You're nobody 'till somebody loves you: Exploring the formation of romantic beliefs and the effects on adolescent females

Visual Culture

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Essay Due Date:	31/ 1/ 2022
Word Count:	6,396

The National College of Art and Design

Painting department, School of Fine Art

You're nobody till' somebody loves you: exploring the formation of romantic beliefs and the effects on adolescent females

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Submitted to the School of Visual Culture in Candidacy for the Degree of BA (Hons) in Fine Art, 2022

National College of Art and Design

School of Visual Culture

I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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Date: 31st of January 2022

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis tutor, Dr Maebh O'Regan, whom without her guidance and support, this paper would not have been possible. I would also like to thank my studio tutor, Susan MacWilliam, who's recommendations and support have helped me realise and developed such interests. I would also like to thank the Head of Painting; Mark O'Kelly, and all the painting department staff for their inspiration, continued support and feedback.

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1. Introduction

"Most of us would consider our romantic relationships to be an integral, even essential, facet of our lives and identities" (Simon, Bouchey and Furman, 2000, p. 3) Yet why is this? I think back to my childhood, from books about prince charming, to sitcom's I watched as a teenager that showed a 'coming of age.' How many stories are we fed throughout our lives that do not involve a romantic plot of some kind?

> Fiona: You…you're… an ogre.
> Shrek: Oh, you were expecting Prince Charming?
> Fiona: Well, yes, actually. (laughs)
> Oh, no. This is all wrong.
> You're not supposed to be an
> ogre! (walks off)
> *Shrek* (2001)

Figure 1: Shrek (2001), scene 5

It was this scene in *Shrek* (2001), pictured in *Figure 1*, that initially got me thinking about romantic narratives in movies, and how rarely they differ. Though on the surface, this excerpt seems like a harmless observation of fairy tales, it really drives home a hard message about romantic love; it runs by the book, and if you don't fit into the mould, it is not meant for you. What other messages do these stories tell?

Through the following research, I have found that there are many factors that come together to form our beliefs around romance; from gender dynamics rooted in family systems, models of relationships (e.g., parent's marriage) (Simon *et al.*, 2000, p. 5), to relationships with peers, previous and ongoing sexual experiences, cultural expectations (Ampofo, 2003, p. 4), and the media we consume. This paper aims to identify how and when romantic ideals are formed and question the effects of such on our lives; Is the socialisation of romantic love damaging to women? Hidden in these light-hearted romantic movies targeted at young women, are there, perhaps, more serious underlying messages that are just embellished in 'I love you's from tall, dark and handsome men?

This is important to discuss, as females are taught to tie their self-esteem to relationships. We must investigate and question whether these beliefs serve us, or, in fact, limit us, as it is them in which we base our lives upon.

I have centred my research around adolescence, as it is a time when we are most susceptible to external influence, like the media. Griffin (2000), as cited by Tolman, Striepe and Harmon (2003, p. 3) defines adolescence as a "crucial moment in which young women must be 'won' for the heterosexual patriarchal system". We are entering the world of romance for the first time, developing sexually, and forming our sexual identity (Driesmans, Vandenbosch and Eggermont, 2016, p. 6). We encounter romantic situations for the first time and establish norms that will inform our future romantic relationships, making it an area worth looking in to.

I will focus my research on how the media forms romantic expectations, as it is one of the main sources that teenage girls learn from in modern society. *Part Two* will explore how, cognitively, we learn from such media, as well as well as what beliefs we establish. I will take a classic romantic comedy, *Four Weddings and a*

Funeral (1994) and compare it to a romantic psychological drama: *Normal people* (2020) in order to examine these messages in context, and to compare attitudes.

To understand how ideals and expectations are formed from romantic media however, it is important to look at the romantic norms formed thus far, in relation to peers, family and gender construct in society. It is from there that we can get an overall idea of how romantic ideals and expectations shape the lives of females. This will be discussed in *Part One*.

Part One

2. The Socialisation of gender

Role schemas are built upon adolescence, and sexual identities are formed in keeping with gender roles set for them (ter Bogt *et al*., 2010, p. 2). "Appropriate gender roles are defined according to a society's beliefs about differences between the sexes" (Blackstone, 2003, p. 2). Identities are formed around these differences, and individuals acquire, value, and adopt different behaviour patterns (Ampofo, 2001, p. 4). Certain expectations are put on Women as a result of these gender roles which, in turn, construct their gender identity. Traditionally, Women are characterised as being nurturing, modest, obedient, needing protection, caring, kind, submissive, weak, and emotional (*ibid.*, p. 4) Thus, resulting in Women fulfilling this role by engaging in, for example, work in the home, nurturing and tending to children (Blackstone, 2003, p. 2). Men, on the other hand are characterised as being quite the opposite; strong, brave, dominant, aggressive, and associated with power and leadership. This pushes the narrative that Men are the dominant decision makers; the chasers, and that women are their submissive dependents who wait for/ are chosen by the man.

