

## Issue 9: Articles

### Romantic Comedy and the Construction of Heterosexuality

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Cinema viewers of Richard Curtis' multi-stranded romantic comedy *Love Actually* (2003) would probably have been unaware that the film originally included a lesbian relationship. Consisting of the headmistress of Karen's (Emma Thompson) son's school, and the teacher's girlfriend, at home, dying of cancer, this couple now appears amongst the DVD deleted scenes. In his commentary, Curtis explains the couple's removal was purely a matter of running time and artistic continuity. However, the ease with which the two women's relationship was edited, their evident isolation within a text made of interconnected storylines, together with the pair's comparative age in a film predominantly featuring bright young couples, and the fact that one is close to death, indicates the precarious position of sexually-marginalized identities within romantic comedy cinema. As suggested by Andy Medhurst's (2005) acerbic re-titling of Curtis' 1994 film *Four Surviving Heterosexuals and a Dead Queer*, homosexual and lesbian characters do not fare well within a genre almost exclusively geared towards male/female union. That sexuality in romantic comedy is limited to *heterosexuality* as the privileged, even the only, form of sexual expression permitted, seems a rather obvious point to make. Although queer characters may feature, even in significant roles, the genre is primarily about heterosexual characters, heterosexual relationships, and consequently, about heterosexuality.

This paper explores not the absent homosexuality but the ever-so present heterosexuality which pervades the romantic comedy genre and the various myths by which it is characterized. As a heterosexual, I am in part defined by others and by myself in relation to the identity this paper explores. Similar to previous studies where authors discuss representations of marginalized groups in popular cinema (Bogle, 1994; Haskell, 1987; Russo, 1987), this paper interrogates constructions and conceptions of the majority, the universal, or the central, depicted in mainstream film. As Stevi Jackson observes, heterosexuality represents "the accepted singular norm against which sexual pluralism must be defended" (1996: 29). Like whiteness, heterosexuality "seems not to be there as a subject at all", securing its cultural dominance "by seeming not to be anything in particular" (Dyer, 2002: 126). Such default social categories are traditionally without character, and identifying the features of something usually featureless necessarily involves forcing into relief qualities otherwise invisible, due, paradoxically, not to their absence from view, but to their constant and pervasive visibility. Consequently, this paper is at times intentionally reductive; revealing -- or imposing -- structure and similarity across a diverse range of films in order to outline the shape of a historically shapeless entity. Outlining heterosexual structures in this manner necessarily limits critical engagement with individual textual complexities and contradictions. Such considerations are largely restricted to the final section, discussing elements which critique heterosexual practices or suggest their insecurities. This deliberate strategy, emphasizing the dominant sexuality's broad and permeating characteristics, coincides with heterosexuality's own construction as an all-pervading social identity, while allowing for subsequent discussion of more subversive representations and constructions which undermine this hegemonic heterosexuality.

Focussing on 1990s and early 2000s romantic comedy cinema -- a genre foregrounding heterosexuality and heterosexual partnership -- allows productive interrogation of themes and formations which contribute to this dominant sexuality. Parallels between representations of heterosexuality within romantic comedy cinema and aspects of heterosexuality as constructed by Western culture suggest a reflective or supportive relationship between film and this central sexual identity. It is a fairly modest claim to suggest that romantic comedies are dependent for financial and cultural success upon the perpetuation of certain heterosexual formations and courtship rituals. However, heterosexuality is not a singular universal entity. As Diane Richardson asserts, there

are many heterosexualities (1996: 2), and other identity formations also characterize the genre, necessarily contributing to the definition of sexuality it depicts. D. Soyini Madison criticizes the protagonists of such cinema, as being invariably white, nubile, beautiful, as well as "always heterosexual", resulting in the exclusion of those outside the "norm" they construct (1995: 227). Similarly, in addition to the absence of lesbian and gay characters, Steve Neale suggests no romantic comedies feature black or Asian couples (1992: 288). While there have been significant subsequent non-white romantic comedies, broadly-speaking the genre's relationship with dominant identity formations extends beyond expressions of heterosexuality. One consistent exception is the romantic comedy genre -- synonymous with the more derogatory term "chick flick" -- being culturally, historically, discursively and promotionally associated with women. This address to both female social audience and feminine spectatorship, to use Annette Kuhn's distinction (1987), is undeniably problematic. As "date films", romantic comedies seek to accommodate both male and female audiences/spectators; as comedies, elements associated with classic "women's films" -- melodrama, gothic horror, female hysteria and psychosis (Doane, 1987) -- are largely absent; unlike soap operas, romantic comedies are rarely domestically-located; and moments of male-gaze female fetishization, as evident in Hillary Radner's analysis of *Pretty Woman's* (1990) opening sequence (1993: 72-3), do feature in these films. Many texts discussed below star male central protagonists, or male and female characters sharing equal time, denying the predominant female perspective characterizing women's narrative fiction. Nonetheless, in contrast to most mainstream cinema, the romantic comedy is comparatively female-centred, drawing selectively on women's genres: in focussing on familial and interpersonal relationships; in rarely depicting overt female objectification; and in featuring male protagonists who are already feminized or become so during the film's course. The heterosexuality romantic comedy represents is a distinctly, if complexly, feminine one. Investigations of other genres and formats no less imbued with different-sex sexualities -- teen comedies, family films, or mainstream pornography -- would undoubtedly reveal other heterosexualities with alternative relationships to dominant and marginalized ideologies and identities.

