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Female Moments/Male Structures: The Representation of Women in Romantic Comedies

In *Sabrina* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1954), actress Audrey Hepburn's love interest was played by Humphrey Bogart, a man 30 years her senior. His character, Lionel saves her from committing suicide and later reveals a story of his own suicide attempt. Other revelations and late night talks lead Lionel's whole family to encourage him to join her in Paris, one of the most romantic cities in the world. Forty-one years later, in the remake of the film, Julia Ormond's love interest is played by Harrison Ford, who is 23 years older than her. The preservation of this large age gap decades later shows a desire to keep the character of Sabrina young so that she can admire the maturity that comes with an older man. Martha M. Lauzen's study of the top 250 box-office films of 2015 at the *Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film* shows that comedies provide the second highest employment to women on films after documentaries.¹ In another study of the top 100 films of 2015 conducted by Lauzen, it is clear that women are typically younger than men, with the highest percentages of female characters being in their 20s and 30s, while the highest percentages of male characters were in their 30s and 40s.² As female characters age from their 30s to their 40s they experience an 8% decrease in representation and male characters experience an increase of 3%.³ And when women and men reach their 50s: "The percentage of male characters is almost twice that of female characters in their 50s."⁴ These statistics highlight the discrepancies and impact of age on the representation of women in film. The discrepancies also extend into the depiction of goals and occupations of women versus men. Specifically, that "78% of male characters but only 61% of female characters had an identifiable

job/occupation.”⁵ Approximately 60% of male characters had a recognizable goal in comparison to 49% of female characters.⁶ More male character goals were related to work, while not surprisingly, more female characters had higher chances of their goals being personal.⁷

Despite limited representation in front of and behind the camera, women are still watching movies, particularly, comedies and romantic comedies. Scholars like Margaret Tally are critical of current studio understanding that female audiences “can’t ‘open’ a picture, that is, that films targeting women can’t draw large crowds on the opening day, which is viewed by the film business as crucial to whether a film will ultimately be profitable or not.”⁸ Between the limited representation and the lack of studio interest, why do women watch films at all? Specifically, why do “women’s films” like romantic comedies persist if women are not valued or reflected by the film industry? In their edited volume of essays, *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*, Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young claim that one of the biggest defining factors of chick flicks by scholars is the pleasure it brings to the women who watch them.⁹ Without pleasure, would women just become masochistic consumers? Like Ferriss and Young, I want to combat the oversimplification of chick flicks in scholarship and culture.¹⁰

On the topic of oversimplification, it would seem to be quite easy to write off romantic comedies because of their structure. Structuralism is a popular theoretical approach to film and other literary texts. Terry Eagleton explains that the idea of structuralism is to distance oneself from the minute details in favor looking at the whole picture.¹¹ By doing so it becomes easy to see the patterns of the piece or in this case, a film. Structuralism is about relationships, but only the relationship between elements of the story internally without consideration of external influences or factors. In this theory these elements can be interchanged with others but the structural pattern would still hold true.¹² Since structuralist theory does not value the specifics,

the context of actors would be irrelevant. For instance, the fact that the two leads in *You've Got Mail* (dir. Nora Ephron, 1998) were Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan, who starred together in *Sleepless in Seattle* (dir. Nora Ephron, 1991) seven years earlier is extraneous to this reading of the film. Seymour Chatman also reinforces the idea that the narrative structure should hold true across manifestations. Specifically, he stresses that the narrative becomes structure through its ability to be applied with different details but achieve the same structure.¹³ So the memorable hitchhiking scene in *It Happened One Night* (dir. Frank Capra, 1934) is irrelevant to the structure, which instead reveals a pattern of retreat as a woman runs from her father to a rushed marriage, and then to a lecturing male journalist. Another example would describe the narrative of *This Means War* (dir. McG, 2012): the love of a woman becomes a source of conflict between two best friends as they fight for her.

Based on the patterns found in romantic comedies, it would seem that women are pawns trapped within the narrative structure. The significance of film resolutions can also add to frivolous or strained endings which reinforce male dominance. In the ending of *Sleepless in Seattle*, the two characters do not even speak to each other until the last ten minutes yet they are immediately coupled through extensive eye contact. This ending forces a coupling between two literal strangers who debate meeting each other during most of the film. Kathrina Giltre offers a critique on the emphasis on happy endings which is defended by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson. They argue for the ending as an exclusive source of meaning that but she finds the reading excessive because it dismisses other meaning possibilities available throughout the whole film. To her, part of comedy is looking backward in order to make sense of the jokes or plot and that the dual-focus narrative emphasizes the process of compromise rather than the actual ending.¹⁴ It is true that in order to value the ending of the film, viewers need to understand

what it took to produce the desired result. We see the ending of these films as a happily ever after, but Giltre argues that, “Their triumph is both symbolic and fleeting; it is a utopian moment, not utopia.”¹⁵ The magic or happiness is believed to be enough, but rarely do we ever see what happens next. In many cases, characters are trying to make egalitarian relationships work in a patriarchal society¹⁶ or deal with incompatible personalities like in *Notting Hill* (dir. Roger Michell, 1999). In his essay, “Entertainment and Utopia,” Richard Dyer looks for signs and patterns within narrative structure to see how they relate to genre. He argues that utopia is conveyed in musicals as feelings or moments rather than a whole utopian society. The films are then constructing utopian situations rather than whole utopian world structures.¹⁷ It is important that these moments are interspersed between seemingly realistic situations. For utopian moments to happen, reality needs to be put on pause.