‘Waiting’ for a man is engrained in the lives of females from the time they are young. Lahad (2019, p. 7) states that waiting ‘produces compliant subjectivities and devalues the present and future’ and explains that married life ‘appeals’ to women as it offers structure, purpose, and value to their lives. He says the act of waiting as single women is an ‘unquestioned presumption, which forms part of the power formations and the gendered order which assumes that a woman’s central objective is marriage and procreation’. Single women are seen as leading empty lives, and their time isn’t valued (*ibid.,* p. 7). They have historically been described as ‘left on the shelf’ and labelled ‘spinster’s and ‘old maid’s. As this idea is engrained into society, young women are taught that single is undesirable, or even *wrong*. This could be detrimental to their self-esteem.

It is believed that ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ behaviour is in fact a result of the separate ways both sexes are socialised. The meaning of gender, therefore, is a social construct, which is organized by the patriarchy and, more specifically, by institutionalized heterosexuality. (Tolman *et al.,* 2003, p. 3) This socialisation is constructed to serve political systems in which social arrangements benefit. It reinforces and sustains a patriarchal society in which white, heterosexual, middle- and upper-class males’ benefit (e.g., Tolman *et al.*, 2003, Ampofo, 2001). Whilst benefitting males, just as gender roles oppose each other, the socialisation of gender also has adverse effects on females. According to Tolman *et al* (2003, p. 3) Feminist-based research found that girls' psychosocial development is negatively impacted by gender expectations, for example, “norms of femininity push girls to avoid conflict and address others' needs more than their own”. This situates women below males and tells them that they are ‘less than.’ Feminist sociologists the WRAP found that the dominant cultural conceptions of female sexuality as being ‘passive, devoid of

desire, and subordinate to male needs and desires make it difficult for women to negotiate safe sex.' When we think of this in relation to consent, we see how dangerous this stereotype can be for young women (*ibid.*, p. 3) During adolescence the world expands for boys but contracts for girls. Boys are taught to chase and explore, whilst girls are taught to refrain from sexual behaviour. What this essentially means is that males gain power over girls' reproductive lives (Ampofo, 2001, p. 4).

Gender socialization literature also describes that especially girls are socialized toward valuing long-term romantic relationships (Driesmans *et al.*, 2016, p. 3). The polarization of gender roles since the nineteenth century continues to encourage females' preoccupation with love and interpersonal relationships and males' preoccupation with occupational achievement for self-fulfilment (Simon *et al.*, 1992, p. 3). Simon *et al* (as cited by Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018, p. 5) also state that the underlying message imbedded in the heterosexual script is the idea that, for adolescent girls, the most important thing in a woman's life is being in love and having a romantic relationship.

High Relationship-contingent self-esteem is a direct result of this. Relationship-contingent self-esteem (RCSE) emerges from perspectives on authenticity, need fulfilment, and relationship functioning and is an unhealthy form of self-esteem that depends on one's relationship (Knee *et al.*, 2008, p. 2). Developing high RCSE is almost inevitable when we consider the emphasis and importance put on romantic love, and it comes with its consequences.

When someone is high in RCSE, even minor negative events in relationships can have significant implications on self-worth. These events directly affect the 'goodness' or 'badness' of the self. People with high RCSE are categorised as being

preoccupied with one's relationship, which, as discussed earlier, is engrained in society through heteronormative ideologies. Those who are high in RCSE also tend to behave in ways that make those relationships worse over time, for example seeking evidence of security at the expense of actual security and healthy relationship functioning *(ibid.*, p. 4). Attachment literature also suggests that high RCSE is associated with the development of anxious attachment styles, which also impact the quality of relationships.

