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

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Abstract:

Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl again. With this formula it seems that romantic comedies are actually meant for men instead of women. If this is the case, then why do women watch these films? The repetition of female stars like Katharine Hepburn, Doris Day and Meg Ryan in romantic comedies allows audiences to find elements of truth in their characters as they grapple with the input of others in their life choices, combat the anxiety of being single, and prove they are less sexually naïve than society would like to admit. In 1999, a character struggles with her career and love life being the subject of newspaper headlines. In 1959, an older single woman repeatedly interrupts and mocks a playboy's wooing via a telephone party line, while fending off unwanted suitors of her own. In 1934, a female character uses her leg rather than her thumb to hitchhike, which embarrasses her male guide. Hollywood romantic comedies from the coming of sound to the present address these themes in their details rather than their structure, allowing the female character to shift with each changing decade. However, in each of these films, there are moments of "knowing," where the female characters or the film undermine the assumed male-dominated structure creating sites of recognition and identification with the audience. It is these moments, which focus on expressions and anxieties of womanhood that mark the films for women and enable us to read the man as an irrelevant narrative device.

While at the movies, you sit and watch the trailers play one after the other. Often you can identify the genre of the film just by its short preview. For romantic comedies, this recognition is captured by the statement, “That’s a chick-flick.” How is it possible for audience members to easily identify romantic comedies and, if they are so predictable, why do we keep making these films? These questions are even more pressing when we examine the lack of change in casting, employment, and character roles.

In *Sabrina* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1954), actress Audrey Hepburn’s eventual love interest was played by Humphrey Bogart, a man 30 years her senior. He physically rescues her, which demonstrates his ability to care for her—a purpose most often associated with the male character in romantic comedies. Mutual revelations and late night talks lead his younger brother and the 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. So even when we remake romantic comedies, restrictive norms against women still persist.

However, these norms are not simply impressions presented on screen. 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 at 34%, after documentaries.¹ Even though comedy genres employ more women, there are still many disparities in representation on and off screen. 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 are 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 inequities also extend into the depiction of goals and occupations of women versus men. Lauzen’s study of Hollywood cinema demonstrates that “78% of male characters but only 61% of female characters had an identifiable job/occupation.”⁵ Approximately 60% of male characters have a recognizable goal in comparison to 49% of female characters.⁶ Character goals are essential to common understandings of Hollywood films because the narratives are goal-centered. More male character goals were also related to work, while not surprisingly, more female characters had higher chances of their goals being personal.⁷ A perfect example of a personal goal is the desire to find true love, which is commonly associated with romantic comedies and women. These statistics imply that female characters are meant to have and attain goals like finding love, and once the female characters find love and/or are past middle age, they are set to disappear from the screen altogether. With little investment in female characters generally and comedy being the genre with high employment of women, we could imagine that subgenres like romantic comedies might be site of reprieve from patriarchal dominance within film and society at large.

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 to show that women are more than objects within film and society at large.¹⁰

On the topic of oversimplification, it would seem to be quite easy to write off romantic comedies based on their structure. Structuralism is a popular theoretical approach that seeks to find a text’s meaning by examining its narrative organization. Terry Eagleton explains that the idea of structuralism is to distance oneself from the minute details of a text in favor looking at the whole picture.¹¹ This approach makes it easier to see the patterns within a text or in this case, a film. Structuralism is about relationships, but only the relationship between elements within the story, which excludes consideration of external factors. In this theory the specifics of elements, like the character and setting, can be interchanged and the plot would hold true despite these changes.¹² Since narrative 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. The established chemistry between the two actors in the first film remembered by audience would not matter to those examining film solely through the narrative. It would also suggest that the film's meaning would be the same if Hugh Grant and Sandra Bullock were to replace Hanks and Ryan. 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 result.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 of structuralism is to 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 over her.

The example of two men fighting over a woman and her affection exemplifies one of the formulas employed in the romantic comedy genre. As Tamar Jeffers McDonald notes in her book, genres, especially romantic comedies, carry a stigma of being “low brow” or simple entertainment for the masses.¹⁴ By nature of being a type of genre, these films have general traits in common. Romantic comedies are a hybrid of two genres and their combination strikes a balance which Leger Grindon describes very well. He explains: “If humor establishes the tone, courtship provides the plot.”¹⁵ While the modes of comedy have shifted to favor dialogue, like *His Girl Friday* (dir. Howard Hawks, 1940) or physical comedy over time, the use of comedy still functions to facilitate and uphold the coupling at the end of the film. These films deal with the development and growth of a relationship between a heterosexual couple while grappling with societal norms around desire, romance, and sex.¹⁶ Grindon elaborates that the employment

of comedy for tone is what draws the line between a romantic comedy and a melodrama.¹⁷ The narrative pattern of these films can often be broken down into a single phrase, such as, “boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl again.” Notice how this popular formula features the man as the active position in the narrative, leaving the woman as something to be lost and gained, like an earring dropped between some couch cushions.

Based on the patterns found in romantic comedies, it would seem that women are trapped within the narrative structure. Film reviewers also perpetuate women as interchangeable elements within the plot of films. We see this in an early review of *It Happened One Night* by Mourdaunt Hall, where Ellie’s character is described by her transitions between her father, Peter Warne, and King Wesley rather than the qualities of the actress or the character in general. Even in a modern timeframe, a film review of *Bridesmaids* (dir. Paul Feig, 2011) in *The Guardian*, compares the whole film to its male predecessor, *The Hangover*, especially when the reviewer basically calls Melissa McCarthy’s character the female Zack Galifiniakis. And even when some scholars and critics break free from the overall narrative, they then place heavy significance on film endings which can 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 and immediately they are 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. She references Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson’s argument for the ending as an exclusive source of meaning but Giltre finds the reading excessive because it dismisses other meaning possibilities available throughout the whole film.¹⁸ 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 result of the process of compromise rather than the actual

ending.¹⁹ 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.”²⁰ 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 society²¹ or facing incompatible personalities like in *Notting Hill* (dir. Roger Michell, 1999).

In his essay, “Entertainment and Utopia,” Richard Dyer argues that utopia is conveyed in musicals as feelings or moments rather than a whole ideal society. These moments are present in genres other than musicals. He notes that it is important for these moments to be interspersed between seemingly realistic situations so they critique the world that encompasses them.²² 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.¹ 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 idea of a “moment” in my analysis of romantic comedy films extends to more than just a suspension of time. A moment can be a look, a gesture, a line, the use of a telephone, a hairstyle or even a costume. Here a moment is reserved for an anomaly that cracks the smoothness of the assumed narrative structure by a film in this genre. It chips away at expectations of what it means to be a woman in a genre that favors men in occupation and power while marketing itself to women.

¹ See filmography attached for complete list of films used for this research project.

During my examination of romantic comedy films I identified three moment themes that were most common across decades. The repetition of female stars along with themes of surveillance, and the refusal of sexual naiveté are expressions associated with womanhood which attract female audiences and enable us to read the man in each film as an interchangeable device. This is the opposite of how Lévi-Strauss describes the exchange of women in kinship networks in his field of structural anthropology. He describes how women are used as literal units of meaning passed between men, especially in cases of marriage where women are passed from their fathers to their husbands.²³ If this is how women are described in relationships between people off screen, it is not surprising to see this communicated through films like romantic comedies. In film, women are typically understood as units in narratives, which are communicated by men through the narrator system.

Tom Gunning's theory of the narrator system explains that the way a story is told impacts how it is communicated to the spectator.²⁴ For an example of this, we could look to *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles, 1941). In the first few minutes, the audience is shown images of the foreboding exterior of Xanadu, followed by a hand clutching a snow globe. A pair of lips uttering the word, "Rosebud" sets the whole mystery of the film in motion. The audience is introduced to the mystery of "Rosebud" as Kane dies before the reporters address it in the newsroom. Then it is not surprising that only the audience is able to grasp the tragic imagery of the Rosebud sled being burned at the end of the film. The organization and intimate presentation allows the audience become the "real" investigators and rewards them at the end of the film. The power of the revelation comes from the beginning of the film when we as spectators are given priority with the utterance of "Rosebud." Gunning argues that the spectator or audience is important because it is their negotiation with the filmic text that makes the narrative become

realized. The narrator system is not a specific person, but acts as placeholders for understanding the perspective and construction of the narrative.²⁵

Since the audience is important for the reading of the narrative it is impossible to abstract the narrator system entirely. To ignore the role of the audience would make the consumption of romantic comedies nonsense. After reading statistics on the limited representation of women in films and behind the camera, it is easy to label the narrator system as male. However, these moments which appear through techniques, shots, looks, and stars, make it possible to read the male narrator system as female.

Even though these films can be coded for women through a female narrator system, it does not mean all women are represented. The dominant history of romantic comedies favors stories of heterosexual white women. I, like many scholars of romantic comedy and women's films such as Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, acknowledge the whiteness of these genres and try to provide critiques of more contemporary films.²⁶ In *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra offer a critique within female film genres like romantic comedies. Their critique distinguishes between two modes of understanding, feminism and post-feminism. Feminism focuses on equality through opportunity and representation forged by collective action. Post-feminism ideology follows the second-wave feminist movement, where equality is achieved individually through one's ability to participate in the capitalistic market. This ideology establishes there is no need for feminist goals because they have already been achieved and moves toward goals related to capitalism and material acquisition. Tasker and Negra establish feminism as 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.²⁷ The whiteness in the contemporary moment is due to the cultural push for individualism and choice, which differs from the direct oppression and 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.