The characteristics explored in this paper include: depictions of heterosexuality as natural, as based upon mutually beneficial difference and traditional models of gender behaviour, and as being historically and socially validated. Exploring these representations alongside the myths which inform them exposes heterosexuality as an identifiable and socially constructed formation. Such understandings are essential for interrogating, critiquing and challenging heterosexuality as an institution which imposes normative behavioural models on all members of society, albeit some more than others. It is hoped that through studies of this kind heterosexuality appears as a formed and bounded entity, rather than the all-pervasive nothing-in-particular by which it is historically characterized.

### **Heterosexuality as Natural and Inevitable**

Heterosexuality's depiction as the natural, inevitable, all-encompassing sexuality is undoubtedly central to its hegemonic authority, and a component consistently identified by those theorizing its construction. Chrys Ingraham writes of a heterosexual imagination which "naturalizes heterosexuality and conceals its constructedness in the illusion of universality" (1996: 169); Richard Dyer observes "the remorseless construction of heterosexuality as natural" (2002: 118); while Richardson argues the sexuality which discourse constructs as natural, as being beyond cultural influence and legitimate state control, is inevitably a *heterosexuality* (1996: 11). In a frequently-cited article, Adrienne Rich's term "compulsory heterosexuality" underlines the sexuality's construction as the only viable option. Described as an "ideology that *demand*s heterosexuality" (228-9, emphasis in original), the author details how female-male couplings have been enforced throughout Western history. Focussing on women's suffering of sexual violence, and lesbian sexualities' historical denial, erasure and punishment, Rich emphasizes the often aggressive material ways in which heterosexuality is imposed. Nevertheless, significantly implicated in this process is the consciousness-controlling "cultural propaganda [...] of heterosexuality" (246). Fairy stories, popular music and wedding iconography -- cultural forms clearly

resonating within the film discussed below -- Rich argues, through their enforcement of particular relationships between men and women, contribute to women's acceptance of sexual abuse and slavery (237). The romantic discourse whereby women are "inevitably" drawn towards men receives particular criticism, for asserting that "primary love between the sexes is 'normal'; and that women need men as social and economic protectors, for adult sexuality, and for psychological completion" (244).

The romantic comedy might be understood as being one-amongst-many popular culture cycles through which compulsory heterosexuality is maintained, or as a genre discursively engaging with the processes through which heterosexuality becomes compulsory. Heterosexuality's natural inevitability is reflected principally through romantic comedy conventions of star and genre. Generic dictates ensure that the couple is brought together by the end of the film. This may involve overcoming barriers of class (*Maid in Manhattan*, 2002), geography (*Sleepless in Seattle*, 1993), nationality (*French Kiss*, 1995), sexuality (*Chasing Amy*, 1997), age (*As Good as it Gets*, 1997), catatonia (*Just Like Heaven*, 2005) or even time (*Kate and Leopold*, 2001), all contributing to the many misunderstandings, missed chances and misadventures which constitute the romantic comedy narrative. The star system reinforces this inevitable coupling, as David R. Shumway suggests, signalling which coupling audiences are to expect and support (1997: 388). Hugh Grant should get together with Andie McDowell (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*), or Julia Roberts (*Notting Hill*, 1999), or Sandra Bullock (*Two Weeks Notice*, 2002), or Drew Barrymore (*Music and Lyrics*, 2007) because these are the highest-ranking female stars in their respective films, a non-diegetic factor distinguishing them from other characters within the narrative. Similarly, Julia Roberts and Richard Gere's union in *Runaway Bride* (1999) appears inevitable because this is a Roberts/Gere romantic comedy, attempting to recreate the success of 1990's *Pretty Woman*. Same-sex partnerships are unlikely, due -- amongst other things -- to the presence of only one significant male and one significant female star within the modestly-budgeted romantic comedy. The high possibility of heterosexual coupling is emphasized in the structuring of posters, interviews and publicity shots. Romantic comedy DVD box covers frequently follow a visual template, positioning actor and actress at opposite sides of the frame, their names superimposed above the title. One man, one woman, and, it would appear, one inevitable outcome. A heterosexual logic consequently structures the romantic comedy, naturalizing the different-sex relationships possible within its generic confines.