Studies have shown that those with anxious attachment styles tend to withdraw, rather than seek support, and tend to be uninvested, distant and non-disclosing, or over-controlling and overly disclosing in relationships (Simon *et al.*, 2000, p. 7). High RCSE is also linked to increased alcohol consumption to cope with relationship problems, as well as depression in Women (Erickson and Dal Cin, 2018, p. 6)

Knee *et al* (2008, p. 5) also states that when self-esteem is contingent, one loses autonomy over their own actions, and often feels pressure to pursue activities that satisfy the contingency. Individuals with high RCSE are also more likely to endorse 'obsessive, selfless love styles,' putting others needs before their own. As mentioned earlier, giving the impact of gender roles on girls' psychological development, and the loss of autonomy when one ties their self-worth to a relationship, society expects women to be selfless, and see them as greedy and selfish when they are not. To be a Woman is to put others before yourself.

3. Parent's marital relationship

We immediately associate the act of being 'selfless' with being a mother, another expectation put on females. Our parents' marital relationship is usually the "first, most immediate, and, oftentimes, the most long-standing model of a romantic bond" we witness (Simon *et al*., 2000, p. 20). As children we interpret our parents' marital behaviour, and its perceived meaning for our own emotional security (*ibid*., p. 21). As females, we are subconsciously informed and influenced by both our mothers' behaviour as a woman, and a partner. We also learn about specific and general aspects of romantic relationships from our parents' marital behaviour, like how to negotiate conflict, to care-giving, care-seeking, affiliation, and physical intimacy (Simon *et al*., 1992, p. 19). Attachment styles also become relevant when we think about parent-child relationships:

> An adolescent with a secure attachment history to a primary caretaker may be more likely to approach romantic relationships expecting closeness and intimacy, and thus engage in affiliative, caretaking, sexual, and attachment behaviours that promote closeness and intimacy, which in turn shape romantic views. The adverse can also be seen in relationships with a dismissive view of parent-child attachment. Individuals' expectations may result in them behaving in a manner that promotes distance between partners (Simon *et al.*, 2000, p. 8).

As children, we learn to distinguish between male and female roles by observing relationships in the home (Ampofo, 2001, p. 4). We are also instructed by these adults on how to behave according to socially defined patterns concerning these roles, and are socialised; accordingly, however, in terms of modelling and instructing on romance and sex, parents may fall short. (ter Bogt *et al.*, 2010, p. 2) The influence of parents' marital relationship on adolescents also comes with its limitations. We know that early adolescent relationships serve a different purpose

than that of a caregiving, attachment in long-term relationships, which are formed later, but more so a relationship which serves to evaluate one's status, self-image, and popularity amongst peers. Nonetheless these general views may provide a template for guiding one's own expectations and behaviour with romantic partners (Simon *et al*., 2000, p. 11).

4. Influence of peers

"The peer context serves several important functions for romantic development. Perhaps most significantly, it is an important setting for the initiation of romantic relationships" (Simon *et al*, 2000, p. 13). As mentioned earlier, relationships formed in early adolescence serve functions other than caregiving and affiliation observed in the home. Peer friendships form a basis for potential relationships, and key negotiation skills are formed in these friendships. Connolly *et al* (1997) as cited by *ibid* (p. 15) states that peer friendships provide a "basis of learned skills, contexts to establish within and develop romantic views". His findings suggest that close friendships provide a "basis of intimacy and expectations for egalitarian relationship quality that are carried forward to romantic relationships".

"Research also shows that in adolescence, girls' earlier concerns with academic and athletic achievement are replaced with concerns about being popular, well-liked, and attractive" (Rosenberg and Simmons 1975; Youniss and Smollar 1985, as cited by Simon *et al*., 1992, p. 3). At this age, having a boyfriend enhances girls' popularity with peers at an age when being popular is important for their self-image (*ibid*, p. 17) It is at this stage when teenage girls begin to evaluate themselves in relation to romantic relationships directly.

Simon, Eder, and Evans (1992) conducted research in which they studied ten peer groups over a three-year period. Through their study they found that adolescents established five main feeling norms around romantic relationships during this time period:

1. Romantic relationships should be important, but not everything in life.
2. One should have romantic feelings only for someone of the opposite sex.
3. One should not have romantic feelings for a boy who is already attached
4. One should have romantic feelings for only one boy at a time.
5. One should always be in love

There are significant costs of conformity to these feeling norms. With regards to feeling norm three, girls may begin to modify their emotions in order to comply. It is possible that this may result in difficulty distinguishing between 'real' and forced romantic feelings in the long term (*ibid*, p.14, p. 16).