The idea of finding utopia in moments rather than structures inspires my analysis and survey of romantic comedies from the coming of sound to the present. I argue that there are moments in these films that allow for engagement and identification with female audiences because they provide sites of female empowerment in restrictive male structures. The repetition of female stars along with themes of surveillance, and the refusal of sexual naïveté are expressions associated with womanhood which attract female audiences and enable us to read the man as an interchangeable device. Tom Gunning’s theory of the narrator system that explains the way a story is told impacts how it is communicated to the spectator.¹⁸ He argues that the spectator or audience is important because it is their negotiation with the filmic text that makes the narrative become realized.¹⁹ The narrative discourse and system is not a specific person but it acts as a placeholder for understanding the perspective and construction of the narrative.²⁰ Since the audience is important for the reading of the narrative it is impossible to abstract the narrator

system entirely.²¹ To ignore the role of the audience would make the consumption of romantic comedies nonsense. After reading statistics on the limited representations and production influence of women, it is easy to label the narrator system as male. However, these moments which appear through techniques, shots, and stars, turn the male narrator system female.

Even though these films are coded for women, it does not mean all women are represented. The dominant history of romantic comedies favors stories of heterosexual, white women. Like many scholars of romantic comedy and women's films, Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young acknowledge the whiteness of these genres and try to provide critiques of more contemporary films.²² In *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra discuss how feminism is more inclusive of different types of women than post-feminism because post-feminism is centered on individualistic goals/motivations and it has roots in consumerism and choice. They argue that consumerism and the freedom to choose mark post-feminism for white, middle-class women.²³ The whiteness in the contemporary moment is due to the cultural push for individualism and choice, which differs from the direct absence of women of color in earlier romantic comedies predating the 1970s. Since there are fewer films featuring women of color in contemporary popular romantic comedy culture, I plan to incorporate them as they relate to the respective themes rather than providing them with their own separate category.

The Star

Stars and films being coded for women is not a new idea. Miriam Hansen argues that Rudolph Valentino, a silent film star whose roles primarily centered on swashbuckling and action had an intense female audience following which challenge the idea that women are passive at the movies.²⁴ She explains that it is impossible to understand female spectatorship

without its relation to male spectatorship but that it is impossible to solely limit readings based on the dominant ideology.²⁵ Basically, it is impossible to read romantic comedies without patriarchy but there are stars or moments that make it readable and coded for women despite the sexist narratives. Hansen describes the complexity of Valentino's stardom: "Valentino's appeal depends, to a large degree, on the manner in which he combines masculine control of the look with the feminine quality of 'to-be-looked-at-ness', to use Mulvey's rather awkward term."²⁶ Laura Mulvey claims that the perspective of the cinema has been understood to represent the male gaze, making women objects of this relentless gaze.²⁷ Hansen argues that Valentino is both the object and the objectifier based on a combination of exotic locations, bondage/captive scenarios, and the long close ups of his face as he looks at a woman mark his films for consumption by women. The cinematic focus on the gaze doubles as both a point of power and as weakness, because while he is gazing, he too is subject of the gaze.²⁸ Faced with news of Valentino's early death, female fans swarmed his funeral and many committed suicide which furthers him as a site of female fetishisms.²⁹ Like Valentino, female romantic comedy stars are sites of ideological conflict, read as objects through the narrative roles they have chosen to play. It is important that even in early films not directed toward women, stars like Valentino were able to create a narrator system coded for women. The ability to read Valentino as a man and an object makes it easier to believe that men can be seen as narrative elements rendered useless by the female star in the moments where her film and character connect with female audiences.

As noted with the reading of Valentino, the power of his star persona came from how female audiences read him and his performances. Richard deCordova claims the interaction between the spectator and the actor creates the "picture personality" which can only come from the films. He sees the spectator as an active role, tasked with tracking stars across films.³⁰ A

picture personality is equivalent to the term movie star, because it originates from film text.³¹ He later explains, “Personality existed as an effect of the representation of character in a film—or, more accurately, as the effect of the representation of character across a number of films. It functioned primarily to ascribe a unity to the actor’s various appearances in films.”³² The key to the star is both the repetition of qualities across her films and the spectator’s willingness to observe the patterns.

Romantic comedy films allow for readings of the star in this way due to the patterns of select women. If we were to track moments in Meg Ryan’s career from the late 1980s to early 2000, we would find a woman who is willing to express her vulnerability verbally and her characters always break up with the “wrong” men, making her the one with control. Despite the neurotic and obsessive-compulsive tendencies of her characters, there are certain empowering instances where a woman would want to identify with them. In *When Harry Met Sally* (dir. Rob Reiner, 1989), Ryan’s character knowingly makes herself an object by faking a convincing orgasm in the middle of a diner. She does this to prove a point to her male friend that women are capable of controlling their sexual performances. *Sleepless in Seattle* (dir. Nora Ephron, 1991) shows Ryan’s character breaking up with her live-in fiancée after she stalks Tom Hank’s character making him the object of her surveillance. She physically tracks him, like prey, and she does not wait for the man to find her. In *French Kiss* (dir. Lawrence Kasdan, 1995), Ryan’s character is dumped but she uses her sexual wiles to seduce her ex, making him beg for her forgiveness, only to dump him again before they have sex. In *You’ve Got Mail* (dir. Nora Ephron, 1998), Ryan’s character breaks up with her live-in boyfriend, despite the fact that she has lost her livelihood. Her character also uses the male character’s words against him at a press event in order to save her business. Many of her characters are shown as urban women, living

and working without the financial support of men or their families. Even though her characters end up with men who are practically strangers or liars, the consistency of these characters and their moments suggests that Ryan used her professional agency to play these specific roles, obviously seeing more in them than restrictive structures.