In my research of this genre, I found three types of moments to be the most prominent. The three themes are broken down into three chapters of this work. These moments of the star, surveillance, and the expressions of female sexuality push back against the seemingly simple and quite repressive narratives that encapsulate them. The first chapter will highlight the complex position of the star within films, specifically those positions occupied by women in romantic comedies. The role of the star in these films also extends its reach to the female audience it calls out to within the stereotypical narrative. The second chapter addresses how women are typically the object of surveillance but how in specific moments they can combat and take ownership of this surveillance. The third chapter examines presentations of female sexuality that suggest a sense of knowing and discusses how this knowing offers an alternative to the female's sexuality monitored and debated by other characters or the plot itself. While I found these three themes to be the most comprehensive way to connect films across very different time periods, I do not mean to imply that other types of moments combatting female oppression in film are impossible.

Chapter 1: The Star

The idea that stars are points of identification for female audiences is not new. Miriam Hansen argues that Rudolph Valentino, a silent film star whose roles primarily centered on swashbuckling and action, had an intense female audience following, challenging the idea that

women are passive at the movies even in the early 1900s.²⁸ Even though the whole point of female spectatorship is to be separate from male spectatorship, which is the common default for understanding the perspective of film, it cannot be understood without its opposite, especially in the United States where we tend to exclusively define social roles within a binary system. Hansen claims that it is impossible to understand female spectatorship without its relation to male spectatorship but that we cannot solely limit readings of actors and film based on the dominant ideology.²⁹ 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."³⁰ She references an argument made by Laura Mulvey, which states that the commonly presented perspective of the cinema represents the male gaze, making women objects of this relentless gaze.³¹ 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. These scenarios allow for the female spectators to identify with Valentino because of his complex position within the narrative. 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.³² Faced with news of Valentino's early death, female fans swarmed his funeral and committed suicide, which furthers him as a site of female fetishisms.³³ 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 and genres not directed toward women, stars like Valentino were able to help 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 and 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 be found within the films. He sees the “spectator” as an active role, tasked with tracking stars across films.³⁴ A picture personality is equivalent to the term movie star, because it originates from the film text.³⁵ 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.”³⁶ Based on the theories posed by deCordova, the key to the star is both the repetition of qualities across films and the spectator’s willingness to observe and create patterns.

Romantic comedy films allow for readings of the star in this way due to the patterns of select women found during different decades. If we were to track moments in Meg Ryan’s career from the late 1980s to early 2000s, we would find a woman who is willing to express her vulnerability verbally and whose 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 fiancé after

she stalks Tom Hanks' 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. And again, 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 entire livelihood. 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 professional agency to play these specific roles, obviously seeing more in them than restrictive narrative 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 of the roles reflecting the identity of the star.³⁷ 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.³⁸ This position of the star can make it difficult for viewers to conceptualize where the actress's personality ends and where her character's traits begin. Since their personal lives are not truly accessible, the audience only has their films and media coverage to formulate the stars' identities. Fans can feed into the power of stars by denoting them worthy of investigation and study. Since audiences blur private and public expressions of star identity, it is not unusual to see this pattern in romantic comedies as well, especially when certain stars are repeatedly featured in these films. Despite efforts to blur the lives of stars on and off screen, they still present tensions and contradictions. Dyer claims that stars are a physical manifestation of a contradiction in one body.³⁹ 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 moments fueled by these female stars offer a different story, one of power and agency. Star theory and moments suggest that in these films, the female characters are a battleground for conflicting ideologies; perhaps women keep watching them to find out the outcome of the fight. In addition to the star being a site of contradiction and a combination of public and private life, Dyer also proposes that charisma of stars can indicate them as extraordinary.⁴⁰ Even when you take these blurred lines around the star into consideration, 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.”⁴¹ The small deviations from the complete type open up possibilities for the star to take ownership of their character and allow readings of both the star and the context to be studied at the same 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 revolutionary 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. Her characters are shown horseback riding, leopard hunting in the woods, and hanging off of a dinosaur exhibition. The repetition of trousers and physical, athletic prowess in her films suggests some truth about her interests off screen. And this extends to Hepburn’s long-term affair with her frequent co-star Spencer Tracy, who was married to someone else. Being a

mistress to a married man comes with a lot of judgment about one's morals and sexuality that could have destroyed her reputation. However, she did not let this stop her and she continued her relationship with Tracy for over twenty years until his death. While secrecy kept this affair from being in public eye, it did not stop news from coming out after Tracy's death. In spite of the information being publicized, Hepburn continued to work in the industry for another twenty years. Hepburn made nine more feature films after Tracy's death and continued to star in television film and theatre productions until 1994. The positivity around Hepburn and her stardom remained until her death with both the media and fans glorifying her career and work. She even received a lifetime achievement award from the Screen Actors Guild in 1979.

Her relationship with Tracy provides another example of her stick-to-itiveness seen on screen. These connections allow audiences to blend her public and private lives together. Tracy 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 because of 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 equality in their relationship. At the end of the film her character, Amanda, reluctantly embraces an overly feminine hat from her husband, Adam—but not before she taunts him with a threat to run against him as the Democratic Nominee for County Court Judge. Between her comment and a knowing glimmer in his eye, we are given a shot of equality where they stare at each other while wearing their respective hats. This exchange of looks and her comment suggest that Adam knows he should not take her concession of femininity for granted, as he pulls the curtains around the bed down.

The temporary truce ending of *Adam's Rib* does not make it hard to imagine what awaits the characters after we see them. The underlying tension between Adam and Amanda reproduces an argument about couples and film resolutions made by Kathrina Giltre. She claims 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."⁴² This quote suggests that a couple defies the odds placed on them as characters within the film and also in the time period they represent. The majority of romantic comedies are set in the time period they were made, and therefore the tension between "happy" endings and the reality the couple would face off screen hovers in the background waiting until the credits begin to role. The setting in the present allows for the audience and the characters to share in the same unknown future, a world where both can exist together off screen. For Giltre, the happiness of these endings is captured by the coupling of the two characters. The consistencies in Hepburn's roles span before and during her relationship with Tracy, and therefore we ought to read her stardom as truly independent from her man. While in this case it might be true for Hepburn and Tracy, in many other films it is hard to believe that a union is truly challenging patriarchy.

For example, in *Sex and the Single Girl* (dir. Richard Quine, 1964) Helen Gurley Brown is a psychologist guru who advocates for single women to take ownership of their sex lives. A reporter for a men's magazine, Bob Weston, pretends to be a patient in order to trash her career and the idea that women can pursue these lifestyles. As the charade of lies grows bigger and bigger, Helen falls in love with Bob, ruins her psychology practice, and almost runs away with another man to spite Bob. In the end, Helen reveals that she just wants to be with Bob and be his wife. Helen's willingness to give up her career for a playboy and manipulator, who she only

knows through lies, does not elevate her character or break down boundaries. Instead her coupling with Bob signifies the very concession to married life that she had written against in her book. This contradictory ending shows the repression of a narrative under a male-dominated society, where a character like Helen Brown with a strong career and ideology is completely undermined by her rushed coupling with Bob Weston. Their forced coupling detracts from her character, making the case that two is not actually better than one.

For the non-egalitarian relationships found in romantic comedies, I side with Dyer's understanding of the star, that one person can be extraordinary without the need to be coupled with another character, and in romantic comedies that usually means the male character. Instead, the complexities captured by one star and her characters make her extraordinary. *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (dir. Kevin Rodney Sullivan, 1998) shows this through Angela Bassett and her character Stella. While Stella also ends up with a man at the end of the film, moments regarding her personal growth make her stand out. She transitions from being an uptight, high-powered, business-woman to having her own company and enjoying her life beyond the workplace. While the film concludes with her coupling with a younger man, the film weighs on her progress and willingness to open up rather than the perfection of their relationship. Instead, we see her execute control by going to get her man and for being unashamed of the age difference between them. Her lover's youth and her earning potential add to her power in the relationship. Their relationship highlights her personal development, especially her struggles to be a mother and an earner while also being feminine enough for her man to be comfortable. Angela Bassett, like Stella, is a very educated woman, who received her undergraduate degree in African-American Studies from Yale University. She continued her academic career at Yale, where she earned her MFA in Drama. While it is no secret that actors do not need to go to college or graduate school,

Bassett challenged this with her academic pursuits. In an interview with Naomi Barr for *O, Oprah Magazine*, Bassett explained how her family members tried to deter her from studying theatre at Yale because it would be a waste of schooling. After a few years of settling, she realized that she needed to do what she loved. Stella defies societal expectations by loving a younger man and by making herself happy in her career. Bassett's pursuit of her passion and professional success creates a faith in her characters that they too can challenge expectations placed on them by others.