Adolescents also tend to pick partners based on the approval of their peers (Simon *et al.*, 2000, p13). This will improve their popularity within the peer group. This, in combination with feeling norm five, perpetuates the narrative that one's value lies in popularity and attractiveness, and rests on whether you are in a relationship or not. "Girls consider being continuously in love as socially desirable because it is a way to reaffirm their popularity with boys and thus to increase their own status in relation to other females" (*ibid*, p. 16).

It is possible that even after romantic relationships become tied less closely to peer group status, females continue to feel that they always should be in a romantic relationship with a male in

> order to validate their attractiveness
> and worth to self and to others.
>
> (Simon, Eder, and Evans, 1992, p. 17)

These feeling norms can be taken for granted so much so that they are not seen as constraints, and that is where the danger lies.

This 1992 study could be perceived as outdated, though I would argue that the added social pressures today, e.g., social media, would mean that the challenges and beliefs formed at this age may have changed, but not necessarily progressed on. Perhaps the preoccupation with one's image and how one is 'seen' with regards to social media persona, and the evaluation of oneself with regards to this, would mean different, or yet even worse pressures?

5. Cultural influences

> The impact of adolescents' dyadic experiences with parents, friends, and romantic partners on their developing romantic views illustrates how successive interpersonal functioning builds upon both previous and concurrent relationship functioning. However, these experiences are afforded and constrained by larger social climates, including one's family and culture (Simon, Bouchey and Furman, 2000, p22).

In western society, dating during adolescence is seen as a rite of passage for young people. However, in western culture arranged marriage is still common practice. In this context, the previous contexts in which adolescents are socialised that I have discussed may be limited; individuals will have no romantic experience prior to marriage. Thus, parent-child relationships and parents' marital influence are likely to have a greater impact (*ibid*, p. 25).

Part Two

6. Romantic Media

As they begin to respond to romantic interests in early adolescence, adolescents are particularly prone to external influence that promote particular romantic beliefs, such as romantic media (Driesmans *et al*., 2016, p. 5). Such media may shape their values and attitudes, as a lot of teen-targeted media contain a variety of messages about falling in love, relationships, and sexual desire (ter Bogt *et al.*, 2010, p. 1). In romantic media, love is portrayed as conductive to happiness, and in most cultures, it defines the meaning and goal of existence (Illouz, 2012, p. 211). Suton *et al*., 2002, (as cited by ter Bogt *et al.,* 2010, p. 1), state that “young people turn more readily to media that presents ‘forbidden fruits’ in a far more overt, detailed, and appealing way than most parents or educators offer”. According to Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Tanner et al, 2003 (as cited by Driesmans *et al*., 2016, p. 2) popular depictions of romantic love are entertaining, idealistic and “reduce the complexity of personalities and emotions to an uncomplicated story of sexual attraction and blistering love”. The media’s use of exaggerated and unrealistic portrayals of romantic and sexual relationships can seriously harm adolescents’ perception of the world when they interpret these reflections as true to life (Johnson and Holmes, 2009, p. 2). Giving that the romantic comedy genre attracts a largely female audience, it could also be thought that film makers intentionally depict relationships that appeal to females (Hefner and Wilson, 2013, p. 14), thus leaving female adolescence in particular to be almost emotionally manipulated unintentionally.

7. The beginning of visual depictions of romance

Illouz credits the 1930s as the beginning of visual romantic depictions. With the replacement of drawing with photography for advertising, and cinema to give images of happiness, (e.g., *figure 2*) there was now a focus on fantasy and realism. She calls this 'The Romantic Tale Spectacle': when the visualisation of romance and movies were put at the centre of American culture (Illouz, 1997, p. 41). Photography had an ability to show 'reality', and close-up shots created intimacy between media and audience. Hollywood celebrities began to be used in advertising and became the glamourised image of the romantic couple. Celebrities were idolised, and symbols of romantic perfection (*ibid.*, p. 43). There was a new excitement associated with cinematic love, and a longing for a love to be 'like the movies'. Images went beyond triggering daydreams, and started providing plots as well (*ibid.*, p. 44)

Figure 2: Hard to get (1938)

8. Effects of media exposure

We are conditioned by romantic media in many ways. Gerbner's 'Cultivation Theory' suggests that exposure to long-term media has lasting effects on how people act, and cultivates assumptions about life (Potter, 2014, p. 3). Gerbner states that the mass distribution of messages turns private perspectives into broad public perspectives, which are maintained through continued publication (Gerbner, 1969, p. 5) which, in this case, is repeated messages about romantic love. Similarly, 'Script Theory' proposes that "exposure to media content activates the retrieval of existing, related scripts in the memory (Driesmans *et al*., 2016, p. 4). Romantic media exposure can activate a romantic script that functions as a reference framework for a media user to evaluate his/her own romantic relationship or partner" (*ibid*., p. 4). We also know humans also imitate behaviour if 1. The model is prestigious, 2. The outcome is desirable and 3. There is no other source of learning. Movies use beautiful actresses, actors, and cultural icons, who are rewarded with what is considered the biggest reward of all; love (Illouz, 1997, p. 45). Oftentimes sex and relationships aren't discussed in family or peer contexts due to culture or shame, meaning movies are the ideal place to learn behaviours.