In order for audiences to track stars like Meg Ryan, traits need to be repeated over the course of multiple films. Dyer's writing on stars also substantiates the idea that roles reflect the identity of the star.³³ He argues that stars cause anxiety and uncertainty because of the inability to separate their public and private selves. Stars are able to blur the lines of authenticity between themselves and the character they are playing.³⁴ Fans can feed into the power of stars by marking them worthy of investigation and study. However, in romantic comedies we see that the idea of public and private with stars can cause tension. Dyer claims that stars are a physical manifestation of two contradictions in one body.³⁵ If we think about stars of romantic comedies, it is clear the male-centered narratives give the perception that women are like hot potatoes that can be passed around from one man to another. However, the patterns of female moments fueled by these female stars suggest power and agency. In these films, the female characters are a battleground for conflicting ideologies and perhaps women keep watching to find out the outcome of the fight. Dyer also proposes that charisma of stars marks them as extraordinary.³⁶ In addition to blurring lines between their personal and public lives, it is impossible to deny that their roles subscribe to tropes or stereotypes, especially in romantic comedies. Yet, Dyer writes that, "The star both fulfills/incarnates the type and, by virtue of her/his idiosyncrasies, individuates it."³⁷ The small deviations from the complete type make it their own and allow readings of both the star and the context of the time.

If any star is an example of making a type her own, it is Katharine Hepburn. Hepburn's films portray women who are extraordinary and type-defying for the 1930s and 1940s. One trademark of Hepburn was her consistency in literally wearing pants even when it would be unlikely for her characters. Such as when she played a socialite in *The Philadelphia Story* (dir. George Cukor, 1940) and in *Bringing Up Baby* (dir. Howard Hawks, 1938) or as defense attorney in *Adam's Rib* (dir. George Cukor, 1949). Hepburn also was not afraid to get physical in her roles. For example, she goes horseback riding, leopard hunting in the woods, and hanging off of a dinosaur exhibit. The repetition of trousers and physical, athletic prowess in her films suggests some truth about her interests off screen. Hepburn's long-term affair with married frequent co-star Spencer Tracy allows audiences to blend her public and private lives together. He plays her husband in *Adam's Rib*, where Hepburn's character takes their marriage to court. Similar to their marriage, their relationship on screen becomes subject to readings and scrutiny, where perhaps two lovers are able to address their quarrels through their characters due to their clandestine relationship off-screen. If the ending of *Adam's Rib* is any indication of their private lives, Hepburn will not stop fighting for her equality in their relationship. Her character Amanda reluctantly embraces an overly feminine hat from her husband, Adam. As they stare at each other with their respective hats, Adam knows he should not take her concession for granted. Kathrina Giltre argues that in early romantic comedies: "The instability of the happy ending points to the impossibility of the ideal couple's existence. At least within patriarchal society. In this respect, the state of their union is extra-ordinary: it is an ideal which can only exist elsewhere and off-screen."³⁸ While in this case it might be true for Hepburn and Tracy, I side with Dyer that it is the contradiction within one person that makes them extraordinary. The consistencies in

Hepburn's roles span before and during her relationship with Tracy, therefore we ought to read her stardom as independent from her man.

With contradiction comes power... female stars' agency off screen impacts their image. The agency associated with stardom predates the careers of Meg Ryan and Katharine Hepburn. Emily Susan Carman chronicles three women, Barbara Stanwyck, Miriam Hopkins, and Carole Lombard, who were leaders in the freelancing/free agency contract movement for men and women during the 1930s. All three women wanted more money and control over their picture choices.³⁹ Carman argues, "Thus, we can understand these three female stars as business savvy women who challenged this coercive system by taking a more active role in shaping their career and image."⁴⁰ This information about their off-screen professional lives builds my argument that women in romantic comedies have power and agency. Carman specifically describes actress Carole Lombard's career as regenerated and even more powerful after her divorce.⁴¹ Stanwyck's divorce enabled her to be free and her "own man." About Stanwyck after her divorce, Carman claims that, "She appropriated masculinity in order to maintain both personal and professional independence—thereby continuing to participate effectively in the patriarchal structure of Hollywood."⁴² Her adaptability and incorporation of masculinity in her identity drives the idea that women were aware of themselves and the structures of patriarchy. The sense of awareness carries over for actresses on and off screen. This reading gives women power, and that the fear of their power incites repression by studios and by the men in their lives. Lombard's character in *My Man Godfrey* (dir. Gregory La Cava, 1936) translates well to her life off screen. Irene Bullock finds Godfrey as a homeless man and hires him to be the butler at her family's home. Enthralled by the chance to shape Godfrey's life, her excitement turns to love. Irene exclaims her love for Godfrey to her family members despite their disapproval. She chases after her right to

choose Godfrey by faking fainting spells to lure him into a kiss and walking into his bedroom against his wishes. Irene, like Lombard, fights for what she wants and succeeds.