While contradictions found within the female star make her extraordinary without a man, they also give her power. This power can come from how female stars use their agency off screen to create the patterns seen by spectators. The agency associated with stardom predates the careers of headstrong stars like Meg Ryan and Katharine Hepburn. Emily Susan Carman chronicles the careers of three women, Barbara Stanwyck, Miriam Hopkins, and Carole Lombard, who were leaders in the movement for freelancing or free agency contracting for men and women during the 1930s. All three women demanded more money and control over their picture choices rather than subject themselves to a seven-year contract with a studio, which gave their employer complete control over what films would satisfy the terms or number of films stipulated in their contract. One specific concern for Stanwyck was her contractual obligation with Columbia, which demanded that she would film *Forbidden*. Stanwyck did not wish to make this film based on her previous roles and stated that she would only make the film if she received a \$20,000 raise and until then she would be contracted with Warner Brothers.⁴³ For these women to make demands before men did in the Hollywood studio system, they needed to have confidence and conviction in themselves and their careers. Their stances certainly offer an alternative to the male-driven narrative of stardom we are typically given. Carman also 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.”⁴⁴ This information about their off-screen professional lives builds my claim that women in romantic comedies have power and agency.

This picture of female star independence is furthered by details about these women off screen, especially when Carman specifically describes how actress Carole Lombard’s career was regenerated and more powerful after her divorce.⁴⁵ Typically, a divorce during a career that finally is gaining momentum would be seen as a stopping mechanism. However in 1933, two years before her divorce, Lombard desired a larger part and a film that would launch her career as a leading lady. As Carman explains, Lombard temporarily worked with Columbia, a lesser-known studio, in order to be the leading lady in *Twentieth Century* (dir. Howard Hawks, 1934). After the success of the film, Lombard was divorced from William Powell by 1935.⁴⁶ By the time Lombard came face to face with her ex-husband on screen in *My Man Godfrey* (dir. Gregory La Cava, 1936) she had already starred in seven films. This, coupled with the fact that she would work with Powell after their divorce, shows a determination for success and an inner strength to match any man.

Lombard’s character in *My Man Godfrey* 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 by walking into his bedroom against his wishes. While these moves could be seen as manipulative, it is not uncommon for this sort of manipulation to be practiced by male characters on screen. Lombard’s character takes on

the power and control in the film by getting what she wants, even if it is marriage. Lombard fought for a better role and a chance to be the lead in *Twentieth Century* even if it meant taking a risk by working for another studio. Irene, like Lombard, fights for what she wants and succeeds. Similar to Lombard's story, Stanwyck's divorce also 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." She demonstrates this through her "freelancer" status with both Fox and RKO which also allowed her to make films with additional studios. Her post-divorce work mentality also crept into the advice she gave to fans where she advised women to have independence and to not get distracted by love. Stanwyck also spoke about how her independence in her work and home life gave her freedom.⁴⁷ Her adaptability and incorporation of masculinity in her identity drives the idea that women were aware of themselves and the structures of patriarchy on film. The sense of awareness is then carried over from their choices off screen to their roles on screen. This reading gives women power and it implies that the fear of their power incites repression by studios and by the men in their lives.

The theme of star power and choice continues with contemporary female stars as well. Hilary Radner argues that despite the film's dismissal of race through assimilation and the main character's coupling with a rich white man, Jennifer 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 and knowledge of her as a New York City native changed the story of the film so her character's perseverance makes the film optimistic and empowering. Lopez, like her character, experienced a rags-to-riches story where she came from the Bronx and worked to be a star in Hollywood. Her hard work and highly publicized relationship with Ben Affleck

symbolized that she had made it.⁴⁸ If Lopez had made it in Hollywood then her role as a maid named Marisa can be seen as regression. However, the changes to the script to reflect her personal life and ethnicity allows for a reading of choice and empowerment. Her star power and ability to have personal details like her hometown added to character strengthens the blur between Lopez as an actress and the character she plays. Her decision to work on the film creates another connection to her life off screen, as she also dates a rich, white actor. However, in the public eye they were seen as equals, which offers hope to the position of her character, Marisa, and her relationship with Christopher.

Lopez's ability to rise to stardom from the Bronx coincides with her character's drive for success in her career. The strong connection between Lopez and Marisa allows the actress' off-screen success to be mapped onto her repressed and limited character. 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 star's embodiment of contradiction, in her reading of Jennifer Lopez because she was such a self-made star who chose a restricted character.⁴⁹ Looking for connections between powerful women's lives off screen while they play characters with little agency on screen creates more opportunities for audience identification. If we look at Sandra Bullock's character in *While You Were Sleeping* (dir. Jon Turteltaub, 1995) we see a woman who works as a token taker at a train station; however, her ordinariness does not stop her from diving 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. Her

characters defy the idea that only men are active risk takers when she rescues a man or a giant, historical structure.

Like Sandra Bullock's active characters, 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."⁵⁰ Female stars, films, and audiences challenge the simple negative and dominating presence of patriarchy on women's culture. For example, 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 provided her an opportunity for both music and movie sales. For each of these films she sings the title song—"Pillow Talk," "Lover Come Back," or "Send Me No Flowers"—and usually another song expressing her feelings. None of the three films are musicals, but the addition of Day to the cast created another outlet for her stardom and role to intersect. The addition of these songs proves Day is just as knowing as the male playboys who are trying to seduce or deceive her in these films.

The stardom of Doris Day provides glimpses of female empowerment in times where that may not have been on the cultural agenda. In the post-war era, the cultural agenda pushed women into the ideal of being a wife with a white-picket fenced home in the suburbs and

children playing in the yard. This agenda glazes over the labor of women during the war, which included taking over men's jobs and even their leisure activities, like baseball. While women were supposed to be cooking and cleaning, Day and her characters were providing a counter-narrative to the simplistic wife and mother. The combination of Day's stardom and roles 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 argues that these agendas were present but not given priority during times of distress and conflict making it seem that they did not exist by writing, "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."⁵¹ Hepburn, Lombard, and Day's stardom and films clearly support Cavell's challenge to the lack of female progress in cinema. Even when we think back to the most memorable parts of Rosalind Russell's performance in *His Girl Friday* (dir. Howard Hawks, 1940), they revolve around her relationship with her job. This feminist agenda is apparent in the first scene as she walks into the newspaper office and passes all of the female telephone operators and continues to stride into the male journalist realm, where she belongs. Other moments include her dominating the telephones in the press room while talking fast and during which the audience sees her fall in love with her career all over again. Russell's performance as Hildy makes it easy to believe that these moments are providing opportunities for identification on topics other than romance.

Identification with female stars can be understood through the details remembered by the audience. Jackie Stacey examines letters written by women about their favorite stars of the 1940s and 1950s to better understand the identification process.⁵² She claims 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 as something they lack or desire.”⁵³ The positive qualities of the characters were attributed to the star while the negative aspects of the narratives were ignored and dismissed by many of the women who viewed them. It would seem that their omission presents the power of stars as a chance for female audiences to forget patriarchy, even if it is just for a moment.

Bringing us into the contemporary moment, Katherine Heigl, 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*, Heigl turned to the big screen. Like Hopkins, Stanwyck, and Lombard, she also wanted out of her contract so she could control her image and her participation in filmic texts. 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 her characters. In *The Ugly Truth*, Heigl's character is taught the art of seduction by the new 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. Heigl, like her characters, finds opportunities to exercise power and choice when the time is right.

Precedents set by female stars and their characters in romantic comedies provide opportunities for female audiences to identify with them and find connections between their lives

and their roles. The agency and power shown by these selected women and their choices offers hope to women in a repressive narratives and society at large. These promising patterns and moments should further encourage the need for control and agency in positions behind the camera of these films as well. The narrator system is a position of understanding created by how the film is constructed and how the audience understands it. If more women were working in film production careers, then perhaps the need to track stars closely or observe moments may be diminished. Their assistance in the construction of narratives about women's lives and desires could perhaps offer more thorough accounts than what has been presented to audiences since the 1930s. Both female stars and women behind the camera can also weaken the idea that women need to be coupled with men in order to be seen as extraordinary.

