he is ever disloyal to Toula. Similarly, there is a primitive animality that is conveyed through the comedic line wherein Toula's mother assures her, 'Greek women – we may be lambs in the kitchen, but we are tigers in the bedroom,' which, as Anagnostou has also noted, suggests 'excessive, bestial sexuality tamed by female domesticity' (2012, p. 147). Furthermore, there is a link made between Toula's family and a kind of atavistic and wholly anachronistic ritual, during the wedding ceremony, when members of Toula's family spit on her as part of their wedding traditions to the sheer horror of Ian's family and friends.

By contrast, Negra claims that the importance of ethnicity in modern society is presented 'as a restorative response to the evacuation of contemporary culture' (2009, p. 138). Ian embodies this in the film when he chooses to convert to Greek Orthodox Christianity, as well as in his general acceptance of Toula's family. Indeed, perhaps the film works as a comedy because Ian's ethnic, social, and economic privilege make the pranks from Toula's family, as well as his misunderstanding and exclusion from the Greek family, benign. For example, Toula's family trick Ian into announcing in Greek at a family gathering that he has three testicles. We do not fear for him because of his stature, good looks, and economic privilege, so he can be subjected, effectively, to humorous othering by Toula's family. More than this, because of Ian's whiteness, there is a benevolence to the moments 'in which the power relations between the culturally dominant and ethnicity are reversed, a reversal that explicitly places the

former in a minority position' (Anagnostou, 2012, p. 141), such as the scenes at Toula's family home and the church and amongst the close-knit community of friends and relatives where Ian is the other/minority person in the room.

As Anagnostou observes, '[t]he sincere, devoted, super-nice white masculinity that Ian represents leaves no doubt about the politics at work' (2012, p. 153), and indeed, Toula's own acceptance of her family only becomes a possibility for her once she views them through Ian's eyes. For example, at the end of the film, when Ian starts using Windex as a catch-all medical treatment in the same way that Toula's father does, she smiles, having previously rolled her eyes when her father did this. Indeed, peaceful cultural pluralism is very much the ideological message of the film. At the end of the film, Toula's family buy her the house next to theirs, with the Greek flag painted across the garage door and mock-Parthenon house frontage, neatly contained behind an all-American white picket fence (see figure 44). This reaffirms the spectator's vision of them as perfect immigrants, working hard, contributing to the American economy, and pursuing suburban domesticity and family values in accordance with and assimilating to dominant American culture.



Figure 44: A shot from the opening of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) showing the family's pristine front garden, adorned with Greek-style statues and a Greek flag painted across the garage door. At the end of the film, Ian (John Corbett) and Toula (Nia Vardalos) live in the house next door to this.

The taxonomic structure of the implicitly white self and ethnic other can be applied to every film in this chapter. The self is aligned with an ideologically constructed and culturally dominant whiteness, and the Other is aligned with an ethnic or cultural minority. Towards the end of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, Toula's father proclaims, 'Here tonight, we have apples and orange, […] in the end we are all fruit.' This summary reveals the film's tacit ideological message that there are fundamental differences between Greek culture and (white) American culture while promoting a message of mutual acceptance. Finally, it is worth noting that, at the time of this film's production, this mutual acceptance was made safe for a mainstream audience through the use of the European emigrant's place in the American narrative. In contrast to rom-coms post 2015, in 2002 the USA was not ready for a hugely successful mainstream rom-com showing an interracial couple unless the relationship was between a white, Protestant character of European descent, representing white America, and a character, such as Toula, who was also Christian and of European descent. In other words, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* had an appeal to the mainstream audience in the early twenty-first century because – in contrast to Islamophobia post 9/11, or the spectre of Jim Crow and its political legacies – the Greek ethnic Other is presented as an unthreatening 'cookie-cutter ethnicity' (Anagnostou, 2012, p. 139) for a white audience. A further appeal of the film is that it represents a shift in sensibility at the turn of the twenty-first century wherein '[t]he WASPs have become the butt of the joke in a nation of immigrants for whom Greekness, here, stands for the generic Otherness that is "us"' (Jacobsen, 2006, p. 127). While I agree with Jacobsen to an extent, the majority of the comedic moments in the film centre upon the incongruity between the actions and statements of the Greek characters and the expectations of the tacitly white audience. Instead, what I suggest marks this film as different to the two films that I analyse in the next section, *Coming to America* (1988) and *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), is that the next two films utilise fairy-tale tropes to explore how interracial and intercultural romantic comedy narratives relate to the ideological message of the American dream.

3.3.2 Two versions of racialised fairy tales: *Coming to America* (1988) and *Maid in Manhattan* (2002)

Having established the tacit whiteness underscoring *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, this section analyses *Coming to America* (1988) and *Maid in Manhattan* (2002) to uncover how race is reproduced through intercultural fairy-tale narratives that present a relationship with a Westerner as the modern-day fairy-tale happily ever after ending for the racialised rom-com protagonist between the late 1980s and mid 2010s. Edmondson suggests that there has been a perception that the romance genre is 'an essentially white form, based on the European chivalric tradition: the leading man as a sort of knight, a powerful person who woos and wins his lady, a virginal or naïve younger woman' (2007, p. 191). While Edmondson goes on to argue that depictions of Black romance exist outside of this knight-younger woman structure, in this section I maintain that two of the most successful mainstream romantic comedy films featuring non-white protagonists in my time period lean heavily on fairy-tale nostalgia in their gender ideology as a means of legitimising the presence of non-white bodies on-screen for a white spectator. Through the use of this knight-younger woman rom-com structure with Black or Brown actors, non-white romance is ideologically fixed in a past that is simultaneously nostalgic and comforting for a white spectator while also reinforcing the notion that gender ideology in non-Western countries is somewhat outdated or "behind" "white" gender ideology.

Within the 1988–2015 fairy-tale rom-com, the success of Black and Brown protagonists occurs through their assimilation to affluent white culture. In *Coming to America* (1988) and *Maid in Manhattan* (2002) the protagonists, Akeem (Eddie Murphy) and Marisa (Jennifer Lopez), perform the role of the perfect US immigrant, who wishes to form a committed, heterosexual relationship with a middle- or upper-class American character. In *Coming to America*, Prince Akeem leaves the fictional African country of Zamunda in order to find a wife 'fit for a king' in Queens, New York, by pretending to be a poor immigrant. In *Maid in Manhattan*, Marisa, a Latina cleaner in a New York hotel, pretends to be a guest and pursues white, Republican politician Chris Marshall (Ralph Fiennes). Thus, both of these films mobilise a sense of

outsiderness in relation to their protagonists' identities, as Akeem and Marisa both feel the need to adapt to fit into their Western surroundings. Akeem temporarily swaps his African culture for African American culture to win the affection of a Black American love interest, Lisa McDowell (Shari Headley), and Marisa temporarily swaps her working-class immigrant life for Chris's upper-class life. Where the films fundamentally differ is in their comedic moments, which are broader and more sexually explicit in *Coming to America* and subtler in *Maid in Manhattan.* As I explore in this section, these comedic differences are partly gendered and partly based on race, reproducing a variant of the heteropatriarchal gender ideology found in the rom-coms analysed in the previous chapter.

Similar to the stereotypical depiction of Greeks in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, in *Coming to America* the depiction of Africa is a cartoonish exaggeration that plays on themes of primitivism, which I here analyse using Crenshaw's (1991) and Hall's (2021a; 2021b) writing on race and primitivism. The opening shots of the film show that wild animals walk through the grounds of the palace in Zamunda amongst the humans (see figure 45), which mirrors Hall's observation that primitivism is 'defined by the fixed proximity of […] people to Nature' (2021b, p. 109). However, it is not just the physical proximity of Black Africans and nature that the film reinforces. The comedic moments also echo Alta Jablow's remark that in popular Western literature, '[t]he image stereotypes of the African cluster about two foci […] [namely, the] childlike may overlap the […] savage' (1963, p. 161, cited in Cameron, 1990, p. 284). In *Coming to America*, Akeem is childlike in his inability to wash or clothe himself without the aid of a servant in the opening scenes. While the trope of an immature or incompetent rom-com protagonist is not remarkable,[63] what is noteworthy in *Coming to America* is the association between an almost teenage fixation on sexuality and Africanness, which is much more explicit than the single line that alludes to animalistic sexuality in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. For example, in the opening scenes of the film, the servant women have uncovered breasts and one servant woman emerges from underwater in the

[63] *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *Love Actually* (2003), and *Trainwreck* (2015) all feature immature protagonists acting in either a childish or primal manner.

royal bath, announcing 'the royal penis is clean' (see figure 46). The crude, sexual nature of this comedic moment links to Crenshaw's assertion that '[s]exualized images of African Americans go all the way back to Europeans' first engagement with Africans. Blacks have long been portrayed as more sexual, more earthy, more gratification-oriented' (1991, p. 1271). Whether we read this as coded for the enjoyment of the heterosexual prince within the fictional world of the film or we read it as presented for the visual pleasure of the male heterosexual viewer, the association is firmly established that Zamunda is a place where visual pleasure is very much presented for heterosexual male enjoyment. This is further reinforced through the insistence of Semmi (Arsenio Hall) that Akeem's wife needs only have physical attributes and Akeem's question to his father, in which he asks, 'How can a man get excited about a woman he has never seen?'



Figure 45: In *Coming to America* (1988), the palace in Zamunda has elephants and other wild animals running around the palace gardens; as such, the African characters, although living in extreme luxury, are also juxtaposed with the animal kingdom.

Thus, the film presents Zamunda as a patriarchal society in which women are raised to serve men and to be used by men (see figures 46 and 47). Since Akeem's father, King Jaffe (James Earl Jones) grants him forty days to 'sew his royal oats' before getting married, Jaffe is presented as the antagonistic force in the film, against whom Akeem seeks to rebel by finding an American woman to marry. This also presents

Africa, represented by Jaffe, as more primitive than America, represented by Akeem's journey, in terms of attitudes towards women. Incidentally, upon arriving in the USA, Akeem attends a Black Awareness Week rally that is really a beauty pageant with women in bikinis and sashes with the words 'Miss Black Awareness' emblazoned on them (see figure 48). Thus, it is not only Zamunda and the physical objectification of women that are thoroughly intertwined for the spectator, but also Black America.



Figure 46: Two of the royal bathers – who are women, naked aside from jewellery – bathe Prince Akeem (Eddie Murphy) early on in *Coming to America* (1988).



Figure 47: In *Coming to America* (1988), when Akeem is introduced to his bride-to-be Imani (Vanessa Bell Calloway), she tells him that she will do whatever he commands of her. He then commands her to hop on one leg and bark like a dog, which she does.



Figure 48: When Akeem (Eddie Murphy) arrives in the US, he attends a Miss Black Awareness pageant at a church. The event is hosted by another character played by Arsenio Hall. All of the women appear to have a lighter skin tone than Hall and all are present on stage in bikinis but do not say any lines of dialogue, while Hall wears a suit and hosts the event. Thus, this scene reproduces a sense of colourism and misogynistic objectification within Black spaces in both Africa and the USA.

The crass, sexual, and aggressive nature of the humour in *Coming to America* also has echoes of what Hall describes as the role of 'the "clown" or "entertainer" that Black men in early US cinema were often made to perform' (2021b, p. 109). Moreover, many of the Black actors who feature in romantic comedies of this period, such as Eddie Murphy, Will Smith, Kevin Hart, Tiffany Haddish, and Martin Lawrence, began their careers as stand-up comedians before moving into acting. Indeed, in the period 1988–2015, it is rare to find a prominent Black male actor who was an actor first before transitioning into comedy acting, unlike white counterparts such as Tom Hanks, Hugh Grant, or Matthew McConaughey, who were first and foremost actors. This has led some commentators, such as Karen Bowdre, to consider that in Black rom-coms often 'the comedic aspects of the film are so strong that the romance is marginalised' (2009, p. 110). In my reading of *Coming to America*, the more obvious comedic moments in Black rom-coms serve, just as the fairy-tale narrative does, to separate Black bodies from realistic depictions of romantic relationships. Moreover, I argue that the extreme, crass comedic moments in this film deny many of the Black characters subjecthood, as they suggest that the film viewer should not view these characters as realistic people engaging in serious, mature romantic relationships. I further contend that, in this way, the film reproduces Cacho's theory of "social death," in which she expounds that certain marginalised people, such as undocumented migrants and Black working-class men, are denied personhood and that '[t]o be ineligible for personhood is a form of social death' (2012, p. 6). In other words, while the rom-com standardly posits "mature" and serious romantic relationships as components of personhood, the Black characters in *Coming to America* are denied credible subjectivity.

The overall theme of *Coming to America* is that it is a story of the move from Black Africa's resistance to American culture towards a more culturally assimilated Black America. Both spaces are presented with a sense of knowing satire, made apparent for the audience not only through the sheer number of comedic moments but also through the fourth-wall-breaking multi-rolling performed by Eddie Murphy and Arsenio Hall. However, what is notably absent in *Coming to America* is the development of Black female characters, who instead are presented in relation to the

negative value of Black female sexuality. For example, when Patrice (Allison Dean) puts her hand on Akeem's crotch he appears horrified (see figure 49), and when Lisa suggests that she come up to Akeem's apartment, he responds that they had better take their time with their relationship. In this way, there is a disconnect between the film's glorying in the Black male gaze and its horror at the notion of Black female sexual enjoyment. Contrastingly, as well as tonally very different, *Maid in Manhattan* tells a similar story of love across class boundaries and across immigration statuses, but one that focuses on the perspective of the female character of colour.



Figure 49: Akeem (Eddie Murphy) appears concerned when Patrice (Allison Dean) places her hand on his crotch while they are watching a basketball game. Despite this, she continues to touch him throughout the scene until he stands up to get away from her.

Oria states that '[t]he neotraditional romantic comedy of the 1990s and 2000s was specially "disconnected" from its social context and unwilling to acknowledge issues that threatened to puncture the genre's escapist bubble' (2021, p. 32). However, *Maid in Manhattan* (2002) focuses on the economic disparity and concordant power disparity between its two protagonists due to how each have been racialised. As such, I contend that the film is willing to acknowledge issues such as racism and politics through its central romantic pair; Chris (Ralph Fiennes) is a Republican and states that he cannot date Marisa (Jennifer Lopez) if she is a Democrat. The film also reproduces racialised inequality in terms of jobs and class in that many of the back-of-house staff at the hotel present as non-white but the majority of the hotel guests and front-of-house staff present as white (see figure 50). Additionally, Marisa experiences racism when some of the white guests misname her Maria and attempt to speak to her in broken Spanish. However, this socio-political side of the film is limited by the fairy-tale ending in which Chris and Marisa appear on multiple magazine front

covers that report their developing relationship and Chris's election to the Senate, which – given the US context – represents a modern-day equivalent of marrying into the aristocracy. In turn this ending underplays the seriousness of the issues to which the film earlier pays lip-service. Instead, I agree with Dodd and Fradley, who state that *Maid in Manhattan* 'espoused a heady combination of immigrant work ethic, entrepreneurial know-how, post-feminist economic autonomy and a "bling" valorisation of conspicuous consumption' (2009, p. 197). Marisa gets her happy ending not after calling out her mistreatment by the white hotel guests and white press who vilify her throughout the film but after reinventing herself and taking another job at another luxury hotel. Thus, *Maid in Manhattan*'s ideological message relates to Cacho's view that 'the values neoliberalism publicizes, naturalizes, and universalizes also make indigent groups of color unable to prove they experience discrimination' (2012, p. 19).



Figure 50: Maid in Manhattan (2002) addresses racial discrimination insofar as the majority of the back-of-house staff present as non-white and the majority of the front-of-house staff and guests present as white.

Dodd and Fradley, in their chapter on Jennifer Lopez and the modern rom-com, have also argued that, in *Maid in Manhattan*, '[a]s an ethnic and economic "outsider" in an over-privileged white social milieu, it is the consummate professionalism of Lopez's character that is again to the fore' (2009, p. 198). Indeed, it is not just her professionalism but her assimilation into white culture that serves Marisa in this film. For example, she very rarely speaks Spanish in the film, only occasionally using the single words '*abuela*' and '*papi*' in otherwise English sentences. By contrast, two of the white hotel guests speak in French during every scene in which they appear and are depicted as thieves who gossip about Marisa behind her back. Thus, speaking a foreign language in the USA is depicted negatively in the film, again reinforcing the value of

assimilation into English-speaking culture for immigrants. In this way the film reproduces the racialised ideological view that values '[a]ssimilation into what is portrayed as a superior white culture, whose ability to shift and accommodate difference is portrayed as its strength' (Lentin, 2020, p. 91).

In addition to Marisa's ability to "overcome" the racism she encounters and her assimilation into white English-speaking culture, a further significant key to her success with respect to her goals in the film is her beauty, as commented on by male-presenting characters. For example, at one point in the film, the hotel security guard tells Marisa he knows about all the comings and goings in the hotel and 'only one thing will make me shut my mouth'; he then points at his cheek. Marisa says, 'you dirty old man,' smiles, and kisses him (see figure 51), and Ty (Tyler Posey), her son, also smiles at this, thus granting this action in-world legitimacy and inviting the viewer to similarly disregard any discomfort they may feel. Similarly, later in the film Ty says, 'I hate to break it to you, but I don't think he is after your money.' And when Marisa tells Chris that they can't be together towards the end of the film, Chris responds, 'Well then you should have worn a different dress,' and he kisses her before she can explain further. It is notable that in all three of these examples, a comment is made about Marisa's physical appearance or an action of physical intimacy is taken by a male character, which the film presents in a comedic light, reinforcing the notion that women are the natural objects of the male gaze in a non-threatening, entertaining way.



Figure 51: In one comedic moment in *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), the hotel security guard (Lou Ferguson) tells Marisa (Jennifer Lopez) that he will tell management that she has snuck out unless she kisses him on the cheek, which she does. Marisa, the security guard, and Marisa's son Ty (Tyler Posey) all smile at this, which legitimises it as a moment of harmless fun. I read this moment as a reproduction of the ideological message that older men pursue physical intimacy with younger women, which was one of the key elements of rom-com gender ideology discussed in the previous chapter.

While Marisa's beauty is not specifically racialised in the comedic moments listed above, there is another scene in which Marisa sits on a magazine with Chris's face on the cover to protect the white suit she is wearing, and when she stands up, the magazine is caught on her coat (see figure 52). After, Chris awkwardly removes the magazine, Marisa asks how the coat looks using deixis ('Is it ok?'), which sets up a comedic moment when Chris looks at her backside and says, 'It's perfect.' This line speaks to the perception of Jennifer Lopez – in a similar way to Janell Hobson's writing on Iggy Azalea or Kim Kardashian – as a curvaceous light-skinned woman of predominantly European heritage. Hobson writes that such women are often

> positioned as ideal beauties, due in part to their curvy but more slender booties, in the style of the ancient Roman Venus Callipyge, wrapped up in sensual desirability, in stark contrast to the derided Venus Steatopygia, couched in […] sexual pathology, racial deviance, and fat shaming. (2018, p. 109)

Furthermore, Chris later describes Marisa as 'kind of Mediterranean,' and it is exactly Marisa's brand of ambiguous otherness – which incorporates an element of the human

body stereotypically associated with Black female sexuality, namely curves on a woman, but in the safety of a light-skinned woman – that makes it palatable for a mainstream rom-com in 2002.



Figure 52: In this comedic moment from *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), a magazine with a picture of Chris (Ralph Fiennes) on the front cover gets stuck to the back of Marisa's (Jennifer Lopez) coat when she sits on it.

Finally, Marisa's assimilation into affluent white culture is completed through the film's promotion of consumerism via her expensive makeover sequences. Of course, makeover sequences are a staple of 1990s and 2000s rom-coms,[64] but what sets Marisa's shopping and makeover montage apart is that shopping in this film has previously only been for the white hotel guests until Marisa's makeover (she has previously been to the same department store on behalf of a white guest). As such, this moment represents her movement into white, upper-class culture and reaffirms the ideological message that affluent whiteness is the predominant but tacit norm. Interestingly, this makeover sequence in *Maid in Manhattan* is facilitated by the racially diverse hotel staff who help Marisa with childcare issues so that she can go

[64] Prominent examples of this include: *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Clueless* (1995), *Miss Congeniality* (2000), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), *Hitch* (2005), *The 40 Year-Old Virgin* (2005), and *Crazy, Stupid, Love* (2011). Interestingly, the earlier films feature makeovers of women and the later three films feature makeovers of men, indicating a shift over time away from the ideological message 'women need to look good in order to attract a man' towards 'men need to look good in order to attract (already good-looking) women.'

shopping. As such, the film seems to suggest that if immigrants, and children of immigrants, are emotionally resilient and hard-working, then they can choose to achieve their goals, they can choose to exceed racism, economic hardship, and limited social mobility. Dodd and Fradley aver that 'Lopez's roles in rom-coms are typically imbued with the neo-utopian discourses of post-feminist "choice"' (2009, p. 204), and I agree that there is a neo-utopian multiculturalism that enables Marisa's choice in the film. In short, the ideological framing here is that success is accounted for on an entirely voluntaristic basis, despite the evidence of structural inequalities.

In conclusion, bell hooks considers that 'in the world of representations whiteness is the essential ingredient necessary for ultimate fulfilment' (2009, p. 16), and in *Coming to America* (1988) and *Maid in Manhattan* (2002) there is a sense that assimilation to white Western culture is necessary for ultimate narrative fulfilment. Akeem needs to go to America and marry an American. Marisa needs to work her way up in New York luxury hotels and marry a white senator. By using the fairy-tale rom-com structure, these films mimic what Hall describes in terms of how the West 'normalises and appropriates Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the primitive, unchanging past' (2021a, p. 265). Instead of merely appropriating Africa, I would adjust Hall's statement in its applicability to the rom-com: the British or American interracial mainstream rom-com of the late 1980s to mid-2010s normalises and appropriates the rest of the world by freezing it into some timeless zone of the primitive, unchanging past. Whether that is Zamunda, the Latinx community in the Bronx, the Greek-American community, each are presented as comedically primitive, and thereby the vision of a universal white, socially liberal West is reinforced. All of the romantic comedy case study films from 1988 to 2015 depicting protagonists of colour reinforce a gender ideology that promotes heterosexual monogamy in an affluent and, most importantly, in the 'White, of Euromerican culture and descent, middle-class, college educated and suburban' (Wynter, 1994, p. 43) manner that Sylvia Wynter describes as the cornerstone of what it means to be North American in the eyes of law enforcement.

3.4 How Rom-Coms Have Represented Race since 2015

In recent years there has been a plethora of romantic comedy films made by streaming platforms, such as Amazon and Netflix, released direct to those streaming sites without the expense of cinema runs, and this has allowed for stories that might have previously been deemed too niche to be made by big production companies. Oria thus notes that in this period, 'one key to romantic comedy's rebirth may lie in the particularization of sexual and racial experience: increasing the genre's specificity may wind up, paradoxically, encouraging its expansion' (2021, p. 28). While this particularisation was not a unique approach to creating commercially successful romantic comedy films, as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) has already shown, what is remarkable between 2015 and the present day is the breadth and scale of rom-com production in comparison to the period from the late 1980s to 2015.[65]

The following section analyses three major trends in rom-coms post 2015 with regards to representations of race and ethnicity: the increase in what I call "incidental ethnicity," meaning characters who are non-white but whose racial identity does not play a role in their function in the film; an increase in rom-coms that foreground the particularisation of racial experience that Oria (2021) notes; and finally, the ongoing trend wherein racialised protagonists favour white love interests or where non-American protagonists favour American love-interests in a manner that promotes white Americanness as valuable on a global scale. Overall, I remain of the opinion that affluent whiteness remains the ideological underpinning of the romantic comedy but that the manner in which it is reproduced in rom-coms has evolved behind a façade of tokenistic diversity. For, as Paul Gilroy notes, '[m]ainstream visibility and inclusion are not the final frontiers of antiracist politics' (2021, p. 7).

[65] Writing in *The Observer*, Louisa Young noted that in 2023 there were thirty-six new romantic comedy films being released in cinemas and through streaming (2023). Media statistics website the-numbers.com lists eight films that came out in 1988 as romantic comedies, compared to 210 romantic comedy films released in 2022. Of course, this partly reflects the fact that many more films are being made today in comparison with the 1980s and many of these are low budget films that have not been seen by many people, but nevertheless this demonstrates that the scale of rom-com production has grown hugely over this time period.

3.4.1 "Incidental ethnicity" in *Yesterday* (2019) and *Love Hard* (2021)

Since 2015, there has been a huge increase in the number of films that feature racialised protagonists in which the race of the character is incidental to their function in the film.[66] It is my argument in this section that two such films, *Yesterday* (2019) and *Love Hard* (2021), reproduce Bonilla-Silva's (2022) notion of a "color-blind" approach to racial ideology. These films speak to a neoliberal, post-racial worldview in that the racial identity of the characters is incidental to their goals and obstacles. As such, these films also reproduce Cacho's point that '[t]he values neoliberalism publicizes, naturalizes, and universalizes also make indigent groups of color unable to prove they experience discrimination' (2012, p. 19), similarly to how I have argued that *Maid in Manhattan* does.[67] However, where *Maid in Manhattan* paid lip-service to systemic racism, it is my argument that these more modern films depict the world as being entirely post-racial.

Yesterday (2019) tells the story of Jack Malik (Himesh Patel), an unsuccessful singer/songwriter from Lowestoft, Suffolk, England, who has a cycling accident during a worldwide electricity blackout and wakes up as one of only a handful of people who can remember The Beatles. Jack, with the help of his manager and love interest, Ellie (Lily James), records The Beatles' songs and achieves worldwide fame and success. The film ends with Jack confessing his plagiarism and his love for Ellie on-stage at Wembley Arena in London, before the pair return to Suffolk, get married, and work as teachers. *Yesterday* (2019), therefore, acknowledges a different economic landscape to some of Richard Curtis's earlier films such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) or *Notting Hill* (1999). Where, in the latter, William Thacker was a white man who could inexplicably afford to own and run a travel bookshop and two-bedroom house in Notting Hill, Jack lives at home with his parents, Jed (Sanjeev Bhaskar) and Sheila (Meera Syal). The casting of Bhaskar and Syal as Jack's parents suggests a superficial

[66] Such as *Set It Up* (2018), *Last Christmas (2019*) and the trilogy of *To All the Boys* films (2018; 2020; 2021).

[67] This is essentially the same argument that Ali Meghji makes when, building upon the earlier work of Gramsci (1971), he notes that '[r]epresentation does not entail systemic change, […] representation in fact is often a way of concealing the inequalities built into a system' (Meghji, 2022, p. 128).

commitment to ethnic diversity, but for each of these characters, their ethnicity appears incidental to the workings of the film. Even their names – Jack, Jed, and Sheila – indicate an interchangeability with whiteness. The family surname, Malik, which is traditionally a Muslim name from Kashmir, does not align with the backgrounds of any of the actors,[68] and through actions such as offering beer and cider to their guests and getting drunk at the family's leaving party for Jack when he goes to LA, the film suggests that not only is their ethnicity incidental but it is also generic and unthreatening to a white audience.

There is also an implicit privilege in the film since Jack receives almost unanimous support for his music, even before he plagiarises The Beatles. This is a comically unrealistic supportive environment, for example at one point Ellie slams on her car brakes mid-conversation to dissuade him when he suggests he might have to give up on music. Jack receives help from a number of benevolent white helpers during the film. Whether it is Ellie driving him to all of his gigs and meetings or buying him a new guitar when he gets out of hospital, or Gavin (Alexander Arnold) producing his first demo album for free, or Ed Sheeran (Ed Sheeran) inviting him to support him on a leg of his European tour, the film reproduces a fairy-tale-esque rise to fame for Jack in relation to his assimilation into predominantly white environments. Jack's friends are all white, except for Rocky (Joel Fry), who is introduced as a work colleague rather than one of Jack's friends at the start of the film. In this way, *Yesterday* continues the theme that characters of colour are encountered at work, extricated from any reference to a non-white community, which has no presence in the film, whereas white characters are encountered in all areas of life by the mainstream, and thus implicitly white, rom-com protagonist.

There are only two comedic moments in the whole film that touch on race, again suggesting that ethnicity is incidental to the functioning of the film. The first occurs when Rocky and Jack board Ed Sheeran's private jet, and Rocky tells Ed Sheeran to leave rapping 'to the brothers – gingers and rap sounds a bit crap.' The second

[68] Patel's family are Gujarati, Syal's and Bhaskar's families are both Punjabi.

occurs when Stephen (Lamorne Morris), an LA marketing guru, tells Jack that naming his album 'The White Album' has some 'diversity issues.' In both of these moments non-white characters make jokes at the expense of white people, which acknowledges the film's position in a post–Black Lives Matter world while not addressing any of the underlying racialised issues in the film, such as cultural appropriation or racial power dynamics within the music industry. All in all, it seems to me that *Yesterday* is a British Asian rom-com experience as imagined by an affluent, middle-class white man, which, of course, is exactly what the film is. In this way, the film is an archetypal rom-com for incidental ethnicity, similar to *Love Hard* (2021).

Love Hard takes the established rom-com tropes of masquerade and deception and applies them to modern dating as Josh (Jimmy O. Yang) uses Tag Abbott's (Darren Barnet) images to catfish Natalie (Nina Dobrev) online (see figures 53 and 54).[69] While the film presents the ethnicities of these characters as arbitrary, I suggest that this film implicitly reproduces colourism insofar as Jimmy O. Yang is of Chinese heritage and presents as such, whereas Darren Barnet is of mixed heritage and presents as ethnically ambiguous, as indicated by his casting in *Never Have I Ever* (2020–2023).[70] While the film does not speak about the racial biases of dating apps, a survey of OkCupid online users between 2009 and 2014 found that Black women and Asian men had the least popular profiles (Rudder, 2014), and Josh states in the film that the reason for catfishing was that he did not get any matches with his real profile. However, instead of exploring racial bias and discrimination further, the film concludes that the real reason Josh failed to get matches was his awkward, unflattering choice of photos. In encouraging Josh to take ownership over his dating profile, Natalie (Nina

[69] Grindon (2011) writes extensively about the use of masquerade, meaning instances in which characters disguise themselves in order to pursue relationships or else when characters are in disguise for another plot reason and then find themselves in a romantic entanglement with characters who are unaware of their disguise.

[70] Indeed, Darren Barnet's career fits the incidental ethnicity paradigm: he rose to prominence through his roles as Paxton Hall-Yoshida in the Mindy Kaling-helmed *Never Have I Ever* series on Netflix, and in a video with Buzzfeed, Barnet revealed that the character was only renamed Paxton Hall-Yoshida (instead of Paxton Hall) after one of the writers overheard him discussing his Japanese ancestry, which they were previously unaware of (Buzzfeed Celeb, 2020).

Dobrev) is really encouraging Josh to take personal responsibility for undoing the racial bias prevalent on dating apps.

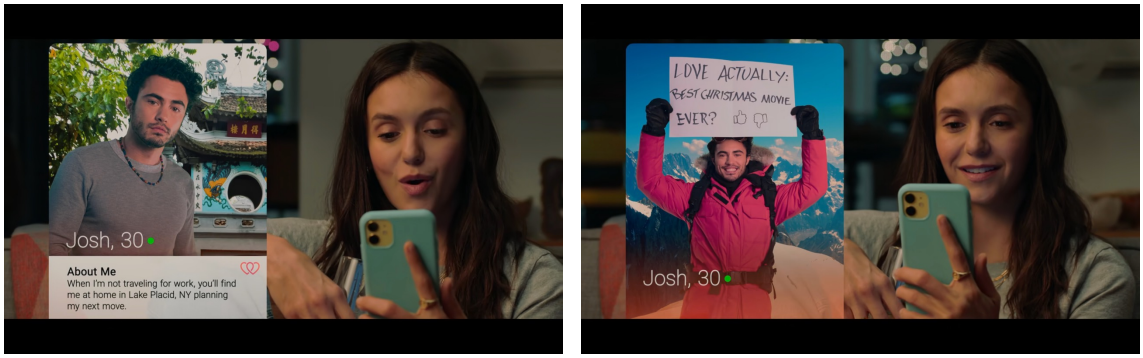


Figure 53: Early on in *Love Hard* (2021), Natalie (Nina Dobrev) sees Josh's fake dating profile, featuring pictures of Tag (Darren Barnet), and she begins an online relationship with Josh (Jimmy O. Yang), thinking that this is what he looks like.

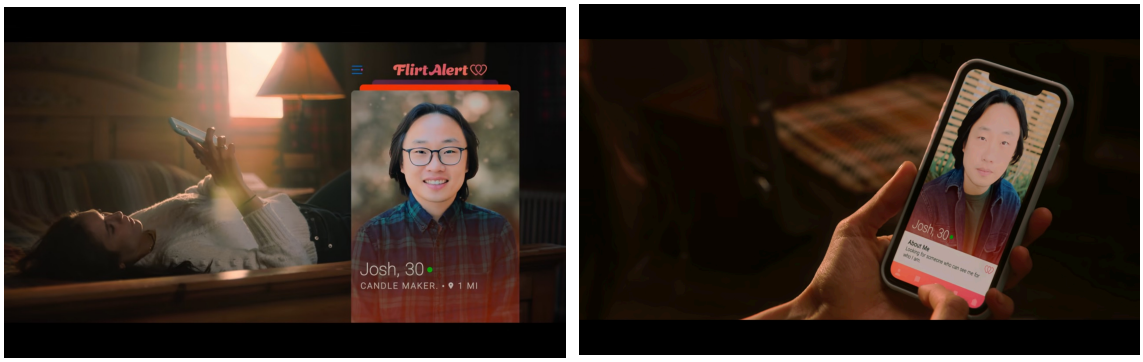


Figure 54: Later on in *Love Hard* (2021), after meeting the real Josh (Jimmy O. Yang) and discovering that she has been deceived, Natalie (Nina Dobrev) comes across a new, real dating profile for Josh, which uses his actual likeness.