This reading of star power and choice continues with the contemporary female stars as well. Hilary Radner argues that despite the film's dismissal of race through assimilation and coupling with a rich, white man, Lopez's star power had a lot of influence over the script of *Maid in Manhattan* (dir. Wayne Wang, 2002). She argues that the presence of Lopez's actual race changed the story of the film as well as the knowledge of her as a New York City native and her character's perseverance make the film optimistic and empowering.⁴³ This reading correlates with understanding of stars' agency and power allowing them choice and freedom rather than confinement by heavy-handed patriarchy. Radner uses Dyer's star theory, particularly the idea of the star as embodying contradiction in her reading of Jennifer Lopez because she was a self-made star who chose a restricted character.⁴⁴ Looking for relationships between powerful women's lives off screen and their characters with little agency on screen creates more opportunities for connection and identification with the audience. Indeed, Sandra Bullock's character in *While You Were Sleeping* (dir. Jon Turteltaub, 1995) works as a token taker at a train station, but she still dives on a train track to save a man's life. Later in *Two Weeks Notice* (dir. Marc Lawrence, 2002), Bullock becomes an assistant after she risks her life as an activist to save old buildings from being torn down by lying in front of a bulldozer. Bullock's characters tend to physically risk their lives for different causes. She defies the idea that men are active risk takers when she rescues a man or a giant, historical structure.

This reading of stars challenges the passivity of female stars and the female audiences who follow them. Maureen Turim argues that, "Enjoyment by female audiences or showcasing female actors and comedians should be our cue to pay attention to what structures such

enjoyment and showcasing, not so much to judge each film as either entirely retrograde or progressive, but rather to get a more complex reading of our contemporary women's films."⁴⁵ I agree that female stars, films, and audiences challenge the simply negative and dominating presence of patriarchy on women's culture. Doris Day starred in *Pillow Talk* (dir. Michael Gordon, 1959), *Lover Come Back* (dir. Delbert Mann, 1961), and *Send Me No Flowers* (dir. Norman Jewison, 1964) with Rock Hudson. The first two films are remarkably similar in plot, which depicts Day as an innocent hardworking business woman who is deceived by a knowing playboy. As an actress, it would be hard to believe that she would want to make the same movie twice. Yet, her stardom as an established singer provides her with music and movie sales. For each of these films she sings the title song, "Pillow Talk," "Lover Come Back," and "Send Me No Flowers" and usually another song expressing her feelings in-between. None of the three films are musicals, but the addition of Day to the cast created another outlet for her star and role to intersect. The addition of these songs prove Day is just as knowing as the male playboys who are trying to seduce or deceive her in the films.

This reading of Day strengthens Stanley Cavell's belief that despite historical distractions such as the Depression and World War II, feminist agendas had not stopped from the 1920s to the 1960s. He writes, "As if the feminist preoccupation could not, during the four decades from the thirties through most of the sixties, get itself on the agenda of an otherwise preoccupied nation."⁴⁶ However, Hepburn, Lombard, and Day's stardom and films contradict these readings of anti-feminist cinema. The most memorable parts of Rosalind Russell's performance in *His Girl Friday* (dir. Howard Hawks, 1940) revolve around her relationship with her job. In the first scene she walks into the newspaper office and passes all of the female telephone operators as she strides into the men's journalist realm, where she belongs. Other

moments include her dominating the telephones in the press room while talking fast and the audience sees her fall in love with her career all over again. Russell's performance of Hildy makes it easy to believe that these moments are providing opportunities for identification on topics other than romance.

Jackie Stacey examines letters written by women about their favorite stars of the 1940s and 1950s to better understand the identification process.⁴⁷ She explains that the female stars are seen by many as role models, who demonstrate the ideal femininity for young women trying to be adults. She finds that, "Powerful female stars often play characters in punishing patriarchal narratives, where the women is either killed off, or married, or both, but these spectators do not seem to select this aspect of their films to write about. Instead, the qualities of confidence and power are remembered as offering pleasure to female spectators in something they lack or desire."⁴⁸ The positive qualities of the characters and these women were attributed to the star while the negativity of the narratives were ignored by many of the women who viewed them. The power of stars gives female audiences a chance to forget patriarchy even if it is just for a moment.

Katherine Heigel, a romantic comedy heroine from the 2000s resembles her female star predecessors. After leaving before the end of her contract on her breakout role in *Grey's Anatomy*, Heigel turned to the big screen. She too wanted out of her contract to have control of her image and the filmic texts she participated in. She chose romantic comedies, appearing in *Knocked Up* (dir. Judd Apatow, 2007), *27 Dresses* (dir. Anne Fletcher, 2008) and *The Ugly Truth* (Robert Luketic, 2009). All three of her characters were workaholics, yet there are other themes that extend across them as well. In *The Ugly Truth*, Heigel's character is taught the art of seduction by the star of her news show. Even though he lectures her throughout the film, there is

a moment where he is in a pool of red jello with two “hot” girls, and she tells him through the earpiece to lick the jello off one of their fingers. Here, she instructs him through an earpiece how to act sexually toward a woman for the sake of the show’s ratings. Heigel like her characters, finds opportunities to exercise power and choice when the time is right.