Women under Surveillance

Female characters, like stars, are constantly under surveillance. Their choices and lives become subject to scrutiny by other characters, the filmic narrator, and even the audience. Often this surveillance happens through public performance, the presence of the press, and devices like the telephone, or physical spaces like an apartment. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger describes how women are constantly aware of themselves as a social object. Berger writes: "Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping."⁵⁴ This idea of duality and self-awareness makes it hard to imagine that a woman can have privacy, especially when she internalizes the judgments and perceptions of others. I, like Berger, argue that women do not have privacy. However, in moments of surveillance in romantic comedies, women refuse to sacrifice their private desires, thoughts, and relationships even in the most public settings. This is doubly true for queer women in film. First, they lose privacy because of their gender, then they become the center of attention

because of their sexuality. Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt explain that “putting queer people on-screen is a hyperbolic mode of going public.”⁵⁵ This amplifies the disclosure of their sexuality to extend first to the surrounding characters and then to the audience watching the film. For queer women, their privacy is exploited twice, all for public consumption. In *Imagine Me & You* (dir. Ol Parker, 2005) Rachel, a woman who recently married her male best friend, falls in love with Luce, the woman who is the florist at her wedding. After Rachel’s eyes meet Luce’s as she walks down the aisle, the plot follows Rachel as she tries to reconcile her sexuality and feelings for someone who is not her husband. Later, Rachel realizes that she loves Luce and when she tracks her down she uses a traffic jam as the perfect opportunity to confess her love. Rachel stands atop of her parents’ car and shouts a phrase taught to her by Luce at a sporting event. Luce then proceeds to stand on top of her cab and shout back to Rachel. In this moment Rachel uses an ordinary public landscape, a traffic jam to profess her love and commitment to Luce. However, since this is also her first relationship with a woman it automatically becomes an outing of her sexuality. As a woman who is now understood as a lesbian, we see Rachel utilize the street for her personal, romantic gain as she literally stands on top of conventions of heterosexuality and masculinity invoked by the many cars and angry drivers. These moments provide agency and acknowledgement of what it is to be a woman in film and in real life.

Regardless of their sexual orientation, women in the world and in these films are unable to separate their public and private lives. Typically romantic comedies are thought to reveal every insecurity and weakness in the female psyche. But what if characters and women were aware of this and decided to use surveillance to their own advantage? Their refusal to sacrifice their privacy becomes evident as they outwit or usurp the most aggressive forces of the social world, such as the paparazzi or broadcast technology. In romantic comedies, this theme of

women reclaiming privacy in public is apparent across films in which the level of external social aggression varies depending on the source. For women, privacy is not a given so characters are left with no choice but to blend two, distinct worlds—the private and public—for their personal use.

We can think about the separation (or lack thereof) between public and private in relation to stars and characters in film. In his book about stars, Richard Dyer explains that a character is defined by a series of signs across a given film. Some of the signs included in his list are appearance, objectives, and the name of the character.⁵⁶ Just as a character's haircut and clothing choices *say* something about the character, her name can also be used as a sign. For example, if the main character were to be named Hope, her name would provide another layer of meaning to her character, especially if she is trying to overcome obstacles like her living situation or her lack of education. Dyer classifies signs based on how they function in expressing emotions, thoughts, and actions related to the public or private interactions. For example, one of the signs he discusses is speech, which I believe to be the most direct sign of a character. While speech is the most direct, it can be communicated through the vocalization of words or acted out through facial expressions and gestures. In my discussion of romantic comedies throughout each chapter, contradiction has been a consistent characteristic of the genre. Speech is extremely important in understanding how the private, internal space of the character interacts with the public/social space of a character. As we know, it is possible to *say* one thing and *do* something completely different. Dyer argues that in moments where the two types of speech collide, the truth presented by the character is believed to come from the internal, subtle expressions or gestures rather than words.⁵⁷ When women in these films are under surveillance, the literal use of speech (words)

can act as a diversion to allow for more intimate or restrained feelings to surface through actions or what is implied between the lines.

Dr. Helen Brown in *Sex and the Single Girl* (dir. Richard Quine, 1964) provides a perfect example where the audience needs to read or see between her lines. Dr. Helen Brown's patient, her love interest, tells her she is attractive, which she denies. She insists that he does not find *her* attractive but that he is transferring his affection to her. However, the camera shows close-ups of her eyes widening, showing that there is more than a doctor/patient relationship blooming. These moments persist throughout the majority of the doctor/patient interactions, and jeopardize her ability to remain professional. Here, the use of indirect language is pivotal to understanding Helen's character and her desires to be with a "married" man. The contradiction here allows her to spare herself from external judgment so she can keep her sexual and romantic desires private. The tendency to favor the private rather than the public gives merit to these "knowing" moments in romantic comedies which allow us to escape the restrictive dominance of the narrative.

Phone conversations are another 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. As the conversation progresses, 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 the defendant, 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.⁵⁸ His utterance validates the seemingly random timing of Amanda's action. Amanda makes a point to recognize and interrogate the legally binding word in moments featured in the trial.

Amanda fights for a reconsideration of the marriage terms. Specifically, she advocates 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 her 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 presence as both his wife and as a defense attorney. Her willingness to use public space for private reasons shows her knowledge that women are unable to compartmentalize these sections of their lives, which men like Adam don't understand because they are free to divide their personal and public lives. Amanda's persistence and dedication exemplifies the desire to share her experience of the world and feeling of surveillance with her husband, which to him comes

off as an attack on his masculinity and privilege. The scenes of the trial show reaction shots of Amanda and Adam, revealing that it is in fact their marriage, not the case, that 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 that challenge him.² Adam’s reference reiterates that as her husband he cannot pull the curtain down at the home or in the courtroom when they are in this situation. Amanda’s emotion and passion in the courtroom scenes show 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 most 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 and out to dinner.⁵⁹ This shift is reflected the overwhelming presence of surveillance of courtship, especially as film moves into the sound era. An explicit public performance of a relationship occurs in the opening scene of *Moonstruck* (dir. Norman Jewison, 1987) where Loretta’s boyfriend proposes to her and she critiques him for sitting instead of getting down on one knee to propose, a comment made known to the entire restaurant. Not only was Loretta aware of the restaurant patrons’ investment in the proposal, but she used that audience/surveillance to get what she wanted— Johnny Cammareri down on one knee with a ring. We, the audience, become part of the public community in the

² For more information on the history of Punch and Judy see “Are Punch and Judy Shows Finally Outdated?” *Smithsonian.com*, February 4, 2013, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/are-punch-and-judy-shows-finally-outdated-10599519/?no-ist>.

dating montage in *Pillow Talk* where Jan and Rex are superimposed over images of Rockefeller Center, a sightseeing boat marina, as well as night club and restaurant marquees. Even though most of these characters ventured into these public spaces to conduct the more intimate parts of their lives, the manner in which they are presented makes everyone, from a character to an audience member, aware of this social pressure which is created by others observing their words and behavior.

In other films like *Roman Holiday* (dir. William Wyler, 1953), the theme of surveillance is conveyed as aggressive by the presence of an obsessive and intrusive newspaper/paparazzi presence. The film 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 with a tearful goodbye. The ending scene is a coded public farewell, where she holds a press conference and Joe positions himself in the front row. When he asks 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. This scene functions as a formal farewell and confession of love between the two characters under the guise of a press conference. 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. The newspaper/paparazzi is embodied by Joe. His ongoing charade and use of Anne for profit allow newspapers to be synonymous with deception and lies. As a princess who is constantly in the public eye, Anne pushes back against their intrusive motivation to distribute all of her inner desires and relationships for public consumption. Instead, she takes their designated space, a press conference, and uses it to tie up her loose-ends with Joe. The audience is placed in the position of

knowing along with the woman, allowing them to identify and become accomplices to this transgressive 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, a fear that almost consumes her every action and thought. The press follows her aggressively and diminishes her privacy with every camera flash. Anna later pleads for Will to give her another chance after she breaks up with him over a press scandal, where she is seen at his apartment. 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 patiently for her response. Anna amends her statement to reflect her desire to stay with Will in Notting Hill. Here, it takes Anna until some of the last moments of the film to utilize the movie press conference to resolve her unfinished relationship with Will. When she does, however, the camera, like the audience, looks to her eyes and face to indicate the transgression into her character's privacy. 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 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 sound and sight of paparazzi taking footage and pictures of her at red carpet events. The presence of these moments at the introduction also marks the woman as the subject of public attention and eventually private attention by the male character. While these films give the press priority in the narrative through the introductions, the women at the end of the film manage to resist and reclaim their privacy while in the press's territory. Giltre comments that the function of the media presence (newspapers) in early romantic comedies is to make the private, public.⁶⁰ As I've noted, this is overly present in these two films, with newspapers attempting to violate and expose any semblance of the women's privacy. This theme persists beyond modernized remakes of *Roman Holiday* and manifest themselves aggressively through other powerful sources such as the welfare agency and the police.

In the film, *Claudine* (dir. John Berry, 1974) the female character, Claudine is more than familiar with the presence of aggressive surveillance in her everyday life. As a single mother with six children, Claudine turns to governmental support to feed her children and herself. When it is time for her welfare officer to visit her, she is bombarded with questions about every purchase and if she has a new man in her life. She hides any ounce of progress for these visits so that she doesn't lose money to survive. At the end of the film Claudine takes a firm stance against the surveillance forces in her life, especially the police. Just after she says "I do" to her new husband, Rupert, her son bursts into the room after running from the police. Her son quickly dons a suit jacket to cover up his black power t-shirt. As the police enter her apartment and break up the wedding celebration, the audience sees Claudine embrace her reality. As a police van starts to drive away with her husband, son, and pastor, she and the rest of her children rush to

climb into the truck. While some would see this as a negative consequence of being a woman of color in the 1970s.³ This moment shows Claudine's refusal to break up her family and her wedding celebration. In this film, the police van emblazoned with "police" lettering replaces the traditional image of a limousine with a "just married" sign. Claudine instead becomes even closer with her husband and children despite the physical and intrusive forces of the government and police.