Incidentally, *Love Hard* also addresses the theme of manipulation in that at various points in the film the characters debate whether *Love Actually* (2003) is the best Christmas movie. The moment the characters focus on most is the scene in which Mark (Andrew Lincoln) tells Juliet (Keira Knightley) to lie to her husband so that he can tell her that he loves her using placards, after she has discovered that, unbeknownst to them, Mark only filmed close-ups of Juliet in their wedding video. In *Love Hard*, discussion of *Love Actually* forms the first conversation that Natalie and Josh have. Initially, Natalie offers the criticism that '[i]t is a movie about people falling in love based on how they look,' but by the end of the film she wins Josh back by arriving outside his house with a series of placards, mimicking the Mark and Juliet scene (see figure 55). I argue that these intertextual references reinforce the legitimacy of men

manipulating women in both films, since Natalie falling for Josh after he initially catfished her legitimises catfishing as a romantic strategy, and the grand romantic gesture at the end of *Love Hard* mimicking the tragic scene from *Love Actually* legitimises the idea that Mark is an admirable rom-com character worthy of mimicry.



Figure 55: Over the course of *Love Hard* (2021), Natalie (Nina Dobrev) changes her opinion on *Love Actually* (2003), so much so that the grand romantic gesture at the end of the film involves her arriving at Josh's house with a series of placards to ask him out.

To conclude, I nuance Beatriz Oria's argument that 'one key to romantic comedy's [recent] rebirth may lie in the particularization of sexual and racial experience' (2021, p. 28) by contending that, in the cases of *Yesterday* and *Love Hard,* depictions of racial experience in post-2014 rom-coms are often only incidental rather than particularised. In these films, the ethnic identities of the protagonists are unrelated to the films' plots or themes. These films contribute to a post-racial gender ideology by situating their characters outside of race. *Love Hard* (2021) engages the romantic comedy in a neoliberal world of internet dating, in which people and romance are commodified without investigating the racial inequalities that contribute to the material conditions of that world. *Yesterday* (2019) engages the mainstream rom-com with tacit whiteness via the music of The Beatles and rural Suffolk in a manner that represents whiteness as an affective condition that belongs to a nostalgia for a "better time," again without engaging in the complexities of lived experience.

3.4.2 The particularisation of racial experiences in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018)

Of films that make the racial identities of their protagonists central to their plots, one of the most commercially successful is *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). As Alberti notes, '*Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) positions itself as radical in foregrounding Asian experiences within a consumerist wedding romcom' (2021, p. 261). The film is essentially the traditional "Cinderella story" rom-com as found in *Pretty Woman* and *Maid in Manhattan* – but presented through an all-Asian-origin lens. This speaks to the rise of the Far East as a location of modern economic prosperity in the twenty-first century and therefore as a trope of affluence in the film. While this film also speaks to the emergence of the global rich as a key target audience for Western cinema, this is not an indigenous film produced solely for consumption by people of Asian-heritage, it is a product of globalisation that universalises the luxurious lifestyles, clothing, and locations on display in the film. For me, Alberti's comment that the importance of *Crazy Rich Asians* within the rom-com landscape is its combination of Asian, specifically Singaporean, references and luxurious consumerism relates to Cacho's observation that 'race is redeemed when linked to other properties of personhood universalized as socially valuable' (2012, p. 3). In short, what makes *Crazy Rich Asians* appealing to both the Asian diaspora and a white, culturally dominant Western audience is the level of opulence on-screen (see figure 56).



Figure 56: Several of the locations that feature in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) connote opulence. Clockwise from top-left: Nick (Henry Golding) travels to a stag party via helicopter; the mansion setting for the engagement party in the middle of the film; the wedding ceremony that Nick and Rachel attend together, which includes an aisle that is flooded to resemble a river; Rachel (Constance Wu) arriving at the engagement party in a hot-pink Audi.

One thing that *Crazy Rich Asians* does is to communicate the difference between Asian experience and Asian diasporic experience, since Rachel (Constance Wu) is American-born Chinese, whereas Nick (Henry Golding) is Singapore-born Chinese. This leads to Rachel being excluded by Nick's mother, Eleanor (Michelle Yeoh), who describes her as a 'foreigner' and remarks that 'all Americans care about is their own happiness.' In Kevin Kwan's original novel, Rachel is born in China and teaches there for a year before visiting Singapore; Kung explains that the change in the film to make her someone who has never visited Asia before 'highlights Rachel's "Americanness"' (2021, p. 223). Indeed, I suggest that the film's comedic exploration of racialised experience often centres upon cultural differences between Nick's family and Rachel, which highlight Rachel's sense of outsiderness. As Kung notes, 'Rachel emphasizes that she is "so Chinese" that she is an "economics professor with lactose intolerance," illustrating that her understanding of her Chineseness is filtered through Western stereotypes of Chinese people' (p. 223). This is a line that Rachel says in the USA to her mother when reassuring her that she will make a good impression with

Nick's family. In this moment, she reproduces racial stereotypes, which the spectator is meant to recognise. If these assumptions were uttered by a white character they could be construed as racist, but in the context of this film they illustrate the gap between Rachel's expectations of Singapore and the reality of Singapore that she later experiences. Taking Althusser's observation that ideology 'represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to real conditions of existence' (2001, p. 147), I posit that Rachel is inculcated into a Western, colonial, white ideological viewpoint in this moment. Moreover, the comedic quality of the moment derives from the fact that Rachel is both the object of the joke and the subject articulating the joke, which reflects the way that *Crazy Rich Asians* presents 'the profound tensions within the Asian experience – especially the differences in identifying with mainland Asia vs. the diaspora' (Ho, 2018). However, more than this, the film articulates tensions within the experience of diaspora when viewing itself.

In order for Rachel to assimilate into Nick's family culture, the film features not one but two makeover scenes. A prominent element of Rachel's makeover in Singapore is the girliness and the direct references to fairy tales: she dons a glamorous dress and becomes 'the topic of the night,' and her friend Peik Lin (Awkwafina) provides a hot-pink Audi, which she describes as a 'pumpkin coach' (see figures 56 and 57). As Kung notes, '[t]he pink Audi in this sequence both highlights Rachel's postfeminist Cinderella quality and emphasizes the consumption power of modern women' (2021, p. 225). In the second makeover scene, Kung argues that the positioning of a gay male character, Oliver T'sien (Nico Santos),

> in the role of fairy godmother challenges the traditional concept of a fairy godmother, which reflects, on the one hand, the neofeministic features of this rewritten version of Cinderella, and on the other, LGBTQ+ recognition in Hollywood. (p. 225)

However – as is developed in the following chapter, which explores the role played by queer characters in rom-coms – the positioning of queer characters as mentors or

comedic supporting characters in heterosexual romantic comedies is far from revolutionary. Instead, it reaffirms the stereotypes of gay men as effeminate, fashion-conscious best-friend characters for heterosexual women, who are also thereby positioned in these films as targets for mockery. The gay best friend is a staple of romantic comedies, as seen twenty years before *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) in *Clueless* (1995), *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *As Good As It Gets* (1997), and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), and the trope of gay men helping heterosexual women prepare for a wedding can be seen in *Father of the Bride* (1991) and *Sex and the City* (2008). Therefore, I consider this another ideological feature of the Hollywood rom-com. Where it is possible to suggest that the gay best friend archetype is in any way challenging is in the film's setting in Singapore, where gay sex was only made legal in August 2022 (Wong, 2022). The film appeals to Chinese and Southeast Asian diasporic audiences in that *Crazy Rich Asians* is not only the first and only current example of a Hollywood rom-com featuring an all-Asian-heritage cast but it also situates these characters within a world of extreme opulence and enviable privilege. However, my contention here is that part of the appeal of the film to a white, Western spectator, as well as the opulence of the visual imagery, is that it invokes an ideological nostalgia for heterosexual weddings and a fixed gender binary through its evocation of the tropes of girliness and outrageous best-friend characters, which in 2018 might feel outdated in a white, Western setting. The film thus positions Singapore in 2018 as akin to the USA in the 1990s, which fuels a feeling of Western cultural superiority – the notion that the USA has developed beyond where Singapore currently is in terms of gender – which serves as a tonic for a US spectator feeling threatened by the economic superiority of Asia.

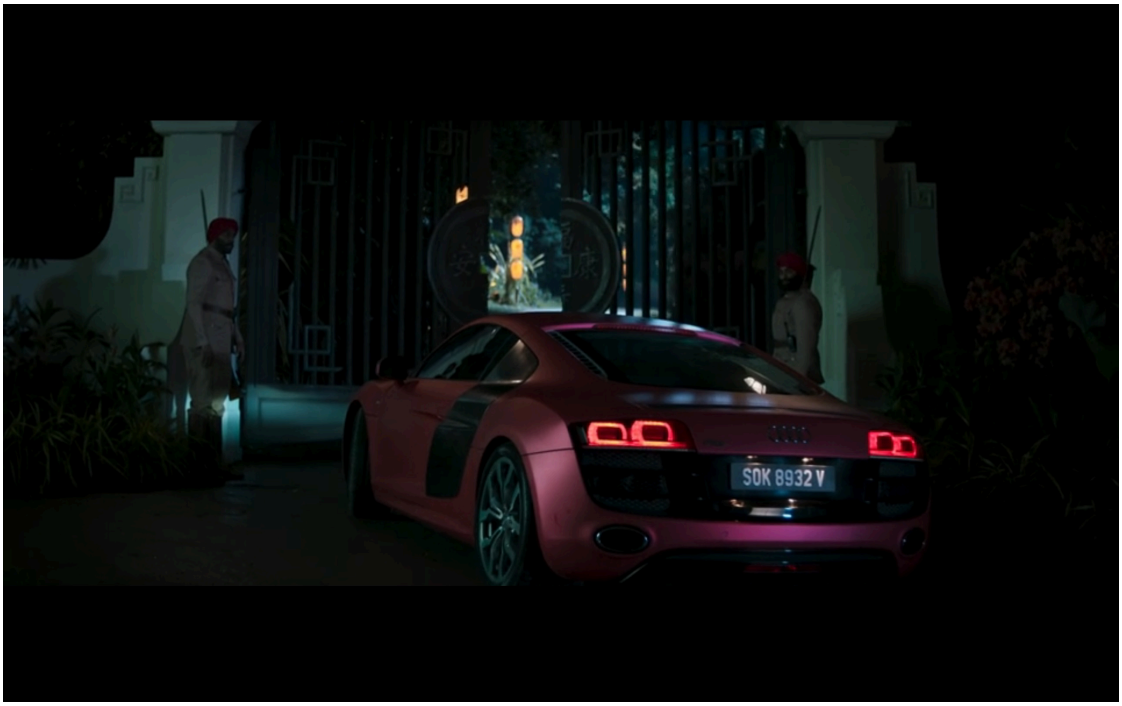


Figure 57: The hot-pink Audi that Rachel arrives to the party in, passing armed guards on the entry gates, visually resembles a luxurious modern-day version of Cinderella arriving at the palace gates in a pumpkin coach in the traditional, Western Cinderella story. I argue that this kind of imagery further marks Singapore as simultaneously a place of extreme wealth and also of tradition compared to the "more modern" US in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018).

Along similar lines, the greatest obstacle between Nick and Rachel is the revelation that Rachel was born out of wedlock. From a Western perspective, this reason to disapprove of someone serves as a mode of nostalgia that harks back to a different time and works to distance the twenty-first-century Western spectator from Nick's family's perspective. The social conservatism here in contrast to Rachel's ideologically Western belief that Nick's family were going to love her reproduces the message, as discussed in the previous chapter with regards to *Sex and the City 2* (2010), that the USA is somehow more evolved than, and superior to, other parts of the world. The outdatedness of Nick's family's values from a Western perspective is further reinforced when Eleanor explicitly says that the reason she disapproves of Rachel is that she is 'a foreigner – American.' Ironically, this appears in the mah-jongg game where Rachel gives up the tiles she needs in order to let Eleanor win the game, which is the moment Rachel shows that she 'understands that family should always

come first, something that Eleanor suspected she didn't comprehend as a jook sing Asian American' (Yang, 2018).[71]

In conclusion, a lot has been said about the fact that *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is the first American film produced with an exclusively Asian-heritage cast since *Joy Luck Club* (1993) and how revolutionary it has been in tackling stereotypes of submissive Asian women and emasculated Asian men. However, I suggest that part of the mainstream appeal and success of the film is that *Crazy Rich Asians* is normatively rooted in whiteness and its tropes. *Crazy Rich Asians* is a heterosexual love story, focusing on the class differences between a middle-class woman and an upper-class man, with constant references to the Western Cinderella fairy story, and the film showcases opulent, luxurious consumerism. The obstacles that the central couple encounter are the traditional rom-com staples of cultural clashes and class difference, which, due to their prevalence in the earlier rom-com films of this period and even in films of the screwball era, seem to be outmoded to an American rom-com audience. Thus, Singapore is simultaneously positioned as a place of twenty-first-century opulence and twentieth-century social norms, the importance of the latter outweighing the former, as the central couple ultimately decide to return to the US to live there at the end of the film. As such, *Crazy Rich Asians* casts a light on gender relations between Singaporean and Western Chinese diaspora communities that confirm a sense of Western superiority in a much subtler, more nuanced manner than *Sex and the City 2* did for Arabic communities – however, the function is fundamentally the same one. The characters are allowed the life they want only when they return to the freedom of American soil. This is because there is an ideological whiteness – formed here as ideological liberal, affluent Westernness – constituted as the pervasive norm within the mainstream rom-com.

[71] *Jook sing* is a Cantonese term for a person of Chinese-heritage who was born and raised in the West or any other Chinese person who identifies more strongly with Western culture than Chinese.

3.4.3 The diasporic eye in *The Big Sick* (2017)

The Big Sick (2017) is another story in which a diasporic, racialised protagonist, Kumail Nanjiani (Kumail Nanjiani), rejects his racialised (Pakistani) culture in favour of white, American culture, depicted in his rejection of an arranged marriage with a desi woman for a love connection with a white American woman, Emily (Zoe Kazan). Notably, this film is autobiographical, and it comments on the meta-process of taking a racialised lived experience and turning it into a piece of entertainment through Kumail's one-person comedy show about his upbringing, which features in the film. He literally performs the Pakistani-immigrant narrative for his predominantly white audience as a stand-up comedian. Kumail is also linked with white American culture through his love for American horror movies and a scene in which he and his brother visit a baseball batting cage that mirrors the batting cage scene from *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989) (see figure 58). Most of all, Kumail embraces secular American culture by rejecting the idea of arranged marriage. He is not shown breaking the law at any point in the film, and he works two jobs: as a stand-up comedian, and as an Uber driver. As such, Gottschalk reasons that the film 'cannot rise beyond the demands of exceptional citizenship' (2019, p. 392), and my reading extends this: Kumail not only performs the part of the hard-working, law-abiding, family-focused "perfect immigrant," he also represents the tension for diasporic individuals who are caught between identification with the dominant white US culture and identification with the culture of their heritage. In this section, I unpack how both the overall narrative and several individual comedic moments in *The Big Sick* depict the former as progressive and the latter as regressive, reproducing a sense of Western global superiority.



Figure 58: Both *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989) (left) and *The Big Sick* (2017) (right) feature comedic scenes in which male characters discuss personal matters in baseball batting cages. I read this as an intertextual reference that legitimises *The Big Sick*'s position within the canon of American romantic comedy films and underscores Kumail and his brother's Americanness in comparison the older generations of their family.

In interracial romantic comedy films, threat is a regular theme: there is the usual rom-com threat of heartbreak or rejection but also the threat of multiculturalism to all-American/traditional British (in other words, white) family values, as well as the threat of misunderstanding the culture of another. This theme of threat is particularly prominent in *The Big Sick* (2017) because of the tension between the semi-autobiographical lead character Kumail's identity as both an American and a Pakistani Muslim post 9/11. In one scene, threat is present for Kumail when he performs stand-up comedy and is heckled with racist abuse. Before Kumail can react, Emily's mother (Holly Hunter), a white woman, leaps to his defence (see figure 59). Emily's mother's defence of Kumail contrasts with his parents, who do not appear to watch any of his performances and instead pressure him to become a lawyer. As Kumail's narrative goals in the film are to become a successful stand-up comedian and to pursue a relationship with Emily, his Brown parents are therefore positioned as obstacles in the way of these goals while Emily's white parents are allies. In essence, this film also has a tacit ideological whiteness at its core because it is structured around a form of identification in which the viewpoints of the white characters are asserted as dominant, regardless of the ethnicity or cultural background of the actual viewer-spectator. Since most mainstream films encourage us to want the protagonist to succeed in their projects, we are psychically aligned with Emily's parents and in opposition to Kumail's family because the former are positioned as helpers and the latter are coded as obstacles in relation to Kumail's projects.



Figure 59: In *The Big Sick* (2017), Emily's mother (Holly Hunter) has to be physically restrained by her husband (Ray Romano) to stop her from attacking a man who heckles Kumail (Kumail Nanjiani) with a racist comment at his comedy show. I read this as an example of how the film positions Emily's white parents as helpers for Kumail and Emily's relationship, whereas Kumail's Brown parents are presented as obstacles.

Another recurrent theme in romantic comedies is the unsuccessful, undesirable other suitors. In romantic comedies featuring racialised protagonists, these characters often appear through arranged-marriage plotlines, in which these unsuccessful suitors are frequently racial stereotypes that the families present to their rebellious young adults. In *Coming to America* (1988), the unsuccessful African suitor, Imani (Vanessa Bell Calloway), is a ridiculous, exaggerated stereotype (see figure 47). When she first appears on screen a singer croons that she is 'completely free from infection, to be used at your discretion.' Imani then says to Akeem that 'ever since I was born, I have been trained to serve you,' and when Akeem tests this by asking her to bark like a dog, she does so. In this way, the film swiftly links African women to infection, animals, and unquestioning subservience to men. In *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), there is a montage of Greek or Greek-heritage suitors the family invite to their house for dinner, who are also depicted as undesirable in a way that suggests racial stereotyping about Greeks (see figure 60). All of these men appear to be older than Toula and have poor table manners (one continually licks his spoon), and two of them sport facial hair and flashy jewellery, which popular rom-com leading men in the early 2000s, such as Hugh Grant, Matthew McConaughey, or Ashton Kutcher, rarely did. Cacho states that '[r]acial stereotypes are not degrading because race is devalued. Stereotypes are degrading because they link race to other categories of devaluation' (2012, p. 3). In the

examples above, the unsuccessful suitors are both presented as racialised and are devalued through association with negative traits (age, infection, hairiness, stupidity, primitivity). Cacho goes on to say that the other half of this process is that 'race is redeemed when linked to other properties of personhood universalized as socially valuable, such as heteronormativity or U.S. citizenship' (p. 3). In *Coming to America* and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, the protagonists' rejection of the unsuitable suitors marks them as socially valuable and aligns them with American standards of behaviour and beauty as well as with progressive American dating norms through their rejection of arranged marriages.



Figure 60: My Big Fat Greek Wedding (2002) features three unsuitable Greek suitors who all display poor table manners, linking them with a sense of primitivity.

Conversely, in *The Big Sick*, the unsuccessful suitors that Kumail rejects are not marked as socially devalued; they are presented as attractive, intelligent women of South Asian heritage. However, the manner in which his arranged marriage prospects are presented echoes stereotypes about the South Asian community: they are presented with photos and paperwork (see figure 61), indicating the scale and pragmatism of arranged marriages in South Asia. In the two earlier films, both of the protagonists actively seek relationships outside of their culture. Akeem falls in love with Lisa because she is American, and Toula falls in love with Ian because he represents an alternative to the expectations her family have for Greek girls to 'marry Greek boys, make Greek babies, and feed everyone.' Thus, in both earlier examples,

the main characters are attracted to their love interests precisely because they represent something different to their families' unsuitable suitors. Similarly, in *The Big Sick*, Kumail, is on-stage and asks, 'Is Pakistan in the house?' and Emily whoops, to which Kumail responds, 'You're not from Pakistan. I would've noticed you.' I read this comedic moment as playing upon the visual image of Emily, a white woman, failing to blend in in Pakistan while also hinting that Kumail is attracted to Emily precisely because she stands out from Brown women.



Figure 61: In *The Big Sick* (2017), Kumail has a box full of pictures of and notes on women of South Asian heritage with whom his family have tried to set him up.

I suggest that in the scene in which Kumail then approaches Emily after the gig, he mobilises his racialisation as a pick-up technique by writing Emily's name in Urdu on a napkin and handing it to her. Indeed, later in the film, after Kumail and Emily break up, he writes another white woman's name in Urdu on a bar napkin. Since we only see Kumail use the pick-up technique with white women, I suggest that the implication is that Kumail instrumentalises his ethnic otherness as a regular ploy when pursuing sex and romance with white women. In short, in these comedic moments, Kumail presents himself as a romantic prospect to white women through Hall's 'imperializing "white eye"' (2021b, p. 107). Kumail does not specifically indicate that he is attracted to Emily because she is white or non-Muslim, but he does ask his parents why they brought him to the USA if they did not want him to have an American life. Therefore, I conclude that the gender ideology present within *The Big Sick* reifies white women in contrast to non-white women for their representation of Western values. Additionally, the film reproduces the oft-repeated dynamic in which white women, and thereby white

female bodies, are idealised as the American beauty standard; a hallmark of assimilation into American culture for non-white heterosexual immigrants is an attraction to white women. As a white woman, the obstacle that Emily overcomes is the unusual rom-com topic of health, whereas as a Brown man, the obstacle that Kumail overcomes is the standard cultural difference between non-whiteness and whiteness. Since one of Althusser's points about ideology is that it 'imposes […] obviousnesses as obviousnesses' (2001, p. 156), I suggest *The Big Sick* thus imposes as an obviousness in the mind of the film's viewer the idea that Black or Brown rom-com characters must always experience their family's culture as an obstacle. In this way, the themes of the film (love overcoming racial/cultural differences, love matches in opposition to arranged marriages, the ethnic male experience as cultural currency for a white female audience) reflect a Western, socially liberal gender ideology and assume heterosexual whiteness as the implicit structure of the mainstream romantic comedy film.

3.4.4 The continued search for Black women in mainstream rom-coms

At this juncture, I must address the lack of Black women as protagonists in the films that I have critiqued so far. This is because this thesis concerns mainstream romantic comedy films produced between the late 1980s and the present day, and in such films Black and Brown female leads are rare. Where Black female romantic leads are more likely to be found is in lower budget, less widely disseminated films featuring characters of colour, such as those critiqued by Edmondson (2007).[72] Edmondson states that 'it's fair to generalize that, for white writers and filmmakers of an earlier age, black sexuality was a threat, either to the sanctity of white womanhood or to white male rectitude, and it was not to be showcased' (2007, p. 195). In this section, I apply Edmondson's ideas to four more modern romantic comedy films, *Jumping the Broom* (2011), *The Incredible Jessica James* (2017), *Nappily Ever After* (2018), and *Rye Lane* (2023). None of these films can be said to have achieved huge mainstream success,[73] but all are available to stream online (true in the UK as of December 2023), and all feature Black women in lead roles.

Edmondson argues that Black women in Black-made rom-coms are usually educated, affluent women who pursue careers as well as romance. When there are interracial romances, such as in *Something New* (2006), the white man that the affluent Black woman chooses is of a lower social status, so that 'the black heroine's choice of the white lover reaffirms black middle-class privilege, […] framing her choice as singular and devoid of material conditions' (Edmondson, 2007, p. 205). Of the four films I am critiquing here using Edmondson's approach, all but *The Incredible Jessica*

[72] Edmondson discusses *Boomerang* (1992), *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998), and *Something New* (2006), for example.

[73] According to IMDb, *Jumping the Broom* (2011) achieved worldwide gross box office takings of $38 million while *Rye Lane* (2023) took $1.5 million. Neither *The Incredible Jessica James* (2017) nor *Nappily Ever After* (2018) have a budget or worldwide box office takings listed on IMDb. None of the films were nominated for Oscars or Golden Globes, although all four were nominated for film awards specifically aimed at actors of colour: *Jumping the Broom* won three awards at the NAACP's 2012 Image Awards and was nominated for seven awards at the 2012 Black Reel Awards; *The Incredible Jessica James* was nominated for three Black Reel Awards in 2018; *Nappily Ever After* was nominated for two of the NAACP's 2019 Image Awards; and *Rye Lane* was nominated in four categories in the 2024 Black Reel Awards and in sixteen categories at the British Independent Film Awards.

James follow Black women who exclusively have relationships with Black men. *The Incredible Jessica James* (2017) was written and directed by a white man, and in the film, Jessica (Jessica Williams), a Black playwright, develops a relationship with Boone (Chris O'Dowd), a white app-developer. The two characters do not move in together and Boone does not affect Jessica's material conditions, except for in the film's final moments when Jessica and her friends use Boone's frequent flier miles to travel to London. However, in the same scene Jessica refuses to label their relationship. As such, this film's depiction of the relation between Jessica's choice of a white lover and her material conditions is marginal at most. By contrast, in *Jumping the Broom* (2011), the comedic incongruity in the film stems from class conflict between the affluent Black family of Sabrina (Paula Patton) and the working-class Black family of Jason (Laz Alonso), her fiancé. Accordingly, in this film, the Black woman's middle-class socioeconomic standing is reaffirmed through her choice of a poorer Black man, and this choice is presented as singular and devoid of material conditions. Similarly, in *Nappily Ever After* (2018), a Black woman, Violet (Sanaa Lathan), breaks up with her Black doctor boyfriend, Clint (Ricky Whittle), and begins a relationship with Black hairdresser Will (Lyriq Bent). Finally, in *Rye Lane* (2023), Yas (Vivian Oparah), a fashion buyer, develops a relationship with Black accountant Dom (David Jonsson). In this way, all of the Black female protagonists in these films are middle-class, professional women whose relationships are almost entirely presented as unconnected to their material conditions, in contrast to the fairy-tale-esque narratives that link romance to rags-to-riches transformations discussed earlier in this chapter.



Figure 62: In *Jumping the Broom* (2011), Jason (Laz Alonso) proposes to Sabrina (Paula Patton) after a date at the opera, and they later marry in a lavish outdoor ceremony at Sabrina's family home. As such, the film reproduces the upper-class social environment found often in the rom-com genre.



Figure 63: In *Nappily Ever After* (2018), Violet (Sanaa Lathan) works as an advertising executive who has her own office and assistant, and she lives in a large, modern apartment. Both her clothing and the décor in her home appear to be meticulously cared for, which suggests a middle-class affluence.

Rather, in terms of socioeconomic milieu, I read *Jumping the Broom* (2011) and *Nappily Ever After* (2018) as situating their Black female leads within affluent middle-class spaces (see figures 62 and 63), while *The Incredible Jessica James* (2017) and *Rye Lane* (2023) reflect a post-austerity economic precarity (see figures 64 and 65). This is achieved throughout *Jumping the Broom*, from the proposal at the start of the film where Jason, wearing a tuxedo, proposes to Sabrina after they attend a night at the opera through to their picturesque wedding at Sabrina's family home at the end of the film. A lot of comedic mileage is derived from the culture clash between Jason's working-class family and Sabrina's upper-middle-class family, the film visually situates Sabrina in a world of opulence. Similarly, Violet in *Nappily Ever After* is a high-powered advertising executive whose expensive wardrobe and home mark her as a figure that the film viewer might aspire to in terms of lifestyle. Consequently, I conclude that *Jumping the Broom* and *Nappily Ever After* reproduce the visual markers of affluence and privilege that I have associated with a tacit whiteness elsewhere in this thesis, but the films' plots are firmly rooted in a Black experience. The practice of jumping the broom is a traditional part of the wedding celebrations in African-American households, which Jason and Sabrina want to incorporate into their own wedding. *Nappily Ever After* is a romantic comedy, but it is also a story about Violet's journey to accept her afro hair after years of feeling self-conscious and straightening it. Therefore, while these films reproduce many of the pillars of the rom-com that I outline in this thesis – such as heteronormativity and affluence – it is incorrect to say that their opulence is an indicator of tacit whiteness. Conversely, Jessica in *The*

Incredible Jessica James and Yas in *Rye Lane* both reference their financial worries in their dialogue and are shown to live in more run-down areas, with Boone in the former film even jokingly asking when Jessica thinks her area is going to get burned down. However, while these areas might bear visual resemblances to the neighbourhood that Marisa (Jennifer Lopez) lives in during *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), neither Jessica nor Yas have their career aspirations linked to their romantic lives in the same way as Marisa does in the earlier film.



Figure 64: In *The Incredible Jessica James* (2017), Jessica (Jessica Williams) works multiple jobs, including as a waiter and leading theatre workshops for children, and when she tours Boone (Chris O'Dowd) around her neighbourhood he jokingly asks when they are going to burn it down.



Figure 65: Rye Lane (2023) features multiple scenes in which the main characters, Dom (David Jonsson) and Yas (Vivian Oparah), walk through graffiti-covered Peckham, which presents a startling comparison to the vision of London in both *Notting Hill* (1999) and *Love Actually* (2003). In the shots of each character at home, Dom appears in a teenage bedroom, having moved back in with his parents, while Yas has a messy bedroom in a shared house.

Outside of socioeconomics, Edmondson also argues that 'new black romance does not imply a white audience against whom black readers and viewers must continually police their own sexuality' (2007, p. 206). This statement is certainly applicable to *Nappily Ever After*, which features the most explicit sex scenes of any of the films analysed in this chapter, including a sex scene that takes place in a shower and another in which Violet pours honey over a man during a one-night stand. By contrast, *The Incredible Jessica James* features a sex scene in which the two leads are fully covered by a duvet, which is typical of many of the other romantic comedies analysed in this thesis, and neither *Jumping the Broom* nor *Rye Lane* feature any sex scenes at all. *Jumping the Broom* avoids sex so much that it opens with Sabrina's voiceover monologue in which she chastises herself because she 'gave up the "cookie" for a cute face, nice body, and some mediocre conversation.' While the rhythm and structure of this utterance clearly indicates a comedic intention, it also hides the film's ideological message, which is that it favours committed monogamy over casual sex. Moreover, the fact that Sabrina cannot even say the word "sex" indicates the anti-sex nature of the film. Similarly, *Rye Lane* also features a comedic moment in which the characters actively avoid sex where Yas tells Dom about an instance when she started to perform oral sex on her ex-boyfriend and Dom covers his eyes (see figure 66). Thus, my reading of these four films indicates that the supposed lack of an implied white audience does not indicate unpoliced Black sexuality, but rather a more complex series of relationships and attitudes towards Black sexuality.



Figure 66: In *Rye Lane* (2023), Dom (David Jonsson) covers his eyes when Yas acts out giving oral sex to her ex-boyfriend.

As I explain throughout this thesis, mainstream romantic comedy is predicated on heterosexual coupling as the principal structure of Western society. However, both *The Incredible Jessica James* and *Nappily Ever After* have ambiguous endings in which it is unclear whether the female protagonists are in relationships or not. This contrasts with every other film discussed in this chapter, which might suggest that there is a transgressive power in the depiction of Black female protagonists, implying Black rom-coms transcend the usual ideologically mandated heterosexual coupling. However, I counter this reading since these romantic comedies were not produced within the mainstream rom-com industry, had smaller budgets, and expected to attract smaller audiences than the other films, which accounts for the space within them to explore more ambiguous endings.

Crenshaw observes that 'the narratives of gender are based on the experience of white, middle-class women, and the narratives of race are based on the experience of Black men' (1991, p. 1298).[74] This is reflected in that the majority of the female rom-com leads that I have analysed in this thesis present as white and the majority of the Black leads that I discuss in this chapter present as male. However, *Jumping the Broom* (2011), *The Incredible Jessica James* (2017), *Nappily Ever After* (2018), and *Rye Lane* (2023) all buck this trend by foregrounding Black women as rom-com protagonists. All the same, as I outlined at the start of this section, none of these romantic comedies has yet achieved significant mainstream attention in terms of either box office takings or Oscar/BAFTA awards. Hence, I must conclude that these are not mainstream romantic comedies in the same way that the other case study films that I analyse in this thesis are. The mainstream rom-com's gender ideology presupposes white heteropatriachy as the tacit norm, and comedy is predicated on a shared expectation which is challenged in a benevolent manner. Therefore, perhaps a protagonist who is Black and female is one incongruity too many for the white spectator (at least in the eyes of the Hollywood producer), and this double incongruity prevents this spectator from getting the comedy,

[74] Similarly, Doane notes that in film the 'category of women is usually used to refer to white women, while the category of Blacks often really means "Black men." What is lost in the process is the situation of the Black woman' (1991, p. 231).

according to a racial gender ideology that assumes whiteness and maleness as tacit norms.

3.5 Closing Remarks

In some ways the key lessons from Chapter 3 broadly align with the key findings from Chapter 2 in terms of the binary gender structure at play in rom-com's comedic moments. The earlier films in both chapters clearly reproduce the ideas that women are valued for their physical appearance, women value relationships over sex, and that women are valued for withholding sex more obviously than in the later films. The later films, however, tacitly reproduce these three messages, but in subtler ways. This implies that, here too, there has been an incremental change in the social structures reproduced in the rom-com.