Viewers also process character information in accordance with their own pre-existing beliefs (Tukachinsky, 2010, p. 19), meaning socialisation through family, peers and culture as discussed above will also either reinforce or unsubstantiate such messages. It is also thought that we select identity- consistent media to sustain our attitudes (Slater, 2015, p. 9). The Reinforcing Spirals Model (RSM) states that attitudes based upon values, ideology and religion influence

our media content choices, which in turn continue to support those central attitudes (*ibid*, p. 9). What's more is that it is possible our current television viewing is a result of prior media exposure as a child, where initial establishment of these beliefs occurred, meaning the happily ever after in Disney continues to grow and develop into later years (Segrin and Nabi, 2002, p. 4). These beliefs, whether first established in the home or by media, are sustained by one another. With princess fairy tales pushed on young girls, and rom coms targeted at women, is it any wonder females hold such idealistic views?

Illouz takes this one step further, suggesting that there is an immense role of fiction in socialisation. She states that fiction has become central to socialisation in our modern world and that our emotions have absorbed "ideational, narrative and fictional content" in a process called 'Fictional Emotional Imagination' (Illouz, 2012, p. 209). We recognise narratives and identify with them, as well as simulate the feelings of the protagonist and engage in plots. The emotions produced mimic real-life emotions, and our emotions embed themselves *in* these stories, and *as* stories (*ibid*, p. 212). When we identify with such narratives, we learn to evaluate our own life experiences, reminisce the past and anticipate them in our own lives (*ibid*., p. 213). It becomes increasingly difficult to experience attraction for what it is when we project narrative scripts on ourselves. Narrative scripts generate expectations and activate daydream and imagination (*ibid*., p. 215) which raise our expectations, leaving us inevitably disappointed.

In 'Consuming the Romantic Utopia,' Eva Illouz asked a group of adult respondents, male and female, to read three stories of love. *Story one* depicted two people who sat opposite each other on a train, who fell in love instantly and married. *Story Two* was of two people who were set up by their parents in their

thirties and eventually married. *Story Three* was of a career woman who wanted stability in her life and to settle down, who married someone she was dating long-term. Most respondents agreed that *Story One* was unrealistic and foolish, but, in contradiction, chose it as the story closest to their ideal (Illouz, 1997, p. 165). Despite their responses that the realist models (stories *two* and *three*) were the most likely to be successful, when asked to recall their personal most memorable love stories, the respondents structured theirs according to narratives of 'love at first sight', choosing stories of immediate attraction and excitement (*ibid.*, p. 166), that were essentially "imitations of fictional codes" (*ibid*., p. 169). Illouz, therefore states that "The fantasy-based model of love is cognitively more salient than the realist one." In using stereotypical expressions like 'love at first sight' and 'princess being rescued' to describe their stories, the respondents suspected their expectations were formed by media stories and images *(ibid*, p. 178), Thus proving the lasting impact of such media.

9. Key messages in Romantic Media

Depictions of sexual relationships on TV often follow the Heterosexual Script, meaning they contain stereotypes and reinforce gender roles. Men are portrayed as "sexual aggressors, Women as sexual objects, relationships are a "battle of the sexes" and sex as recreational" (Ward, 1995, as cited by Erickson and Dal Cin, 2018, p. 5). They also reinforce the idea that, for women, looks and sexiness are most important, and, for men, sexual obsession is normal (ter Bogt *et al.*, 2010, p. 1). The heterosexual script reinforces the idea for adolescents that the most important thing in a woman's life is being in love (Erickson and Dal Cin, 2018, p. 5). These beliefs

extend beyond individual preferences and exist within a culture where these beliefs are reinforced and formed by cultural institutions and repeated in the media we consume (Hefner and Wilson, 2013, p. 4).