While the press and the government are extremely aggressive toward women in these films and in real life, broadcast technologies like the radio are perhaps the coldest instruments of surveillance. Unlike people, the radio has no concept of privacy. Given that *Sleepless in Seattle* makes reference to *An Affair to Remember* throughout the plot, the film is a modern example of how media technology aides in the transgression of public and private spaces. In the film, 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 Sam's 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 Annie recognizing the weight of this act and his vulnerability. Her tears symbolize acknowledgement of two things. First that a man has a choice and he does not *have* to blend his public and private life like a woman does. And second, that devices like the radio are the cruelest and most raw forms of technology to communicate personal information. As a woman in society Annie understands and resonates with Sam's exposure through an act of technological emasculation. The repeated theme of media and technology in the film suggests that women are

³ The film, *Claudine* can be read through many lenses of scholarship, including race and class. While I do not elaborate on them here for sake of examining female moments, it is important to acknowledge how race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect in this film and other films as well.

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, which we saw in *Baby Boom* with J.C. Wyatt. 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.”⁶¹ 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 map 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 women and men. The person being instigated becomes a spectacle.⁶² We can see this in *Moonstruck* where Loretta is tasked with inviting her fiancé’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 and anger disrupts the polite phone etiquette which she tried to establish in the beginning of the call. Only we can see her 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 spaces and private spaces in cities substantiates Pamela Robertson Wojcik’s claim that themes of surveillance are prevalent in urban settings.⁶³ 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 she 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, he 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.⁶⁴ This reading makes the apartment another stage for masculinity and identity performance for the woman to challenge. As a woman, Jan is aware of the inability to keep secrets even in a private setting. Her use of the phone and apartment places Brad in a feminine position of exposure, which knocks down his masculinity and allows her to demand equality like Amanda in *Adam’s Rib*. So like the courtroom and radio,

the apartment and the telephone become devices of opportunity 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 the male hosts 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 he receives promotions in exchange. As a bachelor he ensures there is enough alcohol and snack foods for those who use his place and he becomes annoyed when the guests use them up so quickly. His apartment is a revolving door of drama, which services the narrative. Fran Kubelik is a woman working as an elevator operator in C.C.'s office. As her affair with his boss goes up and down like the elevator she controls, we never see any of it take place in her apartment. Meanwhile, the film establishes C.C.'s agency and choice to blend his public and private lives as opportunistic and entertaining. Fran and other female characters are not given a choice and therefore act out of necessity. The audience, like Fran, questions and mocks the silliness of C.C.'s arrangement and lifestyle. For a man like C.C. to do this is comical, but if a woman were to do this it would not be humorous at all because she would be seen as selfish and morally corrupt. Unlike Jan Morrow, Fran is known as a mistress and sexually active single woman living in the city. The extreme aversion to showing Fran's apartment is captured when Fran attempts to commit suicide in C.C.'s apartment when she thought it was a stranger's. Unlike C.C., Fran has no separation or choice when it comes to public and private spaces. Even though C.C. makes the choice to lend out his apartment, it is still intended for "private" use by the men in his office. The absence of Fran's apartment shows an apprehension and anxiety to expose a woman like her. She is a woman whose lack of privacy makes her more inclined to "promiscuous" sexual activity and to commit a personal act, suicide, in someone else's home. Her acknowledgement of this female

hybridization of public and private space is communicated through these moments. And for the film to show her apartment would mean an acceptance of her body and her choices, an image that filmgoers during the 1960s were most likely unwilling to entertain.

Even though the social world that encompasses the female character is quite restrictive, these moments of reclamation offer a story where women fight back. This defiant and sometimes deviant response to surveillance gives the female characters and the female audience a sense of hope and respite from the barrage of surveillance from the camera, men, and society as a whole. In order for them to take active roles they first acknowledge and accept the idea that as women, they are under surveillance. Then based on the level of aggression and type of surveillance the women in these films choose their response. All of them transgress these boundaries to challenge forces of the press, technology, male characters, and patriarchal ideas about their lives and their bodies. The women's bodies and their sexuality are frequently targets of ongoing surveillance and debate. These women not only challenge ideas of what it is like to be a woman constantly under observation but many of these women offer overt or covert counterpoints to how these narratives suggest they should express or use their sexuality.

Female Sexuality on Display

Not only are women being watched and judged by a spectrum of people and devices, but their bodies become the subject of debate or aversion. The combination of no privacy and patriarchal narratives of sexuality restricts and "purify" a woman and the way she presents both her body and her sexual desires, especially, during the classical Hollywood era, where the Hays code required societal standards of morality and prohibited explicit signs of sex or sexual awareness. At times before the 1970s where sex is not explicitly shown on screen, are we to believe that all female characters in romantic comedies remained chaste and virginal until

marriage? That's what many of the narratives suggest. However, if we continue to ask ourselves why women watch romantic comedies, it seems that dutiful, virginal women are not enough to keep us engaged decades later. In romantic comedies there are moments where women use their bodies or knowledge of their bodies to challenge the common narratives primarily constructed by male executives, clergy, and other moral reformers. Due to the codes enforced in Hollywood between 1934 and the 1960s, female characters used spaces and indirect modes of communication like technology, clothing, and voice-overs to express their sexuality on screen.

As we saw with Wilder's film, *The Apartment*, an apartment can function as a symbol of the female character's relationship status and sexual experience. In the post-war era, the apartment represents alternative living ideals that stray from suburban norms and values, especially for single people.⁶⁵ One of the starkest differences between urban and suburban values is the presence or absence of marriage and children. Wojcik suggests that single women living in urban areas were a frequent topic among magazines, films, and books. And like the term "playboy," sexually active women were described as "bohemian."⁶⁶ A perfect example of the bohemian woman and her apartment is Goldie Hawn's character, Toni Simmons, in *Cactus Flower* (dir. Gene Saks, 1969). Toni's apartment is one small room where her kitchen, living room, and bedroom blend together. Wojcik 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.⁶⁷ Toni's youth, which is juxtaposed against the older, single woman in the film played by Ingrid Bergman, supports Wojcik's claim. Toni's apartment becomes a stage for drama to play out between her older suitor, Julian, and her young, next-door neighbor, Igor, where she is often placed in the middle. The two men who originally vie for her affection show the two possibilities

for a woman in her situation: settle down with Julian and be married or stay single and date a young unattached man like Igor. Interestingly enough Toni chooses young Igor over sophisticated Julian, suggesting that she might not be ready to relinquish her bohemian lifestyle just yet. As men come bursting through the window or front door, it is clear that Toni's youthful sexuality is only a stepping stone before she settles down. Like Fran Kublik's apartment (or absence thereof), we never see the apartment of Ingrid Bergman's character, Stephanie. While we do not see Stephanie's apartment, which could provide some information about her sexuality, we do learn that she had been married before she worked for Julian. Perhaps like Fran Kubelik, Stephanie's apartment would be an acceptance of her lack of innocence which is something that this 1960s romantic comedy was not ready to reveal.

While we don't always see the apartment of an older, unmarried woman in the 1950s and 1960s, we do have the privilege of seeing Jan Morrow's apartment in *Pillow Talk*. Despite Jan Morrow's girl-next-door look, the layout of her apartment challenges the plot's characterization of her as a model of virginity and innocence. Playboy and womanizer-extraordinaire, Brad Allen constantly suggests that Jan is disrupting his phone serenades because of her "bedroom problems" and later he coaches her romance with Rex (his alter-ego), all in an effort to paint her as a sexually naïve woman. However, Jan's brightly painted apartment is fully furnished and decorated with large couches and an eat-in kitchen which suggest that she is an older, single woman who has moved out of her temporary phase. Her apartment is comfortable and "suitable" for entertaining anyone of her choosing, which is different than Toni's crash pad in *Cactus Flower*. She even has a maid named Alma, who is in charge of cleaning while Jan is at work as an interior designer. These visual indications of her maturity are confirmed in the moment where her client's son makes unwanted sexual advances toward her, and we hear her exclaim that she is

almost as old as his mother. Even though the surface-level meaning of her age affirmation does not automatically imply wisdom and experience, the context supplied by other moments allows us to take that step. The sexual assault scene in *Pillow Talk* begins when her client's son, a college man, offers to drive her back to her apartment. On the way home, he pulls over to the side of the road and attempts to kiss her without warning. He continues to physically launch himself at her as she literally pushes him away, yelling. Jan invokes her age and tells the man to stop. Finally, he agrees to take her home if she stops at the bar with him on the way home. This unwanted physical attack on Jan without her consent is a depiction of sexual assault, something that typically is not associated with romantic comedies.

However, while other classical Hollywood films may characterize the unwanted advance as "romantic" this film posits it as problematic. The key to this scene is that they justify her response with comments about her age and experience, implying that a woman her age knows when and if she is willing to engage with a man sexually. Although the sexual assault car scene can be imagined as a sign of "prudishness" on Jan's behalf because the structure contrasts it with scenes in Brad's apartment or "sex palace" filled with switches for mood lighting, a fold-out bed, and an automatic record player, her defense indicates the opposite. The film seeks to further this impression of difference between men and women when Jan and Brad (Rex) are shown in split screen and in spaces with gender "appropriate" color palettes. However, these moments and others can actually suggest that they are sexual equals. If we are starting to believe that Jan has been alone in a car with a man it becomes concrete when we see her alone with Rex toward the end of the film.