In the closing remarks of Chapter 2, I argued that a tension at the heart of the Hollywood rom-com is that the "real" states of sex, gender, and relationships have changed greatly since the 1980s but the "imaginary" representation found in the comedic moments of British and American rom-coms has sustained an ideological nostalgia throughout this time period. However, one of the key lessons in this chapter is that the sense of past-ness is most obvious in the depictions of places and people from outside of both the UK and USA. I found that in films that foreground characters of colour, the representations of other cultures, be they Zamunda, Greece, Pakistan, or Singapore, are comedically ridiculed or othered via their association with different forms of primitivism. Overall, these films also feature more crass sexual humour, childlike naivety, and an opposition to socially liberal female empowerment, from both the male and female characters from countries other than the UK and USA imbued with a sense of otherness. In comparison to which, as with *Yesterday* (2019) and *Love Hard* (2021), the modern-day UK and USA are presented as almost entirely post-racial and egalitarian. Thus, similar to the films analysed in Chapter 2, there appears to be a shift that occurs around the 2010s in the films analysed in Chapter 3, but this relates to the kind of colour-blind postracism that Bonilla-Silva critiques more than postfeminism.

Rather, what remains in place in the films analysed in the latter half of this chapter is the presentation of supposedly "progressive" Western gender politics in

contrast to a more “primitive” gender politics associated with the rest of the world. The gender ideology within mainstream rom-coms thereby presupposes the structure of middle-class, affluent, liberal, suburban, heterosexual whiteness as an implicit norm, even in the absence of white characters, and it represents whiteness as an affective condition that belongs to the nostalgia for an earlier period that is perceived as a “better time” for the white subject.

At the beginning of this project, a question that drove me to carry out this research was ‘if a teenager with a limited amount of real-world experience sat down and watched romantic comedy films on streaming sites, what would they conclude about sex, love, and relationships?’ Based on my research for this chapter, I conclude that they might consider the USA is a bastion of multiculturalism in comparison to a xenophobic and primitive rest of the world. They might be reassured by the presence of middle-class white saviours in the form of Ian in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), Chris in *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), or Emily’s parents in *The Big Sick* (2017). Latterly, they might also conclude that the appeal of non-white protagonists in rom-coms is that they tend to be young, diasporic individuals, integrated into a Western ideology predicated on hegemonic whiteness. In short, assimilation to whiteness is one of their major strengths.

As such, one of the key findings in this analysis was my widening of Hall’s theory of ‘the “absent” but imperializing “white eye”’ (2021b, p. 107) to include a diasporic eye, particularly in the case of *Coming to America* (1988), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), *The Big Sick* (2017), and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). Hall once wrote that ‘Black stand-up comics still ape their ambiguous incorporation into British entertainment by being the first to tell a racist joke’ (2021b, p. 110); it could also be suggested that, in order to cement their position within the Hollywood film industry, racialised writers, producers, and directors are encouraged make the cultures of their heritage visible by satirising them. If ‘[i]deologies tend to disappear from view into the taken-for-granted “naturalized” world of common sense’ (Hall, 2021b, 101), then it follows that a second-generation writer might be ideologically entrenched in a pro-

USA, socially liberal ideological standpoint that views the culture of their heritage as Other. Hall notes that it 'is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that "knowledge,"' (2021a, p. 260), and through this chapter I suggest that, in mainstream rom-com, diasporic individuals are encouraged to conform to an affluent, white vision of socially liberal, heterosexual romance in opposition to a primitive vision of the non-Western world.

One thing that struck me while writing this chapter was the enormous potential for writing more complex stories in television series produced by streaming platforms, which already boast programmes such as *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015–2019), *Master of None* (2015–2021), *Sex Education* (2019–2023), and *Never Have I Ever* (2020–2023), which have space to represent complex romance stories featuring protagonists of colour in a comedic manner. However, as established in the earlier chapters of this thesis, my focus here is on single feature-length films in so far as my work is a comparative study of romantic comedies produced between the late 1980s and the present. The delineation may seem arbitrary, but the problem with some of these series is that they blur the line between feature rom-com and serialised sitcom and would open my research up to comparison with a host of other entertainment formats that exceeds the limited space I have available within the present thesis.

Chapter 4: Queerness and Rom-Com: Exorcising Queerness from Gayness

4.1 Opening Remarks

In the first two case study chapters I have explored how, despite the differences in racial politics, the mainstream gender ideology found in British and American rom-com's comedic moments continually reproduces messages of "naturalised" binary gender roles and binary gender complementarity as part of heteronormative power structures. This gender ideology fundamentally reproduces an essentialist gender binary through gender complementarity and heterosexual monogamy.[75] In other words, mainstream rom-coms often present male and female characters with distinct traits that the opposing gender "humorously" cannot fully comprehend and these incongruities are only reconciled through the heterosexual union of the male and the female dialectic at the film's close. The gender ideology of rom-coms establishes, then, a dialectical relation in which male and female find fulfilment in the other, which reaffirms the theme (and mechanism) of gender complementarity as the necessary salve to the conflict of the rom-com. That is to say, the romantic comedy genre uses its comedic moments and the comically imbued resolutions to its narratives to reproduce a heteronormative mainstream gender ideology, in which the absence of queer romance is a pervasive norm in all of the films discussed so far.

The previous chapter found that this gender ideology is predicated on the assumption of middle-class affluence and whiteness even in films where protagonists do not present as white. The focus of the present chapter is the argument that mainstream rom-com gender ideology is also predicated on heterosexuality even in rom-coms featuring gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans characters. This critique is grounded in J. Jack Halberstam's (2005) and Jose Esteban Muñoz's (2009) understandings of queer time and queer potentiality, which I use to articulate the view that the representation of LGBT characters and LGBT love in mainstream British and

[75] This ideology reproduces heterosexist hegemony, for, as Sedgwick writes, 'in the discourse of most cultures, beneath a rhetoric of "opposites" and "counterparts" and "complementarity," one gender is treated as a marginalized subset rather than as an equal alternative to the other' (2016, p. 47).

American rom-coms does not constitute a queering of the genre but a defanging of the disruptive power of queerness.[76]

As with Chapter 3, I have segmented this chapter into two historical periods to reflect the cultural changes between the periods from the late 1980s to the mid-2010s and the mid-2010s to the present. In the first half of the chapter, my argument is that between the 1980s and the 2010s, mainstream romantic comedy films featuring lesbian and gay characters (I did not find examples of explicitly bisexual or trans characters) configure compulsory heterosexuality as the expected norm and thus hail the spectator as heterosexual. In this period, the mainstream rom-com reproduces what Adrienne Rich refers to as a "compulsory heterosexuality," which 'asserts that primary love between the sexes is "normal," […] that the heterosexually constituted family is the basic social unit' (1980, p. 657), and which positions gay and lesbian characters as outsiders. Rich describes compulsory heterosexuality at a time before my case study films were produced, but I avow that the mainstream rom-com is still ideologically predicated on the kind of naturalisation of heterosexual desire that she describes, as well as on an ideological commitment to the nuclear, heterosexual family unit as the dominant social structure in Western society.

In the first half of this chapter this ideology of compulsory heterosexuality is reproduced in three guises: first, the potential for queer characters is excluded, side-lined, or denied, as in *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002); second, the few gay and lesbian characters appearing in rom-coms appear as tragic supporting characters whose otherness and positioning outside of the heteropatriarchal normativity of the central

[76] I use the terms "queer" and "queerness" here to discuss characters and moments from romantic comedy films that challenge the established rom-com status quo through their performance of gender and sexuality. This reflects Muñoz's idea that '[q]ueerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. […] Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. […] Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world' (2009, p. 1). By contrast, I use the term "LGBT" to describe the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender characters. Following this distinction, as I explore further in the chapter, it is possible for a character to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender without rejecting the normative world of the mainstream rom-com.

romantic couple facilitate heterosexual spectatorship, as in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994); third, as in *The Birdcage* (1996) or *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), gay characters in particular serve as comedic supporting characters whose otherness provides comic relief against the "seriousness" of heterosexual romance. Of course, this argument relies on a slightly artificial dichotomy between comedy and tragedy, as there are also comedic moments featuring the gay characters of Gareth (Simon Callow) and Matthew (John Hannah) in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, just as it is possible to read the outsiderness of Armand (Robin Williams) and Albert (Nathan Lane) in *The Birdcage* or George (Rupert Everett) in *My Best Friend's Wedding* as tragic. However, I maintain that George, Albert, and Armand are primarily coded for laughs, whereas Gareth and Matthew are more associated with tragedy. And in all instances these characters serve to accentuate the desirability of the central heterosexual couples. In short, I argue in the first half of this chapter that the "com" can be gay but the "rom" needs to be heterosexual for the mainstream rom-com of the 1980s–2010s.

In the second half of this chapter, I analyse how these tropes (lack of LGBTQ+ representation, LGBT comedic supporting roles, and the link between queerness and tragedy) have changed from 2018 onwards given the huge increase in the number of romantic comedies featuring LGBT characters.[77] Foucault wrote that 'homosexuality threatens people as a "way of life" rather than as a way of having sex' (1980, p. 310), and it is this exact distinction between queerness as a "way of life" and LGBTQ+ as an umbrella term for a range of sexual orientations (lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc.) and gender identities (trans) that is the focus of the second half of this chapter's analysis. I seek to expose this distinction through my close readings of *Love, Simon* (2018), *Happiest Season* (2020), *Single All the Way* (2021), *Anything's Possible* (2022), and *Bros* (2022). I conclude that these films put lesbian, gay, and trans characters into the normative rom-com structure but they do not queer the rom-com due to their commitment to what Lisa Duggan terms "homonormativity" (2004). The application of

[77] The films that I am analysing were released from 2018 to 2023. Although it is not the main focus of this thesis, using Hall's (Hall et al., 1978; Hall, 1990) approach to conjunctural analysis, these changes can be read in relation to the #MeToo movement, Black Lives Matter, and the emergence of what Rivers (2017) calls fourth-wave feminism.

queer theory to the rom-com's comedic moments constitutes a reappraisal of the rom-com genre. This contemporary reappraisal is core to this thesis' contribution to new knowledge, and is particularly pertinent at the current historical moment due to the current shift towards awareness of LGBT+ identities, which were systemically excluded earlier in this time period.

Across the two halves of this chapter there is therefore a tension between a desire for the representation of LGBT+ characters in mainstream rom-com and the toll taken by assimilating queer characters into a genre which has been widely labelled 'the most conventional and conservative of all genres' (Deleyto, 2009, p. 3). Sara Ahmed notes that '[t]he desire for recognition is […] a desire to have an ordinary life' (2017, p. 219), but it is my contention that in the mainstream rom-com this translates to the desire for LGBTQ+ representation manifesting as a desire for normative narratives of productive time – a desire to eschew queerness.

4.2 Heteronormative Gender Ideology and Rom-Com

As I have already mentioned, “lesbian,” “gay,” and “bisexual” refer to sexualities, while “trans” refers to a gender identity that differs from sex assigned at birth.[78] In order to illustrate how “LGBT” differs from “queer,” I turn to Halberstam’s definition of the latter as that which ‘refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time’ (2005, p. 6). By differentiating these two terms, “LGBT” and “queer,” it is possible to understand that a romantic comedy can be LGBT – it can showcase a relationship between two men, or a relationship between two women, or a relationship that includes at least one trans character – without challenging normative logics and organisations of community, embodiment, or activity in time and space.

Halberstam’s articulation of “queer time” as ‘the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing’ (2005, p. 2) certainly appears at odds with the majority of romantic comedy plots, which feature characters enmeshed in their positions within family structures. Typically, rom-com protagonists overcome a series of comedic obstacles in order to form a heterosexual couple and are often married or engaged by the end of the rom-com, which I read as the mainstream rom-com reinforcing the message that the “happy ending” leaves characters normatively positioned for child-rearing and inheritance. For example, several of the films discussed in the previous two chapters, such as *Coming to America* (1988), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), *Love Actually* (2003), *Jumping the Broom* (2011), and *Trainwreck* (2015), all revolve around the protagonists and their families negotiating their new relationships, but in all of these cases the outcome is the assimilation of the characters into normative productive time. More acutely, as shall be seen, if ‘[q]ueer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and

[78] LGBTQ+ organisations such as Stonewall (2023) list a number of other sexual and gender identities such as questioning, intersex, and asexual. However, since none of the rom-coms that I have included as case studies include characters who self-identify as questioning, intersex, or asexual, I have not included these identities in my analysis.

reproduction' (Halberstam, 2005, p. 1), then none of the mainstream romantic comedy films surveyed in this chapter operate within queer time, even those featuring LGBT protagonists.

As will be discussed later, the majority of rom-com's LGBT characters have typically been gay men, which brings to mind Ahmed's observation that '[f]eminist philosophers have taught us for over a century how man becomes universal; woman particular' (2017, p. 216). Typical LGBT representation in rom-com remains androcentric, but beyond that basic observation I also note that these gay men exist outside of the family unit and are thus presented as peripheral to the rom-com's central focus on the importance of the family unit.[79] These gay characters often fulfil the roles of friend, mentor, or – as described in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) in the previous chapter – "fairy godmother," and they are often coded as middle or upper class. Therefore, they often offer repetitions of 'the witty and erotized Wildean homosexual role' (Sedgwick, 2016, p. 217) that Sedgwick noted as a staple of upper-class homosexuality in English literature. In effect, modern romantic comedies reproduce 'the mutual distinctness of the aristocratic-style, ascriptively feminine, "tragic," and affluent or apolitical male homosexual stereotype on the one hand, and on the other the actively, projectively homophobic mass culture' (p. 217). It is perhaps unsurprising given the neoliberal consumerism of romantic comedies that this stereotyping represents gay men as signifiers of a (mostly) white, socially liberal, financially comfortable lifestyle; affluent, stylish gay men whose appearance is marked by self-fashioned excess and who become part of the 'larger material context that often includes spacious, beautifully furnished homes' (Cohen, 2010, p. 85). Cohen further notes that '[i]t's not the wealth in itself that seduces the heroine but the wealth of things available for self-expression' (p. 86), which I argue includes gay male best friends who contribute to the wealth of self-expression available to heterosexual (usually female) protagonists.

[79] For example, Matthew (John Hannah) and Gareth (Simon Callow) in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), Christian (Justin Walker) in *Clueless* (1995), Simon (Greg Kinnear) in *As Good As It Gets* (1997), George (Rupert Everett) in *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), Oliver (Nico Santos) in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), and John (Dan Levy) in *Happiest Season* (2020).

In recent years, there have also been increasing, albeit fewer, numbers of lesbian characters in mainstream rom-coms who exist outside of the heterosexual family unit, such as Amy (Kaitlyn Dever) in *Booksmart* (2019), Riley (Aubrey Plaza) in *Happiest Season* (2020), and Cherry (Dot-Marie Jones) in *Bros* (2022). The comparative lack of lesbian roles in rom-coms compared with gay roles perhaps speaks to the double-outsiderhood that lesbians face – as Rich notes, 'women who do not attach their primary intensity to men must be, in functional terms, condemned to an even more devastating outsiderhood than their outsiderhood as women' (1980, p. 657). Similarly, there are an increasing number of trans characters in rom-coms, such as Kelsa (Eva Reign) in *Anything's Possible* (2022) and Angela (Ts Madison) in *Bros* (2022). In terms of bisexual, pansexual, or asexual characters in romantic comedy films, *Crush* (2022) features a bisexual protagonist, but there are no overt examples of pansexual or asexual characters identifying themselves as such in mainstream romantic comedies. While we might argue for the presence of pansexual or asexual moments in mainstream romantic comedies, examples of characters self-identifying under any of these labels are limited to non-existent in mainstream films, and consequently does not form a major part of this chapter. However, it is worth noting the problem with labelling characters' (especially supporting characters') sexualities based on the actions those characters perform – as Alexander Doty states, 'one of the heterocentric traps […] [is] assuming that all characters in a film are straight unless labelled, coded, or otherwise obviously proven to be queer' (2000, pp. 2–3).

At this juncture, I wish to address the two options when analysing the lack of diversity in terms of LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream culture: undertaking a "paranoid" reading, or a "reparative" reading (Sedgwick, 2002). I suggest that a paranoid reading focuses on LGBTQ+ characters or moments that are unequivocally queer because they are labelled as such. Contrastingly, a reparative reading is open to queer readings of characters and moments that are not explicitly labelled as LGBTQ+ within the film discourse. To give an example of these two modes of reading from *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), there is a scene in which Charles (Hugh Grant) and his

friend Tom (James Fleet) wake up next to each other on the morning of the fourth wedding (see figure 67). A paranoid reading of this scene notes that Charles and Tom are only in bed together because it is Tom's job to ensure that Charles finally makes it to a wedding on time and that the homosociality on display here is not an overtly queer moment in the film but relates to Charles's immature inability to keep time – an obstacle which he must overcome in order to achieve the goal of monogamous heterosexual coupling. Alternatively, this moment could be read reparatively as a queer moment of homosocial intimacy between the two male characters. Following this approach, I interpret this moment as an instance in which the film engages with queerness as a source of comedy. This comedic moment perhaps evokes a boarding-school dorm room, mirroring Sedgwick's argument that the middle-class gentlemen's view of erotic homosexual desire has been depicted as a thing of 'childishness' (2016, p. 177). Both paranoid and reparative reading approaches inform the close analyses of the films in the rest of this chapter in order to uncover the tacit heteronormativity that is reinscribed through the mainstream rom-com's comedic moments without negating queer reparative potentiality.



Figure 67: Charles (Hugh Grant) and Tom (James Fleet) wake up in bed together on the morning of the fourth wedding in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994).

However, I primarily utilise a paranoid reading style that 'places its faith in *exposure*' (Sedgwick, 2002, p. 130) because I am writing at a time when there is an

ever-increasing 'desire for recognition' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 219) in a concrete way.[80] I use reparative techniques with *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) primarily to expose the lack of lesbian representation in the film, but I conclude that despite the transgressive potential of the rom-com, mainstream films tend to reproduce the heterosexual rom-com formula with gay and lesbian characters without ultimately queering the narrative. In short, since the late 1980s, the mainstream rom-com has gone from compulsorily heterosexual to LGBT-adjacent to LGBT-inclusive, but it has never operated on queer time.

[80] Indeed, the dearth of explicitly LGBTQ+ references in historical texts requires a reparative approach to reading them in order to draw out much of queer history, but in the present, a paranoid approach that demands unapologetically queer representation is more useful for analysing the particularisation of sexual experience that Oria notes as a strength of the post-2014 rom-com (2021, p. 28).

4.2.1 Compulsory heterosexuality in *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002)

The ideological commitment to compulsory heterosexuality at play in *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) is particularly salient given that women's football is a domain in which 'the lesbian stereotype has real currency' (Caudwell, 2002, p. 30). Queerness is present both in the perception of women's football from those outside of the sport as well as in the lived experience of numerous high-profile female footballers.[81] In this section, I argue that the erasure of lesbian experience in mainstream rom-com, except where it is mocked as exotic or perverse, is epitomised in *Bend It Like Beckham*. In the film, Jess Bhamra (Parminder Nagra), despite her Indian Sikh family's desire for her to go to university, get married, and learn to cook Punjabi food, secretly joins a women's football team behind her parents' backs and starts a relationship with her white, male football coach, Joe (Jonathan Rhys Meyers). The film mirrors *The Big Sick* (2017) in that it can be regarded as a romantic comedy that tells the story of a person of South Asian heritage growing up in the West and choosing romance with a white, Western love interest over their family's values, which are derided as "backward" by the film's other characters.[82]

Yet, more than this, *Bend It Like Beckham* reproduces the connection between Indianness and the bifurcation of gender into heterosexual masculinity and femininity. Jigna Desai writes that films like *Bend It Like Beckham*, *Bollywood/Hollywood* (2002), and *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) attempt 'to disrupt South Asian gender normativities of heterosexuality through challenging the dominant gendered ideologies such as female

[81] In the 1920s, Lily Parr and Violette Morris were both openly lesbian international footballers (Dohle, 2020, p. 8), and high-profile lesbian footballers in the modern era include England international player and football manager Hope Powell, England international player and BBC pundit Alex Scott, captain of Team GB at the 2012 Olympics Casey Stoney, six-time FIFA World Player of the Year Marta, Australian team captain Sam Kerr, and USA team captain and Ballon d'Or winner Megan Rapinoe. In the same year that *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) was released, Jayne Caudwell published an article in which she interviewed female footballers in the UK, finding that many of them were aware of the common assumption that female footballers are gay; almost all of the respondents reported that the teams they played for were predominantly made up of lesbian players, and Caudwell thus argues that, within women's football, 'the lesbian stereotype has real currency and may work to displace notions of dominant heterosexuality' (2002, p. 30) but ultimately '[h]eterosexuality is usually protected, maintained and reproduced […] via complex workings of homophobia and heterosexism' (p. 41).

[82] In one scene, one of Jess's teammates describes the idea that 'Indian girls aren't supposed to play football' as 'a bit backward.'

chastity and virginity, multiracial romance, and arranged marriage' (2003, p. 212). However, I suggest that *Bend It Like Beckham* does this by positioning the gender normativities of heterosexuality as something belonging to the older generation and the "disruption" of sexual liberation, multiracial romance, and female empowerment as belonging to members of the second-generation South Asian diaspora and their assimilation to Western culture. By the end of the film, Jess scores the winning goal in a cup final, convinces her parents to let her go to California to become a professional footballer, and enters a relationship with Joe, all of which I suggest are representative of a sense of "progressive" feminist multiculturalism that the film associates with its white characters. By contrast, the older Brown characters in the film preach the "traditional" gender pillars of female chastity and arranged marriage: Jess's mother (Shaheen Khan) tells her to cover her legs in public and Jess's father (Anupam Kher) shakes the hand of Jess's friend Tony (Ameet Chana) when he announces they want to get engaged. Thus, while I broadly agree with Desai that *Bend It Like Beckham* disrupts South Asian gender normativities, it does so in a manner that reproduces a generational divide between "traditional" heterosexual normativity for the older generation and more socially liberal, in other words, more "Westernised" heterosexual romance for the younger generation.

Additionally, while the obvious, paranoid reading of *Bend It Like Beckham* concludes that the film is a standard rom-com following the relationship between Jess and Joe, it could also be read reparatively as a queer romantic comedy that focuses on the relationship between Jess and her friend and teammate Juliette/Jules (Kiera Knightley).[83] After all, the film's narrative hinges on the moment that Juliette approaches Jess in the park and convinces her to join her football team. Such a queer reading is supported by Rich's notion of a 'lesbian continuum' (1980, p. 651) that includes female friendship and intra-female care. Following this idea in Rich, I consider women's football teams as quintessentially lesbian spaces.[84] Through football, Jess and

[83] Chakraborty similarly notes that '[a]ll through the film, Jess and Jules seem to be being marked out for the formation of a lesbian couple' (2011, p. 130).

[84] I also consider men's football teams as homosocial spaces but due to the long history of homophobia directed towards male players such as Justin Fashanu (Read, 2012) and the comparative lack of openly

Juliette express physical intimacy through training practices in numerous montages in the film in addition to their obvious friendship and the emotional care they show for each other outside of football. They embrace, they hold hands, they even briefly kiss on the cheek at one point after they speak to the American scout. Indeed, the only aspect of Rich's lesbian continuum that is absent in the film is sexual intimacy.

Jess and Juliette even experience homophobia, largely stemming from their respective families' opposition to their desire to play football, which they associate with lesbianism. Both characters are under pressure from their families to perform traditional "feminine" womanhood (see figure 68): Jess's mother teaches her to cook traditional Punjabi food and measures her up for a sari that will make her 'mosquito bites' look like 'juicy, juicy mangoes,' while Juliette's mother (Juliet Stevenson) tries to buy her a padded bra and says, 'no boy is going to want to go out with a girl who has got bigger muscles than him.' Jess and Jules are seen embracing on a street corner, which Jess's family mistake as her kissing a boy due to Juliette's short hair, and which leads one of Jess's family to describe Juliette as 'some dykey girl from her football team' (see figure 69). In this way, the film reproduces homophobic outrage, exaggerated and taken out of context for comedic effect, without ever reproducing homosexual romance.



Figure 68: In *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), both Jess (Parminder Nagra) and Jules (Kiera Knightley) are taken clothes shopping by their female relatives who make comments about how they should want to wear clothes that will appeal to men or boys. Jess is also taught how to cook Punjabi food in another scene. Thus, both characters are under familial pressure to perform traditional femininity.

gay male players and managers it is harder to argue that a male football team is quintessentially a queer space.



Figure 69: The only moment in which *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) appears to showcase homosexual intimacy is a comedic moment in which Jess's relatives see Jess (Parminder Nagra) and Jules (Kiera Knightley) laughing together and, misunderstand the situation, assume that they are kissing.

A further important comedic moment in the film that reproduces the notion of compulsory heterosexuality comes when Juliette's mother spots Jess wearing her shoes at Jess's sister's wedding and declares, 'Get your lesbian feet out of my shoes!' in response to which two of the elderly Brown women at the wedding remark, 'Lesbian? I thought she was a Pisces?' and 'She's not Lebanese, she's Punjabi' (see figure 70). This is an important moment for revealing the film's compulsory heterosexuality because it is a comedic moment that is also a moment of erasure. The two elderly women simply do not know the word "lesbian," and thus the film denies the existence of lesbianism within their frames of reference. This in effect links lesbianism with a sense of modernity and Westernness, since it is two older, South Asian women who do not understand it as a term. This has led Mridula Nath Chakraborty to read this as 'a moment of postcolonial irony, not feminist emancipation or even queer triumph' (2011, p. 130), since, as she notes, it was under British colonial rule that homosexuality was first made a criminal offence in India. Finally, at the end of the film, it is Jess and Juliette who leave together for America to live happily ever after as professional footballers. To co-opt Shumway's (2003, p. 153) summary of rom-com structure discussed in the introduction to this thesis, *Bend It Like Beckham* can be summarised as 'Girl meets girl. Girl loses girl. Girl gets girl back.'

However, as Claire Hines surmises, 'any exploration of an alternative reading runs the risk of reinforcing the privileged position of the dominant reading' (2009, p. 118). Thus, to reparatively read *Bend It Like Beckham* as a queer love story between Jess and Jules like this is to ignore the substantial compulsory heteronormativity at the film's core. I have shown here how this film could have been made as a queer rom-

com, but, ultimately, creative decisions were made that positioned the heterosexual love story between Jess and Joe at the centre of the film. Doty writes, with regard to mainstream film, that 'basically heterocentrist texts can contain queer elements, and basically heterosexual, straight-identifying people can experience queer moments' (1995, p. 72), but the point remains that the film is still a heterocentrist text. The film still reproduces a connection between being a lesbian and parental disapproval. Although the characters perform numerous actions that could be located on the lesbian continuum, there are no moments in which a character in the film explicitly self-identifies as a lesbian. The only character who identifies as gay is Jess's friend Tony, who tells Jess that he 'really likes David Beckham.' However, intriguingly, at no point does he say the word "gay," "homosexual," or "bisexual" or any other word that specifically allows the audience to identify his sexuality. Even in the film's queerest moment, it still reproduces homosexuality as the love that dare not speak its name.



Figure 70: In *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), the women who do not understand what the word "lesbian" means are older, South Asian women. I read this as a comedic moment through which queerness is associated with Westernness and compulsory heterosexuality is associated with older Brown people.

I must therefore conclude that *Bend It Like Beckham*, through its plot and comedic moments, side-lines the queer potential of the film in favour of a reproduction of heteronormativity. This aligns with both Chakraborty when she writes that the film constitutes 'a demonstration of how to straitjacket desire to fit normative

gender identity' (2011, p. 130) and Jigna Desai, who states that the film provides 'a familiar marginalization of nonheteronormative sexualities in the service of consolidating an acceptable understanding of feminist agency' (2003, pp. 213–214). Perhaps, for the mainstream spectator in 2002, the expectation was that the gaze constructed by the mainstream rom-com was white and heterosexual, and while it was possible to subvert *one* of those expectations, subverting both risked alienating the imagined viewer. Thus, while Sean Redmond contends that Bollywood rom-com, made for South Asian and South Asian diasporic audience, 'confirms the superiority of Eastern/Indian ways of being and belonging, shaping and informing the (inter)national imaginary of India' (2009, p. 65), I read *Bend It Like Beckham* as a film that tacitly assumes a Western spectatorship in that it confirms the superiority of Western ways of being and belonging, while India in the film represents a homophobic past that is out of step with modern Britain.

4.2.2 The gay best friend/family member as comic relief in *The Birdcage* (1996) and *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997)

If "queer time" is 'about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing' (Halberstam, 2005, p. 2), then *The Birdcage* (1996) and *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) – much like *Bend It Like Beckham* – do not operate in queer time; instead, they depict gay men as both comedic relief and helpers assisting heterosexual couples in the processes of establishing or maintaining themselves within the structures of heterosexual marriage and family. The films use gay stereotypes for comedic relief, juxtaposing them with the "seriousness" of heterosexual romance without challenging relationship norms. As such, I argue that these rom-coms are gay-adjacent but not queer.

My Best Friend's Wedding is the story of food critic Julianne (Julia Roberts) who attempts to sabotage the wedding of her best friend, Michael (Dermot Mulroney), to Kimberly (Cameron Diaz), with the help of her editor and other close friend, George (Rupert Everett). Ironically, George, as the only gay character, is excluded from heterosexual marriage yet he advises Julianne, a heterosexual-presenting woman, on how to pursue a relationship with Michael. Additionally, he provides comedic moments through witty lines of dialogue, such as when he arrives at Julianne's hotel room and remarks, 'Death by mini bar, how glamorous!' and especially in the series of scenes in which Julianne forces George to pretend to be her fiancé in an attempt to make Michael jealous (see figure 71). There is also dramatic irony in this sequence when George describes himself and Julianne as inhabiting 'some glittering, Doris Day-Rock Hudson extravaganza' with a knowing intertextual reference to Rock Hudson's homosexuality and his appearances alongside Doris Day in the rom-coms *Pillow Talk* (1959), *Lover Come Back* (1961), and *Send Me No Flowers* (1964). Although none of the other characters in the scene seem to understand the reference, the film spectator understands this as a coded reference to George, who, like Rock Hudson, is a gay man hiding his homosexuality in this scene.[85]

[85] Not every viewer will get this reference, but in this moment, the film speaks to a certain demographic of viewer – one who has an appreciation for the lineage of mainstream rom-coms.



Figure 71: A comedic moment from *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) in which George (Rupert Everett) gropes Jules (Julia Roberts) while pretending to be her fiancé in a display that exaggerates and satirises heterosexual male sexuality.

Similarly, the gay characters Armand (Robin Williams) and Albert (Nathan Lane) in *The Birdcage* (1996) provide many of that film's comedic moments, and both also pretend to be heterosexual to help the film's protagonists (see figure 72). *The Birdcage* is an American romantic comedy film that tells the story of Armand Goldman, a nightclub owner, and his partner Albert, a drag queen, who hide their queerness from the ultra-conservative parents of Barbara (Calista Flockhart), their son Val's (Dan Futterman) new fiancée.[86] Armand and Albert have their own careers and, in contrast to George, we see numerous scenes in which they exclusively interact with other gay characters. However, their main role in the film is to hide their sexuality in order to protect their son, Val, and his heterosexual relationship. Jason Jacobs maintains that, typically in mainstream media, young queer characters are presented in conjunction with an 'ideological fixation on the beneficent role of the family' (2014, p. 321) that embraces them for who they are. It is my contention that, despite the film's queering of the nuclear, heterosexual family – evidenced in the opening and closing numbers, which both feature drag queens singing 'We Are Family' by Sister Sledge (see figure 73)

[86] It is also an English-language remake of the French film *La Cage aux Folles* (1978), which itself is based on a 1973 play of the same name by Jean Poiret.

The Birdcage is actually predicated on this same ideological fixation with the beneficent role of the affluent, white family as a space in which heterosexual coupling is the focal point.



Figure 72: Partway through *The Birdcage* (1996), Albert (Nathan Lane) dons drag and pretends to be the wife of Armand (Robin Williams) in order to have dinner with their son's fiancée's politically right-wing family.



Figure 73: The Birdcage (1996) starts and ends with scenes in the eponymous drag club. In the first scene, 'We Are Family' by Sister Sledge is performed by a cast of drag queens. At the end of the film, the central couple and their respective parents don disguises to dance with drag queens in order to escape from the journalists who are after them.

Suzanna Danuta Walters describes the stereotypical queer characters in the romantic comedies of the 1990s as a 'hip accessory […] used – to a certain extent – to add a certain up-to-date cachet of hipness to the film' (2001, pp. 154–155). Building upon this and Cohen's (2010) aforementioned theorising on the material world of the rom-com, I argue that Armand and Albert's affluence, their status as owners of a drag

club, and indeed their gayness elevate and extend Val and Barbara's hipness in contrast to Barbara's conservative parents, just as George does for Julianne in *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997). Decadence is evident in George's character from his upper-class English accent, his high-status job as Julianne's editor, and his seemingly unlimited money and airmiles – he twice flies at short notice to the wedding and then back to work to support Julianne.