Johnson and Holmes (2009) studied romantic comedies rated U, PG or 12's made between 1995 to 2000 and documented all relationship orientated themes, resulting in them finding significant core messages consistent across the genre. Using their findings, I have focused in on what is considered a 'classic' romantic comedy: *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (FWF*)* (1994), and a contemporary romantic series *Normal people* (NP) (2020) in order to bring such studies up to date and compare attitudes. In comparing a classic and contemporary together I believe will reflect more accurately on the socialisation of love today, as we consume media from different years all the time, and also bring references up to date. I will discuss under the following headings: Affection, Relationship issues, Relationship discussion, Romantic speech, Open communication, Importance of partner, being single and Commitment, as categorised by Johnson and Holmes.

Affection

Johnson and Holmes found that non-sexual touching outweighed sexual activity, meaning almost half the films left out an important aspect of romantic relationships, potentially leading viewers to disconnect such behaviours (Johnson and Holmes, 2009, p. 10). They also found a lack of affection in married couples, potentially leading viewers to assume affection diminishes once you tie the knot. *FWF* (1994) and *NP* (2020) approach sexual activity in different ways. *FWF* (1994) insinuates sexual intercourse with passionate kissing, followed by characters scantily

clad the morning after. Kisses are highly passionate, and portrayed as an earth-shattering moment of realisation, as seen in the final scene in *figure 3* when lightning strikes as Carrie and Charles realise their love for one-another during a kiss in the rain.

Figure 3: Four Weddings and a Funeral (1994)

Sexual activity is much more graphic and honest in *NP* (2020). Sex is depicted throughout, and Connell and Marianne's naked bodies are shown. *NP* (2020) also breaks the stigma around women's bodies, choosing to show Marianne's unshaven body. *NP* depicts Marianne and Connell equally as initiators and interested in sex, again breaking another stigma around women and sexual desire, and men as sexual aggressors.

PDA was also shown to be a signifier of a partner's true feelings, with emphasis put on being 'as in love as your seen to be' (*ibid*., p. 12). This could be amplified in the modern climate, due to social media and the projection of the self. In *Episode 6* of *NP* (2020) Marianne and Connell argue over his lack of public physical

affection, demonstrating the importance of PDA to Marianne, which also hints at her romantic beliefs about relationships:

Marianne:	You don't want to touch me, but you get to dictate who else does?
Connell:	I touch you
Marianne:	Yeah, as long as there's another six closed doors between us and another person...

Relationship issues

A study by Hefner and Wilson (2013, p. 13) found that challenge messages occurred more than ideal expressions. Similarly, Johnson and Holmes (2009, p. 10) found 82 incidents of depiction across their films, with only 9 of confessing, 33 of these of cheating. This could cultivate a sense of a need to be cautious of others. Relationships were also found to break down after arguments (*ibid.*, p. 11) leaving young viewers with an impression that arguments are unhealthy. Interestingly, it was found that actions had no real long-lasting consequences on characters, not reflecting accurately how one would experience conflict in the real world. Characters were quick to forget, and moments of deceit had no lasting impact, which may leave viewers to underestimate the consequences of their own actions (*ibid.*, p. 13). Carrie cheating on her husband with Charles in *FWF* (1994) had no effect on their relationship. Opposingly, In *NP* (2020), Connell's treatment of Marianne in school effects their adult relationship. For example, in *Episode 5*, when, years later, Marianne asks Connell if he ever thought about asking *her* to the debs, and he replies with no. However, their relationship is seen to end after arguments, and despite their relationship issues, they always find their way back to one another.

Relationship discussion

Johnson and Holmes (2009, p. 13) coded a large amount of 'love epiphanies' where characters realised their love for one another. Characters were also seen to discuss their relationship positively in new/ long term relationships. In contrast, married couples often spoke negative about one another. This may lead viewers to see marriage and love as separate entities. In *FWF* (1994), married men make comments like 'I might be in real trouble', and sarcastic 'best of luck's, when referring to their wives. In *NP* (2020), there isn't an overly optimistic view on marriage either, with Marianne's abusive Father, and Connell's single Mother.

Romantic speech

In the Johnson and Holmes study (2009, p. 10), compliments were largely coded, and the majority were expressed by male characters, reinforcing gender norms and a Man's role to 'take the lead', and leading females to form idealised expectations. Exaggerated romantic gestures were also coded, which may lead adolescents to believe that such gestures are an indicator of a partner's feelings, and value them over trust and communication (*ibid.*, p. 10). This can be seen in *FWF* (1994), when Charles runs after Carrie to tell her he loves her at the train station, and when he stops his own wedding for her.