In this second car ride we are presented with a vocal and visual image of Jan as a willing sexual participant, which drastically differs from the first car scene with the college student.

Instead of a stopped car and physical fighting, we see Jan all dreamy-eyed and smiling as she and Brad speed away to a romantic cabin. From the start, the intention to go away for the weekend is already in place, rather than being decided by only one person. It becomes clear that Jan's rejection of the younger man's advances was not a validation of her virginity but of his own inexperience. Although his inexperience makes her refusal acceptable in the narrative, it is disturbing because it ignores the legitimate reason of refusal which is simply that she is a woman who has the right to consent. The first car ride doesn't work. The juxtaposition between these two car rides proves that her innocence is not at stake here. Jan's eagerness and enthusiasm with Brad allows us to read his sexually motivated apartment and the serenading of women before Jan as qualifications necessary for him to be her sexual equal.

In addition to these moments, the use of the I-voice in *Pillow Talk* is another manifestation of Jan's sexual experience and desires which is used in the second car ride scene. 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.⁶⁸ As she drives to the cabin with Rex, an I-voice of Jan/Day sings "Possess Me" with lyrics expressing her readiness to be with Rex in both a romantic and sexual capacity. The usage of the I-voice here encourages the audience to trust that it *is* Jan's inner thoughts being communicated boldly through song, which functions as an outward expression of sexual desire when it would have been 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 tames and marries a converted playboy.

Bridget Jones's Diary (dir. Sharon Maguire, 2001) doesn't have a female character seeking her sexual equal, but seeking marriage and a committed relationship. Like *Pillow Talk*, the film uses the I-voice to address desires and relationship anxiety. In many moments

throughout the film the I-voice reveals Bridget's true feelings/thoughts that betray her public performance of how a single woman should act. Scenes where she worries about being alone for the rest of her life are often the subject of the I-voice, which can seem patriarchal and neurotic, similar to the neurotic, female leads played by Meg Ryan. However, in one scene where she introduces her sexist boss who is inappropriate towards women at a book release party, Bridget's 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 experienced by Bridget in her everyday life. And as I noted in the surveillance chapter, women are in a constant state of negotiation as they deal with external demands placed on them by social rules or laws and their own thoughts and desires. In addition to calling out her misogynistic boss, Bridget's I-voice functions to express how she feels about herself and the way she is perceived by the world as a single woman. Her I-voice recites her plan to lose weight or her plan to cover up her unwanted weight with control-top underpants that are visually unflattering. These moments of self-reflection offer an opportunity for female expressions to be boldly separated from the restrictive male narrative.

The use of the I-voice in *Bridget Jones's Diary* creates a subversive counter-narrative written "between the lines" for female audiences. These moments expose her vulnerability and the difficulties of being a woman who is also single. 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 have a conversation that is not about a man.⁴ However, if we think of the audience playing an active role in the film consumption, then some of Bridget's I-voices would actually pass this test. Instead of two characters, the I-voice allows conversations

⁴ The specific strip which inspired the Bechdel test is titled "The Rule." An image of the strip in its entirety can be seen on this blog <http://dykestowatchoutfor.com/the-rule>

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 talk and worry only about men.

Despite these moments, Bridget and those around her still fear the threat of singledom looming over her. This fear is odd to imagine when we discuss a character in the 21st century but it is different from classical Hollywood films where there is literally no other alternative. Angela McRobbie explains that Bridget Jones's character is a result of modern privileges such as unquestioned education and urban living. The removal of these concerns allows women to internalize new problems like "remaining single."⁶⁹ McRobbie's reading implies that women of the 21st century no longer have to fight for their right to work, learn, or live alone, so they turn to the one category of uncertainty: romantic relationships. The imperative to end one's single status, which consumes Bridget's dialogue throughout the film, 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."⁷⁰ We can see the tense relationship between women in romantic comedies and time when we think of Jan's age in *Pillow Talk* or the years demarked by bridesmaid dresses piled high in Jane's closet in *27 Dresses*. If we accept the idea that some barriers on education and living have shifted for women, then perhaps contemporary women are internalizing the societal pressures of marriage. We repeatedly hear of women's ages in these films or references to it, marking their single status as a threat. Why are we so afraid of the older single woman? What does she reveal or threaten to reveal that we can't see?

Moments of sexual desire or relationship anxiety expressed through signs, especially technological devices, highlight a long-standing fear of women and what they can do. Jacob Smith claims that women are often associated with telephones and that some early prank phone calls were made by women. He explains that the telephone and prank call can be a source of comedy and social anxiety.⁷¹ I argue that single women in romantic comedies function like phones and prank phone calls. These films are meant for entertainment but female audiences' eight-decade-long fascination with these films suggests there is something more. Like the star and moments of surveillance, a women's knowledge of herself and her body can create tension. In romantic comedies, these women are the subjects of humorous and ridiculously romantic situations which can make them seem dim, neurotic, or insecure. Still, these women with their expressions of sexuality can become sites of social anxiety because they use signs to demonstrate their sexuality in ways that challenge conventions and restrictions placed by others. Women who are demonstrating their presence sexually in subtle or explicit ways can be the target of cultural anxiety because they provide counter-examples to how we are used to seeing women in films and real life. This combination of comedy and social anxiety makes the moments or expressions of sexuality in these films transgressions.

The telephone becomes a great sign of transgression which 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."⁷² The telephone provides another way of invoking sexual intimacy without physically displaying it for audiences. Even though this analysis applies to films during Production Code 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* when Harry and Sally are shown split screen in their beds watching a movie together. This scene with the telephone is more intimate than the actual sex scene and its immediate aftermath where the two are very uncomfortable. Sally's availability through her bedroom telephone becomes just another way of expressing female sexuality in romantic comedies.

While many moments are seen as private or covert modes of sexuality and singleness, they can also manifest themselves externally and explicitly. Post-feminist discourse advocates heavily for the use of material signs expressing "independent" feminine characteristics, like a woman's sexuality. Evidence of external, material signs is readily apparent in contemporary films, which coincides post-feminist ideology's rise in popularity. In addition to writing about the Jennifer Lopez's stardom which was referenced in the star chapter, Hilary Radner addresses one of the most important identifiers of contemporary women in her book, *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks and Consumer Culture*. Like McRobbie, she explains that women are postponing marriage in favor of careers. However, Radner claims that these women are economically empowered and have discretionary income which they can spend on fashion and luxury goods.⁷³ In modern times I believe that women have more earning power than they did during the second-wave feminism, however, I do not subscribe to the ideology that

collective, feminist goals are achieved. In order to use post-feminism here we need to believe that women have extra money which they spend on material items like clothing that can stand in for expressions of their identity, and in the case of my argument, sexuality. This definition can extend to any item that can be purchased and put on display by a woman in film, and in this case romantic comedies. I use post-feminism here because it offers more than superficial readings of female characters in modern films and provides a way to make sense of characters like Bridget Jones or Elle Woods in the context of empowerment.

Even though post-feminism pushes for reading external signs of female empowerment, it can prevent us from looking for less obvious signs of empowerment, or in the context of moments in romantic comedies, a woman's sexuality. What if a commercial film purchased or rented by a character in a film could function as this type of sign? In *Imagine Me & You*, we see an example of how a rental video can communicate another layer of meaning to an object. When Rachel begins to seriously explore her sexual attraction toward women and question her marriage to Heck, she goes to the video rental store to acquire a lesbian porn film. After narrowly evading her mother at the video store, Rachel dashes home to watch the film. We see her purposely set herself up at the television. We never see the images, but we hear the sounds of women making sexual noises and we are shown Rachel's enjoyment and curiosity as she watches the images. This brief moment of gratification for Rachel is soon interrupted when her husband, Heck comes home. She lies to him about the video, telling him it was a "mistake," and planning to return it immediately. Here, the audience is aware that the video means more than just visual pleasure but reflects her newly emerging sexual attraction and love toward women, specifically a florist named Luce. Rachel's acquisition of the film shows her agency and the moment stands out as a more honest display of sexuality than the surrounding images of her lying in bed next to her

husband. If we subscribe to a post-feminist theory of material expression, then the monetary “rental” of the lesbian pornographic film can take on a new meaning of empowered sexuality for Rachel’s character in the film.

While the acquisition and consumption of a video is a subtle example which shows how materials signify female sexuality and knowledge, clothing is used to express this theme in a more physical manner. The Playboy bunny outfit is a frequent subject of analysis for women and female characters in film because it functions as a source of objectification, acknowledgement, and critique. Due to the history of the costume it is hard to solely cast a negative judgment against it. The costume was designed by an African American fashion designer named Zelda Wynn Valdes who was known for making outfits for celebrities and for designs that accentuated the female body.⁵ With this in mind, we cannot overlook how men used this accentuation of women’s bodies to objectify and sexualize them. In her two-part undercover exposé of the Bunny Club in New York City, Gloria Steinem provides examples of men touching her and soliciting sex from her just because she was dressed and working as a bunny in the club.⁶ This reading feeds into the common understanding of women being seen as objects by men. In film, particularly romantic comedies, both of these positions are combined to create a reading where female characters knowingly wear the costume despite its negative connotations, daring audiences to create new meaning.