Women under Surveillance

Female characters, like stars are constantly under surveillance. Their choices and lives become subject to scrutiny by other characters and the filmic narrator. Often this surveillance happens through public performance, the presence of the press, and devices like the telephone, or the apartment. In his book on stars, Richard Dyer explains that a character is defined by a series of signs across a given film.⁴⁹ One of the signs is speech, which I argue is important to romantic comedies because of its potential as a site of contradiction. In *Sex and the Single Girl* (dir. Richard Quine, 1964), Dr. Helen Brown’s patient tells her she is attractive, which she denies by saying that it is a transference of affection. However, the camera shows close-ups of her eyes widening, showing that there is more than a doctor/patient relationship blooming. Dyer writes that speech is either direct through public, external expressions, or indirect through private, internal expressions. But in instances of opposition the truth is to be revealed through the private indirect rather than the public dialogue.⁵⁰

This tendency to favor the private rather than the public gives merit to these “knowing” moments in the films which allow us to escape the restrictive dominance of the narrative. Phone conversations are a great method for the cinema to offer verbal and physical contradictions. In *Baby Boom* (dir. Charles Shyer, 1987), J.C. Wyatt leaves her powerful corporate position when she inherits a baby from her deceased cousin. Refusing to put the baby up for adoption, J.C. leaves New York for a quiet, apple farm in Vermont. After months of frustrations and isolation

she creates her own baby food business, which is where we see a pivotal phone call. While talking to her friend from New York, she brags about her baby food business, discussing how amazing it is to be in Vermont. While on the phone, J.C. stands in her kitchen angrily stirring her applesauce while pretending to be happy for her friend's urban successes. While the film ultimately confirms that J.C. has made the right decision to mother and live in the country, this moment reveals a crack in her armor, where we can even imagine her feeling regret. This moment of unhappiness and frustration is revealed only to the assumed audience, allowing them to take the position of confidant, otherwise it would be quite detrimental to her image in the rest of the film.

While J.C.'s vulnerability and need to defend her public image is brief, *Adam's Rib* distorts boundaries between public and private through the subplot. The central source of conflict revolves around a case where a woman attempts to fatally shoot her husband at his mistress's apartment. Defending the woman's right to protect and fight for her marriage inspires Amanda to represent her, even though she knows that her husband could be the prosecutor. She fights for equality and full disclosure as a spouse and as a professional, something her husband, Adam disagrees with. Adam's stance on marriage in a professional and private level is solidified when he repeatedly refers to it as a contract.⁵¹ His utterance validates the seemingly random timing of Amanda's action. Amanda makes a point to recognize and interrogate the legally binding word. She fights for the idea that the person you enter a marriage with can change and that changes the status of the marriage. She confronts Adam's unwillingness to acknowledge her public presence as well as their private one. Just as she supports his life outside their apartment, he should do the same for her. By being on the opposite side of the bench, she makes it impossible for him to deny her existence as both his wife and as a defense attorney. The scenes of the trial show

reaction shots of Amanda and Adam, revealing that it is in fact their marriage, not the case, is on trial. Adam exclaims that their marriage is not a Punch and Judy show, but implies that it is starting to resemble one. Describing Punch and Judy, Linda Rodriguez McRobbie defines it as a violent puppet show where Mr. Punch uses a stick to beat his “annoying” wife, Judy and those who challenge him.⁵² Adam’s reference reiterates that as her husband he cannot pull the curtain between the home and the courtroom when they are in this situation. Her emotion and passion in the courtroom scenes shows her dedication to negotiating the terms of their marriage and their relationship off screen. The tension and banter between them makes marriage a spectacle for public and private consumption.

Adam and Amanda were already married but a number of romantic comedies are about courtship. As we progress through the early twentieth century Giltre claims there is a shift in the nature of dating. Courtship and dating have moved from a private, supervised activity within the home to a public rite of passage like going to the movies or out to dinner.⁵³ *Roman Holiday* (dir. William Wyler, 1953) follows a brief whirlwind romance where a disguised princess falls in love with a deceptive journalist in the city of Rome. Just before the end, Anne, the princess leaves her new boyfriend and returns to her place at the throne. The ending scene is a coded public farewell, where she holds a press conference and Joe positions himself in the front row. When asked about her favorite part of her European tour, she looks at him and claims that Rome will always hold a place in her heart. Shots of emotionally fueled looks between them reveal that it is really Joe who will hold the place in her heart. Here, we focus on her facial expressions and how they change when she sees him rather than the actual words she is saying to the crowd. This scene functions as a formal farewell and confession of love between the two characters under the guise of a press

conference. Once again, the audience is in on this transgressional use of public space for an intimate moment between two lovers.

Similarly, *Notting Hill* tells the story of Anna Scott, a famous movie actress who falls in love with a British bookshop owner named Will. Their relationship seems doomed to fail based on her constant fear of the press. She later pleads for Will to give her another chance after she breaks up with him over a press scandal. He rejects her and she immediately plans to leave for the United States. After he realizes his mistake, he finds her at a movie press conference, where she tells of her plans to return home to Los Angeles. After he pretends to be a reporter and asks her to stay in England through implicit language, she is asked the question again. The cameras, reporters, and Will wait for her response. Anna amends her statement to reflect her desire to stay with Will in Notting Hill. These moments reveal confessions of private truths for each character yet they take place in public forums like a courtroom, a palace press conference, and a movie press conference. The women in these films find ways to use public opinion and surveillance to their personal advantage.

The introductions of *Roman Holiday* and *Notting Hill* use moments of surveillance as entry points into the narratives. The first shows a newsreel of princess Anne's trip across Europe which uses found footage interspersed with detailed shots of Anne participating in activities that correspond with the locations. The abstracted and typical male newsreel voice unites these images, making it a recognizable newsreel format. The pressure of public investment in her character creates a foundation for the rest of the film. *Notting Hill* introduces Anna with the sight and sound of paparazzi taking footage and pictures of her at red carpet events. The presence of these moments at the introduction also mark the woman as the subject of public attention and eventually private attention by the male character. Gilre comments that the function of the

media presence, like newspapers in early romantic comedies is to make the private, public.⁵⁴ Yet, I argue that this theme perpetuates. For example, in *Sleepless in Seattle*, Annie is first introduced to Sam and Jonah through the radio. Alone in her car she cries as she listens to Jonah and Sam talk to a radio “doctor” about Sam’s depression, which results in his revelation of sadness over the loss of his wife. Her tears resemble a connection as Sam communicates intimate details about himself over the radio. Annie’s crying then can be seen as her recognizing the weight of this act and his vulnerability. The repeated theme of media and technology in the films suggest that women are constantly under surveillance by the audience, other characters, and the women themselves. These moments are addressed only to the female audience, who is able to distinguish the truth.