However, George, as a gay man, also adds to Julianne's position as an outsider in *My Best Friend's Wedding*. The film positions Kimberly in the guise of traditional femininity and Julianne as a modern woman (see figure 74), with George a further indicator of Julianne's modernity. To highlight this difference, the film's plot reveals that Kimberly is willing to drop out of university in order to marry Michael, which I read as her character's endorsement of traditional female roles. By contrast, Julianne is passionate about her career as a high-powered journalist, only interacts with male friends, and talks in the film about not normally engaging with what she derogatorily refers to as 'love stuff.' Furthermore, Kimberly is getting married in a lavish, four-day wedding (see figure 75), whereas Julianne attends the wedding with the sole intention of breaking it up. As I have been arguing throughout this thesis, the mainstream rom-com is in essence heterosexual marriage propaganda, and I do not think it is incidental that, in this antagonistic juxtaposition of Julianne and Kimberly, George is affiliated with Julianne, who, by her own admission in the film, is the 'bad guy.' To this end, George's gayness – certainly in the 1990s – is a further extension of Julianne's outsiderness to the film's wedding setting. Moreover, since George does not have his own agency – he does not have his own love interest or other narrative goals outside of assisting Julianne – I must conclude that *My Best Friend's Wedding* reproduces gayness as an accessory to exclusion.



Figure 74: In *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), Julianne (Julia Roberts) frequently wears darker colours and sports a more unkempt hairstyle, whereas Kimberly (Cameron Diaz) often wears pastel colours and has neat, tidy hair. I read this as a visual representation of Julianne's rejection of the normative femininity that Kimmy represents.



Figure 75: The wedding at the end of *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) further adds to the sense of wealth and privilege that undergirds the world of the film. In respect to this, George's apparent wealth is congruous, but the wedding, as the ultimate celebration of the structuring of society around normative heterosexuality, marks George as an outsider.

Furthermore, George's hipness is reflected in his fashionable attire (see figure 76). Richard Dyer argues that 'fashion and the other style trades gave [queer men] a space to exercise a skill we have had to be very good at, namely, presentation' (2002, p. 63), and in *My Best Friend's Wedding*, George is shown to be a master of presentation. This is the case not only in his high-end clothing but because he slips in and out of camp presentation and passing as straight, particularly in the masquerade section in which Julianne introduces him to the wedding party as her fiancé (see figure

77). During this sequence, George enacts what Stevens describes as 'the gay friend's performative fluidity [which] often serves as comic relief. Arguably, the comedy lies in seeing a male body acting against normative cultural expectations' (2009, p. 138).



Figure 76: George (Rupert Everett) wears a blazer or dinner jacket in almost every scene in which he appears in *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997). I argue that this reproduces not only the connection between gay men and care in their appearance but also the upper-class world of the film.



Figure 77: George (Rupert Everett) performs queer camp through his animated facial expressions and physicality while nominally pretending to be Julianne's fiancé in *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997).

As established in the opening chapters of this thesis, comedy occurs through incongruity, and in this moment, the viewers' expectation is that George, who is lying

about how he and Julianne met, would not draw extra attention to the lie. However, in the film his attitude is almost one of daring anyone to disbelieve him as he leads an entire restaurant in a rendition of Dionne Warwick's 'I Say a Little Prayer.' Certainly, there is comic relief in this scene, which stems from George's performative fluidity; George switches between overt masculinity, forcefully shaking everyone's hands, to femininity in his singing of a song made famous by a female singer. His camp use of the word 'darling' and the idea that it is a 'sacrilege' not knowing who Dionne Warwick is makes this masquerade sequence one of the funniest sections of the film – precisely because of the unpredictability of George's actions and the tension around Julianne potentially being caught out in an embarrassing lie. Stevens postulates that, in the rom-com, 'the gay friend's talent for acting out non-masculinity leads him to be regarded as spectacle' (2009, p. 138), and Cohen thinks that a defining aspect of the rom-com is that '[i]n romantic comedy, spectacle becomes central' (2010, p. 80). I draw these points together to conclude that George is the star of the film, since through this sequence he becomes the central spectacle. What I add to these earlier theorists' ideas is the notion that we are meant to feel jealous of Julianne because she has such a witty, funny gay friend. In the film Julianne is emotionally cold and manipulative, but our perception of her is thoroughly intertwined with our perception of George. He has dinner with her in the first scene of the film, accompanies her in various scenes throughout the middle of the film, and he dances with her at the wedding in the film's final scene. Thus, George's wit, playfulness, intelligence, and daring – in short, his queer personality – are at the core of Julianne's appeal for the viewer.

While, unlike George, Albert and Armand are positioned in a complex relation to the normative structure of a child-focused family unit, I argue that their contradictory insider/outsider position is elevated by their proximity to characters whose racialised otherness exceeds their own. That is to say, their gay and Jewish otherness from the dominant heterosexual Christian US culture is mitigated by their juxtaposition with their gay Guatemalan housekeeper, Agador (Hank Azaria). Their affluent Jewish alterity is particularly distinguished from Agador's "primitive"

otherness at three comedic moments in the film: in the first, Agador remarks that Armand refuses to put him in the drag show because he is afraid of his 'Guatemalan heat'; later, Barbara's father, Senator Keeley (Gene Hackman), refers to Agador as 'that beige savage'; and finally, when pretending to be their butler, Agador repeatedly trips over his shoes because he claims he is not used to wearing them (see figure 78).

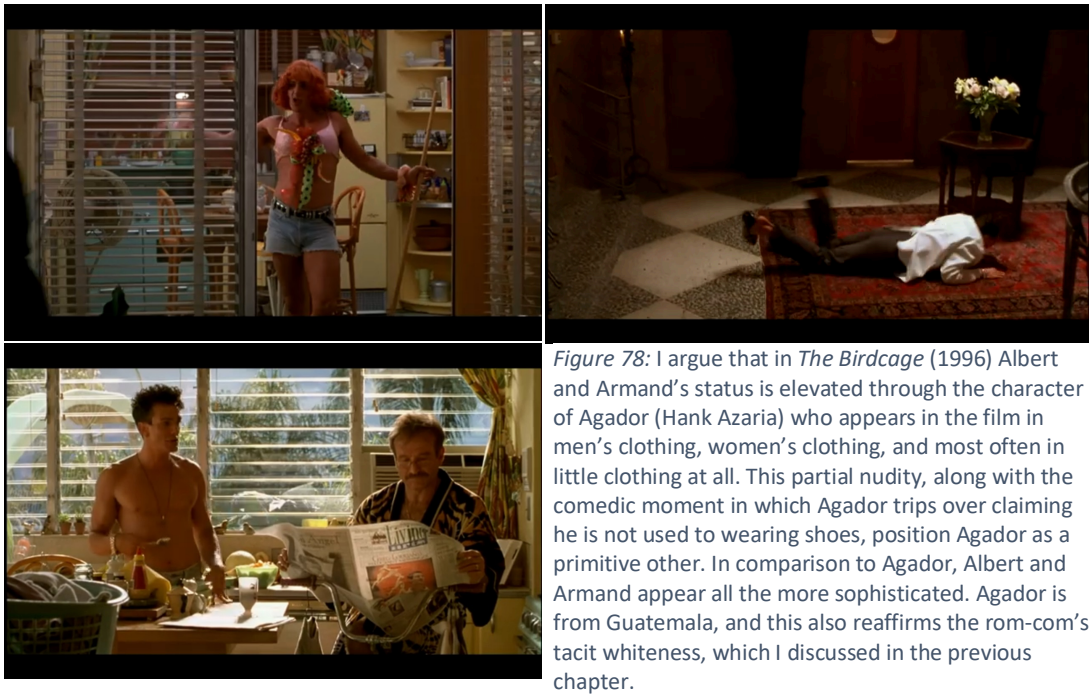


Figure 78: I argue that in *The Birdcage* (1996) Albert and Armand's status is elevated through the character of Agador (Hank Azaria) who appears in the film in men's clothing, women's clothing, and most often in little clothing at all. This partial nudity, along with the comedic moment in which Agador trips over claiming he is not used to wearing shoes, position Agador as a primitive other. In comparison to Agador, Albert and Armand appear all the more sophisticated. Agador is from Guatemala, and this also reaffirms the rom-com's tacit whiteness, which I discussed in the previous chapter.

Additionally, the film also features a second character whose otherness reinforces Albert and Armand's relative privilege: the Black sex worker in whose bed a political colleague of Senator Keeley's is found dead. The identity of this character is revealed through the structure of a joke when Senator Keeley, talking into a phone, asks: 'Whose bed? A prostitute? A minor? A Black?' and then later comments that his colleague 'has just been found dead in the bed of some underage Black whore.' The rule-of-three in which three pieces of information are introduced consecutively – 'A prostitute? A minor? A Black?' – with increasing absurdity hails a liberal, white spectatorship insofar as Senator Keeley's bigotry is the target of the joke. The viewer is encouraged to feel a sense of superiority over the senator due to the cruelty with which he guesses the person's identity. The order of the adjectives suggests that being Black is the worst trait for the person to have in this situation, in the senator's opinion, or is at least the last one the senator guesses. Similar to Agador, another function of

the Black sex worker character in this comedic moment is to legitimise Armand and Albert by comparison. Furthermore, Armand and Albert's affluence is reinforced through Armand's ownership of the nightclub, which allows him to be covertly referred to as variously a 'businessman' or a 'cultural attaché' in different sections of the film, in contrast to the economic precarity of Agador and the sex worker. Finally, their status is reflected in the team of employees – drag queens and club performers – who help to redecorate their house so as to conceal their queerness from the Keeleys.

In contrast to the other films analysed in this chapter, *The Birdcage*'s comedic moments are also marked by a queering of gender labels, particularly those used to describe Albert. Agador frequently calls Albert 'Miss Albert,' Armand refers to Albert as 'my wife,' and at the bakery Albert requests the following message on a cake for Val: 'To my piglet, from his auntie.' Finally, at the end of the film, Val pulls Albert's wig off in front of the Keeleys and refers to Albert as his mother. When dressed in drag in the nightclub at the end of the film – disguised in an attempt to avoid the paparazzi – even Senator Keeley says, 'I don't want to be the only girl not dancing.' It is interesting to note that while Albert is referred to using both male and female language, Armand is only referred to using male language. In this way, the film reproduces a heterosexual marriage by coding Armand as the "husband" and Albert as the "wife" in their relationship. The comedy derived from Albert's effeminacy is also evidenced in a conversation between Val's biological mother, Katie (Christine Baranski), and Armand in which she says, 'I'm not very maternal,' as she opens a bottle of champagne between her legs and it spills over the desk in a clearly phallic act (see figure 79). Armand replies, 'Don't worry about that, I'm very maternal, and Albert's practically a breast.'



Figure 79: In another moment from *The Birdcage* (1996) that is playful with performances of gender, Katie (Christine Baranski) opens a champagne bottle between her legs in a movement that mirrors male masturbation.

This repositioning of Armand and Albert into the roles of husband and wife is further reinforced when Albert is presented as a hysterical character, frequently screaming with both delight and shock; he also takes pills for his nerves, and, as Doane has noted, historically, 'disease and the woman have something in common – they are both socially devalued or undesirable, marginalized elements which constantly threaten to infiltrate and contaminate that which is more central, health or masculinity' (1988, p. 38). Indeed, there are further examples of the idea that Albert functions as the woman in Armand and Albert's quasi-heteronormative relationship, as he is the star drag queen in Armand's club and as such he is a commodity that Armand displays for money. This further resonates with Doane's claim that '[t]he woman's objectification, her susceptibility to processes of fetishization, display, profit and loss, the production of surplus value, all situate her in a relation of resemblance to the commodity form' (p. 22).

In conclusion, George lacks his own dramatic goals or projects in *My Best Friend's Wedding*, he simply aids Julianne in her pursuit of heterosexual coupledom. I thus read George as the stereotypical example of what Danuta Walters describes as

'the incidental queer [who] often serves to unite heterosexual couples, or to provide solace to heterosexuals suffering from the slings and arrows of wayward affections' (2001, p. 155). Not only is he coerced into pretending to be her fiancé for Michael and Kimberly's heterosexual-presenting family and friends, he drives Julianne to the airport, carries her bags, and flies across the USA to rescue her from the social awkwardness of the wedding and her own poor decisions (this occurs not once but twice in the film). Similarly, in *The Birdcage*, Albert and Armand provide comedic relief and serve to assist with the heterosexual relationship between Val and Barbara. The film also reproduces a gender ideology in which the gay men taken most seriously are gay men who "pass" for heterosexual, or who otherwise exhibit more normatively masculine behaviours. The film thereby privileges the more masculine-presenting Armand over the more effeminate Albert through its comedic moments. Where George's camp comedic moments highlight the seriousness of the heterosexual relationships in *My Best Friend's Wedding*, Albert's extreme campness and Senator Keeley's extreme conservatism mark two ends of the social spectrum which validate the young, heterosexual couple in the normative middle ground of *The Birdcage.* In summary, both films may feature gay male characters, but they do not queer the gender expectations of a heterosexual spectator, they simply present gay men as comedically effeminate outsiders.

4.2.3 Gayness and tragedy in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994)

Similarly to *The Birdcage* (1996) and *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) associates the gayness of its two gay characters – Matthew (John Hannah) and Gareth (Simon Callow) – with middle-class affluence. In this way, all three films reproduce the message that '[i]n contemporary debates about urban life, affluent gay populations are often described as part of a "creative class" that enhances the city's cultural life and cultural capital' (Halberstam, 2005, p. 15). For example, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* follows protagonist Charles (Hugh Grant) and his friendship group of white, middle-class friends, of whom Gareth is the most flamboyantly dressed visual symbol of their cultural class status (see figure 80). Indeed, since all of the friends are all at the same weddings, and Charles reveals in conversation that he knows the first wedding's groom from university, it seems likely that they all went to university together. This is a further marker of their middle-class milieu, since the film was produced in the pre-Blair era when university education was more of a marker of class than it is today. Screenwriter Richard Curtis attended the University of Oxford, as did lead actor Hugh Grant, and the characters' accents and the opulence of the weddings further suggest that these may well be Oxbridge graduates. Thus, the class and educational backgrounds of the characters are relevant to the way that homosociality is constructed in this film in several ways: Dyer writes that '[t]he image of queers as upper class and white is seldom utterly secure but nor is it often dislodged from centrality' (2002, p. 6) while Sedgwick describes the literary tradition of depicting 'upper-class male homosocial desire, grouped with dissipation' (2016, p. 176). In summary, in all three of these films, gayness is ideologically connected to affluence, but where the films depart in their representation of gayness is in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*'s more pronounced sense of tragedy, seen not only through Gareth's death but also through Gareth and Matthew's exclusion from the legitimising structure of marriage – at Gareth's funeral Charles remarks that he had never realised that, in a sense, Gareth and Matthew had really been married all along, yet Matthew has to refer to himself as a 'friend' of Gareth's during the service. This mirrors what Kyle Stevens notes of rom-coms of the 1990s that imply that 'gay love is inevitably tragic'

(2009, p. 141), which in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* manifests as: heterosexual couples have weddings, gay couples have funerals.



Figure 80: An assortment of moments from *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) in which Gareth (Simon Callow) is both flamboyantly dressed and associated with unhealthy indulgence through either drinking or smoking.

Incidentally, Gareth is never actually referred to as gay nor do he and Matthew kiss or perform any other act of specifically homosexual intimacy. The first time they appear on screen, Matthew wipes shaving foam from Gareth's cheek as Gareth cooks breakfast and then playfully touches Gareth on the nose (see figure 81), but this is the most physically affectionate moment of gay love in the whole film. Indeed, through Matthew's eulogy at Gareth's funeral, much more screen time is given to the tragic mourning of their love than to any joyful displays of affection between them when Gareth is alive. This ideological message that heterosexuals have weddings while homosexuals have funerals reflects the film's historical context during the AIDS crisis, which, alongside the absence of gay marriage in the 1990s, leads Stevens to suggest that '[o]ne way of reading the existence of gay characters in marital narratives is to […] remind the heterosexual protagonists (and presumably, the spectator) to embrace their capacity to marry because not everyone can' (2009, p. 142). I extend this argument further to suggest that the absence of physical intimacy between Gareth and Matthew reinforces the message that the heterosexual viewer should embrace the experience of rom-com recognition. Or rather, while there are gay characters in some

mainstream ’90s rom-coms, these examples barely touch upon gay joy and pleasure, and so the only form of gay representation is tragic. By comparison, the plethora of heterosexual-presenting characters offer a variety of points of identification for the heterosexual viewer and reinscribe the myth of heterosexuality as normalcy.[87]



Figure 81: A tender moment of care in the opening moments of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) in which Matthew (John Hannah) wipes shaving foam from the cheek of Gareth (Simon Callow) before affectionately flicking him on the nose.

While *Four Weddings and a Funeral* does not depict overt physical intimacy between the gay characters, the film does not avoid sex altogether. There are two sex scenes – one featuring Charles and Carrie (Andie McDowell) in which both characters are semi-naked, and one featuring Bernard (David Haig) and Lydia (Sophie Thompson) in a side room at their wedding reception in which they grunt and thrust whilst, unbeknown to them, Charles awkwardly tries to slip out of the room. There is also a third scene where Carrie invites Charles for a nightcap and the film cuts to them in bed together the following morning. So, while the film does not group homosexuality with dissipation in terms of carnal pleasure, there is an indulgence to Gareth’s character,

[87] Indeed, my reading aligns with Halberstam’s assertion that ‘while gay or lesbian characters may appear within heterosexual romances as putative alternatives to the seemingly inevitable progression within adulthood from adolescence to romance to marriage to reproduction to death, the queer characters […] will function only to confirm the rightness of heterosexual object choice’ (2005, pp. 84–85).

and he is seen drinking or smoking in almost every scene in which he appears (see again figure 80). This connection between gayness and decadence is completed when at the third wedding, shortly before he dies, Gareth puts on a Scottish accent and tells an American guest that he does not know Oscar Wilde personally but he can get his fax number. Aside from the British snobbery evident in this comedic moment, which depicts an American believing that Oscar Wilde, who died in 1900, was contactable by fax machine in 1994, the connection between Oscar Wilde and Gareth connotes the former's wit, comparative sophistication, and sexuality in this moment.

In contrast to the heterosexual sex scenes discussed above, the only mention of gay sex – aside from the repeated use of the word 'bugger,' which is regularly uttered in the film as an expletive devoid of the meaning of actual buggery – is when George (Rupert Vansittart) reminisces that when he was at school an older boy 'buggered [him] senseless, [but] still, [it] taught [him] a thing or two about life.' In this way, the film reproduces what Sedgwick refers to as the historical middle-class gentleman's view of erotic homosexual desire as a thing of 'childishness' (2016, p. 177) due to the normalising of homosexual behaviour within private boys-only schools. Further to the idea of heteronormative time, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* presents the ordering of successful middle- to upper-class British and American life as extending from immaturity to adulthood, according to the sequence: school, university, weddings, and finally monogamous coupledom.[88] Most of the film's monogamous couples are then realised as heterosexual marriages, but two core relationships exist at the end of the film outside of heterosexual marriage. The first is Matthew and his new partner, seen only in photographs in the final shots of the film (see figure 82). The second is Charles and Carrie, who agree not to marry and to remain 'not being married' for the rest of their lives, following which they are shown in photographs with a toddler at the film's close. I therefore challenge Stevens's assertion that the film 'refuses to pose [Gareth and Matthew] as a living relationship for other (straight) characters to aspire to at the

[88] If, as Halberstam suggests, '[q]ueer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death' (2005, p. 2), then *Four Weddings and a Funeral* does not reproduce a sense of queer time.

film's end' (2009, p. 141) because Matthew is posed as being in a living relationship at the end of the film, but simply not with Gareth. However, crucially, we do not know anything about the new man in the photographs with Matthew, which makes it difficult to aspire to their relationship in the same way as to the relationships between characters who have both received a lot of screen time during the film.



Figure 82: The final shots of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) depict all of the characters from the film in a series of still images either in the same relationships they were in during the bulk of the film or with their new partners. Matthew (John Hannah) appears with an unknown man.

Moreover, the heterosexual characters in the film have the choice of whether to marry or not. For the gay characters, there is no choice. For the heterosexual viewer, there is a choice of heterosexual characters and relationships in relation to which they might recognise themselves. For the homosexual viewer, there is only Gareth and Matthew's tragic relationship, since we are not given enough detail about the man with Matthew in the final images. Stevens notes that while *Four Weddings and a Funeral* 'might appear progressive for valorising the love between [Matthew and Gareth], it is careful too to render it an abstract or nostalgic ideal through having Gareth die' (2009, p. 141), and it is exactly the abstraction, the vagueness of Matthew and the mystery final man that I think is worth discussing here. The final man, like Gareth, exists in a liminal space, easily idealised but always as the outsider. This contrasts with the sheer volume of heterosexual love expressed on screen, thus implying that heterosexual love exists in a more tangible, relatable, specific manner, contrary to the film's apparent adjacency to queer love.

Four Weddings and a Funeral, then, engages with issues around homosexuality in terms of its association between gayness and decadent affluence, its comedic moments that focus on gay experiences as part of heterosexual adolescent development, and the exclusion of gay men from the institution of marriage. Writing about the formation of his identity as a gay man, Dyer articulates the idea that there is a 'peculiar mixture of pain and beauty that [he] took to be the "condition" of homosexuality' (2002, p. 21), and this combination of pain and beauty is the essential message of *Four Weddings and a Funeral,* which reinscribes heterosexuality as the rom-com's norm.[89] While *Four Weddings and a Funeral* might feature gay characters, it offers limited, out-of-reach, tragic queer potentiality.

[89] This is to say that *Four Weddings and a Funeral* is an example of what Halberstam asserts when they write that '[e]ntertainment, in many ways, is the name we give to the fantasies of difference that erupt on the screen only to give way to the reproduction of sameness. In other words, as much as viewers want to believe in alternatives, the mainstream film assumes that they also want to believe that the choices they have made and the realities within which they function offer the best possible options' (2005, p. 84).

4.3 How Rom-Coms Have Represented Queerness since 2015

In the introduction to her book *After "Happily Ever After"*, Maria San Filippo states that, post 2014, 'romcom isn't dead – it's different. It's indie, it's queer' (2021b, p. 3). In this section I interrogate this claim in relation to the romantic comedy films *Love, Simon* (2018), *Happiest Season* (2020), *Single All the Way* (2021), *Bros* (2022), and *Anything's Possible* (2022). Certainly, these films provide evidence that since the 2010s there has been a huge increase in gay, lesbian, and trans rom-com characters in both supporting roles and, increasingly, as protagonists. However, I argue that these films also continue to reproduce the connections between LGBT characters and feelings of fear and otherness – that being gay, lesbian, or trans is often *the* major obstacle that protagonists must overcome or which threatens their rom-com happy ending.

The following section expounds two of the major themes of rom-coms since the mid-2010s with regards to queerness. The first is the ongoing connection between gayness and negative emotions, most often realised as a fear of being outed, which features as a major plot-point in *Love, Simon* (2018) and *Happiest Season* (2020), where the protagonists spend the majority of the film hiding their sexualities from other characters, and more briefly in *Anything's Possible* (2022), where the trans protagonist's love interest hides his attraction to her from his friends and family. This appears hand-in-hand with the second major theme: the ongoing absence of happy representations of queer couples. Much like rom-coms featuring interracial relationships that focus on race as an obstacle for the protagonists to overcome, there are very few LGBT rom-coms in which the central obstacle that the protagonists face is not their own queerness, of which *Single All the Way* (2021) is a rare example.

A further point worth making is that all of these films depict young LGBT+ characters being supported by their suburban heterosexual families but also thereby position the heterosexual family as the only space in which young LGBT+ people can grow up happy. In this way these films make LGBT romance safe and palatable for a mainstream spectator by positioning it within a world of affluent, heterosexual, suburban affluence. While, for reasons I go into later in this section, *Anything's*

Possible is the "queerest" of these films following Halberstam's writing on queerness, overall I argue that these films reproduce social and gender relations that reaffirm gender normativity and thus can once again be described using Duggan's (2004) understanding of "homonormativity." In short, in *Love, Simon* (2018), *Happiest Season* (2020), *Single All the Way* (2021), and *Bros* (2022), the mainstream rom-com is gay but not queer. In *Anything's Possible* (2022), the rom-com is finally queer but – perhaps – no longer mainstream.

4.3.1 Homonormativity in *Love, Simon* (2018), *Happiest Season* (2020), and *Single All the Way* (2021)

Love, Simon (2018), *Happiest Season* (2020), and *Single All the Way* (2021) are prime examples of why San Filippo (2021b, p. 3) claims that the rom-com is now queer in that they all feature either gay or lesbian characters in lead roles. They are also different from the earlier films in this chapter because they each feature distinctly queer themes such as coming out and relationships between lesbian or gay people and their heterosexual family members. However, these films exorcise queerness from gayness by linking the heteronormative institution of the affluent, suburban family with success for gay and lesbian characters. As I show in this section, the narratives in *Love, Simon*, *Happiest Season*, and *Single All the Way* are inextricably linked to domesticity, consumption, and a fear of exclusion from heterosexual productive time. In other words, these films reproduce Lisa Duggan's concept of homonormativity: 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption' (2004, p. 50).

Love, Simon and *Happiest Season* sustain heteronormative assumptions in that they are films specifically about coming out and the need to conceal one's sexuality, which reproduces Dyer's assertion that, historically at least, a core 'feature of being a queer [is] that it is a bad thing' (2002, p. 6), something to be hidden or denied for fear of negative repercussions. Consequently, I consider both films less as romantic comedies concerned with the romantic relationships that the protagonists pursue and more as coming-out movies in which the characters' aims are to conceal their sexual identities from their families for the majority of both films. Indeed, the entire premise of *Love, Simon* (2018) revolves around an American high school student, Simon (Nick Robinson), who begins a secret email relationship with another boy at his school using pseudonyms, as neither are ready to come out publicly. Similarly, in *Happiest Season* (2020), Harper (Mackenzie Davis) invites her girlfriend, Abby (Kristen Stewart), to spend Christmas with Harper's family, but, just before they arrive, Harper reveals that

her family do not know that she is a lesbian and persuades Abby to pretend to be her heterosexual roommate for the holidays. As such, both films reproduce the connection between being gay and a fear of being outed, tacitly reproducing heteronormativity as the social norm. More than this, both films also feature moments in which the protagonists are finally outed by heterosexual-presenting characters, thus denying Simon and Harper their own narrative agency. Simon is blackmailed and eventually outed by his classmate, Martin (Logan Miller), while Harper is outed to her parents by her sister Sloane (Alison Brie) following an argument. When Simon tells his sister that he is gay, her first suggestion is that he denies it; similarly, when she comes out to her family, Harper tells them that she was 'so scared that you would find out that I wasn't who you wanted me to be.' As such, none of these moments are presented comedically in the films, which sustains the idea that there is a seriousness and a credible threat associated with coming out.

In contrast, *Single All the Way* explores the story of two gay best friends, Peter (Michael Urie) and Nick (Philemon Chambers), who spend the festive period with Peter's family and, urged on by the family, become a couple at the end of the film. Neither character comes out to anyone, and, while Peter suggests that they pretend to be a couple so that his parents will stop asking when he is going to settle down, Nick swiftly rejects the idea. Instead, there are numerous comedic moments in which Peter's family embrace his sexuality and queer culture, such as when, as Nick and Peter arrive at the family home for Christmas, Peter's mother (Kathy Najimy) greets them with a sign that reads 'SLEIGH Queen' (see figure 83) or when Aunt Sandy (Jennifer Coolidge) asks if Peter's date is from Grindr. Jennifer Coolidge and Kathy Najimy have both been described as 'gay icon[s]' (Baska, 2021), and in one scene Sandy says, 'the gays are obsessed with me. I don't know why, but I love it.' Journalist Maggie Baska posits that Coolidge's status as a gay icon stems from her campness and her partnering with several LGBTQ+ organisations over the course of her career, similar to Najimy. Certainly, there is a campness and a spectacle to *Single All the Way*, from the opening scene's photoshoot with several semi-naked male models through to the over-the-top Christmas decorations at the family house and the spectacle of the

Christmas pageant (see figure 84). In short, as film reviewer Benjamin Lee notes in his review of the film for *The Guardian*, *Single All the Way* is a 'formulaic festive movie [which] is more of the same but with an LGBT twist' (Lee, 2021). The formula here also includes following an affluent white protagonist who wishes to settle down into family life with a monogamous partner and a protagonist of colour whose goal is assimilation into white culture. In other words, the gay characters are depoliticised and absorbed into the normative institution of the suburban family as revealed in the analysis from this thesis's earlier chapters.



Figure 83: In *Single All the Way* (2021), Peter's mother (Kathy Najimy) welcomes her gay son and his gay friend to her house for Christmas with a sign that reads 'SLEIGH Queen.' "Slay" is a term 'from Black queer communities, a term that means to perform one's task flawlessly' (Bey, 2017, p. 173), and through popular culture such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009–present), the phrase "slay, queen" has entered common parlance, so much so that an affluent, white, suburban mother puns on the term in this film. For this moment to work comedically "slay, queen" must be mainstream enough as to be intelligible for a Netflix viewer but not so mainstream for it to be expected that an affluent, suburban mother would know to pun on this term. I therefore conclude that this comedic moment reveals something about the state of homonormativity in Western culture in 2021.





Figure 84: I argue that, like a number of the films discussed in this chapter, *Single All the Way* (2021) glories in camp and spectacle, such as in the opening credits when Peter (Michael Urie) organises a photoshoot with several male models dressed as topless Santa Clauses or in the community nativity that the family help to organise.

In 2009, Kyle Stevens wrote that '[g]ay characters now frequently fulfil this role traditionally reserved for straight males: that of educator and moral centre' (p. 140). However, over a decade later, in *Single All the Way*, Peter's mother and father advise him on how to pursue homosexual relationships, positioning them as the educators and moral centres of the film; Peter's mother even reveals that she is reading a book on parenting LGBT children to help her to guide Peter. By contrast, *Happiest Season* reproduces the figure of the isolated gay man as mentor in the form of Abby's gay best friend, John (Dan Levy). John bears a number of similarities to George in *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997); there are superficial similarities – both work in publishing, John is a literary agent where George was a newspaper editor; both are tall, dark-haired, and conventionally good-looking – as well as narrative similarities where both John and George console and advise the female lead characters, in-person at the start of each film, over the phone in the middle of each film, then at the end of each film both John and George make surprise trips to the location of the female protagonist. However, my analysis of their similarities focuses on how both of these films reproduce the idea that 'the gay friend's performative fluidity often serves as comic relief' (Stevens, 2009, p. 138), since John and George are both convinced to pretend to be heterosexual romantic interests for their female friends. Both characters perform an outrageous campness while they are supposedly "in character" as heterosexual love interests; where George screams and slaps Kimberly on the bottom, John feels Connor's (Jake McDorman) arms.

One difference between the portrayals of John and George is the overt politics of John, who has some of the wittiest lines of dialogue in the film connected to LGBTQ+ issues. For example, at one point he describes marriage as 'tricking the woman you claim to love by trapping her in a box of heteronormativity and trying to make her your property,' and later, when Abby tells him that she plans to ask Harper's father for his blessing to marry his daughter, John quips, 'way to stick it to the patriarchy! Well done!' However, I argue that this is a continuation of John's role as the kind of 'hip accessory' (Danuta Walters, 2001, pp. 154–155), which, as I mentioned

earlier, was Danuta Walter's assessment of the stereotypical queer characters in the romantic comedies of the 1990s. Nevertheless, just as Doty noted that 'most comic gender and sexuality rule-breaking is ultimately contained or recuperated by traditional narrative closure' (2000, p. 81), *Happiest Season* closes with Abby and Harper's inclusion into Harper's family unit. The film's credits then play alongside images from the family's Instagram posts, which show Harper and Abby's engagement and the whole family attending a Pride parade (see figure 85). In this way, the heteronormative institution of the family is once again reinforced by the film as the dominant ideological structure.

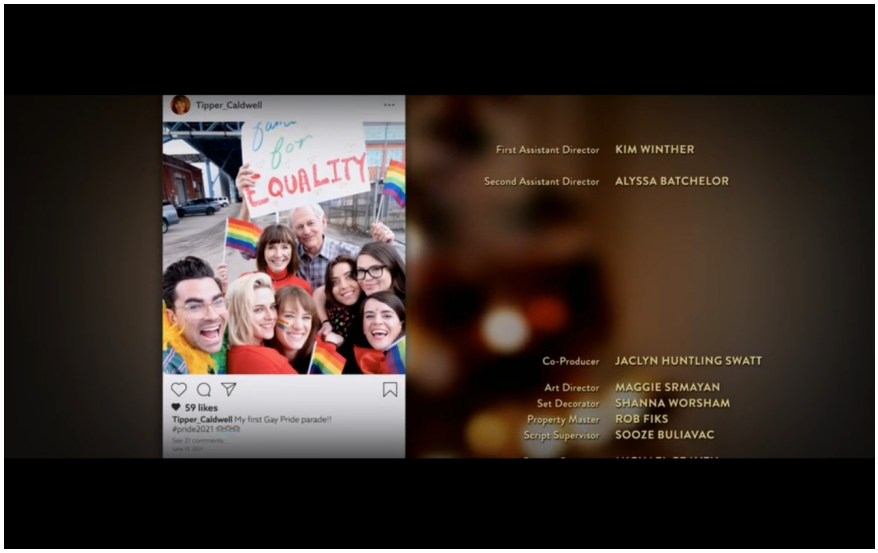


Figure 85: The end of *Happiest Season* (2020) shows the whole family attending a Pride parade together.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, mainstream romantic comedy films tend to centre white, heterosexual, affluent, slim, and able-bodied characters, and where a rom-com subverts one of these elements, the others often remain intact. To this point, all of the gay characters whose families appear in these three films are white, affluent, slim, and able-bodied, and all three films code this as "normal." In the opening voiceover to *Love, Simon* (2018), Simon even states, 'I am just like you. For the most part my life is totally normal,' and yet the visual images that accompany this are a large suburban house and a new car with a ribbon tied around it, the latter of which Simon's parents have bought for him (see figure 86). As such, the film signals that the normality to which Simon refers is affluent, suburban, middle-class normality. This is reaffirmed when Simon lists the activities that he and his friends indulge in: they 'drink

way too much iced coffee, watch bad nineties movies, and hang out at the waffle house, dreaming of college and gorging on carbs.' The consumption mentioned in this opening monologue is later enacted on screen when he and his friends drive in Simon's car to pick up iced coffee from a drive-thru. Later, Simon goes to the same drive-thru alone and buys a single iced coffee to show his loneliness, and at the end of the film the whole friendship group, now including his love interest Bram (Keiynan Lonsdale), get five iced coffees from this same drive-thru (see figure 87). Thus, while their interpersonal relationships might change, the ideological mandate for consumerism remains the same.