In a similar effort to create new meaning from signs like overly feminine colors and the Playboy bunny costume, Carol M. Dole suggests that women like Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde*

⁵ In an article for the Huffington Post, Julee Wilson provides a brief history and background on Zelda Wynn Valdes and her relationship to fashion and the Playboy bunny costume. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/07/zelda-wynn-valdes-playboy-bunny_n_2637802.html

⁶ Show Magazine published Gloria Steinem’s undercover story, “A Bunny’s Tale,” in 1963. This link provides full text copies of both articles here: <http://dlib.nyu.edu/undercover/bunnys-tale-gloria-steinem-show-magazine>

(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 a costume party.⁷⁴ This reading implies that Elle knows the connotations surrounding the “bunny” apparel but as a sign of confidence in her body and sexuality, she wears it anyway. Dole’s observation of awareness in Elle points to a crucial component of moments whether they be of the star, surveillance, or female sexuality. For these moments to become more than just blatant objectification of women on screen, female characters need to be conscious or knowledgeable of themselves and how they are seen. We see this theme of awareness and persistence in a similar moment in *Bridget Jones’s Diary* where Bridget also wears a Playboy bunny costume for a themed party, which has been changed from “saints and sinners” to a traditional garden party. Both of these moments feature embarrassment for the women but their *choice* of outfits presents their freedom to express their sexuality and their acknowledgment of how their outfits fit into a larger conversation of women and their sexuality. This theme of material sexual expression runs throughout *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, where she chooses to wear short skirts and “revealing” tops to work to cue to her boss that she is sexually available and interested in a physical and emotional relationship with him.

In African American romantic comedies, these moments of sexual awareness are externalized in different ways. *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (dir. Kevin Rodney Sullivan, 1998) expresses modern anxiety of an older woman dating/falling in love with a younger man. Stella’s sister repeatedly comments on the age of Winston, Stella’s love interest, mentioning that he is practically illegal at the age of twenty. This obsession with age is part of the ongoing narrative of women in romantic and sexual situations in romantic comedies. Like women in similar films, Stella pursues a relationship that brings her pleasure and happiness despite the

objections of her family. The previous two films relied on objects like a bunny costume to convey sexual awareness and desire. This film uses Stella's changing hairstyles as cues for her character's evolution and development, especially when she begins to become sexually involved with Winston while on vacation in Jamaica. The moments when her hair changes cue the audience to look for shifts in her character. The beginning of the film shows Stella 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 shown in braids. This moment is important because it is associated with happiness and sexual desire, which is the direct opposite of the unhappiness she had with her straightened hair and assumed unfulfilling sex life.

Hairstyles are also associated with coming-of-age and sexual maturity for Monica in *Love and Basketball* (dir. Gina Prince-Bythewood, 2000) as she deals with her complicated on-again, off-again relationship with her neighbor and fellow basketball player, Quincy. As a young girl and high school student, it is natural for Monica to have her hair pulled back or in braids. However, as Monica nears graduation, she attends her school dance and has her hair straightened by her sister. In this film, this signifies maturity: after she loses her virginity to Quincy, it becomes a symbol of sexual maturity. Later, toward the end of the film we see another physical and material manifestation of her empowerment in her relationship with her husband. We see Monica achieving her dream of playing in the WNBA, and as she walks onto the court, we see Quincy and their young daughter watching on the sidelines. When she turns around, the back of her jersey has her last name hyphenated with her maiden name and Quincy's last name, giving the sense that she is refusing to give up her dreams while being in a relationship with him. These images and the moment where Monica literally uses her body to fight for her desire to be with Quincy as an adult show the variety of iterations of a woman's independence and sexuality in

these films. The use of hair and clothing in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* and *Love and Basketball* illustrate different examples of moments and invite the possibility for more moments featuring women of color in a genre that has historically excluded them as leads and wearers of symbols like the Playboy bunny costume. Monica's use of her body as a sign in *Love and Basketball* connects back to how women in early romantic comedies used their bodies to break through spatial boundaries for their personal pleasure.

In early romantic comedies, it was common for women to challenge their relationships and ideas about their sexuality through their bodies. In her examination of romantic comedies from 1934 to 1965, Kathrina Giltre details how despite the restrictions placed on female characters there were opportunities for pushback. She explains that while romantic comedies of the time ended in coupled bliss because there were really no other options for women, the female characters still addressed and challenged the institution of marriage, making it both the focus and the problem of the narrative.⁷⁵ I argue that in addition to challenging the institution of marriage, female characters bound to permanent relationships used their bodies to express their sexual awareness and desires.

In *It Happened One Night*, heiress Ellie Andrews is married but is traveling with a man, Peter Warne, who is helping her run away from her father to get to her new husband, King Westley. The entire narrative ensures that Ellie is never left without the company of a man as she makes her journey from Florida to New York City, implying that a woman could never travel safely alone without male protection. Ellie runs away from her overbearing and nagging father to Peter, a practical and road-experienced journalist. Throughout their journey Peter lectures and instructs Ellie about the proper ways to budget money and meticulously critiques the way she dunks a doughnut in her coffee. Later in their trek up the coast, the pair are left to hitchhike.

After demonstrating the variety of hikers' thumbs one can use to stop a passing car, Peter has no success. Ellie patiently waits and appeases him as any naïve pupil would. However, when she offers to give it a try, she is immediately successful. She ignores Peter's lesson on hitchhiking in favor of using her body to stop a car. Ellie lifts up her skirt to reveal her leg, a body part that carries more meaning than a simple thumb. Right away, a car screeches to a halt and Peter and Ellie hop in. Nowhere in the film is she "taught" about the sexual implications of her body, but she still does it. This suggests that Ellie's knowledge of her body and the sexually-charged implications of using her leg prove that she is not quite as naïve as Peter and the film have assumed.

Although Ellie's sexual awareness did not extend to her desire, there are moments of sexual desire displayed by Irene in *My Man Godfrey*. As I mentioned in the star chapter, this film carries additional meaning for the two stars, Carole Lombard and her ex-husband, William Powell. Irene's character is often depicted as overly emotional and child-like, which is why her speeches and actions are readily ignored by her wealthy, aristocratic family. When Irene decides she is in love with her servant, Godfrey, we see Irene use her body to visually signify her desire, which is labeled by Godfrey and her family as "inappropriate." After she asks to visit Godfrey's living quarters, which is basically just his bedroom, he tells her no and lectures her on the boundaries of their relationship as master and servant. Despite his insistence, Irene violates the boundary in his absence. She is found later alone in his bedroom for an extended period of time. Not only does Irene willingly cross over to his space, she specifically enters his bedroom, which is a very explicit, intimate place in a private dwelling. Later in the film, Irene uses her body to trick Godfrey into a kiss. She fakes a fainting spell and as he is holding her, she reaches her arms around him and gives him a kiss. The ability to faint on command and to know that it would

illicit a physical response from Godfrey demonstrates her sexual awareness in the film. Again, Irene uses her body to break boundaries and to create her desired intimacy with Godfrey against his wishes. Through her body, Irene becomes the one who places demands on relationship. These moments emasculate the male lead who is the one expected to push for physical intimacy in the narrative.

Another example of the female lead emasculating the male lead can be found in *Bringing Up Baby*. In the film an aristocratic woman named Susan meets a forgetful paleontologist named David. Through a series of coincidences and meetings orchestrated by Susan, the two end up acquiring and losing a leopard. Susan, like Irene in *My Man Godfrey*, uses her body to express her desire to be with David, a man who is about to be married. Early on in the film Susan steals David's clothes while he showers. She does this so he cannot leave the house and go back into the city to marry his fiancée. Like Irene she crosses into a man's bedroom, however, she takes his clothes and leaves him no choice but to wear a woman's robe around the house as he tries to find her. This projects a feminine image of David which is bolstered by Susan's pursuit of him. Even after they find the leopard and part ways, Susan uses her body to demand a relationship with David after he has rebuffed her the entire film. In one final grand gesture, Susan climbs an extremely high scaffolding and confesses her love for David while swaying back and forth on a ladder. Susan eventually knocks the ladder over, and we see her hanging on the edge of the platform all because she wants to be with David. Her positioning gives David no choice but to help her onto the platform and to hold her close. Female characters like Monica, Irene, and Susan use their bodies to physically defy boundaries between themselves and the men they desire.