Like the radio, the telephone is an important device in romantic comedies. However, it is associated with deception and performance. Jacob Smith describes how prank-calling changed the way phones were thought of and used: “It is notable how popular press stories about the early phone pranks often describe the pranksters exploiting the telephone’s ability to function as a gateway to larger social networks.”⁵⁵ By using modes of communication in unconventional ways, romantic comedies heighten the anxiety and public concern already attached to women. Phones are typically associated with women, so the anxieties and concerns surrounding misuses of phones maps onto unconventional displays of womanhood seen through moments when the narrative is on pause. In *The American President* (dir. Rob Reiner, 1995), Sydney Ellen Wade is a political consultant who attracts the attention of President Andrew Shepherd. After their first meeting, Shepherd acquires her phone number and calls her. She laughs at the idea of the President calling and asking her out on a date. She mistakes him for a friend prank-calling and

hangs up on him. Like other women in these films, Sydney makes the man, who happens to be the President, foolish.

In addition to the media/public concern around prank-calling, Smith discusses the use of prank calls as instigation for verbal violence. This “agonistic talk” occurs when the caller frustrates and instigates the receiver of the call to the point of inappropriate language and threats of physical violence. These calls are typically conducted by men and are received by both women and men. The person being instigated becomes a spectacle.⁵⁶ We can see this in *Moonstruck* (dir. Norman Jewison, 1987) where Loretta is tasked with inviting her fiancée’s brother to the wedding. When she calls to speak with Ronny he tries her patience, gets angry, and hangs up on her. Frustrated by his excessive masculinity she slams the phone down and screams, “Animal!” His aggression disrupts the polite phone etiquette which she tried to establish in the beginning of the call. Only we can see Loretta release her anger and frustration with him after the conversation has ended. Accepting the idea that phones are related to women, we can see a connection between prank-calling and how women undermine the performance of the man through phone conversations.

If the telephone is a device for trickery and performance then the apartment is a place where this can be physically staged. The close proximity of public and private spaces in cities substantiates Pamela Robertson Wojcik’s claim that themes of surveillance are prevalent in urban settings.⁵⁷ Men’s interest in getting women to their apartments becomes a major plot point for films at the time of *Pillow Talk*. Infamous party-line playboy, Brad Allen seduces women through his apartment’s piano with the song “You Are My Inspiration” which Jan repeatedly interrupts. He becomes fixated on luring the un-trappable Jan Morrow to his apartment. Brad creates an alternate identity named Rex Stetson, who is the complete opposite of him. His

postponement of apartment seduction encourages her to go away with him. When Jan finds the sheet music to his seduction song on the cabin's piano, she foils his plans. As a sign of his commitment to her, Brad offers up his apartment as sacrifice for her to redecorate. Wojcik provides examples of texts like *Playboy* magazine that stress the importance of hosting for bachelors, because it requires showmanship and performance.⁵⁸ This reading makes the apartment another stage for masculinity and identity performance for the woman to challenge. The apartment and the telephone become opportunities for the woman to ridicule the strong ideas of masculinity presented by society and the narratives.

The Apartment (dir. Billy Wilder, 1960) serves as the perfect platform for Wojcik's theory of men hosting in their apartments. The film follows the life of C.C. Baxter, who loans his apartment out to his work superiors so they can meet with their mistresses and receives promotions in exchange. As a bachelor he ensures there is enough alcohol and snack foods for those who use his place and becomes annoyed when the guests use them up so quickly. His apartment is a revolving door of drama, yet we never see the female character, Fran Kubelik's apartment. The audience, like Fran, questions and mocks the silliness of C.C.'s arrangement and lifestyle. Unlike Jan Morrow, Fran is known as a mistress and sexually active single woman living in the city. This extreme aversion is captured when Fran attempts to commit suicide in C.C.'s apartment when she thought it was a stranger's. The absence of her apartment shows an apprehension and anxiety to expose such a woman, marking her as private social threat to the audience. Her sexual promiscuity marks her as the woman who does not end up with a man, however Fran challenges the sexual expectations of a leading woman at the time.