Figure 86: Love, Simon (2018) opens with this shot of a large suburban house and a car with a ribbon tied to it, which Simon (Nick Robinson) drives to school.







Figure 87: *Love, Simon* (2018) contains three versions of the same shot during the beginning, middle, and end of the narrative. The first one is the coffee order for Simon (Nick Robinson) and his three closest friends, the middle shot show Simon's order after he has fallen out with his friends, and the last shot shows the order for Simon, his three closest friends, and his new boyfriend, Bram, at the end of the film. In this way, I argue that the film reproduces an ideological mandate for consumption.

In this way, the film reflects Rivers's assertion that with regard to representation of women there is 'a desire to promote an unthreatening and consumer-friendly brand of feminism, rather than the social, economic, or political advancement of women' (2017, p. 70). It is clear from the consumerism in *Love, Simon* that the film promotes a consumer-friendly brand of gayness as part of its construction of gender ideology, but I also argue that one reason for the film's unthreatening brand of gayness is its lack of investment in gay characters of colour. Bram is Black and Jewish, but since he is only revealed to be the real person behind Simon's hitherto anonymous email correspondence at the very end of the film, his identity as a queer person of colour is largely unexplored. Ethan (Clark Moore), a gay student of colour at Simon's school, features as a supporting character but is presented more as a representative of stereotypical Wildean wit and high fashion rather than as a character with his own agency or detailed backstory (see figure 88). For example, when a bully says, 'cool scarf, Ethan… hope it doesn't get caught in your vagina,' Ethan retorts, 'Great choice on the cargo pants, by the way, looks like you got gangbanged by a TJ Maxx.' Rather than challenging the homophobic link between homosexuality and femininity implicit within the insult, Ethan engages in snobbishness and wit, two further gay stereotypes in this comedic moment. The film also sustains the position of the institution of the white family through Simon's family's relative acceptance of him in comparison to Ethan's. Ethan confides to Simon that his mother tells his grandparents that he has girlfriends because his mother says that 'they are old and religious, […] but you should hear her voice when she talks about the girls.' The film thus subtly reproduces the idea that successful gay men are those who can hide or mask their sexuality, as Simon does for much of the film, and who anyway are embraced by their clumsy but socially liberal (white) family, whereas Ethan, who cannot or will not pass, is associated with social exclusion from both his classmates and his (presumably non-white) judgmental family.



Figure 88: I read the character of Ethan (Clark Moore) as presenting as more stereotypically gay than Simon due to his long flowing hair and preppy clothes, which mirror the kind of careful self-fashioning of the gay characters in the earlier films discussed in this chapter.

As with Ethan in *Love, Simon*, *Single All the Way* does not touch upon differences of lived experience between Nick, as a gay man of colour, and Peter, as a white gay man, on any meaningful level. The film depicts Peter as an affluent professional working in advertising, and his family home in New Hampshire connotes an affluent upbringing, whereas Nick works as a freelance labourer via the TaskRabbit app to supplement his income as a children's book writer. This marks the film as existing in a post-austerity gig economy where the rich increasingly outsource tasks to the poor via apps and under a neoliberal ideology where people are encouraged to pursue side hustles to increase their economic productivity. However, in the context of the film, the difference in Nick's and Peter's wealth is not an issue for their relationship. Instead, Nick uses his tasker skills to put up the external Christmas lights at Peter's family home, and he helps to build sets for the local children's Christmas pageant. Thus, rather than engaging with the complexities of social or economic inequality, the film trivialises them. Once again, this romantic comedy reproduces the neoliberal viewpoint – as articulated by Rottenberg, who posits that neoliberalism is a 'normative form of reason that moves to and from the management of the state to the

inner workings of the subject, recasting individuals as capital-enhancing agents' (2018, p. 7) – while leaving relative privilege unacknowledged.

Instead, regardless of race, the lives of all of the gay and lesbian characters in these films are enhanced by their proximity to suburban domesticity. As such, I argue that in contrast to the earlier social narrative in which 'small towns were considered hostile to queers and urban areas were cast as the queer's natural environment' (Halberstam, 2005, p. 15), these films embrace the affluent suburbs as a location in which homonormativity thrives. For example, in *Love, Simon* there are several comedic moments involving Simon and his father, Jack (Josh Duhamel), that reproduce the notion that heterosexuality is the dominant norm and homosexuality is a subversion of that norm. For example, when Simon tries to come out to his family by telling them that he has something important to say to them, his father quips in response, 'Let me guess – you got someone pregnant?' This echoes an earlier scene in the film, equally dismissive of Simon's sexuality, when his father jokes that his son is searching the internet for 'lingerie photos of Gigi Habib.' Such comedic moments both reinscribe heterosexuality as the presumed norm for teenage boys while also marking the father as out of touch with modern celebrity culture and as someone who is out of touch with names that are not of European origin, as he gets Gigi Hadid's name wrong. In *Love, Simon*, older people who are in positions of authority are white and heterosexual, whereas young people, essentially Simon's friends, are queer and/or non-white. Even Simon's mother, Emily (Jennifer Garner), who is more tolerant of him, is portrayed as lacking in political sophistication, as she makes a sign for a protest that reads 'Down with the patriachy' – a spelling mistake that Simon later corrects (see figure 89). As such, the film uses comedic moments to reproduce the idea that younger feminists, or Gen-Z in general, are more politically active and aware of minoritarian issues than older generations. This is also the case when the school's vice principal, Mr Worth (Tony Hale), wears a Pride badge after Simon is outed while labouring the point that when he said earlier in the film that he and Simon were similar he did not mean in terms of sexuality. As such, the suburban authority figures of the parents and the high

school's vice principal are made into symbols of acceptance while also reinforcing the distance between Simon's homosexuality and their heterosexuality.



Figure 89: In *Love, Simon* (2018), Simon corrects a spelling mistake on a sign that his mother (Jennifer Garner) has made, which further indicates that he is more socially aware than the members of the older generation.

Finally, the family as the dominant institution at the heart of the rom-com gender ideology is further reinforced by the way that the gay and lesbian characters are embraced by the generations of their families. Whether that is the clunky interactions between Simon and his parents in *Love, Simon*, the Instagram posts at the end of *Happiest Season* (see figures 85 and 90), or the way that Peter's father, Harold (Barry Bostwick), tells Nick that he 'always thought that you and Peter should be together' in *Single All the Way*. The positioning of these queer characters in supportive family environments challenges what Moddelmog notes as the Christian Right's 'theory of "development," in which environment, especially deficient parenting, plays a key role in the instantiation and cultivation of homosexual desire' (2009, p. 168). By juxtaposing proficient parenting with gay and lesbian offspring, these films naturalise and normalise homosexuality for their audience. However, it must be stressed that by reappropriating this argument, these films reiterate the importance of family support for LGBTQ+ people, reasserting the dominant position of the wealthy suburban family structure. As Ahmed notes, '[t]o be middle of upper class is to have more resources to

fall back on when you fall' (2017, p. 219), and the ideological message of these love stories is that LGBT folk can exist only when protected by the resources of a middle- or upper-class family.

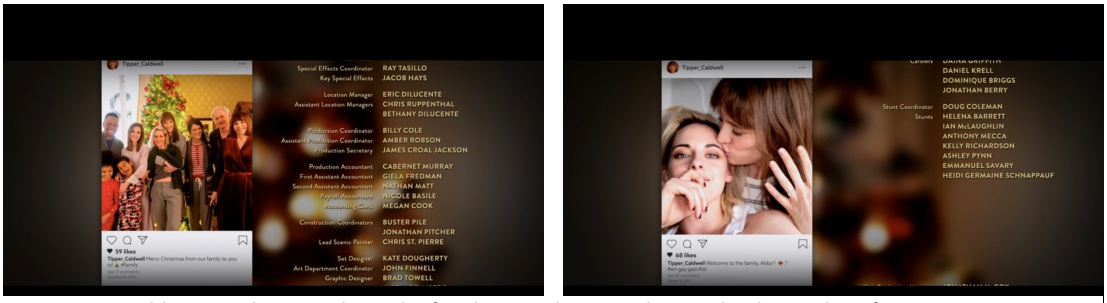


Figure 90: In addition to the post about the family attending a Pride parade, the credits of *Happiest Season* (2020) are also accompanied by Instagram posts that celebrate Abby (Kristen Stewart) and Harper (Mackenzie Davis). One image has them hugging at the centre of a family photo, and the other shows Abby waving an engagement ring at the camera. The Instagram feed is meant to be that of Harper's mother (Mary Steenburgen), and so I argue that these images represent the idea that the affluent, white, suburban family is a hegemonic structure that can absorb minoritarian experiences.

In conclusion, my analysis of these three films supports Moddelmog's conclusion that 'adding gay characters to romantic comedy has not disrupted the conservatism of the genre' (2009, p. 171). These films – although far more open to representations of gay and lesbian coupledom – share an ideological and structural affinity with the other films in the chapter: they may have gay characters, but they're certainly not queer, and gayness is essentially a construct of a heteronormative gaze in these films. Muñoz writes that '[t]o see queernesss as horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describe as straight time is interrupted or stepped out of' (2009, p. 32). By rejecting the horizon, *Love, Simon*, *Happiest Season*, and *Single All the Way* provide gay and lesbian representation through their embrace of the temporal stranglehold of straight time.

4.3.2 Queer socio-political rom-com satire in *Anything's Possible* (2022) and *Bros* (2022)

In this section, I argue that two recent romantic comedies, *Anything's Possible* (2022) and *Bros* (2022), are the queerest of the mainstream rom-coms analysed in this chapter because they reflect contemporary political discourses and a younger audience's perspective by imagining the potentiality for queer relationships outside the normative structuring of productive time (Halberstam, 2005). Thus, *Anything's Possible* and *Bros* depict not only trans and gay characters in romantic relationships but queer relationships insofar as their protagonists exist outside of this understanding of productive time, at least initially. At the end of *Bros*, the two men, Bobby (Billy Eichner) and Aaron (Luke Macfarlane), do not commit to each other forever; instead, at the end of the film, Bobby gets down on one knee in front of a museum full of onlookers to ask Aaron, 'will you date me for three months and then we will reassess?' to which Aaron says yes. Similarly, at the end of *Anything's Possible*, the protagonists, cisgender male high-school student Khal (Abubakr Ali) and trans female high-school student Kelsa (Eva Reign), decide to break up because Kelsa is leaving Pittsburgh to go to college elsewhere but Khal is staying. As such, neither film reproduces a narrative of longevity, typical of the rom-com. This rejection of stability at their narrative conclusions is one of the reasons that I categorise these as not just gay and trans but queer romantic comedies. However, they are not mainstream. Muñoz writes that '[q]ueerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world' (2009, p. 1). Kelsa and Khal's relationship in Pittsburgh is the here and now for them, and a marriage proposal would lock Bobby and Aaron into a future that is a continuation of their here and now; the rejection of both of these paths marks these films as not only gay and trans, but as queer. As I show in this section, these are films that push the mainstream rom-com structure to, or indeed past, its breaking point.

Another aspect of *Anything's Possible* that marks this film apart from the other romantic comedies discussed in this chapter is its relative lack of comedic moments. *Anything's Possible* (2022) tells the story of Kelsa, an American trans girl in her final year of high school in Pittsburgh, and her relationship with her cisgender male

classmate, Khal (see figure 91). The narrative has a number of classic rom-com elements that are coded comedically in other films in this chapter. For example, *The Birdcage* (1996) features a family who are at times confused by their child's choice of romantic partner, just as Khal's family at times do not understand Khal's relationship with Kelsa; in both films there is an incongruity between the parents' vision of their child's romantic partner and their actual choice. Similarly, in *Anything's Possible* Kelsa, a girl, is banned from using the girls' changing rooms at school, and in *Happiest Season* (2020) Abby and Harper, a couple, are not allowed to share a bed even though the other couples in the household do (see figure 92); in both of these films there is an incongruity whereby a person is not permitted to occupy a space that should normally be theirs. However, in contrast to the numerous instances such as this one from *Happiest Season* in which lesbian and gay characters mask their sexualities in comedic moments, Kelsa's exclusion is depicted with little or no comedic levity. *Anything's Possible* explores a number of issues related to the contemporary trans experience, such as when Kelsa is banned from using the female changing rooms after another pupil, Em (Courtnee Carter), accuses her of assault, or when in another argument Em tells Kelsa that 'Khal is only dating you for the woke points' in a serious manner. Noël Carroll summarises one version of the incongruity theory of comedy as follows:

> someone is comically amused if and only if (i) the object of their mental state is a perceived incongruity, which (ii) they regard as neither threatening or anxiety producing nor (iii) annoying and which (iv) they do not approach with a genuine, puzzle-solving attitude, but which, rather, (v) they enjoy precisely for their perception of its incongruity. (2014, p. 37)

I therefore conclude that, in *Anything's Possible*, the moments that focus on Kelsa's trans identity are not coded for comedy because there is something preventing these moments from being received in comedic terms. For example, regarding Kelsa being banned from using the female changing rooms, this is only congruous (i) if Kelsa is not a girl, which in the film she clearly is. I think it more likely these moments are not coded for comedy due to their connection to serious, threatening issues (ii) that

contribute to the 'higher prevalence of anxiety symptoms or disorders in the transgender population compared to cis people' (Millet, Longworth, and Arcelus, 2016, p. 10). Another possibility is that the film viewer is expected to approach these moments with a genuine puzzle-solving attitude (iv) – as Muslim family dinners and trans exclusionary policies are less common elements of the rom-com genre, the viewer is not expected to have a baseline assumption for this scenario, and so they must solve the puzzle of what the incongruity is in this situation. Finally, due to the complexity of issues surrounding intergenerational relationships between first- and second-generation Muslim Americans, and issues around gendered public spaces, it is possible that a viewer cannot be expected to enjoy these moments purely for their incongruity (v). Of course, it is conceivable that individual viewers could find these scenes unfunny for each of the reasons stated above, but since my thesis concerns the film as artefact and not reception theory, the point remains that, in the film, trans issues are not presented comedically.



Figure 91: Anything's Possible (2022) is a teen high-school rom-com that follows the relationship between cisgender boy Khal (Abubakr Ali) and trans girl Kelsa (Eva Reign). As Khal is taller and broader than Kelsa, the film reproduces the sense that women desire taller, powerful men and men desire petite women - an idea that I interrogate further in the next chapter on body difference.



Figure 92: Much like the older films *The Birdcage* (1996) and *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *Happiest Season* (2020) contains comedic moments that centre upon the queer characters masking their sexuality, as in this scene where Harper (Mackenzie Davis) literally hides herself behind a bedroom door so that her mother will not find her in Abby's (Kristen Stewart) bedroom.

However, *Anything's Possible* features comedic moments in which Khal and Kelsa mock heterosexual characters' reactions to them, such as when Khal's parents search his internet history and ask him if he is trans and he informs them that he isn't but his girlfriend is. There is a beat and then a comedic moment when Khal's father sighs in relief and says, 'I told you, he's just gay.' In this moment, the object of the joke is Khal's father's ignorance, and I argue that this example of comedy that punches up reaffirms that Khal's father's ignorance is the dominant hegemonic position. In short, I conclude from reading these comedic moments that, in 2022, the viewer was expected to feel comfortable laughing at someone conflating gay with trans, but the viewer was not expected to find trans exclusionary bathroom policies comedic, which also suggests that the viewer these films interpellated was not a mainstream one.

In contrast, *Bros* (2022), which charts a relationship between two adult gay men living in New York, Bobby (Billy Eichner) and Aaron (Luke Macfarlane), features a larger number of comedic moments. *Bros*' comedic moments speak to and satirise aspects of queer culture in the twenty-first century. For example, a recurrent source of comedy in *Bros* is the competition between colleagues at Bobby's place of work, a

museum of queer history, such as when they fight about what to put in the new exhibition they are installing: Cherry (Dot-Marie Jones) argues for more coverage of lesbian history, Robert (Jim Rash) promotes bi history, and Bobby suggests an exhibition on Abraham Lincoln's supposed homosexuality. This comedic dispute speaks to the idea, noted by Halberstam, that

> [i]n mainstream gay, lesbian, and trans communities in the United States, battles rage about what group occupies the more transgressive or aggrieved position, and only rarely are such debates framed in terms of larger discussions about capitalism, class, or economics. (2005, p. 20)

Indeed, the position Bobby and his colleagues are in is that they do not have enough funding to open their museum, and the solution is a donation from an eccentric benefactor, Lawrence Grape (Bowen Yang), who insists that the museum should include a ride and holograms. While this is clearly a comment on the pervasive power of individual wealth in the USA, as Lawrence's ideas are executed, it also reproduces the idea of combative individual identity politics within LGBTQ+ communities. As such, the film speaks to LGBTQ+ issues but solves the problem of the underfunding of LGBTQ+ projects under capitalism with the solution of a capitalist benefactor. While one could consider how through the character of Lawrence the film offers a purposeful critique of capitalism, I suggest that this is ambiguous.

Rivers notes that trans women are 'rendered invisible by a feminist response that focuses on biological constructions of womanhood' (2017, p. 147). With this in mind, a notable feature of *Anything's Possible* is the association between Kelsa and the natural world. Kelsa applies to study zoology at college, and she bonds with Khal when Khal makes Kelsa laugh by narrating their classmates flirting as if they were in a nature documentary. The last question Khal asks is what Kelsa's favourite animal is, and in the moment she says that she does not know, but in a later scene Kelsa makes a video explaining that her favourite animal is the marsh harrier because some males change their feathers to resemble females. She says to herself, 'look at that beautiful, talented

trans girl' (see figure 93). This line is positioned at the end of the film and so acts as a kind of conclusion to the story. This connection between the natural world and the trans experience is striking because it challenges the common use of biological justifications for transphobia.[90] Hall, in talking about the ideology of racism, contends that '[i]deologies tend to disappear from view into the taken-for-granted "naturalized" world of common sense' (2021b, p. 101). Thus, in the climax of *Anything's Possible*, the film attempts to counter the transphobic ideological manipulation of nature with an alternative ideological manipulation of nature, rather than dismantling the taken-for-granted naturalised world of common sense. Hall goes on to say that '[i]deologies therefore work by the transformation of discourses (the disarticulation and rearticulation of ideological elements) and the transformation (the fracturing and recomposition) of subjects-for-action' (p. 101), and I argue that in this moment the film takes the notion that if human behaviour can be "observed" in the natural world then it is legitimised, rearticulating this myth to prepare the film spectator as a subject-for-action. In short, the film appropriates aspects of the biology-as-truth argument from socially conservative ideology and repurposes this logic to legitimise trans identities.

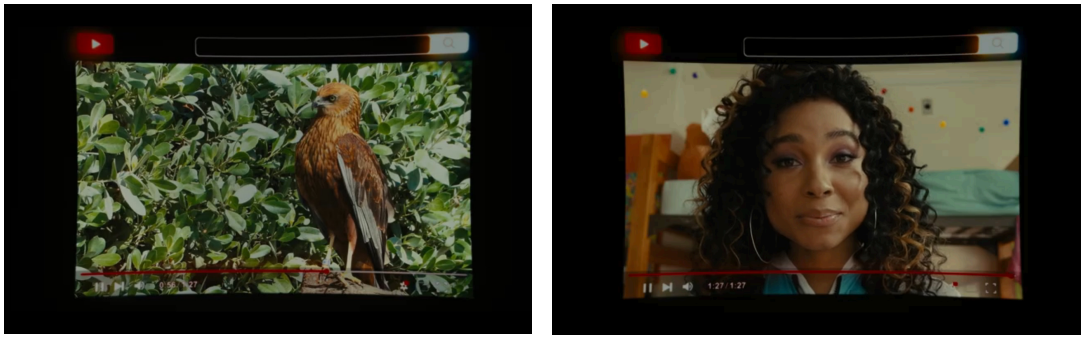


Figure 93: At the end of *Anything's Possible* (2022), Kelsa (Eva Reign) posts a video in which she tells the viewer that her favourite animal is a marsh harrier, which she describes as a naturally occurring 'beautiful […] trans girl.'

Where *Anything's Possible* focuses on adolescent queer characters, *Bros* touches upon what Halberstam describes as 'the stretched-out adolescence of queer culture makers that disrupt conventional accounts of subculture, youth culture,

[90] For example, in Germaine Greer's argument that, due to the increased visibility of trans identities, '[r]eal women are being phased out' (2000, p. 3), she ideologically uses the term "real" as a synonym for cisgender, implying that only cisgender women are "real" women.

adulthood, and maturity' (2005, p. 153). In the film, Bobby and Aaron perform a stretched-out adolescence in that their relationship involves both verbal play and also physical play, such as their playfighting in one scene in the park, which leads to them kissing (see figure 94). These two characters both hold down high-status jobs, as a lawyer and as the head of a museum, which marks them as adult. They attend male-only raves and participate in gay orgies, which marks them as part of a queer subculture, but they also both discuss serious social and political issues, such as the casting of heterosexual actors in gay roles in order to win Oscars, where Bobby remarks, 'straight people love seeing us miserable.' In this way, *Bros* disrupts the normative understanding of productive time by blending aspects of adulthood and maturity with moments of play.



Figure 94: One of the comedic moments in *Bros* (2022) involves Bobby (Billy Eichner) and Aaron (Luke Macfarlane) play-fighting in the park, which leads to them kissing. Another group of men come over to break up the fight before realising what they are doing. In her review of homosociality in literature, Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick describes the double bind that 'to be a man's man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being "interested in men"' (2016, p. 89). Historically, this has been a danger for heterosexual men who might be misconstrued as homosexual. However, in this comedic moment, *Bros* inverts this dynamic, as the danger for Aaron and Bobby is that the onlookers misconstrue their flirting as genuine aggression.

Similar to the protagonists in *Bros*, Kelsa is also positioned in a complex relationship to middle-class affluence and normative productive time. While Kelsa is a minor, her mother works as a doctor and the home that she lives in with her mother is a large suburban house, replete with a number of shiny Apple products (see figure 95). However, the film concludes that Kelsa and Khal's queer romantic potential exists outside the scope of productive time. Indeed, it can be argued that the film echoes Muñoz's idea that 'if queerness is to have any value whatsoever, it must be viewed as being visible only in the horizon' (2009, p. 11). As previously mentioned, Kelsa rejects

the here and now of her relationship with Khal in favour of the potentiality for another life by attending college; a life which adheres to the middle- to upper-class trajectory mentioned earlier in this chapter, but which lacks the concrete specificity of her relationship with Khal and thus represents an abstract potentiality.



Figure 95: In *Anything's Possible* (2022), the large suburban house that Kelsa (Eva Reign) lives in with her mother reinforces the connection between rom-com and affluent suburban lifestyles. There is a lot of Apple product placement in the film, for example when Kelsa's mother (Renée Elise Goldsberry) confiscates her Mac, which I read as further reinforcing the sense of affluence in the film.

By contrast, *Bros* concludes with a rejection of the here and now because Bobby proposes they stay together for three months and reassess, however this does not alter the fact that the film ends with a proposal, which visually mirrors a proposal of marriage (see figure 96). Furthermore, the film also features a final scene set 'three months later' in which Bobby and Aaron agree that their relationship is 'going pretty well'; Aaron asks Bobby if he wants kids someday, and Bobby says no, so Aaron chases him down the street, trying to convince him. Bobby is the main character in the film – it is his voiceover that opens the film, and the spectator first views Aaron from across the nightclub floor from Bobby's perspective (see figure 97) – and as Bobby physically runs away from Aaron's suggestion that they have children, the film focuses on a queer protagonist who challenges the heteronormative life trajectory that his partner suggests. However, again, the point remains that through the proposal and the mention of children, *Bros* also reproduces the 'aping of traditional straight relationality, especially marriage, [which] for gays and lesbians announces itself as a pragmatic strategy when it is in fact a deeply ideological project' (Muñoz, 2009, p. 21). In conclusion, both of these films raise questions about whether a rom-com that imagines queer relationships that challenge heteronormative social structures is

compatible with the feature-film rom-com format. It is easy to argue, as I have shown here, that *Anything's Possible* does not fit with the other romantic comedies discussed in this chapter, either because of its comparative lack of comedic moments or because of its resolution wherein the characters break up. *Bros* fits more neatly amongst the other romantic comedies discussed in this chapter, but – although it has queer moments and themes – due to the proposal and mention of reproduction in the final scenes, *Bros* is ultimately homonormative in its ideology. I therefore conclude that, at least in 2022, queerness as articulated by Halberstam (2005) and Muñoz (2009) is incompatible with the mainstream rom-com.



Figure 96: Ultimately, I argue that *Bros* (2022) reproduces a message of homonormativity in that Bobby (Billy Eichner) gets down on one knee and gives Aaron (Luke Macfarlane) a ring. Although Bobby's suggestion that they stay together for three months and then reassess plays with the sense of longevity as a relationship ideal, the moment nevertheless assimilates gay characters into the visual tropes of heterosexual romance.

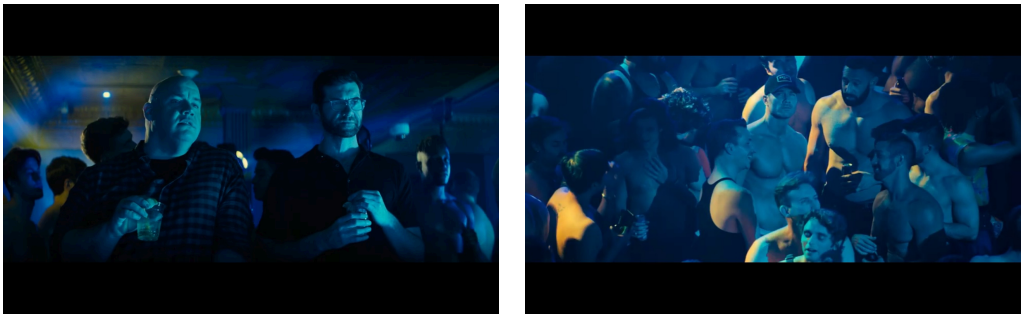


Figure 97: In *Bros* (2022), (right) Aaron (Luke Macfarlane) is first seen in a nightclub (centre of shot, wearing the baseball cap) from the perspective of Bobby (Billy Eichner) (left). In this moment, Mulvey's notion of the male gaze is reproduced from a gay perspective insofar as Luke is displayed 'as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium' (1988, p. 62). I also argue that this moment reaffirms Bobby's position as the protagonist of the film, whose view the spectator is encouraged to identify with.

4.4 Closing Remarks

On the surface, this chapter traced the evolution of lesbian, gay, and trans characters in mainstream rom-com from the late 1980s to the present day; the first relationship between the rom-com and queerness is exclusionary, and, of course, many of the rom-coms that I have discussed earlier in the thesis, such as the older films like *When Harry Met Sally…* (1988) or *Pretty Woman* (1990) or even more recent films such as *The Big Sick* (2017) can be viewed in this light; the second is LGBT-adjacent, as seen with the supporting characters in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *The Birdcage* (1996), and *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997); the third is LGBT-inclusive as shown by the gay, lesbian, and trans protagonists in *Love Simon* (2018), *Happiest Season* (2020), *Single All the Way* (2021), *Bros* (2022), and *Anything's Possible* (2022). This evolution in terms of lesbian, gay, and trans representation reflects – and indeed contributes to – the sense of progress in terms of LGBT rights and the visibility of openly LGBT people in British and American media across this time period. After all, as Ash Kinney d'Harcourt states, 'the visibility and centralization of [LGBT] characters as protagonists in their own happily-ever-after story has an indisputably positive impact on viewers, particularly those who see their lives and identities reflected' (2021, p. 116). In this way, the LGBT representation in the rom-com can be seen as part of a media landscape that initiates conversations around queer issues, challenges queerphobic perceptions, and, simply, grants space to identities that have been systematically marginalised. In short, the argument can be made that the visibility of particular identities in the media embeds and evolves the public consciousness; that the gay best-friend characters in the 1990s opened the door for LGBT protagonists in the 2010s and 2020s.

However, this chapter also carried out a deeper analysis of not just *who* is permitted screentime in mainstream rom-coms, but *how* the spectator is invited to recognise themselves in relation to these characters via the films' comedic moments. In this respect, my analysis has demonstrated that there was an othering of those who live outside of the regulatory system of nuclear, suburban families, and a great deal of comedic mileage derived from the clunky reconciliation between the LGBT characters and their heterosexual friends and families. The films may feature gay, lesbian and

trans characters, but, as this chapter has shown, the comedic moments often showcase these characters comically masking their sexuality, or humorously negotiating their assimilation into affluent, suburban, nuclear-family-based social structures. Thus, we can conclude that, during the time period between the late 1980s and the early 2020s, the mainstream rom-com as feature film became increasingly – even performatively – gay, but no more queer.

Indeed, it is my argument that the increase in LGBT representation does not necessarily correspond with greater challenging of stereotypes nor the showcasing of alternatives to heteronormative ideology. Instead, as Kinney d'Harcourt notes, a number of television series that feature prominent queer characters 'nevertheless emphasize domestic themes such as marriage and parenting, sometimes at the cost of depoliticizing the queerness' (2021, p. 106). Obvious examples of this include *Friends* (1994–2004), the US remake of *The Office* (2005–2013), and *Modern Family* (2009–2020). I argue that each of these hugely popular, mainstream TV-shows reproduce what Jason Jacobs finds in his analysis of *Glee* (2009–2015), namely that the show presents both 'homophobic and gay-positive attempts to hail queer people into identities that are acceptable by heterosexual standards' (2014, p. 341) and that there is an 'ideological fixation on the beneficent role of the family' (p. 321).

With regards to why LGBT characters and stories are more represented now in rom-com, but only within the bounds of family units and monogamous couplings, one explanation is that, as Foucault said, 'homosexuality threatens people as a "way of life" rather than as a way of having sex' (1980, p. 310). As such, LGBT characters having sexual relationships in mainstream rom-com is permissible for the mainstream viewer precisely because it has been detached from any threat of counter-cultural disruption. In this way, mainstream entertainment appears to offer fantasies of difference while in fact reproducing sameness because the viewer wishes to feel vindicated in their normativity (Halberstam, 2005, p. 84). Where queer characters challenge the apparent rightness of heterosexual object choice, as *Anything's Possible* does and *Bros* threatens to until its conclusion, there is a fundamental paradox that prevents the romantic

comedy from functioning for a mainstream audience. This summation could be critiqued for being overly negative and undervaluing the importance of representation. However, in the introduction to this thesis I set out an aim to critique romantic comedy films as historical artefacts from a 2024 perspective. And from a 2024 viewpoint, the LGBT representation in feature-length rom-coms amounts to a commercialisation and containment of queerness when compared to LGBT representation in mainstream TV shows such as *Sex Education* (2019–2023), *Never Have I Ever* (2020–2023), and *Heartstopper* (2022–present). For, as with the previous chapter on race and the mainstream rom-com, it seems apposite to note the potential for further research into the narratives and moments explored in longer formats available on streaming sites, which is not found in stand-alone feature rom-com films. It has been suggested that 'the serial TV drama makes possible an exponentially expanded middle: an increased space for digression, reversal and continual movement both toward and away from the traditional telos of romantic comedy – namely the "happy ending"' and that '[b]y maximizing the time of storytelling […] the TV romcom also maximizes the space of ideological possibility' (Alsop, 2021, p. 220).

Finally, in writing this chapter, I was struck by Stacey Abbott's assertion that the teen rom-com 'is ostensibly for teenagers and about the teenage experience but produced from the perspective of adults reminiscing or revisiting their own teenage years' (2009, p. 53). Building upon this, most rom-com is about young love, with protagonists often in their teens, twenties, and thirties, but produced from the perspective of people in their thirties, forties, fifties, and older. Given that in the UK and the USA there have historically been a host of bills and laws designed to exclude, deny, and incarcerate LGBTQ+ people,[91] most of which were repealed in the 2000s and 2010s,[92] this may explain why mainstream rom-coms are only just dealing with queer

[91] In the UK, Section 28 prohibited the promotion of homosexuality by schools and local authorities and was introduced in the Local Government Act 1988. The equivalent in the US is the Anti-LGBT Curriculum Laws, which still exist in six US states as of 2022. In 1996, President Clinton signed the Defence of Marriage Act, which codified non-recognition of same-sex marriages.

[92] Section 28 was repealed in Scotland in 2000 and in England and Wales in 2003. In the USA, gay marriage was legalised in Massachusetts in 2004, and in 2013 the US Supreme Court struck down the Defence of Marriage Act. In the UK, legislation to allow same-sex marriage was passed in 2013 in England and Wales, in 2014 for Scotland, and 2019 for Northern Ireland.

love now. Moreover, the idea that the systems of rom-com production are controlled by older creatives provides a sense of hope for the future that is reflected in recent TV rom-com output listed in the last paragraph. Those of us who, like myself, have no memory of Section 28 and no real understanding of adulthood before gay marriage came into being, are now emerging into positions of power, meaning that the evolution that I noted in terms of *who* is permitted time and space in feature-length rom-com might soon be mirrored in terms of *how* they are represented in its comedic moments.