Romantic speech coded in the study included 'True understanding', 'love at first sight', 'fate', 'soul mate' and open communication, which, again, could lead adolescence to place more importance on these aspects *(ibid.,* p. 13). In a separate study, Hefner and Wilson (2013, p. 10) found that 75% of films they studied

perpetuated an overarching romantic ideal message such as ‘soul mate’, ‘love conquers all’, ‘idealisation of partner’ or ‘love at first sight’. In *NP* (2020) the idea of soulmates is reiterated constantly, with Connell and Marianne finding their way back to each-other throughout. Similarly, Carrie and Charles ‘coincidently’ find their way back to each-other throughout, exchanging romantic glances implying a ‘love at first sight’ moment. *FWF* (1994) also includes phrases like “When you can’t take your eyes off, is it love at first sight?”, “It’s always been you since the first day we met, I always knew it was you” and “Maybe all this waiting for this one true love stuff gets you no-where” followed by Charles reuniting with Carrie and sharing that ‘Thunderbolt’ moment he waited for.

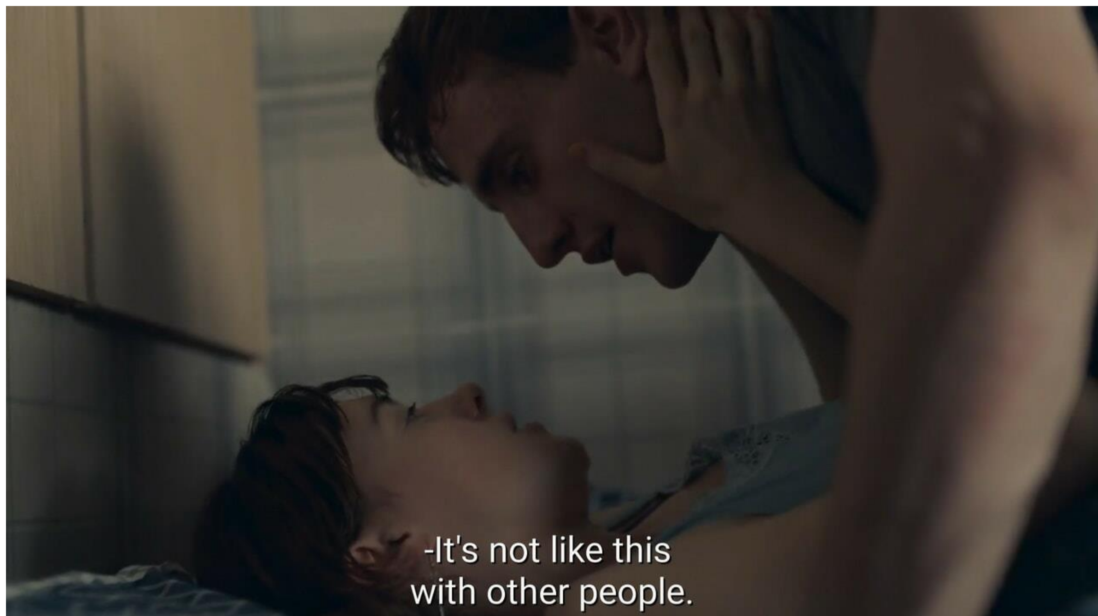

Figure 4: Normal People (2020)

The majority of films in the Johnson and Holmes study found that characters claimed that there was something special about their relationship (2009, p. 15). This can be seen in *NP* (2020), as seen in *Figure 4*, with ‘It’s not like this with other people’ being a common phrase used by Connell and Marianne throughout.

Open Communication

Open communication was also coded, and characters were seen to admit feelings freely and express their emotions (Johnson and Holmes, 2009, p. 13). This can be seen in *FWF* (1994) when Charles tells Carrie that he thinks he loves her, despite her being engaged to another man. The adverse can be seen in *NP* (2020), with Connell and Marianne's relationship breakdown being a direct result of their constant miscommunication.

Importance of Partner

The importance of partner was emphasised throughout. Partners were quickly loyal, preoccupied with each-other, knew each-other's thoughts and prioritised each-other over everything (*ibid.,* p. 14). This is echoed in both *FWF* (1994) and *NP* (2020); Charles is in-love with Carrie the moment they make eye contact, and Connell tells Marianne he loves her in the third episode, the second time that they have sex. In believing that such characteristics should be present early on, adolescents may misjudge their own relationships (*ibid.,* p. 14). Love in films happens spontaneously and develops quickly into a meaningful relationship when, in reality, longer time is needed.