Expressions of Female Sexuality

In addition to being a site of surveillance, the apartment also functions as a relationship and sexual experience device. The apartment in the post-war era represents alternative living ideals that stray from the suburban norms and values, especially for single people.⁵⁹ Apartment living stands as opposite of suburban values of marriage and children. Wojcik suggests that the single women living in urban areas were a frequent topic among magazines, films, and books. Like the term, “playboy”, sexually active women were described as “bohemian.”⁶⁰ She discusses how unlike the bachelor pad, a bohemian woman’s place would be sparsely furnished and not the place for entertaining. It was seen as a transitional space from which women would leave to marry or move to a better apartment.⁶¹ Although she does not seem bohemian, Jan Morrow’s apartment in *Pillow Talk* challenges the plot’s characterization of her as a virgin. Brad Allen, Morrow’s antagonist comments about her “bedroom problems” and coaches her romance with his alter ego, Rex, which paints her as a sexually naïve woman. Jan’s apartment is fully furnished, brightly painted, and decorated with large couches and an eat-in kitchen. She even has a maid named Alma, who is in charge of cleaning while Jan is at work as an interior designer. Also, there is a scene where her client’s son makes unwanted sexual advances toward her where she exclaims that she is almost as old as his mother. These components make it impossible to deny that Jan is not a virgin. While Brad’s apartment has light switches, a fold-out bed, and a piano all signs of a bachelor’s seduction palace. The structure of the film uses split screens and color to show their apartments in opposition. However, these moments and others suggest that the characters who inhabit them are actually sexual equals. In *Pillow Talk*, Jan’s sexual experience and desires manifest through the use of the I-voice. Michel Chion’s theoretical work on voices in cinema defines the “I-voice” as a form of vocal intimacy where a voice is recorded

close to the mic.⁶² As she drives to the cabin with Rex, an I-voice of Jan/Day sings “Possess Me” with lyrics expressing her readiness to have sex with him. The usage of the I-voice here encourages the audience to believe that it is Jan’s inner thoughts because outward expressions of sexual desire were taboo at the time. Again, these moments make it hard to believe that an older single woman living alone in New York City would be virginal until she marries a converted playboy.

Similar to *Pillow Talk*, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (dir. Sharon Maguire, 2001) uses the I-voice to address desires and relationship anxieties. In many moments, the I-voice reveals Jones’s true feelings/thoughts that betray her public performance. Scenes where she worries about being alone for the rest of her life are often the subject of the I-voice like when she makes a resolutions to “find nice, sensible boyfriend to go out with.” However, in one scene where she introduces her perverted boss, her I-voice repeatedly says his name Fitzpervert instead of Fitzherbert. To everyone else she looks like an uneducated mess, but the audience is able to see this negotiation between the private truths and public lies. Her I-voice recites her plan to lose weight or wear control-topped underpants that are visually unflattering. These moments expose her vulnerability and the difficulties of being a woman who is also single. Angela McRobbie describes Bridget Jones’s character as a result of modern privileges such as unquestioned education and urban living. The removal of these concerns allow women to internalize new problems like “remaining single.”⁶³ Concerns about “remaining single” are typically seen a regressive way for a woman to spend her time. The Bechdel test which is named after a comic strip in Allison Bechdel’s series, “Dykes to Watch Out For” suggests that it is very rare to see a film where two female characters to have a conversation that is not about a man. However, if we think of the audience as taking an active role in the film’s consumption, then some of Bridget’s I-voices would actually pass this

test. Instead of two characters, the I-voice allows conversations between the lead character and the *audience*. The moments where Bridget addresses her weight, vices or social introductions offer a challenge to these restrictive structures where women only talk and worry about men.

The imperative to end one's single status, demonstrated by Bridget is motivated by time. In their book on post-feminism's contemporary ideological shift from feminism Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra claim: "Women's lives are regularly conceived of as time starved; women themselves are overworked, rushed, harassed, subject to their 'biological clocks,' and so on to such a degree that female adulthood is defined as a state of chronic temporal crisis."⁶⁴ Many romantic comedies show female characters constantly being lectured about monogamous relationships by their friends and family. Subscribing to the idea that some barriers on education and living have shifted, perhaps the contemporary women are internalizing the societal pressures of marriage. We repeatedly hear references to women's ages in these films, marking their single status as a threat. Keeping in mind that Jacob Smith claims that women are often associated with telephones and that prank phone calls are a form of comedy and source of social anxiety,⁶⁵ I argue that single women in romantic comedies are like phones and prank phone calls. These films are meant for entertainment but the eight-decade long fascination of these films by women suggests there is something more. The combination of comedy and social anxiety makes the moments of sexual expression transgressions in these films.

The telephone also challenges ideas of single women, intimacy, and sexuality. In his discussion of phones and voices, Chion stresses the power of voices with no image. But more importantly he writes that the phone creates, "A vocal intimacy that is rarely encountered in social life, for ordinarily you do not permit just anybody to speak right into your ear."⁶⁶ The telephone provides another way of invoking a sexual relationship without physically displaying it

for audiences. Even though this analysis applies to films during censorship, it can also be a nuanced way of suggesting intimacy when films were saturated with sex scenes. The fact that Jan Morrow has a telephone in her bedroom and her bathroom implies sexual availability and access, once again challenging the assumption of her as a virgin. A memorable split screen moment with the telephone shows both Brad and Jan in their respective bathtubs, where their feet are meeting in the middle. The visual game of footsie combined with the telephone's location shows the control and awareness of single women even in the 1950s. This use of the phone in bedrooms can be seen in many films and is especially present in *When Harry Met Sally*. Harry and Sally are shown in a split screen while in their beds watching a movie together. This scene with the telephone is more intimate than the actual sex/aftermath where the two are very uncomfortable. Sally's availability through her bedroom telephone, like Jan's, become just another way of expressing female sexuality in romantic comedies.