Chapter 5: Gendered Body Difference in Relation to the Neoliberal Project of the Self

5.1 Opening Remarks

So far, this thesis has analysed the comedy in mainstream rom-coms between the late 1980s and the present day as a means of reproducing, and tacitly regulating, a naturalised binary, heteronormative gender ideology in British and American cinema, and I have looked at how this ideology is complicated by race and queerness. In this final case study chapter, I introduce themes of sizeism, ableism, and ageism and their intersection with sexism regarding the regulation of bodies on screen as the final ideological element at play within the mainstream gender ideology found at the core of the rom-com's comedic moments.

Romantic comedies are generally described as having a 'lighthearted tone' (Grindon, 2011, p. 23) or a 'utopian optimism' (Ruiz, 2021, p. 182), which I argue throughout this thesis is key to the ideological mechanism through which they hail their spectator. The rom-com's upbeat nature and predictable "happy ending" offer reassurance to the viewer that in the face of any number of obstacles, happiness is conferred to the protagonists via the heterosexual, or at least heteronormative, coupling through which the rom-com's gender ideology is reproduced. One of the ways in which this happiness-orientated idealism manifests on-screen is in the manner that rom-coms constitute the bodies of their (gendered) protagonists.

For both male and female perspectives, this means that the bodies of protagonists in rom-coms tend to appear young, fit, and healthy, resonating with Harvey's assertion that '[i]n a Darwinian neoliberal world […] only the fittest should and do survive' (2007, p. 157). However, there are gendered differences determining what these bodies must look like for male and female characters in romantic comedies. In this way, I argue that the mainstream rom-com reproduces Butler's assertion that '[t]he heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine" where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female"' (2007, p. 24). That is to say, the mainstream rom-com institutes the production of discrete asymmetrical categories of gendered body types: tall and strong

male/masculine bodies; petite female/feminine bodies. The bodies of female protagonists tend to be young, slim, petite, and able (see figures 98–100); older, fatter, taller, or disabled female bodies are either excluded altogether from the rom-com genre or are othered in the film's comedic moments through slapstick, gross-out humour, or derisive comments from supporting characters.[93]

As Beasley and Brook note, 'the aesthetic margins of what constitutes a plausibly attractive person seem to be significantly more elastic for men than for women' (2019, p. 152), and in mainstream rom-coms the male actors playing lead roles are certainly often older than their female counterparts. However, even for men, bodies that are not generally athletic, tall, and able are similarly often either excluded altogether or othered through comedic moments of slapstick, gross-out, or derision. The gendering of this difference – where women's bodies are more tightly regulated by the rom-com than men's – may be because, as Butler notes, 'reason and mind are associated with masculinity and agency, while the body and nature are considered to be the mute facticity of the feminine' (2007, p. 50). Therefore, as discussed in Chapter 2, under mainstream ideology, a woman's value is primarily conveyed by her body, whereas a man's value is conveyed through his actions. Consequently, there appears to be something incompatible between the visual representation of "happiness" at the core of the rom-com genre and fatness or disability.[94] In this chapter, I, then, ask: what is ideologically at stake for the rom-com regarding the focus on young, able, "healthy" bodies, and (how) does the rom-com differentiate between male and female bodies in terms of ableism?[95]

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[93] I use the term "fat" here as the accepted term within the field of fat studies, as explained by Plotz who writes that '[b]eing part of Fat Acceptance and Fat Studies entails a deliberate use of the words "fat" and "fatness." Since "obesity" is a highly medicalized term, expressing the conceptualisation of fatness as a disease, and "overweight" implies that there is an ideal weight one should not exceed, Fat Acceptance and Fat Studies reject either term, using instead "fat" and "fatness" for the purpose of re-appropriation and re-signification' (2021, p. 5).

[94] As Alison Wilde notes, for both men and women there is a 'continuing reluctance to see disability in the context of the perfect world of the romantic comedy' (2019, p. 72).

[95] Goodley defines "ableism" as 'a space fit for normative citizens; [which] encourages a bias towards autonomous, independent bodies; and lends support to economic and material dependence on neoliberal and hyper-capitalist forms of production (2014, p. 21), and Campbell contends that '[a]bleist systems involve the differentiation, ranking, negation, notification and prioritisation of sentient life' (2017, p. 288).



Figure 98: Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan in *You've Got Mail* (1998).



Figure 99: Jude Law and Cameron Diaz in *The Holiday* (2006).



Figure 100: Himesh Patel and Lily James in *Yesterday* (2019).

My answers to these questions hinge upon the way "non-ideal" bodies are either comically mocked in rom-coms or are excluded altogether. Instead, already slim, able-bodied protagonists undergo superficial bodily transformations that reproduce the neoliberal worldview that 'seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market' (Harvey, 2007, p. 3). Synthesising ideas from Harvey's writing on neoliberalism with Foucault's (1988b) "technology of the self" and applying them to the rom-com genre, I surmise that the mainstream British and American rom-com reproduces the message that the transformation of the body and soul results in happiness and that through entrepreneurial self-improvement anyone can achieve this. In light of this, the lack of older, fatter, or disabled bodies in protagonist roles in rom-coms suggests that these bodies are incompatible with the self-improvement and/or desirable romantic coupling inherent to the ideological centre of the rom-com genre.[96]

Harvey (2007) describes the concept of neoliberal individualism according to which subjects understand themselves as individual capital-enhancing agents, and Foucault's concept of "technologies of the self." Foucault defines technologies of the self as:

[96] While these trends are widely applicable to most Hollywood genres, I maintain that rom-com is amongst the most exclusive of genres due the prominence of beauty and physical attraction as key generic themes. Thus, with recent releases such as *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* (2023) starring Harrison Ford, *Expend4bles* (2023) starring Sylvester Stallone, *The Great Escaper* (2023) starring Michael Caine, and *Golda* (2023) starring Helen Mirren, there appears to be more space for older bodies in non-rom-com genres.

> [technologies] which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (1988b, p. 18)

The parallel between this definition and the bodies in romantic comedies as I perceive them is thus: in rom-coms protagonists often undergo transformations, from makeover sequences to realisations of truths about themselves and about whom they wish to be in order to forge romantic relationships; the promise of the rom-com, which is that the romantic pair will (almost always) attain a state of happiness via their final romantic coupling, is made possible by their earlier transformations of body and/or soul.[97] So, a key aspect of the rom-com is the appearance of agency on the part of the protagonist to drive their own transformation. The rom-com's promotion of individual agency appears to align relatively seamlessly with Harvey's statement that neoliberal thinking is characterised by a 'fundamental commitment to ideals of personal freedom' (2007, p. 20), although he couches this by adding that there is often a 'tension between the theory of neoliberalism and the actual pragmatics of neoliberalization' (2007, p. 21). Similarly, Foucault paints a knotty picture of the interlinking relationships between what he terms "technologies of production", "technologies of sign systems", "technologies of power" and "technologies of the self", which he avers 'hardly ever function separately' (1988b, p. 18) and together produce systems of domination. However, for the purposes of this thesis, the point remains that both Foucault and Harvey describe systems that treat the individual as an agent that can be self-regulated according to a system of constraints. I suggest that in the rom-com, these ideas find their parallel in the appearance of the individual protagonist who appears to "choose" their makeover despite the impacts of multi-layered societal pressures and image-centric consumer culture. What is key here is therefore the

[97] Foucault discusses how 'the three major forms that any technology is able to take in its development and its history: as a dream or, better, as a utopia; then as a practice or as rules for some real institutions; and then as an academic discipline' (1988a, p. 154), and in this chapter I discuss the body as a technology of the self as represented through the dream/utopia of the mainstream rom-com.

semblance of agency – the messaging around agency – regardless of the realities of societal and governmental pressures.

Furthermore, the perceived lack of agency and control around disability, age, and weight are key aspects of their incompatibility with entrepreneurial self-transformation. Harvey notes that '[t]he founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental,' since these ideals 'appeal to anyone who values the ability to make decisions for themselves' (2007, p. 5). It therefore follows, under a neoliberal worldview, that '[p]articular problems arose, in short, because of lack of competitive strength or because of personal, cultural, and political failings' (p. 157). Consequently, in the context of the neoliberal rom-com, bodily failure is equated with a failure of the self. Thus, the failed body may either be excluded from the rom-com, as it is deemed too pitiable to fit within the rom-com genre, or else it is pitiable enough to engender comedy, which links it back to the superiority model of humour. However, the questions remain, why are old or fat female bodies more laughable than old and fat male bodies? And why should the rom-com exclude female disability and illness more than for male equivalents?

To answer these questions, I draw upon a body of work that suggests that, more so than men, '[w]omen are encouraged to see themselves as a project, their bodies and their selves as a site of production' (Gray, 2003, p. 496); that '[t]he ideal self (for work) is feminine, a self that can be sold and, as such, is produced' (Goodman, 2013, p. 4); and that self-managed 'transformativity is the possibility of the plastic body, the flexible subject, and of becoming a more desirable self' (Gray, 2003, p. 496). Hence, if men and male bodies tend to be valued for their strength, power, and status, while women and female bodies are valued for their physical beauty and caring abilities, then the disabled man may still have status and power, but the disabled woman's physical appearance is marked as more problematic.[98] Moreover, as

[98] Indeed, Ruti states that modern films feature 'a resolute celebration of femininity as a physical attribute' (2016, p. 80).

McRobbie notes, womanhood is associated so strongly with visual appearance that aesthetics becomes its ontological start- and end-point, and 'cultural intelligibility as a young woman is now tilted towards the achievement of "affluent, middle-class maternity" with its many accoutrements, in particular a spectacularly slim body, and well-groomed and manicured appearance' (2020, p. 32). In summary, the failed male body may still connote power or status, but the failed female body, to extend McRobbie's point, is no longer culturally intelligible as a female body in a heteropatriarchal worldview.

The pattern whereby male disability is presented as more compatible with comedic moments than female disability is seen through the supporting characters in some of the mainstream rom-coms analysed thus far in this thesis. For example, in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), Charles's brother, David (David Bower), is deaf, and this results in comedic moments such as when Charles (Hugh Grant) deliberately mistranslates David's sign-language utterances. Conversely, in *Notting Hill* (1999), the protagonist Will (again, Hugh Grant) has a female friend, Bella (Gina McKee), who uses a wheelchair, but the film does not contain any comedic moments relating to Bella's disability and rather codes it as tragic. Thus, mainstream rom-com appears to suggest that certain forms of non-conforming female bodies, namely disabled female bodies, are not compatible with comedy. By contrast, several supporting characters in films discussed earlier in this thesis whose bodies challenge the strong-masculine/petite-feminine dichotomy are presented as comedic. For example, in *Bros* (2022), when the protagonist Bobby (Billy Eichner) becomes aggressive at work after taking steroids, one of the other characters cries, 'Angela and the lesbians – hold him down,' and a group of characters – including the trans female character, Angela (Ts Cherry), and lesbian Cherry (Dot-Marie Jones) – wrestle Bobby to the ground in a comedic moment that plays on the incongruity between the perception of male physical dominance and the reality of female strength (see figure 101).[99] Similarly, romantic comedies also often feature comedic moments in which the joke is at the expense of characters who are

[99] For further discussion of fat supporting characters and comedic moments, see Plotz (2021).

perceived to exhibit fatness or old age (for example, the unsuitable suitors montage from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), discussed in Chapter 3).



Figure 101: In *Bros* (2022), a comedic moment involves trans woman Angela (Ts Cherry) and 'the lesbians' pinning Bobby (Billy Eichner) to the floor during a fight. In this moment, I suggest that the comedy stems from women taking up space and displaying strength which is more often associated with masculinity. As such, this can be read as a queer moment of comedy since it challenges essentialist and binary thinking around gendered bodies.

In what follows, I draw together further examples of comedic moments from this chapter's case study films to critique mainstream rom-coms' reinforcement of the ideological message that the gendered body is a project. Failure of the body project is either a contemptable moral failure worthy of comedic attention, as in the case of old age, fatness, or (mis)performance of femininity, or otherwise is a tragic, painful failure, as in the case of disability and disease.[100] In this context, Shaun May's phenomenological description of the decrepit "comic" body in Beckett's theatre is useful:

[100] As will be discussed later, rom-coms can feature examples of characters who comedically take steps to avoid weight gain and ageing, such as Harry (Jack Nicholson) in *Something's Gotta Give* (2003), or Samantha (Kim Cattrall) (who takes hormone replacements) in *Sex and the City 2* (2010).

> the body is the locus of the interconnection between "finitude of possibilities" and "temporal finitude" – the latter reflected in the entropic biological decline with which we constantly live, and the former most clearly seen in the "falling away of possibilities" that accompanies facing up to that fact. (2016, p. 158)

While May avers that this is relevant for Beckett, I consider it a useful framework for thinking of bodies in mainstream rom-coms. Indeed, an element of the utopian world of the rom-com is precisely its focus on young, able-bodied protagonists whose temporal finitude and therefore finitude of possibilities is ideologically masked. When characters with visible signs of perceived poor health appear on screen, the spectator is presented with the spectre of temporal finitude, which is at odds with the rom-com project. As such, I posit that the rom-com is a product of biopolitics insofar as biopolitics 'is concerned with matters of life and death, with birth and propagation, with health and illness, both physical and mental, and with the processes that sustain or retard the optimization of the life of a population' (Dean, 2010, p. 119).

In summary, in this chapter I examine the notion that, between the late 1980s and the present day, the rom-com protagonist's body must be optimised so that the subject can also be optimised according to market principles, and when this is not achieved, the individual is ripe for comedic othering. The rom-com body is thus articulated as a signifier of social value within the neoliberal project, and has been since the late 1980s, where bodily failure is equated with moral failure in the case of fatness and age or with tragedy and suffering in the case of illness and disability. Since tragedy and suffering are incompatible with the light-hearted, utopian optimism with which the mainstream rom-com interpellates its spectator, illness and disability are predominantly excluded from the romantic comedy as anathema to its gendered ideology. By contrast, fatness and age are mocked in mainstream rom-coms' comedic moments. I break this argument down into four problematics, which I consider in relation to case study films: the neoliberal problem of the female body in which the non-conforming body hinders the protagonist's objectives in *Tall Girl* (2019); the fat body as a sign of moral failure in *Shallow Hal* (2001) and *Isn't It Romantic* (2019); the

ageing body as a sign of a failure of self-care in *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) and *Ticket to Paradise* (2022); and the incompatibility between the mainstream rom-com and the genuinely non-conforming body as evidenced by the romantic dramas *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Love & Other Drugs* (2010), and *Me Before You* (2016). This represents a contribution to knowledge insofar as I synthesise existing rom-com genre scholarship, such as that of Wilde's writing about disability (2019) and Plotz's discussion of sizeism in rom-coms (2021), linking these to a wider discussion of how romantic comedy's comedic moments reproduce the notion of the neoliberal body project.

5.2 The Neoliberal Problem of the Non-Conforming Female Body in *Tall Girl* (2019)

In this section, I analyse Jodi (Ava Michelle) in *Tall Girl* (2019) to suggest that the mainstream rom-com's solution to the problem of the female body taking up space is self-regulation, and that the comedic dimension derives from the failure to self-regulate. The problem of the female body for neoliberalism is essentially the paradoxical manner in which, under neoliberalism, people 'are increasingly being hailed as generic human capital' (Rottenberg, 2020, p. 17) while also being rooted in a gender ideology that 'has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another' (Butler, 2007, p. 191). This means that men and women are hailed as workers and consumers in their twenties and thirties, and, as has been noted earlier in this thesis, this is reflected in romantic comedy films produced between the 1980s and the present day, which often depict men and women who pursue high-powered careers alongside romantic coupling. However, as previously discussed, the mainstream rom-com for the past thirty years has, at the same time, reproduced characters as binarily embodied gendered beings whose value to society is predicated on family-orientated heterosexual coupling. As I discuss in this section, the answer provided by the mainstream rom-com to this paradox is continual self-regulation of the female body. Rottenberg describes the current situation whereby under neoliberalism 'the promise of *future* work-family balance where futurity functions as a technology of self' (2020, p. 106, emphasis in original) undergirds a relentless focus on career work and general self-improvement for younger adults in the "now." I suggest that the mainstream rom-com reproduces this promise of futurity as a technology of the self through workout montages, clothing choices, makeover sequences, and other instances of bodily self-investment which pacify the unruly female body by promising the future benefit of a happy romantic pairing.

In *Tall Girl* (2019), Jodi (Ava Michelle) is an American high-school student who is taller than all of the boys in her class until one day a tall foreign exchange student, Stig (Luke Eisner), arrives. Jodi briefly dates Stig before forming a romantic couple with her

friend Dunkleman (Griffin Gluck), who claims to have loved her for years despite their height difference (she is taller than he is). As such, Jodi also has the objective of getting a boyfriend and perceives that her height (she mentions in a voice-over that she is 6 foot 1) prevents her from achieving this goal.[101] Even though Jodi adheres to traditional Western beauty standards (see figure 102), she questions her attractiveness in dialogue, and the narrative in the film hinges on the idea that she struggles to find a romantic partner.



Figure 102: A promotional image for *Tall Girl* (2019) featuring the protagonist Jodi (Ava Michelle), in which she appears to be taller than her classmates at high school.

Indeed, there is a comedic moment in which Jodi is the object of mockery for her belief that the boy that she likes might like her back, when some of her classmates prank call her, pretending to be Stig. Plotz discusses how in Hollywood comedies, 'the fat woman's sexual confidence is mocked, presented as unfounded and delusional, and thereby employed as a source of comedy' (2021, p. 98), and here I read a parallel with the messaging around Jodi's tall body being associated with delusional confidence. While Jodi is not delusional in her sexual confidence, as Stig asks her out eventually, her sexual confidence is nevertheless a target for mockery.

[101] In this way, both films depict their heroines as having a "surveillance gaze" (Ruti, 2016, p. 88).

The premise of *Tall Girl* (2019) is that American high-school student Jodi (Ava Michelle) cannot find a boyfriend at school because of her supposedly non-conforming body in terms of her height.[102] However, by the end of the film she is in a relationship with a shorter man (see figure 103). *Tall Girl* is therefore notable because it provides an exception to Beasley and Brook's assertion that due to 'the familiar heteronormative order insisting that men (as a category) are taller and stronger than women (as a category)' then 'even though many women are taller/stronger than many men, we very seldom see them paired in romantic comedies' (2019, p. 163). *Tall Girl* contains a makeover sequence in which Jodi's sister, Harper (Sabrina Carpenter), and their mother (Angela Kinsey) take Jodi to buy makeup, get her hair done, and buy her clothes. Contrary to Ford and Mitchell's assertion that in many Hollywood films, 'men try to control female transformations completely' (Ford and Mitchell, 2004, p. 6), Jodi's mother and sister are primarily responsible for Jodi's transformation, which speaks to how gender ideology is purveyed through the "conduct" of women towards one another where "conduct" acts as a kind of moral pressure to enforce conformism with patriarchal norms. However, Jodi's friend and love interest, Dunkleman (Griffin Gluck) buys her a pair of high heels, which serves as a turning point in the film insofar as this is the moment when Jodi embraces her height (see figure 104). Cohen states that '[h]igh heels, which second-wave feminists condemned as a byproduct of patriarchal oppression, can be the expression of female assertiveness' (Cohen, 2010, p. 83), and in *Tall Girl,* Jodi's high heels express her assertiveness, but only when sanctioned by a male character.

[102] Tallness and fatness function similarly in terms of challenging the strong-male, petite-female gender ideology. Plotz discusses how fat women in Hollywood films disrupt 'the seemingly natural order of men being taller, bigger and stronger than women and therefore being (physically) dominant' (2021, p. 77), and, clearly, female tallness similarly disrupts the perceived naturalness of male physical dominance.



Figure 103: In *Tall Girl* (2019), Jodi (Ava Michelle) will not date Dunkleman (Griffin Gluck) because she is taller than he is.

Thus, in *Tall Girl*, once again, there is a power imbalance where the male characters have more power than the female characters. Earlier in the film, Jodi had said that no one makes high heels in her size, a line that is repaid when Dunkleman enters her bedroom while she is sleeping, leaves out a pair of high heels in her size that he has bought from a drag queen store, and strokes her hair. The tension in this moment is comedically subverted when Jodi wakes up with a fright and punches him in the throat, but, after apologising, Jodi's decision to keep and wear the shoes later in the film retrospectively legitimises his controlling behaviour. Indeed, at the end of the film, Dunkleman gets into a fight defending Jodi when another character mocks her (see figure 105), following which she realises that she can date Dunkleman after all. Thus, the actions that lead Jodi to realise that Dunkleman is the one for her reproduce traditional gender roles insofar as he buys her high heels as a gift and then, as Jodi remarks, 'you defended my honour, and you took a punch for me.'



Figure 104: The high heels that Dunkleman buys for Jodi (Ava Michelle) from a drag store in *Tall Girl* (2019), which I read as a moment in which he asserts his masculine agency over her physical appearance.



Figure 105: In *Tall Girl* (2019), Dunkleman (Griffing Gluck) further asserts his masculine agency when he gets into a fight with another teen who makes fun of Jodi's height.

The film presents Dunkleman's persistence as part of his appeal as a romantic partner. Dunkleman is first introduced via a comedic moment in which he walks into their classroom and flirts with Jodi, to which Jodi responds, 'You do this every day, it's never going to happen,' which underlines Dunkleman's persistence. Also, early on in the film, Jodi remarks that Dunkleman has carried his things in a milk crate for years but she does not know why. At the end of the film, Dunkleman reveals that he did this so that one day he could stand on the milk crate to kiss Jodi because she had always been that much taller than him. He then stands on the crate, making him significantly taller than Jodi, such that he has to bend down to kiss her, thus recreating the visual image of a taller man bending down to kiss a shorter, daintier woman (see figure 106).



Figure 106: Dunkleman (Griffin Gluck) stands on his milk crate so that he has to bend down to kiss Jodi (Ava Michelle) in *Tall Girl* (2019), recreating the illusion of ideal gender dimorphism.

Finally, in addition to dictating Jodi's physical appearance by buying her high heels and his knowledge that they will end up together, the third aspect of Dunkleman's superior power or status is that he fights another boy who insults Jodi. Rowe Karlyn writes that '[g]irls learn that according to our culture's preferred model of sexuality, infantilized women desire Big Daddies who can protect them' (2011, p. 59), and while Dunkleman is not presented as physically big, it is worth noting that both he and Jodi's father (Steve Zahn) seek to protect her during the film: Dunkleman does this through physical violence; her father does this, in one flashback, by taking her to the doctor and suggesting she take medication to stunt her growth, and by inviting a group of tall people to their house to talk to her in another scene. Consequently, the film forms a patriarchal link between Jodi's father and Dunkleman via the actions that both males take to protect Jodi from harm. Hence, while *Tall Girl* concludes with its female protagonist claiming that they have decided to embrace their bodily "flaws" – Jodi wears high heels to the school prom despite her height – I contend that her supposedly non-conforming female body is reconciled with the strong-male, petite-female mainstream gender ideology through Dunkelman's actions. His physical altercation with another male love rival situates her "larger" female body within heteronormative gender roles that associate males with physical dominance and females with needing to be protected.

Tall Girl therefore reinscribes the message that men are valued for their power, money, and physical protection and that women are valued for their aesthetic appearance. By wearing the high heels that Dunkleman buys her, endorsing his physical defence of her "honour," and legitimising his insistence on the inevitability of a romantic relationship between them despite her earlier protestations that it was 'never going to happen,' Jodi infantilises herself, channelling her sexuality into a submissive relationship and endowing Dunkleman with power. In this way, Jodi, despite her potential to disrupt gender normativity through her supposedly non-conforming female body, reaffirms normative femininity through her actions and choice of romantic partner.

In this section, I have discussed how *Tall Girl* engages with themes of female body image insofar as Jodi perceives herself as being too tall to find a suitable male romantic partner. In this way, the film demonstrates the neoliberal problem of how supposedly non-conforming female bodies disrupt romantic projects. The film also features comedic moments that centre upon Jodi's supposedly non-conforming body, which supports my argument that – in contrast to the discussion of disability at the end of this chapter – the "problem" of female bodies that take up space is compatible with the interpellation of a "simple-pleasures" rom-com spectator. In the following section, I extend my argument regarding the body as a neoliberal project, considering the way in which a subject's moral value is reflected in their physical appearance and arguing that *Shallow Hal* (2001) and *Isn't It Romantic* (2019) present the fat body as a sign of moral failure.

5.3 The Body as a Sign of Moral Failure in *Shallow Hal* (2001) and *Isn't It Romantic* (2019)

Where *Tall Girl* (2019) engaged with issues of female bodies taking up space in terms of height, *Shallow Hal* (2001) and *Isn't It Romantic* (2019) feature protagonists who take up space insofar as they are referred to as fat. Hal (Jack Black) in *Shallow Hal* and Natalie (Rebel Wilson) in *Isn't It Romantic* pursue romantic projects in which their bodies are presented as obstacles. More so than in *Tall Girl*, both films feature an extreme number of comedic moments that rely on what Plotz (2021) describes as "fat slapstick" and "fat gross-out" humour, in which body failure is presented as an object of ridicule and derision. Additionally, through the quantity of such fatphobic comedic moments, as well as each films' use of fantasy narrative elements, both *Shallow Hal* and *Isn't It Romantic* undermine the credibility of fat protagonists as romantic agents. It follows that, in contrast to the films discussed in the previous section, genuinely non-conforming fat bodies threaten the light-hearted, utopian rom-com spectator interpellation so much that *Shallow Hal* and *Isn't It Romantic* are more comedies featuring rom-com tropes than they are true rom-coms.

Isn't It Romantic (2019) is a "romantic" comedy in which Natalie (Rebel Wilson), a cynical Australian architect living in America, suffers a head injury and finds herself trapped inside a romantic comedy world in which she must break free from clichés and find her way back to reality. During the film, she briefly dates her wealthy, good-looking boss, Blake (Liam Hemsworth), before realising that she really has feelings for her friendly co-worker Josh (Adam DeVine). In another rom-com trope, Natalie interrupts Josh's wedding to Isabella (Priyanka Chopra) and declares her feelings for him, only to have a car accident outside the church and wake up back in the real world. The entire film then ends with a song and dance number, which further breaks the film's fourth wall. As such, the film employs a number of cynical comedic moments of meta irony and genre spoofing, which means that the gender ideology of the film is frequently ambivalent and which similarly undermines the credibility of the film's romantic narrative. For example, *Isn't It Romantic* opens with a young Natalie back home in Australia watching *Pretty Woman* (1990) and being told by her mother

(Jennifer Saunders) to 'look in the mirror dahl', we're no Julia Roberts.' Additionally, the film references *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989) in a scene when Josh mimics having an orgasm while eating takeaway food, following which Blake walks in and says, 'I'll have what he's having.' The film also features a scene in a karaoke bar the night before Josh's ill-fated wedding to Isabella, which I read as a knowing reference to a scene in a karaoke bar from *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997). Furthermore, in another scene the red dress (see figure 107) that Natalie wears on a date with Blake bears a striking resemblance to the red dress that Julia Roberts wears (see figure 108) in a scene at the opera in *Pretty Woman* (1990). Beasley and Brook assert that intertextual references 'constitute multiple iterations of dating nostalgia and produce a kind of mirror effect. […] The reiterative nostalgia of romantic films reinforces the idea that there is something deeply familiar, timeless, and traditional in heteronormative narratives of romance' (2019, p. 138). However, I contend that the sheer quantity of the intertextual references, particularly when combined with the slapstick and gross-out moments discussed below, constitute a ridiculing of the rom-com genre that distances *Isn't It Romantic* from the films it spoofs and thus reinforces the ideological message that true romance is incompatible with the fat female protagonist.



Figure 107: Natalie (Rebel Wilson) wears a red ballgown on her date with Blake (Liam Hemsworth) in *Isn't It Romantic* (2019).



Figure 108: Vivian (Julia Roberts) wears a red ballgown to the opera with Edward (Richard Gere) in *Pretty Woman* (1990).

As previously mentioned, *Isn't It Romantic* also employs frequent examples of what Plotz (2021) refers to as "fat female slapstick" and a few examples of "fat female

gross-out" comedy, which further undercut the believability of the romantic moments. For example, Natalie is twice knocked out in the film because of her clumsiness – she runs into a pole (figure 109) and later crashes a car (figure 110) – and these two moments transport Natalie between the "real world" and the "rom-com world." This encourages the film spectator to question the reality of the romantic narrative in which Natalie is caught in a love triangle between her potential romantic interests, Josh and Blake. One particularly salient example of female gross-out comedy occurs when Natalie and her friend are discussing rom-com tropes from adjacent bathroom stalls and Natalie – who we can infer has a problem with constipation – tells her friend not to wait for her. This moment occurs early in the film before Natalie has opened herself up to love, such that her constipation might be seen as indicative of her emotional constipation. Thus, in this comedic moment Natalie's bodily failure is representative of an implied psychological obstacle or failure of character.[103] Additionally, there is another moment where defecation is referenced in the film when Natalie returns to the "real-world" at the end of the film and her dog defecates on the carpet of her apartment, which Natalie smiles at and says is 'about right,' again linking Natalie's home life with base humour. Neither of these moments are as extreme as the male-centred gross-out comedy in, say, *There's Something About Mary* (1998) – which famously features a scene in which a male character (Ben Stiller) masturbates before a date, after which his love interest (Cameron Diaz), thinking the ejaculate is hair gel, rubs it into her hair – but they do reinforce the connection between female fatness and a lack of control over abject bodily functions, general grossness, and disgust.



Figure 109: Natalie (Rebel Wilson) is knocked out after running into a pole in *Isn't It Romantic* (2019); when she wakes up she is in the "rom-com world."



Figure 110: Natalie (Rebel Wilson) crashes a car at the end of *Isn't It Romantic* (2019); when she wakes up she is back in the "real world."

[103] Plotz notes that, in contrast to male gross-out, 'the female gross-out in *Bridesmaids* is still narratively constrained, presenting female misconduct as a problem, rather than as a productive experience' (2021, p. 168); I argue that this is also the case in *Isn't It Romantic*.

These two comedic moments involving defecation also reinforce the depiction of Natalie as unhealthy, which mirrors Plotz's point that 'slapstick involving fat characters is of a specific type, presenting them as clumsy/physically unfit and/or highlighting the weight, size and volume of the fat body' (2021, p. 132). In another of the slapstick moments in the film, Natalie runs in slow motion to interrupt Josh's wedding, holding her breasts as she runs (see figure 111). The shot highlights the idea that her body prevents her from exercising and, specifically, through the use of the slow-motion effect, also emphasises the entropic movement of her fat. Furthermore, when she arrives at the wedding, Natalie's non-conformity to perfected femininity is reinforced by her ungainly and breathless panting as she complains about not having a sports bra.

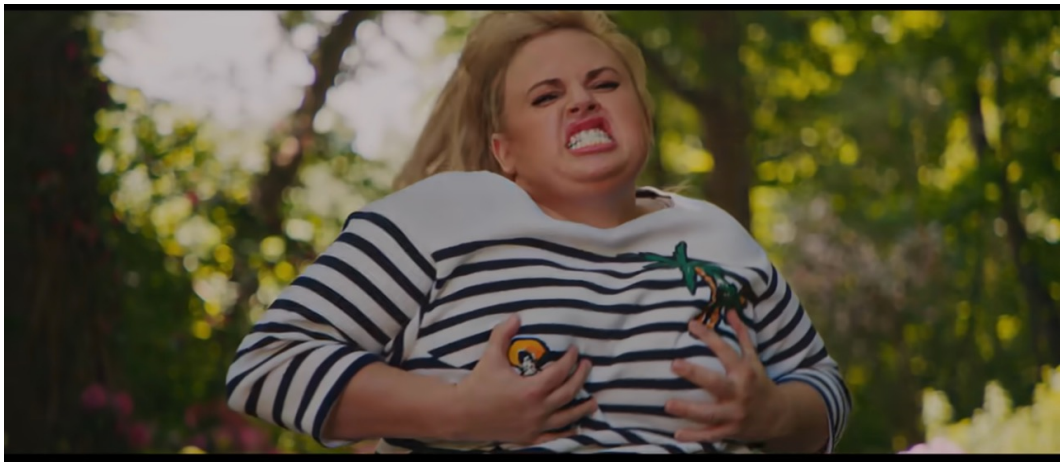


Figure 111: Natalie (Rebel Wilson) comically holds her breasts and grimaces as she runs to interrupt Josh's wedding in *Isn't It Romantic* (2019).

There are also several moments of fat female slapstick in *Isn't It Romantic* (2019) that divorce Natalie's fat body from her humanity. Plotz says of fat slapstick that in these comedic moments '[f]atness itself is turned into a comic spectacle and thereby a comic and demeaning image of fatness is constantly being reinforced' (2021, p. 154). I nuance this point by suggesting that the fat slapstick in this film is not only demeaning, it is dehumanising. For example, when Natalie leaves the hospital, she is immediately hit by a limousine (see figure 112), yet the reality of this impact is unrealised because Natalie is supposedly protected from the blow by the cushioning of

her fat. Similarly, during a scene in which Isabella and Josh take Natalie to a karaoke bar, Natalie sings karaoke and falls off a table, and again her body is treated as more of an object than she is as a human subject. One could contend that both of these moments occur during the "coma-world" section of the film, but in the "real-world" section of the film Natalie successfully fights off her male attacker when she is robbed on the subway only to once more run into a metal pillar and knock herself out as she flees. Henri Bergson writes that '[w]e laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing' (1913, p. 58), and I maintain that in this fight sequence, Natalie uses her body and her mass as a weapon.[104] Plotz asserts that slapstick involving fat characters often 'relies heavily on the representation of fat characters as not in control of their bodies and also reproduces a clear and common stereotype of fat people as unhealthy, physically unfit and physically incapable' (2021, p. 136), and this is mirrored in *Isn't It Romantic* when the successful fight we witness on the subway is immediately followed by Natalie displaying a complete lack of physical control when she runs straight into a metal pole. In other words, when Natalie's body's entropic mass gets the better of her it desubjectifies her, turning her into a mere object.