Being single

Johnson and Holmes also found that happy emotions were expressed when in a relationship, and the opposite could be seen for those who are single (2009, p. 14).

Of all 15 coded incidents of being single, all were negative. Single characters were all portrayed as 'lonely, miserable and inadequate' (*ibid.*, p. 11). In *FWF* (1994), Charles' ex-girlfriend Henrietta is depicted as miserable and crazy when single, and sane and content when she finds a boyfriend. Charles is sad throughout, wondering when his day will come: "Why am I always at weddings, and never actually getting married?". In *NP* (2020) Marianne is teased about having no one to go to the debs with and called a 'Fridget'. However, after they leave school there is no negative emphasis on 'being single'.

Commitment

Weddings were shown to be the culmination point in all films (Johnson and Holmes, 2009, p. 14). What happens after, when the movie ends, is often left to the imagination. Couples fly off into the sunset and live happily ever after (*Grease*, 1978, as seen in *figure 5* comes to mind). In *FWF* (1994), Charles marries Carrie, and they live happily ever after. However, *NP* (2020) doesn't follow the typical narrative. Instead, Connell goes to New-York, and Marianne stays in Ireland. There is no culmination point, or happy ending as such. This perhaps sends the message that happily ever after doesn't necessarily end with a relationship. Or, even more, that there is no such thing as happily ever after.

Figure 5: Grease (1978)

10. Conclusion

A lot of things come together to form our beliefs about romantic love. *Part one* demonstrated how peer, parental and cultural influences each play a part in the romantic socialisation of females, with “those who maintain a traditional gender role orientation are likely to be influenced by the rules and rituals of the generations that came before them” (Blackstone, 2003, p. 4). The impact of such on ones’ self-esteem in terms of *RCSE*, and also, its effects on *attachment styles* in relationships was also discussed. *Part two* discussed the role of media in cultivating romantic ideals; in how role scripts and schemas are formed to how these stories embed themselves in our lives through *script theory*, and our *fictional emotional imagination*. It also dissected romantic messages in media and examined how such messages shape viewers beliefs and expectations.

This research may not be applicable to all Females. Illouz (2012, p. 10) states that relationships portrayed in romantic media may not be relevant to all Women

e.g., lesbians, those not interested in domesticity or married women. Culture, religion, and social class will also determine the impact of romantic media, as well as previous media exposure as a child, and media preferences.

More research is needed in examining romantic socialisation via the media today, as many studies are out-dated in that they do not mention social media, or the online world. By studying *Normal People* (2020) I found its portrayal of romantic love and female sexuality to be empowering, progressive, and a more honest depiction than *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1997) and other romantic comedies of its kind. However, it is hard to judge whether it would have a lasting impact on a new generation, due to what is mentioned above, and in how people don't normally consume in terms of current relevance, but rather genre preferences. In years to come, when the quantity of modern romantic media increases, collectively it may have the ability to shift views, but with the vast majority of media reiterating heteronormative ideals and functioning in a society that promotes love socially guided by norms and stereotypes, it is unlikely such programming would make a significant difference.

The problem doesn't lie with romantic relationships themselves, but more the message pushed about how essential they are, and how tightly linked relationships are to female's self-esteem. Romantic movies aren't deliberately manipulative, and there is nothing wrong with dreaming. The danger lies when fantasy messages are constantly pushed that people begin to form expectations that can't be met, and when there is no variation in the narrative. If the marketing of relationships was pushed equally towards males, and movies stepped away from such cliches, perhaps positive changes could be seen. However, with the nature of heterosexual relationships functioning under a patriarchal system, it's hard for romantic love to ever be fair.

Romantic media can be particularly damaging to female adolescents as they are directly targeted, and are most likely to believe in ideas of love at first sight and other cliches, and these idealised views held by women that can affect the roles of men and women in the larger social structure (Sprecher and Metts, 1989, p. 22) They are also at a crucial point in their lives where they are developing their sexual identity and entering the romantic world for the first time, and are susceptible to external influence.

These visual depictions of romantic love embed themselves in the lives of females, cultivating beliefs and expectations. They are seduced by romantic media, which reiterates social and political messages that confine females their entire lives, to the point where they don't even realise it. Perhaps that is the true meaning of 'Love is blind'.

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