While many feminine moments are seen as internal/private modes of sexuality and singleness, they can also manifest themselves externally, especially in contemporary films, if one subscribes to post-feminist theory. In addition to writing about the Jennifer Lopez's stardom, Hilary Radner addresses one of the most important identifiers of contemporary women. She explains that women are postponing marriage in favor of careers and that these women are economically empowered and have discretionary income.⁶⁷ If women have extra money then their turn toward material items becomes a mode of expression, particularly of their sexuality. This can be seen in *There's Something About Mary* (dir. Peter and Bobby Farrelly, 1998) where Mary is repeatedly seen in thin tops with no bra on whether she is in her house or walking out on the street. Carole M. Dole also suggests that women like Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* (dir. Robert Luketic, 2001), use masquerade or clothing to express their empowerment. She

specifically addresses the use of a Playboy bunny costume by Elle where she is aware of its stereotypical associations but wears it anyway thinking it was for a costume party.⁶⁸ In a similar moment, Bridget Jones also wears a Playboy bunny costume for a party, which theme has been changed. Both of these moments feature embarrassment, but their choice of outfits reflect their freedom to express their sexuality. This persists throughout *Bridget Jones's Diary*, where she wears a short skirt and revealing top to work to cue to her boss that she was available and interested.

In early romantic comedies, it was common for women to challenge their relationships and ideas about their sexuality through their bodies. Kathrina Giltre makes an important evaluation of these films. She explains that romantic comedies of the screwball and censorship-era addressed and challenged the institution of marriage because there were really no other options for women at the time. Giltre also talks about marriage or coupling being the focus and problem in these films.⁶⁹ However, it did not stop these women bound to permanent relationships from expressing their sexual knowledge and desires. In *It Happened One Night*, heiress Ellie Andrews is married but is traveling with a man who is helping her get to her new husband. Throughout the film, the practical road-experienced journalist, Peter lectures and instructs Ellie about the proper ways to budget money and dunk a doughnut. Later on in their journey, the pair are left to hitchhike. After explaining and demonstrating the variety of hikers' thumb techniques, Peter has no success. Ellie listened as a naïve pupil would, however when she gives it a try she lifts up her skirt to reveal her leg. A car screeches to a halt and they hop in. Ellie's knowledge of her body and the sexually charged implications of using her leg show that she is not quite as naïve as Peter and the film have assumed.

Female moments of sexual desire occur in *My Man Godfrey* when Irene decides she is in love with her servant, Godfrey. After she asks to visit his living quarters, which is basically a bedroom, he tells her no. Irene, however, violates the boundary in his absence, finding herself in his bedroom which is a very intimate place. Irene also tricks Godfrey into a kiss, when she fakes a fainting spell. As he is holding her she reaches her arms around him and gives him a kiss. And again in *Bringing Up Baby*, Susan steals David's clothes while he showers so he cannot leave the house and marry his fiancée. She climbs an extremely high scaffolding and confesses her love on a ladder. After she knocks the ladder over, Susan is hanging on the edge of the platform leaving David no choice but to help her up and hold her close. These women use their bodies to physically defy boundaries between themselves and the men they desire. The moments of sexual awareness and pursuit of men through the body indicate that even when women in romantic comedies are left with no technology or filmic devices, they can still combat the assumptions about their choices, relationships, and sexual knowledge.

Conclusion

In African American romantic comedies, female moments and devices that facilitate them become apparent in different ways. *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (dir. Kevin Rodney Sullivan, 1998) expresses a modern anxiety of an older woman dating/falling in love with younger man. Stella's sister repeatedly comments on how he is practically illegal at the age of twenty. Despite her family's objections and criticism from his family, Stella pursues this relationship that brings her pleasure and happiness. Unlike the white romantic comedies, this film uses Stella's changing hairstyles to serve as cues for her character's evolution and development. The moments when her new hair changes are introduced signal the audience to look for other changes in her character. The beginning of the film shows her in the office with

her hair straightened. However, when she goes to Jamaica and embraces her sexual pleasure with the younger man, her hair is braided. This moment is important because it is the opposite of the unhappiness she had with her straight hair. Hair styles are associated with coming of age and adulthood for Monica in *Love and Basketball* (dir. Gina Prince-Bythewood, 2000) as she deals with her complicated relationship with her neighbor, Quincy. The pivotal ending of the film shows Monica achieving her dream of playing in the WMBA. We see her walk onto the court and then we are shown Quincy and their young daughter watching on the sidelines. When we see the back of her jersey, her last name is hyphenated, stating that she refuses to give up her dreams while being in this relationship. She too uses her body to fight for her desire to be with Quincy, when she plays him for his heart in a game of basketball.

The use of hair and the themes found in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* and *Love and Basketball* show the possibilities of different devices and more female moments in films featuring women of color. *Love and Basketball* is also written and directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood. In her study of the top 100 Worldwide Grossing Films, Martha M. Lauzen wanted to investigate if the presence of women in production and as the female lead had any impact on the box office sales of the films.⁷⁰ She found that films with female leads had significantly lower budgets. However, if the budgets were held at the same amount, there would be no significant difference in box-office sales of films starring and employing women. Lauzen proves that films with higher budgets grossed more money and the films with more men in front of and behind the camera behind are getting bigger budgets.⁷¹ So basically the budgets and the distribution of funds stacks the female driven films against the financially weighted male protagonist films. Clearly, women are going to the movies and they are equally as viable as an audience, however, these other factors impact who is responsible for making films, like romantic comedies for women.

The use of additional types of moments and devices by women of color like the powerful ending in *Love and Basketball* along with Lauzen's statistics suggest that there is hope for changes in the representation of women in front of and behind the camera. Eventually, we could see a transition to films where female audiences can identify with the whole structure rather than just moments.

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⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, 4.

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⁸ Margaret Tally, "Something's Gotta Give- Hollywood, Female sexuality, and the 'Older Bird' Chick Flick" in *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*, eds. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2008), 120.

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