The physicality of sexual awareness can also be displayed through literal moments where female characters have sex. In these moments there is no need to allude to female sexuality

through more subtle devices like the telephone because it is being visually presented. However, just because female characters are shown having sex with another character, it does not automatically classify the imagery as a moment. In these situations, we look to how the female character is presented and in most cases it is very easy to read the scene from a male point of view. Like her classical Hollywood predecessors, Ellie Andrews, Irene Bullock, Susan Vance, and Jan Morrow, Amy Schumer's character, Amy Townsend, in *Trainwreck* (dir. Judd Apatow, 2015) has many female moments of sexual awareness. Similar to Irene and Susan, her awareness demonstrates her command of her desires as well as one of her sexual partners, Steven (John Cena). While having sex with a super "masculine" man, Amy constantly instructs him on what to do and what to say. In the end he is unable to "talk dirty" at her request and instead says things to her that are not sexy at all. Many films show women's faces during sex, for example, *Bridesmaids* and *Moonstruck*. Here, the camera position is similar, over the man's shoulder looking at the woman's face. We see Amy subvert this male spectator position by making faces of dissatisfaction and annoyance with Steven. It becomes even more ridiculous when he experiences what seems like exaggerated pleasure while her facial expressions show disappointment. His masculinity and ability to satisfy her becomes "humorous" because it critiques stereotypical displays of muscular masculinity. While it is sad to think about her dissatisfaction, it is also more realistic. Amy is not easily impressed by any man that looks like a body builder. Her facial expression is a female moment of sexual awareness because Amy knows what she wants from her sexual partner and clearly lets the audience know when she is sexually dissatisfied. We are presented with this imagery again in a montage of dissatisfying men featuring her I-voice providing counter-narratives about her sexual encounters. The I-voice diverts the structural urge to label her as a slut, allowing her to show and tell us why these past

partners have not worked out. Amy uses her face and body along with the I-voice to communicate a counter-narrative of female sexual awareness where a woman knows what she wants and is extremely disappointed when she does not get it.

In earlier films where sex was not explicitly shown, women used signs such as the telephone, clothing, the I-voice, and their bodies to combat the projection of naiveté on them. These moments of female sexuality offer narratives where female characters know their sexuality and can act on it, whether in a subtle or obvious way. These moments offer a third option for female characters in romantic comedies rather than simply praising the virgins or punishing the promiscuous. Contemporary films that display female characters having sex like *Trainwreck* now clarify that just because women are having sex it does not mean their needs or desires are being fulfilled. Amy's portrayal of sex creates space in romantic comedies for women to recognize moments of dissatisfaction alongside moments of satisfaction. Despite the narrative structure's attempt to box in female characters' sexualities, these moments disrupt the seamless story of women we have been conditioned to see.

Conclusion

Seeing these moments of female awareness and empowerment are opportunities for identification for female audiences. While these narrative disruptions work against the repressive structures that force women into heterosexuality, marriage, or both, they are still only moments. How can we make moments extend into structures? One of the first responses that comes to mind is female authors. If patriarchy were an easy fix then having more female authors would solve all of our problems. However, it is naïve to think the problem of patriarchy can be solved so simply. While I think more women need to be in the film industry, regulating them to producing "chick flicks" is not the answer. And expecting existing female romantic comedy filmmakers to

perfectly represent stories of strong women would also be unfair, especially when we think about the logistics.

In her study of the top 100 Worldwide Grossing Films Martha M. Lauzen wanted to investigate whether the production presence of women and the female lead had any impact on the box office sales of the films.⁷⁶ 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 claims that films with higher budgets grossed more money and the films with more men in front of and behind the camera are getting bigger budgets.⁷⁷ So basically the budgets and the distribution of funds stacks the female-driven films against the financially weighted male protagonist films. This unequal distribution of representation and resources makes it impossible to determine the success of films made by women. Based on Lauzen's studies of women in production and in leading roles, it is hard to say female authors would absolutely fix cinematic inequality. Yet in order to make a definitive statement about the efficacy of female authors, there need to be more women in the cinema through employment and financial investment from studios.

The patriarchal system of Hollywood has restricted possibilities and representation for women in cinema. And after watching romantic comedies from over eight decades, it is still upsetting to see how narratives limit women in a variety of ways. So what do we do with these complicated texts? In her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey explains that the cinema is not only structured for the male viewers but it gives them pleasure. Her response to cinema's patriarchy is to abolish pleasure by dissecting it and avoiding satisfaction.⁷⁸ As the title of my paper explains, I am aware of the maleness of film narratives and on that level I agree with Mulvey's argument. However, I strongly disagree with the abolishment of pleasure

in film because as I have noted through the concept of moments there are opportunities for female pleasure that disrupt the narrative. To abolish pleasure requires that we ignore the spectator completely and in the genre of romantic comedies that means ignoring women or female audiences.

To be fair, Mulvey was working closely with Hitchcock's body of work, which is typically considered masculine and violent against women. In her introduction to *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, Tania Modleski revisits Hitchcock's films and rereads them for redemptive qualities that were absent in Mulvey's analysis. Modleski believes that Hitchcock's work is ambivalent toward women. She uses the film *Psycho* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) as an example to explain how Mrs. Bates speaks through Norman at the end of the film and offers a reading where Mrs. Bates rightfully places blame on her son for committing crimes like Marion's death in the shower scene.⁷⁹ Like Modleski, I believe that it's important not to ignore texts that bring pleasure to male viewers or that are structured in a patriarchal manner. First, because it would be difficult to find a lifetime of films to study and it's important for academics to unearth new meanings in presumably widely understood texts. While Mulvey and Modleski primarily focused on Hitchcock's work, it has its shortcomings. Hitchcock has no opportunity to produce something new, whereas my analysis of romantic comedies has the chance to create change through criticism and moments of female empowerment which I have identified in this paper. Unlike Hitchcock's films, romantic comedies are still being made and will still be made for the foreseeable future. I believe it is important to create an honest discourse around women in film because as Lauzen's statistics and the restrictive narratives of romantic comedies have shown us, there is definitely room for improvement.

In order to craft ideal, feminist forms of cinema we first need to distinguish what moments of existing texts function for women and their pleasure from what elements restrict female characters and their stories. Since women make up approximately fifty percent of the population in the United States, they should be equally as viable as an audience for the film industry. And despite limited moments of identification with films like romantic comedies, women are still watching films. With moments such as the female star, surveillance, and expressions of female sexuality there is room for women in film regardless of their race and sexuality. If we continue to produce films with moments that communicate directly to women *and* increase female representation in the film industry, we could see a transition to films where female audiences can identify with the whole structure rather than just moments.

Filmography by year released

It Happened One Night (dir. Frank Capra, 1934)

My Man Godfrey (dir. Gregory La Cava, 1936)

Bringing Up Baby (dir. Howard Hawks, 1938)

The Philadelphia Story (dir. George Cukor, 1940)

The Shop Around the Corner (dir. Ernst Lubitsch, 1940)

His Girl Friday (dir. Howard Hawks, 1940)

Adam's Rib (dir. George Cukor, 1949)

Roman Holiday (dir. William Wyler, 1953)

Sabrina (dir. Billy Wilder, 1954)

Pillow Talk (dir. Michael Gordon, 1959)

The Apartment (dir. Billy Wilder, 1960)

That Touch of Mink (dir. Delbert Mann, 1962)

Sex and the Single Girl (dir. Richard Quine, 1964)

Cactus Flower (dir. Gene Saks, 1969)

Claudine (dir. John Berry, 1974)

Annie Hall (dir. Woody Allen, 1977)

The Goodbye Girl (dir. Herbert Ross, 1977)

Manhattan (dir. Woody Allen, 1979)

Starting Over (dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1979)

Baby Boom (dir. Charles Shyer, 1987)

Moonstruck (dir. Norman Jewison, 1987)

Overboard (dir. Garry Marshall, 1987)

When Harry Met Sally (dir. Rob Reiner, 1989)

Sleepless in Seattle (dir. Nora Ephron, 1993)

Muriel's Wedding (dir. P.J. Hogan, 1994)

Sabrina (dir. Sydney Pollack, 1995)

While You Were Sleeping (dir. John Turteltaub, 1995)

French Kiss (dir. Lawrence Kasdan, 1995)

There's Something About Mary (dir. Peter Farrelly and Bob Farrelly, 1998)

How Stella Got Her Groove Back (dir. Kevin Rodney Sullivan, 1998)

You've Got Mail (dir. Nora Ephron, 1998)

Notting Hill (dir. Roger Mitchell, 1999)

Love and Basketball (dir. Gina Prince-Bythewood, 2000)

Bridget Jones's Diary (dir. Sharon Maguire, 2001)

Kissing Jessica Stein (dir. Charles Herman-Wurmfeld, 2002)

Maid in Manhattan (dir. Wayne Wang, 2002)

Two Weeks Notice (dir. Marc Lawrence, 2002)

The Wedding Date (dir. Claire Kilner, 2005)

Imagine Me & You (dir. Ol Parker, 2005)

27 Dresses (dir. Anne Fletcher, 2008)

The Ugly Truth (dir. Rob Luketic, 2009)

When in Rome (dir. Mark Steven Johnson, 2010)

Just Wright (dir. Sanaa Hamri, 2010)

Bridesmaids (dir. Paul Feig, 2011)

This Means War (dir. McG, 2012)

What's Your Number? (dir. Mark Mylod, 2011)

Jenny's Wedding (dir. Mary Agnes Donoghue, 2015)

Trainwreck (dir. Judd Apatow, 2015)

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