Figure 112: A scene from *Isn't It Romantic* (2019) in which Natalie (Rebel Wilson) is hit by a limousine but does not suffer any injury, which I read as a moment of fat slapstick in which Natalie's fatness precedes her humanity in service of a joke.

[104] This moment also evokes Plotz's argument that 'the depiction of fat women as violent and the type of violence they are shown to engage in reinforce the notion of them being outside of normative femininity' (2021, p. 77).

Unlike *Isn't It Romantic*, *Shallow Hal* (2001) features two overweight romantic leads, Hal (Jack Black) and Rosemary (Gwyneth Paltrow), but the majority of the fat slapstick comedic moments use Rosemary's body as the object of the comedy. In the film, chauvinist Hal is hypnotised by life guru and motivational speaker Tony Robbins (Tony Robbins) into seeing people for their inner beauty. He then dates Rosemary, who is played by Paltrow in the actress's own body when seen by Hal (see figure 113) and played by Paltrow wearing a prosthetic fat suit when seen from other characters' perspectives (see figure 114). A great deal of the film's comedic moments centre upon slapstick, in which the slim Rosemary, seen from Hal's perspective, breaks chairs; drinks an entire milkshake without pausing for breath; and jumps into a swimming pool, the splash from which catapults a child into a nearby tree. As such, the physics in these moments defies belief. I argue that the extreme nature of these moments hails a spectator who is not intended to believe in the reality of the situation, and while Rosemary is presented as a moral character – as indicated by her job working in a children's hospital and a moment in the film when she gives her leftovers to a homeless man – she is also presented as thin in these scenes, as she is played by Gwyneth Paltrow and, in these scenes, Paltrow does not wear prosthetics. This represents the tacit connection in visual form between physical slimness and morality and implies that both can be characterised as entrepreneurial self-investment. Even though the viewer knows that the "real" Rosemary is larger, visually the ideological link is maintained.



Figure 113: A recurring theme in *Shallow Hal* (2001) is that Rosemary's (Gwyneth Paltrow) weight breaks the furniture she tries to sit on. However, when the character is seen from Hal's perspective, she is played by Paltrow without prosthetics.



Figure 114: In *Shallow Hal* (2001), when Rosemary is seen from others' perspectives and at the end of the film when Hal has been unhypnotised, she is played by Gwyneth Paltrow in a prosthetic fat suit. She also performs unrealistic feats of strength that undermine the believability of the film.

Despite Beasley and Brook's suggestion that '[r]omantic comedies are usually spectacles of beauty […] [and] *Shallow Hal* (2001) is, in some ways, the instructive exception to this rule' (2019, pp. 162–163), it is my view that the film repeats the trope of female Western beauty ideals as spectacle and reproduces comedic mockery of women who do not fit these ideals. Indeed, the film produces a double pleasure whereby, for the majority of the film, Mauricio (Jason Alexander) jokes about women's physical appearances – he refers to women variously as 'a pack of stampeding buffalo,' a 'hyena,' a 'hippo,' and a 'giraffe' – while the camera presents these mocked women through the eyes of Hal in that they are played by conventionally attractive women.[105] Indeed, the character of Rosemary is seen played by Paltrow without prosthetics in almost every scene – with comedic moments created by the incongruity between her appearance and that of her larger shadow, her larger clothing, and her large appetite, the two different scenes in which chairs break when she sits on them (see figure 113), and various other scenes in which her slender appearance does not match the effects of her weight (see figure 115). In this way, this film is reflective of Medhurst's apposite observation that comedy can function as a means of 'selling us bigotry in the name of entertainment' (2007, p. 19).



Figure 115: Shallow Hal (2001) derives comedy from the incongruity between Gwyneth Paltrow's slim physique and the effect that Rosemary's weight and actions have on the world around her.

[105] While Beasley and Brook identify the message of *Shallow Hal* as 'the improbability of "inner" beauty's cinematic appeal' (2019, p. 163), Mendoza notes that in *Shallow Hal*, and also in *The Nutty Professor* (1996), the 'recuperation of the fat character hinges on the presence of their thin personas – on the literal, diegetic narrative that inside all that fat there is inside a thin person just waiting to get out' (2009, p. 281).

In the pairing of Jack Black and Gwyneth Paltrow, the film reproduces the message – once again – that men are valued for their status, power, or personality, whereas women are valued for their physical appearance. Additionally, in *Shallow Hal*, Hal's male friends, Mauricio and Walt (Rene Kirby), are not tall, muscular, slim, able-bodied Hollywood leading men, yet the women they are presented as dating are slim, able-bodied, conventionally beautiful women. By positioning male characters at the centre of the film, whose views are expressed throughout the film, and from whose viewpoint the female characters are viewed, the film recreates all three aspects of Johnson's (2014) "patriarchal legacy."[106] While Mauricio's success with women is unjustified in the film – which I suggest is another element of the film that undermines its credibility as a rom-com – by contrast, the supporting character Walt, who has fibromyalgia, has his success with women justified by the information that he has just sold his business for millions of dollars. Since Mauricio's success with women is unjustified but Walt's requires justification, I regard this as ableist, because it reflects the idea, expounded in the second chapter of this thesis, that in mainstream rom-com gender ideology men are valued for their power and status, and Walt particularly needs to justify his success in this way to negate the negative value of his disability. Walt's disability is also exploited to produce the film's comedic moments, since Walt makes a number of jokes about his disability, such as when he walks on his hands and flirts with a woman in a nightclub by saying, 'I got a leash, would you like to take me for a walk?'[107] Furthermore, Walt is made an object of ridicule in the film when he attends a double date with Hal and Rosemary. When the scene is viewed from Walt's perspective, Walt's date, Tanya, played by Sacha Knopf, wears subtle makeup and appears younger (see figure 116). However, when the scene is viewed from Hal's perspective, she is played by Nan Martin, who was in her seventies at the time of

[106] Johnson's (2014) theory of the "patriarchal legacy" distinguishes three forms of patriarchal ideology: male domination (the simple exclusion of women from positions of prestige and power), male-centredness (the supposition that the most important stories, events, and knowledge concern men), and male identification (essentially, for our purposes, where the viewpoint of the film is a "male gaze").
[107] This is an example of what Alison Wilde refers to when she writes that 'though it may appear that the tendency to put disabled people and specific impairments at the centre of comedies […] has become less acceptable (especially after the disability discrimination laws of the 1990s in the UK and USA), novel forms of comedy have arisen which might be characterised by their stance of post-political-correctness, often with disability and impairment as their object of ridicule' (2019, p. 28).

filming and wears heavy makeup (see figure 117). Tanya tells Hal and Rosemary that it was 'good timing' meeting Walt when she did, since he had just become wealthy, implying that Walt's money is all she is interested in. Thus, while the casting of a disabled actor as a supporting character was groundbreaking at the time, the nature of these comedic moments reinforces an ableist ideology.



Figure 116: Tanya (Sacha Knopf) seen from Rosemary's perspective in *Shallow Hal* (2001).



Figure 117: Tanya (Nan Martin) when seen from Hal's perspective in *Shallow Hal* (2001).

It is also notable that *Shallow Hal* features a male disabled character but no disabled female characters, suggesting that there is something less threatening to the rom-com about male disability than female disability. I contend that this is because, as I have previously said, men are valued for their power and status while women are valued for their physical beauty, and thus a male character can still be reconciled with the rom-com's mainstream gender ideology so long as he is presented as high status. Consequently, I assert that *Shallow Hal* should be read as more of a bromantic comedy about male-to-male interactions and male power dynamics than a believable heterosexual romance. To explain this reading further, I use Hartmann's definition of patriarchy as a form of male homosociality in which:

> relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women. (1981, p. 14)

Shallow Hal is about patriarchal, hierarchical male interdependence and male dominance over women, since the film opens with a young Hal being told by his father

never to 'settle for average' women. A second male role-model figure who aids Hal in his sexual project is motivational speaker and life guru Tony Robbins, who hypnotises Hal to see the inner beauty in women rather than outer beauty. This male-male relationship is hierarchical in three ways. First, Robbins instructs Hal and so acts as a mentor; but their hierarchy is also mirrored in the physical size difference between the two men (see figure 118) – Hal calls Tony 'banana hands' due to his large body; and finally the hierarchy is evident in the power difference, which is reinforced when Robbins grabs Hal by his head and shouts at him to scare him during the hypnosis. Hal's subsequent relationship with Rosemary is then defined by the hierarchical male-male relationship between Hal and her father (Joe Viterelli), who is also Hal's boss. When they first meet, in a moment of male solidarity, Rosemary's father praises Hal's initiative and tells him that he can stop the 'act' of pretending to like Rosemary to get ahead in business, which reflects the material nature of male-to-male interactions and the mediating functions played by women in patriarchal systems.



Figure 118: Hal (Jack Black) is noticeably much smaller than Tony Robbins (himself), emphasising Hal's comparative lack of maturity/physical development in *Shallow Hal* (2001).

The final major male-to-male interaction in the film is Hal's friendship with Mauricio, which follows a more equal fraternal relationship than these others, since Hal and Mauricio both attempt to help each other in their pursuits of women in a more equal manner compared to the more competitive male-to-male relationships in the

film.[108] Of the two friends, Mauricio is the more chauvinistic, immoral character, and he is also the one who exhibits body failure more explicitly, which supports the argument of this section of the thesis that the mainstream rom-com presents fat body failure as a failure of the project of the self. This is evident in gross-out comedy, such as the moment when Mauricio interrupts a conversation between Hal and Rosemary to tell Hal about a particularly impressive bowel movement he has just had. It is also evident when we are informed that Mauricio has a benign growth resembling a pig's tail, which further links him to an animalistic baseness. In a final moment of male privilege, the film concludes with Hal, no longer hypnotised, going to win Rosemary back at her parents' garden party and kissing the cook, Helga (Leslie DeAntonio), thinking her to be Rosemary. Rosemary's mother (Jill Christine Fitzgerald) sees this and corrects him but does not otherwise question what is going on. Instead, she encourages Rosemary to listen to Hal's revelation that he loves her. So, Hal has a power and privilege over women's bodies even after overcoming his shallowness.

In conclusion, *Isn't It Romantic* and *Shallow Hal* both implement the fat body as a sign of moral failure in the neoliberal project of the self. By reproducing these clichéd connections between fatness, bodily failure, and feelings of unattractiveness, both films hail a spectator who is expected to recognise these connections. Due to the prominence of fantasy elements and fat slapstick in both films, as well as the heavy-handed genre spoofing in *Isn't It Romantic*, I also suggest that neither interpellates a spectator with the same earnest relation to the film as is commonly found in other romantic comedies. Instead, *Shallow Hal* is a prototypical patriarchal bromance in that 'bromances [are] vehicles for celebrating men's power and privilege' (Beasley and Brook, 2019, p. 179). In contrast, *Isn't It Romantic* centres on the fat female experience of romance through a fantasy narrative, and thereby it reproduces a sense that the mainstream fat rom-com remains, essentially, still a fantasy. Thus, through their

[108] Derrida writes that 'the figure of the friend […] seems spontaneously to belong to a *familial, fraternalist* and thus *androcentric* configuration of politics' (1997, p. viii; emphasis in original), but Beasley and Brook note that 'Derrida […] conceives of fraternal politics as a rejection of patriarchy – in its most literal sense, the rule of the father – and as fundamental to democratic politics' (2019, p. 171). Nevertheless, the point remains that *Shallow Hal* focuses primarily on Hal's androcentric relationships.

emphasis on non-routine, supernatural narrative elements (Hal's hypnosis and Natalie's coma), *Shallow Hal* and *Isn't It Romantic* reproduce the ideological message that '[l]ove is routinely "for" the able-bodied, the slim, the beautiful' (Beasley and Brook, 2019, p. 140).

5.4 The Ageing Body as a Sign of a Failure of Self-Care in *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) and *Ticket to Paradise* (2022)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, a core facet of neoliberal feminism is that '[t]he promise of a happy *future* work-family balance […] inscribes futurity as a promise as well as an orientation' (Rottenberg, 2020, p. 133, emphasis in original). This is to say that neoliberalism requires young people to self-invest, work hard, and maximise their working potential in the short term in the hope of achieving a more pleasant work-family balance later in life. In the mainstream romantic comedy film this is realised in the image of the affluent professional, heterosexual or homonormative couple who simultaneously pursue careers while also finding a romantic partner for domestic cohabitation and, at least by implication, for child-rearing.[109] However, this raises a problem for neoliberalism: the problem of reconciling futurity with those for whom the future is precarious, including those with poor health, disabilities, and, as I discuss in this section, the old. The neoliberal answer to this is to present self-care as a moral duty and to reproduce the notion that 'vulnerability and dependency are graphically equated with personal carelessness' (McRobbie, 2020, p. 17). In this section, I analyse how two romantic comedy films that focus on older protagonists, *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) and *Ticket to Paradise* (2022), reinforce the ideological message that age-related bodily failure is a sign of the moral failure of self-care. *Something's Gotta Give*, starring Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton, conveys this message particularly through slapstick comedic moments, which treat the ageing body as an object to be laughed at, both as it is and also as an object prone to bodily failure. The later film, *Ticket to Paradise*, starring George Clooney and Julia Roberts, despite having lead actors of a similar age to the older film, achieves this through a refusal to acknowledge age-related bodily failure as a theme at all, which I argue reflects both a tacit youth-

[109] For examples, in *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989), the main couple are a journalist and a political consultant; in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), Bridget (Renée Zellweger) becomes a television presenter and her eventual romantic partner, Mark (Colin Firth), is a barrister; in *Trainwreck* (2015), Amy (Amy Schumer) is a journalist and Aaron (Bill Hader) is a surgeon. In all of these films, the protagonists appear to be in their twenties or thirties and do not have children.

orientation in the mainstream rom-com and the illusion that age can be avoided via self-care.[110]

Something's Gotta Give (2003) focuses on two older characters: Harry (Jack Nicholson), a sixty-three-year-old lifelong bachelor who drinks, smokes cigars (see figure 119) and claims in the film's opening voiceover that he has been dating younger women for forty years, and Erica (Diane Keaton), a successful playwright and the mother of Harry's girlfriend at the start of the film, Marin (Amanda Peet). During the course of the film, Harry has a heart attack while kissing Marin and stays at Erica's house to recover, during which time Erica and Harry fall for each other. Accordingly, the central plot of the film hinges upon several comedic moments concerning age-related bodily failure in connection to health and morbidity. In addition to this, there are also repeated references to Viagra in the film, representative as it is of the dysfunctional older male body in relation to sexual virility. For example, in the hospital, Harry is asked if he has taken Viagra, which he denies, but when the doctor says that is good because Viagra reacts badly with the medication they have put him on, Harry immediately rips out his catheter, implying that he has indeed taken it. Furthermore, the film plays on the older body in relation to clumsiness, as when, for example, Harry stumbles out of the room when he hears Erica's car pulling back in, comically steadying himself on the walls and furniture. So, the film clearly contains numerous examples of age-related bodily failure, but Harry also cries multiple times towards the end of the film, insinuating mental or emotional fragility alongside his physical fragility.

[110] In 2003, Jack Nicholson was sixty-six years old and Diane Keaton was fifty-seven. In 2022, George Clooney was sixty-one years old and Julia Roberts was fifty-five.



Figure 119: Harry (Jack Nicholson) in *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) shows a disregard for his own health until he suffers a heart attack.

By contrast, *Ticket to Paradise* (2022) is the story of a divorced couple, Georgia (Julia Roberts) and David (George Clooney), who both attend their daughter Lily's (Kaitlyn Dever) wedding in Bali. During the film, Georgia and David fight, possibly sleep together, kiss, and decide to stay in Bali with Lily and her new husband, Gede (Maxime Bouttier). Thus, the plot of *Ticket to Paradise* is entirely unrelated to bodily issues facing older people. Instead, both David and Georgia are presented as physically attractive and capable in both their personal lives and in terms of their jobs. Where Harry retires at the end of *Something's Gotta Give*, neither David nor Georgia mention retirement. Indeed, David and Georgia even excel at youth-orientated physical activities, such as when they swim in the sea or beat the younger couple, Gede and Lily, at the bar game beer pong. Consequently, David and Georgia are depicted as capable in essentially every project they pursue in the film, and I propose that this relates to the light-hearted, utopian quality with which mainstream rom-coms hail their spectator, because in *Ticket to Paradise* ageing bodies are present only because they neither look nor act like ageing bodies.

Elizabeth Evans asserts that in popular feminism '[t]here is no discussion, for instance, of bodily concerns such as the menopause, or of sexuality in older age, of widowhood, or of a western media that refuses to take older women seriously' (2015, p. 105). While *Ticket to Paradise* addresses sexuality in older age, such as when David

tells Georgia that she looks like she is in her 'prime,' it does not reference the menopause at all. Where *Sex and the City 2* (2010) features a plotline in which Samantha (Kim Cattrall) takes hormone replacements, *Ticket to Paradise* simply avoids discussion of menopause altogether. For me, this suggests that, despite the way that, as Jermyn describes, in recent years the wider media and celebrity discourse has embraced the menopausal turn, the rom-com may even have taken a step backwards towards the way that '[a]cross Western cultures […] menopause has long been configured as a difficult, shameful and secretive stage in the life course' (2023, p. 2). By comparison, *Something's Gotta Give* addresses both sexuality in older people and menopause through its comedic moments. Sexuality in older age is referenced when Harry's mouth drops open when he sees Erica in a black dress and high heels, and the menopause is referenced later in the film when Harry and Erica are about to have sex: Harry asks about birth control, and Erica simply responds, 'menopause' and smiles. This leads me to conclude that the older film gives a more rounded view of ageing that the more recent film disavows.

As well as the romantic relationships the older female leads have with men their own age, both films also present the women going on dates with much younger romantic partners: Julian (Keanu Reeves) tells Erica she is 'incredibly sexy,' and Georgia's younger boyfriend, Paul (Lucas Bravo), attempts to propose to her several times during the film. Thus, in this respect, these films challenge the idea that the 'menopause has long been framed by some commentators to be a time of *renewal* for women, and release, by virtue of the ageing process, from restrictive appraisals based on socially sanctioned modes of femininity' (Jermyn, 2023, p. 2). While their new relationships mark a renewal for Georgia and Erica, they are still praised for their visual appearance in both films, which, as I argued in Chapter 2, is a core element of the interpellation of female characters in mainstream rom-com ideology. If, as Germaine Greer writes, '[t]o be unwanted is also to be free' (1991, p. 4), then neither woman is free.

Rather, both films associate youth-orientated activities and, in the case of Erica, clothing that accentuates femininity with a pleasurable sense of being wanted romantically. Erica's transformation regarding self-care is not centred upon her health but rather on her appearance. At the start of the film, Erica appears in numerous scenes in turtleneck jumpers (see figure 120), which is commented on by several other characters in a way that is presumably meant to imply that the turtleneck makes her look asexual or frumpy. After Harry questions her on this, she starts to wear lower-cut tops and dresses, and when she and Harry have sex, she asks him to cut her turtleneck jumper off her using a pair of scissors. I suggest that this extends the idea, referred to earlier in this thesis, that in rom-coms 'sexual self-objectification is women's fastest route to success' (Ruti, 2016, p. 12) by applying this principle to include women in their fifties and sixties. Erica is then narratively rewarded for her embrace of more revealing, more obviously feminine clothing with positive male attention and, ultimately, with her romantic relationship with Harry.



Figure 120: Erica (Diane Keaton) in *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) initially wears a turtleneck jumper in numerous scenes before she asks Harry to cut it off of her when they have sex.

By contrast, Harry's transformation is a result of exercise and stopping smoking cigars, for which he is rewarded with a denouement scene in which he and Erica take Marin, her new husband, and her daughter out for lunch. Harry has sold his business interests by this point in the film, and thus he and Erica have achieved the sort of

work-life balance associated by Rottenberg (2020) with neoliberal feminism insofar as they made self-investments (Harry's focus on his health; Erica's embrace of her feminine sexuality) that result in the film's final image depicting a happy work-family balance. While the film references death and bodily failure much more than many of the other romantic comedy films discussed in previous chapters, there is still an idealised (heterosexual, affluent, white) vision of family-orientated coupledom realised at the end of the film: that of idealised grandparents (see figure 121).[111]



Figure 121: In *Something's Gotta Give* (2003), the film ends with Harry (Jack Nicholson) and Erica (Diane Keaton) enjoying time as grandparents to Erica's grandchild, which I link to the neoliberal promise of future work-life balance as a reward for their newfound self-care: Harry's in terms of health, and Erica's in terms of her appearance.

As I have suggested, a striking aspect of *Ticket to Paradise* is that it contains remarkably few references to age.[112] Instead, the sources of comedic incongruity in *Ticket to Paradise* centre upon the contempt that David and Georgia have for each other, alongside some moments of slapstick physical comedy, none of which refer

[111] A similar reading of the normativity at the end of *Something's Gotta Give* is given by Jermyn, who discussing the fact that Harry and Erica are now paired with each other rather than their much younger romantic interests earlier in the film, notes that 'social order has been reinstated in the constituting of this normative nuclear family arrangement' (Jermyn, 2020, p. 195).

[112] On the one hand, the comparative lack of references to age in *Ticket to Paradise* might speak to the changing perception of where old age begins due to increasing lifespans in the US. On the other hand, I argue that it reveals the ideological promise of futurity for the neoliberal subject who embraces self-care.

directly to David and Georgia's ages. There is a moment in the film when David jumps into the sea, taking off his top to reveal a tanned, slim physique and jumping into the water (see figure 122). This contrasts starkly with the depiction of Harry's body in *Something's Gotta Give*, since Harry at one point in the film struggles to walk up a set of stairs (see figure 123). In *Ticket to Paradise*, David only requires physical assistance when he is carried back to shore after being bitten by a dolphin. Therefore, Harry's bodily failure stems from his age and lack of self-care, whereas David's bodily failure stems from a freak accident. Similarly, in another scene in *Ticket to Paradise*, Georgia exhibits a brief moment of bodily failure when she falls out of bed after noticing that David is in bed with her. Here again, this clumsiness is caused by her surprise at seeing her ex-husband in her bed following a drunken night out, not from her age. Whereas in *Something's Gotta Give* there is a moment when Harry falls asleep while reading and then falls into a wall when he is awoken, Georgia and David both exhibit accidental bodily failure while engaging in otherwise youthful activities, which their bodies seem to cope with (see figures 124–127). Rather, in *Ticket to Paradise*, the character whose clumsiness invokes the greatest number of comedic moments is Georgia's younger boyfriend, Paul: in one scene he is bitten by a snake, which causes him to collapse and slur his speech; and, in a later scene, he accidentally headbutts Georgia while trying to propose to her.



Figure 122: In *Ticket to Paradise* (2022), David (George Clooney) jumps into the water, revealing an age-defying activeness and slim physique.



Figure 123: A plotline in *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) involves Harry (Jack Nicholson) attempting to climb stairs to prove that he is fit enough to have sex without having another heart attack, which reproduces the message that men of all ages pursue sex and acknowledges the idea than an ageing body can be an obstacle to sex.



Figure 124: Georgia (Julia Roberts) swims with dolphins in *Ticket to Paradise* (2022).



Figure 125: David (George Clooney) plays squash in *Ticket to Paradise* (2022).



Figure 126: David (George Clooney) and Georgia (Julia Roberts) out-drink their daughter and her fiancé and celebrate by dancing in *Ticket to Paradise* (2022).

In conclusion, a comparative analysis of the representation of the ageing body in *Something's Gotta Give* and *Ticket to Paradise* reveals that the mainstream rom-com presents the ageing body as a sign of a moral failure of self-care. This is conveyed to the spectator through the poorly maintained ageing body as an object of derision in the former film, and by omitting to acknowledge any signs of ageing in the utopian vision of well-maintained older bodies in the latter. David and Georgia appear to have taken care of their bodies and so do not exhibit any signs of bodily failure related to ageing; whereas both Harry and Erica exhibit visual signs of ageing as well as failures of self-care. This fits with neoliberalism's insistence on individualised responsibility. It is particularly notable that self-care for ageing female characters takes the form of continuing to dress in a feminine, sexually attractive manner, while self-care for male characters focuses more on health concerns. Of course, this gendered difference reinforces the core aspect of mainstream rom-com gender ideology discussed in Chapter 2: that men are valued for their power and status, and women for their visual appearance.

5.5 The Incompatibility between the Rom-Com and the Non-Conforming Body in *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Love & Other Drugs* (2010), and *Me Before You* (2016)

So far in this chapter, I have discussed the mainstream rom-com's representation of "non-conforming" bodies in the forms of fatness, height, and ageing. This section examines the representation of non-conforming bodies in terms of disability and disease. That is to say, bodies that fail to keep the individual healthy and able rather than bodies that merely have a visual appearance outside of the norms of standard gender ideology representation, such as age, height, or weight. In *Forrest Gump* (1994), the eponymous Forrest (Tom Hanks) has a low IQ and wears leg braces as a child before serendipitously becoming an inadvertent participant in several historical events of the twentieth century. In the course of the film, Forrest befriends Lieutenant Dan (Gary Sinise), who becomes a wheelchair user after losing part of his legs in the Vietnam War, and Forrest falls in love with Jenny (Robin Wright) – they marry and have a child together before Jenny dies of an unnamed disease, which it is suggested may be AIDS. *Love & Other Drugs* (2010) is about a romance between a charming pharmaceutical salesman, Jamie (Jake Gyllenhaal), and a fiercely independent woman with Parkinson's disease, Maggie (Anne Hathaway). *Me Before You* (2016) centres on the romance between an outgoing professional carer, Louisa (Emilia Clarke), and a nihilistic man left paralysed following a traffic accident, Will (Sam Claflin), before Will chooses to die from assisted suicide at a Dignitas centre at the end of the film. Both *Forrest Gump* and *Me Before You* end with one of the romantic pair dying, and *Love & Other Drugs* ends with Jamie caring for Maggie. At the end of this section, I conclude that due to these tragic narrative arcs, the films reproduce the idea that genuinely non-conforming bodies are incompatible with the light-hearted, utopian manner in which the mainstream rom-com interpellates its spectator. There is also a sense that disability and disease threaten the myths of heterosexual, productive time, which are core to the heterosexual and homonormative romantic narratives seen in the other romantic comedy films already discussed.

A difficulty in writing this chapter was the lack of disabled representation in romantic comedies. As such, this section analyses three romantic dramas – *Forrest*

Gump (1994), *Love & Other Drugs* (2010), and *Me Before You* (2016) – which all feature able-bodied actors portraying characters with disabilities, and which contain comedic moments but are largely unrelated to disability. I contend that, contrary to King's assertion that '[c]omedy can function as a safety net, permitting the use of material that might otherwise be controversial or impossible to include in mainstream film' (2002, p. 149), the perception of disability and illness as tragic complicates their inclusion in the "utopian" or at least "light-hearted" rom-com genre. Instead, these three films suggest that, for the mainstream cinema viewer, disability is too unsettling to be reconciled with the romantic comedy genre, which is 'frequently critically constructed as inherently trite or lightweight' (Abbott and Jermyn, 2009a, p. 2). Therefore, the films in this section reproduce the ideological link between seriousness, morbidity, and disability, which are at odds with the mainstream rom-com genre.

First, I shall justify why these films deserve consideration in a thesis that hitherto focuses solely on romantic comedy films. *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Love & Other Drugs* (2010), and *Me Before You* (2016) all somewhat fit the rom-com formula insofar as they have plots driven by what Billy Mernit suggests is the key question for all rom-coms: 'will these two individuals become a couple?' (2020, p. 16). Like rom-coms, all three films also contain many comedic moments, but these are almost always unrelated to their protagonist's physical impairments. In *Forrest Gump*, the comedic moments often focus on Forrest's social misunderstandings, lack of general knowledge, and physical comedy, which are linked to his cognitive impairment rather than his physical disability. Incidentally, this suggests that, in 1994 at least, cognitive disability was seen as a more appropriate source of comedy than physical disability. Comedy is derived from Forrest's lack of general knowledge, such as when he says that the Ku Klux Klan used to 'like dressing up like ghosts or something' or when he refers to Apple Inc. as 'some kind of fruit company.' Forrest also misunderstands social cues, such as when he shows President Johnson his gun wound on his buttock during a televised meeting. Additionally, Forrest performs moments of slapstick physical comedy in the film, such as when he pilots a boat and sees his friend waving at him from the dock, immediately jumping overboard and swimming to shore (see figure

130). In this way, Forrest demonstrates comedic superhuman capabilities as well as a simplistic moral goodness, which further reaffirms the link between bodily capability and moral worth established earlier in this chapter. In *Love & Other Drugs*, the comedic moments primarily stem from the lack of morality exhibited by the able-bodied, conventionally attractive protagonist Jamie and his fatter, more immature brother, Josh (Josh Gad). However, there are relatively few scenes that derive comic incongruity from the ill protagonist, Maggie. This pairing of a conventionally attractive male with a fatter, taller, or otherwise less conventionally attractive male is also typical of romantic comedy films of the late 1980s to the present, and *Love & Other Drugs* further boosts its rom-com credentials with scenes in which Jamie "teaches" other men how to seduce women, reminiscent of similar love guru scenes in rom-coms during the 2000s and 2010s, such as *Hitch* (2005) or *Crazy, Stupid, Love* (2011).



Figure 127: Forrest (Tom Hanks), still wet from swimming to shore in a moment of superhuman slapstick comedy from *Forrest Gump* (1994).

Compared to the two older films, *Me Before You* features physical disability more prominently through its main character, Will, who is paralysed from the neck down. Additionally, among the three films discussed in this section, *Me Before You* contains the fewest comedic moments. *Me Before You* contains some comedic moments unrelated to disability, such as when the able-bodied protagonist, Louisa (or Lou), wears her mother's "smart" clothes from the 1980s and her skirt rips during a job interview, or the repeated dynamic in a series of scenes in which Lou greets Will and he ignores her. Indeed, there are relatively few comedic moments concerning disability in *Me Before You.* Early in the film, when Lou first meets Will, he groans in a manner that resembles John Hurt's performance as Joseph Merrick in *The Elephant Man* (1980), but he breaks off this performance, saying in a clear, upper-class voice, 'Hello Louisa Clarke, I'm Will Traynor.' None of the other characters in the scene smile

or laugh, and, instead, another carer, Nathan (Steve Peacocke), remarks under his breath, 'You are a bad man, Mr T.' As such, this moment is coded as unsuccessful comedy, with the subject matter too uncomfortable for the characters in the scene to find amusing. Elsewhere, there are light-hearted moments that incorporate Will's disability, though not at his expense. For example, Will's wheelchair gets stuck in the mud when they go horseracing, but Will's embarrassment in this moment – he tries to discourage Lou from asking for help – prevents the moment from being realised as truly comedic (see figure 128). By contrast, there is a scene in which Louisa sits on Will's lap as they dance at a wedding (see figure 129) and the pair take delight in drawing the attention from the other wedding guests, which is a comedic moment that incorporates Will's disability. However, the target of the comedy here is the reaction of the fusty, old-fashioned wedding guests, not any bodily failure on Will's part.



Figure 128: In *Me Before You* (2016), Will's (Sam Claflin) wheelchair gets stuck in the mud when they go horseracing, but his obvious embarrassment and discomfort prevents this moment from being purely comedic.

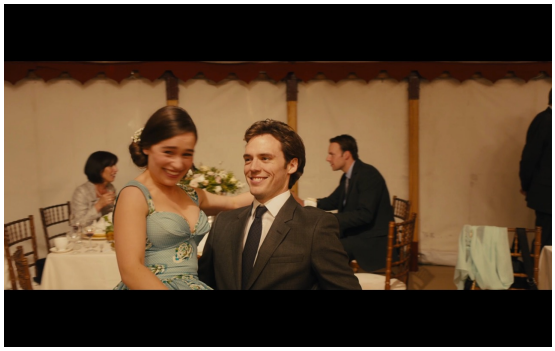


Figure 129: Will (Sam Claflin) and Louisa (Emilia Clarke) dance at a wedding in *Me Before You* (2016) in a rare comedic moment than references Will's disability.

Another reason that I consider *Me Before You* in this thesis is that it reproduces tropes of classic rom-coms, such as when Lou and Will attend a classical music recital together and Lou wears a red dress reminiscent of the red dress worn in *Pretty Woman* (1990) by Vivian (Julia Roberts) when she and Edward attend the opera (see figures 130 and 108). The notion of going on a date to listen to high-brow music is further established in the rom-com canon by *Moonstruck* (1987), and as I have previously noted the red dress also referenced in *Isn't It Romantic* (see figure 107). However, *Me Before You* mimics the visual tropes of the rom-com genre most

obviously when Will and Lou attend a wedding together, since this is perhaps the most typical of rom-com locations.[113]



Figure 130: Louisa (Emilia Clarke) wears a red gown in *Me Before You* (2016), which is again reminiscent of the dress worn by Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* (1990) (see figure 108).

In addition to their deployment of comedic moments and rom-com tropes detailed above, all three films also fit with the other romantic comedies discussed in this chapter in the way they value their gendered protagonists based on either male power or female beauty. Indeed, much like *Tall Girl* (2019), the gender dynamics in the romantic couples in both *Forrest Gump* and *Love & Other Drugs* also reaffirm myths of male physical dominance: Jamie gets into a fistfight with Maggie's other male love interest (see figure 131), and Forrest punches three other men who show interest in Jenny over the course of the film. As such, both male lead characters demonstrate physical aggression to "protect" their female love interests. In *Me Before You,* Will does not physically protect Lou, and since he decides to end his life, I suggest that the

[113] As Dodd and Fradley note, '[n]o feature of the rom-com synthesises the genre's core elements as conveniently as the wedding ceremony. For it is here, at the altar of the romantic imaginary, that the traditions of the past and the ideological flux of the present come together, where the internal turmoil of the most private, personal longings are declared, celebrated and legitimised in the public sphere, and where the problem of the eternal conflict between the sexes is heightened, investigated and then purposefully – nay, fetishistically – resolved' (2009, p. 193).

film presents this as an example of bodily failure – Will's body prevents him from performing normative masculinity and so fails in his project of the self. By contrast, all three female characters are praised for their physical beauty in their films: Forrest describes Jenny as an 'angel'; Jamie comically remarks to Maggie, 'I'm sorry I stared at your tits, but they are very nice'; and Will remarks that he wants to be thought of as 'a man who's been to a concert with a girl in a red dress.' Therefore, all three films reproduce the dichotomous, rom-com gender ideology wherein male characters are valued for their strength and female characters are valued for their physical appearance.



Figure 131: Jamie (Jake Gyllenhaal) gets into a fight with another of Maggie's love interests in *Love & Other Drugs* (2010).

However, despite the aforementioned comedic moments, utilisation of rom-com tropes, and the rom-com-esque gendered valuing of these films' protagonists, I argue that none of these films should be read as mainstream rom-coms because they do not situate disability issues within rom-com narrative frameworks, rather they place rom-com tropes within tragic disability narrative arcs.[114] In short, *Forrest Gump* and *Me Before You* are not romantic comedies because Forrest's love interest, Jenny, and Will die at the end of their respective films. Similarly, *Love & Other Drugs* becomes decidedly more dramatic around a third of the way into the film, after Jamie meets Maggie, a twenty-six-year-old woman with early onset Parkinson's disease.

[114] Thus, all three films reaffirm Davis's observation that '[p]hysical disabilities appear in the popular imagination in a variety of ways, notably as challenges or tragedies' (2017, p. 39).

In *Me Before You,* Lou's goal once she and Will develop a romantic relationship is to dissuade Will from travelling to Switzerland to end his life via assisted suicide, which she ultimately fails to do. For this reason, even though *Me Before You* has variously been described as a rom-com (Wilde, 2019, p. 76), a 'fairytale romance' (Pepper, 2016), and 'a quirky opposites-attract love story' (Wanshel, 2016), the film is fundamentally tragic in tone and in its narrative conclusion, culminating as it does with Will's death by assisted suicide.[115] Notably, in one scene Will remarks that even if he went back to work, he would not be 'himself,' which implies that his able-bodiedness is a fundamental characteristic of his subjectivity. Will's decision to end his life since he cannot go back to work as "himself" finds an echo in Foucault's concept of the technology of the self: 'sometimes what [the citizen] has to do for the state is to live, to work, to produce, to consume; and sometimes what [they] ha[ve] to do is to die' (1988a, p. 152). As such, Will's non-conforming body ultimately derails his project as a neoliberal, capital-enhancing agent and prevents him from the kind of family-orientated, domestically coupled futurity which I have suggested is key to the mainstream rom-com's neoliberal ideology.[116]

Will's unwillingness to continue his life while he is reliant on the care of others reveals another aspect of these three films that is incompatible with the idealism of the mainstream rom-com genre: their evocation of care. Rottenberg posits care work as 'one of neoliberal rationality's most vulnerable fault lines in the present' (2020, p. 103), which is to say that there is a tension in a society that casts people as generic human capital regardless of disability and prizes longevity yet in which domestic care is undervalued. I suggest that the obviousness of the problems associated with care, and thus the unearthing of this fault line, in *Forrest Gump*, *Love & Other Drugs*, and *Me Before You* makes these films incompatible with the "simple-pleasures" form of

[115] As Beasley and Brook note, *Me Before You* reproduces the ideological message that '[g]allows humour and the occasional slapstick gag aside, in romance narratives illness and disability are firmly situated in the realm of darker, serious drama' (2019, p. 162).

[116] As Halberstam suggests, in Western culture, 'we create longevity as the most desirable future, applaud the pursuit of long life (under any circumstances), and pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity' (2005, p. 4); so, in *Me Before You*, Will's disability disrupts his potential for longevity not by shortening his life expectancy by itself but by disrupting his sense of subjecthood.

spectator interpellation that I describe in this chapter. That is to say, the presence of care work grounds these films in a real-world experience and not in a rom-com "utopia." Beasley and Brook note, in the mainstream rom-com, that '[o]bstacles impeding the lovers are likely to be farcical and situational rather than the darker, more morbid situations associated with romantic drama' (2019, p. 138). However, I suggest that it is not only the morbidity associated with disability and disease that challenges their suitability for rom-coms but also their evocation of the complications that care work presents to the individualistic, capital-enhancing neoliberal project.

In the previous sections I asserted that the mainstream rom-com casts fatness and age as signs of moral failure. While Maggie's Parkinson's disease and Will's paralysis are not narratively linked to moral failure, Jenny's illness is presented as a result of her life choices. After scenes in which she appears in Playboy magazine, sings in a strip club, is involved in various countercultural movements, and takes drugs – including one she injects – Jenny contracts an unnamed 'virus,' before eventually dying. Jenny's headstone states that she passed away in 1982, aged thirty-six. While the film does not explicitly say that she dies of HIV/AIDS, the timing of her death and the references to her time living in San Francisco, where there was and still is a large gay population, imply that this may be the cause of her death. Forrest represents a normative life: he goes to college, plays on the All-American Football Team, serves in the army, starts his own successful business, and then invests in other people's successful businesses. In contrast, Jenny represents the dangers of nonconformist life, and Jenny's disease is narratively juxtaposed with her drug-taking and therefore implicitly linked to her countercultural activities (see figure 132).



Figure 132: In *Forrest Gump* (1994), the attire of Forrest (Tom Hanks) and Jenny (Robin Wright) visually reflects their choices, the former choosing a life of service, the latter choosing a countercultural life.

Similarly, in *Love & Other Drugs*, a central source of comedy is Jamie's immature, overweight multimillionaire brother, Josh. Josh's lack of self-care and lack of morality are firmly intertwined when his wife divorces him because he is addicted to internet porn, leading him to sleep on Jamie's sofa for the rest of the film.[117] His immaturity is further demonstrated in numerous comedic moments in the film, such as when Jamie asks why he is sleeping on the sofa when he is so rich, to which he responds, 'You're my big brother!' Josh further demonstrates a lack of social awareness when Jamie catches him watching Jamie and Maggie's homemade sex tape, or when Josh and Jamie attend a pyjama party and Josh sits on a bed in long sleeved pyjamas and socks, next to a woman in lingerie (Bree Jo Newman), and awkwardly talks to her about his business interests before she removes her bra and starts to kiss him (see figure 133). Josh's simultaneous fascination with sex and lack of sexual awareness serve to reinforce the image of Jamie's newfound maturity, evident when he attends a meeting of Parkinson's sufferers with Maggie, or when he enrols in medical school at the end of the film.



Figure 133: In *Love & Other Drugs* (2010), Josh (Josh Gad) sits awkwardly on a bed telling a woman in lingerie, Bree (Jo Newman), about his business interests in a comedic moment that plays on his immaturity and thus reproduces a link between fatness and immaturity.

[117] This speaks to Plotz's assertion that 'a large number of those fat male representations that are marked present the fat male body as a "less than masculine" body, de-masculinized, feminized and/or infantilized' (2021, p. 9).

A final reason that these three films are not romantic comedies, yet shed an interesting light on them, is that they feature characters exhibiting genuine emotional distress as a result of their bodily impairments. In addition to Will's desire to end his life in *Me Before You*, in *Forrest Gump*, Lieutenant Dan demonstrates serious self-loathing when he describes himself as a 'goddamn cripple, a legless freak.' Furthermore, Lieutenant Dan also tells Forrest that he wanted to die in the war rather than live on with a disability. Towards the end of the film, Lieutenant Dan walks to Forrest and Jenny's wedding on his new prosthetic 'titanium alloy' legs, and he is accompanied by his fiancée, Susan (Teresa Denton). This is also the first time that Lieutenant Dan appears clean-shaven and with short hair, which suggests that his ability to perform able-bodiedness and his ability to assimilate into middle-class America are intrinsically linked (see figures 134–136), just as Will's ability to function as "himself" is linked to his able-bodiedness. Where Lieutenant Dan's disability and Will's disability are not sources of comedy in their respective films, there are several comedic moments in *Love & Other Drugs* that occur during the 'Un-Convention' meeting of Parkinson's sufferers that Jamie and Maggie attend. For example, one attendee tells the crowd through a microphone that she is much better at hand-jobs now. However, this section of the film also features a moment when one of the other partners of a Parkinson's sufferer earnestly tells Jamie to leave Maggie 'and find himself a healthy woman' because of how difficult it will be caring for her as her health deteriorates. Therefore, all three films mark non-conforming bodies affected by disability or disease as fundamentally negative things that seriously hamper or prevent romantic relationships.



Figure 134: Lieutenant Dan (Gary Sinise) early on in *Forrest Gump* (1994) when he and Forrest are fighting in the Vietnam War.



Figure 135: Lieutenant Dan midway through *Forrest Gump* (1994) when he uses a wheelchair.



Figure 136: Lieutenant Dan at the end of *Forrest Gump* (1994) when he attends Forrest and Jenny's wedding.

In conclusion, the threat of care and death in all three films – Will's assisted suicide, Jenny's premature death, and the implicit threat of Maggie's premature death – prevent all three films from interpellating their viewers into a simple-pleasures relationship of viewing. All three films present disability as an obstacle to romantic partnering, with *Forrest Gump* and *Me Before You* concluding with the central couple separated by death, while *Love & Other Drugs* leaves the looming spectre of care as the future of Jamie and Maggie's romantic relationship. All three films contain comedic moments that suit the rom-com genre, all three films feature rom-com tropes, and all three films value their female protagonists for their physical beauty and their male protagonists for their power and status. However, ultimately, all three films position their characters within tragic narrative arcs. In this way, these films demonstrate that genuinely non-conforming bodies are incompatible with the neoliberal mainstream rom-com's ideological projects.

5.6 Closing Remarks

To summarise the key findings of this final case study chapter, I have argued that the comedy in these case study films reveal an ideological link between bodily failure, as represented by height, fatness, old age, and disability, and a failure of self-care, which is fundamentally sizeist and ableist in nature. I have articulated the neoliberal problem of the female body that challenges the "norm" of the small, petite, feminine body, and I have explored how *Tall Girl* (2019) reconciles this through consumerist manipulation of the body's appearance as well as by juxtaposing a taller female body with displays of dominant masculinity from male love interests. I have also explored how mainstream romantic comedies that feature fat protagonists mobilise fantasy elements and particularly fat slapstick and fat gross-out comedic moments to undermine the romantic credibility of their films in *Shallow Hal* (2001) and *Isn't It Romantic* (2019). This reinforces the ideological link between fatness and moral failure, similar to how *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) and *Ticket to Paradise* (2022) present the ageing body as the sign of a failure of self-care. Through this analysis, I have suggested that the mainstream rom-com reproduces the notion that fat, tall, or ageing bodies are reconciled with Western beauty standards through individual self-improvement in a manner reminiscent of Foucault's (1988b) "technology of the self." However, I have concluded that bodies marked by disease or disability are incompatible with the mainstream rom-com genre's mandate to hail a simple-pleasures, utopian spectator. Instead, when mainstream romantic films include characters with disabilities in lead roles, these films are most often presented as romantic tragedies, as with *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Love & Other Drugs* (2010), or *Me Before You* (2016).

In the previous chapters of this thesis, I separated the films produced in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s from the films produced since the mid-2010s and what I perceive to be a cultural shift in the wake of the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements. However, in this chapter I have found no evidence of such a shift impacting the depiction of disability and fatness, other than the fact that fat characters are no longer played by slim actors wearing prosthetic fat suits. By contrast, I have found that disabled characters continue to be played by able-bodied actors, as with

Sam Claflin in *Me Before You*. Therefore, the genre's adherence to neoliberal ideals of entrepreneurial bodily transformation and self-reliance, and its mockery of body difference, further perpetuates the marginalisation of certain groups. While I have included films released since the mid-2010s in each section of this chapter, in terms of the narrative arcs and comedic moments analysed, the position of the mainstream feature-length rom-com seems to have been stagnant, suggesting a need for more progressive formats and narratives in the future.

There is also something to be said here for the risk-averse nature of the Hollywood film industry in which big budget films based on existing intellectual property are continually financed, but it is increasingly difficult for smaller films to be made. Cord Jefferson urged producers to back smaller budget films in his Oscar acceptance speech after winning for Best Adapted Screenplay in 2024 (Oscars, 2024) against the backdrop of reports that Hollywood 'lately hasn't been set up to regularly produce [mid-budget] movies at the rate it used to' (Faughnder, 2023; see similar observation in Asmelash, 2022). This risk-averse climate, fuelled by the decline in cinema-goers and spiralling costs in the wake of the covid pandemic, writers' strikes, and the cost of living crisis, leaves romantic comedy films in a vulnerable position in terms of funding. I argue here that this aversion to risk is particularly pertinent to the kinds of bodies that are represented on screen in a number of ways. First, there is a lack of established fat, disabled, or tall female stars, whose name recognition might convince producers to feature them in lead roles in larger budget films.[118] This means that producers, keen to see a return on their investment, might favour established rom-com leads, such as Meg Ryan, Julia Roberts, or, more recently, Lily James, whose bodies tacitly reproduce the gender ideology described in this thesis that favours slim, white women. Where Rebel Wilson is a notable exception, establishing her brand recognition playing fat best-friend characters before transitioning into lead roles, such

[118] While the primary method that I have used in this thesis is textual analysis, one of the other areas of film studies that my thesis speaks to is star theory. Since, '[t]he circulation, reception and cultural currency of stars cannot be explained convincingly by exclusively textual, sociological or economic forms of analysis' (Donald, 2007, p. 110), an analysis of contemporary rom-com stars (or the lack thereof) could be a future avenue for research but does not constitute a major cornerstone of this current thesis. Rather, I bring it in here to augment the discussion of my findings.

as the one discussed in this chapter. However, her status within the rom-com landscape differs from Meg Ryan, Julia Roberts, and Lily James's in a number of ways. First, as analysed previously, her roles use physical comedy that defies the laws of physics as well as a large number of meta references to create a more ironic, less sincere rom-com world that questions the believability of her as a credible rom-com character. Second, Wilson has spoken publicly about how she felt 'pigeon-holed' by the way that her size was seen as a core component of her comedic value to the film industry, even revealing that she had a clause in her contract for the *Pitch Perfect* films (2012–2017) that stated that she could not lose weight during filming (Thorp, 2024). Anne Friedberg defines the film star as 'a particular commoditised human, routed through a system of signs with exchange value' (Friedberg quoted in Donald, 2007, p. 111), and, clearly, part of Wilson's "exchange value" was her size. This stipulation in her contract also speaks to the fact that body size is not a protected characteristic, which is at the heart of the key findings in this chapter. The film producers could threaten to terminate Wilson's employment based on a change in her body size as something that is judged to be within her control – as opposed to sexuality or race – which is the same mitigating assumption that sanctions the fat-centric moments of comedy discussed in my analysis. Where there has been a change in the way that mainstream media present sexuality and race, as discussed in the last two chapters, there has not been a change between the 2000s and the 2010s in terms of the mockery of fatness.

Where I have noted that are relatively few fat film stars, George Clooney and Julia Roberts represent a number of older film stars, who established their names in the earlier boom periods for the film industry and have been continually trusted with the bigger budgets required for lavish, expensive rom-com feature films, as they approach their sixties. However, in my analysis they are present in *Ticket to Paradise* only so long as they are playing essentially the same roles that established their fame earlier in their careers and without reference to their ageing bodies. While some might argue that the roles for Julia Roberts and Diane Keaton examined in this chapter's case study rom-coms echo a sense of quiet revolution at the core of the genre, I contend

that this is only true for Keaton. In the case of Roberts, it is indicative of the repetition of her witty, acerbic on-screen persona without acknowledging the realities of ageing. John Ellis notes, the star is 'a performer in a particular medium whose figure enters into subsidiary forms of circulation and then feeds back into future performances' (Ellis quoted in Donald, 2007, p. 111), and I contend that the continued use of Clooney and Roberts – alongside Jennifer Lopez, Renée Zellweger, Hugh Grant, and numerous other rom-com stars who have continued to make romantic comedy films into their fifties and sixties – reflects a desperation from a film industry keen to deflect attention from today's floundering cinema releases by reminding viewers of the heady boom of the 1990s and early 2000s, rather than a commitment to telling romantic stories that reflect the realities of older daters.

Conclusion

This thesis began by presenting the often-noted problem of unilaterally reading either "progressive" or "conservative" rom-com gender ideology purely from the almost ubiquitous rom-com trope of the "happy ending" (Deleyto, 2009). This is to say that much of the existing literature that interrogates the genre's ideological function centres upon discussion of the idea that no matter how much non-normative gender structuring occurs in the first eighty-five minutes of a rom-com, the final five minutes resolves conflict between the central romantic pair through a tacit endorsement of heterosexual marriage. However, this ignores the bulk of the film in which more complex ideological structuring hails the spectator in more nuanced and intriguing ways. To address this problem, this thesis developed a mixed methodological approach that combined theories of comedy with contemporary feminist writing to bring greater precision and nuance to discussions surrounding gender ideology and the rom-com's comedic moments as sites of ideological interpellation.

As I draw this thesis to a close, I must, however, return to the conclusion that the 85-minutes prior to the rom-com's resolution also tacitly reproduce a normative gender ideology against which viewers are invited to recognise themselves. The key lesson of this thesis is the uncovering of the stability of the default gender binarism that structured the mainstream gender ideology found in rom-com's comedic moments between the late 1980s and the present day. Each of the case study chapters has used content analysis to provide evidence for this claim. In Chapter 2, I read the continuation of the messages (the gendering of physical value as inherently female and the power/status as inherently male; the idea that women set sexual limits; the association between masculinity and sex-drive, femininity with emotional connection) as an element of the rom-com's enduring nostalgic, simple-pleasures appeal. In response to the increasingly complex issues around gender and sexuality in the modern world, there was an enduring simplicity to the "traditional" gender roles offered in the rom-com and the comedic moments derived from laughing at gender transgressions analysed in this thesis. A potential criticism of this argument could be

that it contained a tautological loop. Where I found characters enacting "traditional" gender expectations I argued that this upheld the normative gender ideology, and where I found characters transgressing gender expectations, I read this as a comedic moment in which the misperformance of gender was coded for incongruity and thus tacitly relied upon "traditional" gender expectations for the viewer to get the joke. One could argue that I was thereby choosing to read transgressive instances of gender misperformance as evidence of exactly what it was not.

However, this objection oversimplifies the level of detail of my analysis. My argument in Chapter 2 was not simply that Samantha throughout *Sex and the City 2* (2010) and Amy in the first two-thirds of *Trainwreck* (2015) were amusing because they were sex-positive women who desired status and physical pleasure at odds with our collective understanding of femininity. It was that their moments of gender transgression were both judged negatively by other in-world characters and also presented in opposition to the positively-coded gender-normative narrative suture for the female protagonists – Carrie in *Sex and the City 2* and Amy in the final act of *Trainwreck.* This might also lead a critic to ask: what then might it look like for a rom-com's comedy to not tacitly uphold a normative gender ideology? My answer to this is that comedy can come from any number of sources, especially if we return to Koestler's definition of bisociation as 'the perceiving of a situation or idea in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference, M_1 and M_2' (Koestler, 1989, p. 35). Two characters might walk through a park during a torrential downpour and one of them might remark, 'Lovely weather.' On a date in a restaurant, one character might wear a white shirt and black trousers and be mistaken for a member of the waiting staff. Two characters might lean in for a kiss only for one of them to sneeze before their lips meet. Indeed, there are a number of just such comedic moments unrelated to the performance of gender in the films that I have analysed in this thesis. The point is, rather, that all of the films were selected as being representative of mainstream British and American mainstream rom-com, and all of them contain comedic moments that *do* centre upon the performance of gender.

The key contributions of the second and third chapters were twofold. First, they further found examples of comedy that supports a "traditional" gender ideology in other mainstream rom-coms. Second, they uncovered how tacit whiteness and heteronormativity embedded within these comedic moments betray the rom-com genre's reification of the pleasures of societal privilege. The final case study chapter then elucidated how the rom-com's comedic moments that mocked bodily failure, the ongoing exclusion of disability from the rom-com genre, and the comedic moments that associated a lack of entrepreneurial self-investment (such as comedy that mocked fatness or signs of "premature" ageing) with bodily failure further upheld the illusion that entrepreneurial self-investment results in success. In short, the rom-com's focus on heterosexual, white, affluent, young, able-bodied protagonists provided the spectator with the fantasy that the normative privilege they saw on screen is both universal and attainable, and consequently that expressions of non-conformity to gender norms were laughable incongruities resulting from poor choices. In this way, I contend that the comedic moments in rom-coms over the past thirty-five years also speak to a sense of superiority in terms of how spectators are invited to recognise themselves in relation to structures of power in which affluence, heteronormativity, self-investment, and a sense of social liberalism that contrasts with non-Western primitivity are coded for value.

Thus, in focusing on British and American romantic comedy films, this thesis notes the manner in which both UK and US rom-coms have hailed their spectator as broadly Western-centric. While elsewhere it has been noted that 'the transatlantic romances of popular media, like so much of pop culture romance generally, are overwhelmingly the love stories of white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, economically privileged protagonists' (Brickman, Jermyn, and Trost, 2021a, p. 3), this thesis nuanced this to include youth, slimness, and able-bodiedness as core tenets of the rom-com gender ideology over the past thirty-five years. This leads me to infer that, when read through their romantic comedies, the default state for the Western (specifically British and American) subject has been one configured along these exclusionary lines while purporting to depict inclusive themes of universal love and acceptance.

Of course, within the time period between the late 1980s and the present day, the rom-com is not a static object, and each case study chapter has addressed the shifts in the specific examples of comedy deployed in each film across the period. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 all noted shifts that occurred in films during the mid-2010s in which there was a move towards somewhat tokenistic representation of female imperfection, racial difference, and lesbian, gay, and trans characters, while the films continued to pose all of these identity markers as obstacles that protagonists needed to negotiate in order to achieve their narrative goals. While there was a value in the visibility of such underrepresented characters in these films, which expanded the capacity for the representation of marginalised voices, what this led to was a commercialisation and containment of femaleness, racialised identities, and queer lifestyles. Thus – to co-opt Hall's (2021b) distinction between overt and inferential racism – while there was a move away from "overt" ridicule where favourable coverage was given to characters who mocked women, Black or Brown characters, or LGBT characters, there remained a commitment to "inferential" ridicule whereby rom-coms had discriminatory premisses and propositions inscribed in them as a set of *unquestioned assumptions.* As discussed in Chapter 5, there appears to be no such shift in comedic moments centred upon body difference during this time period. For me, this speaks to the neoliberal principle of individualism, whereby aspects of identity that are perceived as outside of the individual's control are no longer ripe for mockery, while those that are perceived to be part of a neoliberal body project, are routinely ridiculed. This further implies that while there has been an acknowledgment in the UK and USA in recent years that gender, race, and queerness are naturally occurring. By contrast, there is a tension at play in the continued perception that the body can be controlled in terms of size and age by morally admirable adherence to the principle of self-investment.

This leads to a discussion of further tensions in the genre revealed through my analysis. For example, the rom-com's focus on the beginning of relationships but not on the lifetime of ongoing relationships reproduces neoliberalism's focus on

'ephemerality and the short-term contract' (Harvey, 2007, p. 166) over unbreakable bonds while superficially aping a utopian vision of "happily ever after" narrative closure.[119] Thus, the ideology of the rom-com reveals a further contradiction: the ongoing appeal of the fairy tale in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is often ultimately belied by the reality of life commitments in the remorselessly brutal contemporary economic climate. In short, the mainstream rom-com is wedding propaganda not marriage propaganda. It delights in the journey from initial attraction to the moment the protagonists declare their love, even for older characters. All the while, the rom-com's ideological pillars of "love at first sight," "the one," and "happily ever after" – which all suggest the enduring, eternal, romantic imaginary – mask the genre's real focus on the initial stages of attraction. I posit that the rom-com hails its spectator subject in this state of idealised, utopian consciousness and as such remains a deeply ideological phenomenon.

Rom-coms, insofar as they derive comedy from either satirising or subverting gender norms, require a set of widely accepted gender norms that are available to the audience in order for them to get the incongruities that particular jokes or comedic moments mobilise. However, understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality are becoming increasingly fluid and complicated. Once again, while reception theory lies outside of the remit of this work, it seems as though this work could be continued elsewhere by mapping the findings of this thesis onto a survey of the production of rom-coms and their reception. It seems to me that the conservatism inherent to the rom-com genre might be one explanation for the increasingly ironic and self-referential nature of films produced in the last few years, such as *Isn't It Romantic* (2019) and *Happiest Season* (2020). The rom-com, as a fundamentally conservative genre in both its comedy and its narrative closure, is no longer relevant to the contemporary viewer in a genuine relation to the complex state of gender, sex, sexuality, and relationships. Therefore, it might seem disingenuous to both producers and consumers if the industry continued to make rom-coms – at least in the

[119] This echoes Wexman's observation that there is a contradiction in 'the concept of romantic love as an intense, all-consuming passion that is by its nature short-lived and its status in the modern world as the cornerstone of lifelong monogamous marriage' (1993, p. 8).

constrained 90-minute format – without a certain knowingness. For, whether we personally judge rom-coms sweet, funny, cringe-inducing, alienating, or in any other way, they engage us in a relationship that upholds a stratified societal structure with waves of individual privilege.

This is not to say that the rom-com is dead, as Brian Henderson (1978) famously claimed. However, I think it is fair to conclude that the mainstream, 90-minute romantic comedy film, which due to its brevity thrives on short, simple stories, is certainly in a moment of crisis. The early stages of this crisis can be traced back to the films that Jermyn labels as "wrong-coms," such as *Mr & Mrs Smith* (2005), *Date Night* (2010), and *This is 40* (2012), in which 'the prizes enduringly held up by heteronormative culture – long-term monogamous marriage, and reproduction within matrimony – [are] uncovered, dissected, and found to be destructively dysfunctional' (2021, p. 306). However, this crisis emerges more clearly in the recent spate of films that I term "anti-rom-coms" in which those same rom-com tropes are destabilised but – importantly – the films' plots are resolved in a way that leaves the central couple separated, such as *Marriage Story* (2019), *Promising Young Woman* (2020), and *Barbie* (2023).[120] Indeed, a potential avenue for further research would be to apply this thesis's mixed methodological approach to films that engage with rom-com genre conventions but have not been included here as they break with the rom-com's ideological matrix. Alternatively, this project could be followed by a similar analysis of the recent phenomenon of the lower budget seasonal Hallmark-style romantic comedy films, of which *Single All the Way* (2021) and *Love Hard* (2021) could be included. I would suggest that, among their fans, there is something appealing about the predictability and old-fashioned-ness of these lower-budget rom-com iterations, which proudly continue to reproduce the rom-com's conservative gender ideology. They raise questions such as: do the viewers who enjoy watching Hallmark-type rom-coms

[120] Zsófia O. Réti argues that *Promising Young Woman* (2020) 'relies on the tropes of romantic comedy traditions to give a sharp critique of the cultural climate that tolerates, denies, and normalizes rape' (2023, p. 189). She goes on to write that a strength of the film 'is that it is not only the rape-revenge genre that reflects on rape culture, but rom-com traditions also belong to (and represent) the very same twisted social order' (p. 195). Similarly, *Barbie* (2023) utilises romantic comedy traditions to articulate the twisted patriarchal social order.

enjoy them because of how relatable they are, how bad they are, or how they speak to a simple-pleasures form of viewing that more complicated TV rom-coms no longer cater to? This work would require an analysis of the wider discourse and fandom around rom-com, which is, however, not part of this current research, but could provide a useful counterpoint to the findings I have uncovered here.

Which brings me back to the key intervention of this thesis, which is to argue for a radical rethinking of the function of the romantic comedy film, and to directly challenge Rowe Karlyn's (1995; 2011) work on the idea of comedy as a transgressive space for showcasing female unruliness. I must conclude that the rom-com's comedic moments, which earlier feminist theorists have argued were potentially revolutionary, have actually further embedded traditional, conservative gender expectations as the norm against which comedy makes sense. I suggest, then, that the rom-com is a conservative genre, not simply because of the near ubiquity of the "happy ending", but because of the widespread instances of comedy that relies on gender expectations throughout the entirety of each film surveyed. Rom-coms do not have to use gender and identity as the basis for their humour, and perhaps in the future, they won't, but over the past thirty-five years, they have done so continuously.

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Appendix

Table 1 – Production Details for the Case Study Films

Thesis Chapter	Title	Year of Release	Directed by	Written by	Budget (in $million)	Global Box Office Takings (in $million)	IMDB Rating (and link to webpage)	Rotten Tomatoes Rating (and link to webpage)
2 - Mainstream Ideology	When Harry Met Sally	1989	Rob Reiner	Nora Ephron	16	93	7.7	91%
2 - Mainstream Ideology	Love Actually	2003	Richard Curtis	Richard Curtis	40	248	7.6	64%
2 - Mainstream Ideology	Sex and the City 2	2010	Michael Patrick King	Michael Patrick King	95	294	4.5	15%
2 - Mainstream Ideology	Trainwreck	2015	Judd Apatow	Amy Schumer	35	141	6.2	84%
3 - Race	Coming to America	1988	John Landis	David Sheffield, Barry Blausterin	36	289	7.1	73%
3 - Race	The Big Sick	2017	Michael Showalter	Emily Gordon, Kumail Nanjiani	5	56	7.5	98%
3 - Race	Crazy Rich Asians	2018	John Chu	Peter Chiarelli, Adele Lim	30	239	6.9	91%
3 - Race	My Big Fat Greek Wedding	2002	Joel Zwick	Nia Vardalos	5	369	6.6	76%
3 - Race	Maid in Manhattan	2002	Wayne Wang	John Hughes, Kevin Wade	55	155	5.4	38%

3 - Race	Yesterday	2019	Danny Boyle	Richard Curtis, Jack Barth	26	155	6.8	63%
3 - Race	Love Hard	2021	Hernán Jiménez	Daniel Mackey, Rebecca Ewing	N/A	N/A	6.3	53%
4 - Queerness	Four Weddings and a Funeral	1994	Mike Newell	Richard Curtis	4	246	7.1	96%
4 - Queerness	The Birdcage	1996	Mike Nichols	Jean Poiret, Francis Veber, Edouard Molinaro	31	185	7.2	84%
4 - Queerness	My Best Friend's Wedding	1997	P. J. Hogan	Ronald Bass	38	299	6.3	74%
4 - Queerness	Bend It Like Beckham	2002	Gurinder Chadha	Gurinder Chadha, Guljit Bindra, Paul Mayeda Berges	4	77	6.7	85%
4 - Queerness	Love, Simon	2018	Greg Berlanti	Issac Aptaker, Elizabeth Berger	10	66	7.5	92%
4 - Queerness	Happiest Season	2020	Clea Duvall	Clea Duvall, Mary Holland	N/A	2	6.6	82%
4 - Queerness	Single All the Way	2021	Michael Mayer	Chad Hodge	N/A	N/A	6.2	68%
4 - Queerness	Anything's Possible	2022	Billy Porter	Ximena Garcia Lecuona	N/A	N/A	5.7	86%
4 - Queerness	Bros	2022	Nicholas Stoller	Nicholas Stoller, Billy Eichner	22	15	6.4	88%
5 - Body Difference	Forrest Gump	1994	Robert Zemeckis	Winston Groom, Eric Roth	55	678	8.8	71%

5 - Body Difference	Shallow Hal	2001	Peter and Bob Farrelly	Peter and Bob Farrelly, Sean Moynihan	40	141	6.0	49%
5 - Body Difference	Something's Gotta Give	2003	Nancy Meyers	Nancy Meyers	80	265	6.7	72%
5 - Body Difference	Love & Other Drugs	2010	Edward Zwick	Charles Randolph, Edward Zwick, Marshall Herskovitz	30	103	6.7	49%
5 - Body Difference	Me Before You	2016	Thea Sharrock	Jojo Moyes	20	208	7.4	54%
5 - Body Difference	Isn't It Romantic	2019	Todd Strauss-Schulson	Erin Cardillo, Dana Fox, Katie Silberman	31	49	5.9	69%
5 - Body Difference	Tall Girl	2019	Nzingha Stewart	Sam Wolfson	14	N/A	5.2	38%
5 - Body Difference	Ticket to Paradise	2022	Ol Parker	Ol Parker, Daniel Pipski	60	169	6.1	57%

N.B. All figures correct when accessed online 29th January 2024.