Heterosexuality might be further naturalized in these films through an array of textual devices. *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) presumes both universal and irresistible heterosexuality, ultimately endorsing Harry's (Billy Crystal) theory that men and women cannot be friends because (heterosexual) sex always gets in the way. *Sleepless in Seattle* contains numerous diegetic and non-diegetic "signs" pointing to the union of its protagonists, constructing heterosexual romance as ordained by fates communicating through a torn wedding dress, an overheard talk radio show, lights on a sky-scraper. *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) suggests heterosexual romance's ability to overcome both class difference and the complications of legally-enforced cross dressing. *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days* (2003) constructs a scenario where she (Kate Hudson) is deliberately trying to get dumped, and he (Matthew McConaughey) is only going out with her for a bet. Nevertheless, by the end of the film, they cannot help but fall in love. In *You've Got Mail* (1998), despite the electronic communication methods the protagonists employ, they are simply recreating a traditional epistolary relationship Joe's (Tom Hanks) father enjoyed with Kathleen's (Meg Ryan) mother a generation ago, just as the film itself is a remake of 1940's *Shop Around the Corner*. And through its panoramic narrative sweep, *Love Actually* suggests that "[heterosexual] love is all around".

*One Fine Day* (1996) parallels the increasing closeness of its adult leads (George Clooney and Michelle Pfeiffer) with the burgeoning friendship between their children. Given childhood's traditional associations with innocence, closeness to nature, and preternatural insight, children's status as the end product of successful heterosexual

congress, and the practical considerations of step-child compatibility, this relationship between the adult protagonists' offspring foreshadows their own eventual union. Testimony to the irrepressibility of heterosexual attraction, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) depicts different-sex love surviving despite the medical intervention of reconstructive brain surgery. True to generic convention, in the opening scene, Joel (Jim Carrey) and Clementine (Kate Winslet) meet as if for the first time. However, as flashbacks reveal, both have previously enjoyed a relationship together which was subsequently erased from their minds by a specialist health clinic following the partnership's decline and collapse. Despite the thorough medical procedures they have undergone, it seems Joel and Clementine are destined to be together, heterosexual attraction confounding the unnatural efforts of meddling scientists and disruptive relationship "experts". Throughout *When Harry Met Sally*, interviews with various couples interrupt the narrative, providing a backdrop of "men and women testifying to the value of the heterosexual love match" (Krutnick, 1996: 26). The advanced age of many interviewees testifies to the durability and historical lineage of heterosexual romance. Heterosexuality's irrepressibility is evident in the couples' various stories: teenage counsellors at adjoining summer camps overcoming institutional gender segregation; a pair who remarried after thirty-five years divorced; and original "high school sweethearts" still together after all these years. Even the sturdy print-fabric couch on which the couples sit, and the floral wallpaper hanging behind them suggests a tasteful middle class respectability, situating their tales of heterosexual coupling within the domestic family home, albeit one which is strangely isolated and decontextualized. This is a heterosexual collective Sally and Harry eventually join, as the final couple interviewed in the film's closing shot.

Heterosexuality, these films variously suggest, is natural, inevitable, timeless, all pervading, all around: the defining qualities of a hegemonic ideology and identity formation. There are undoubtedly detours along the way to different-sex union, which themselves prove particularly revealing in distinguishing true heterosexual love from the inauthentic or artificial. The formal and political dimensions of "the wrong partner" are discussed by Neale as representing a necessarily-discarded aspiration or personality trait inhibiting the true couple's formation (1992: 289). Notions of heterosexuality are often implicated in such characterizations. Julia's (Drew Barrymore) yuppie fiancé in *The Wedding Singer* (1998) represents her prioritization of economic security over emotional satisfaction, a frequent trope denying heterosexual marriage's legal and financial privileges while mobilizing money's negative associations with culture rather than nature, the head rather than the heart. Initial failures in romantic seduction and consummation are also revealing. In *What Women Want* (2000) the sex Nick (Mel Gibson) gets through exploiting his super(un)natural ability to read women's thoughts is ultimately unsatisfying. Only by truly accommodating the feminine can he hope for a fulfilling relationship. In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, another male-centred magical realist romantic comedy, the agency's unnatural and unscrupulous interventions are personified by Patrick's (Elijah Wood) use of stolen mementoes from Clementine and Joel's relationship to woo his increasingly-suspicious female client. In *Groundhog Day* (1993), Phil's (Bill Murray) endeavours to seduce Rita (Andie MacDowell) using intimate knowledge accumulated through their repeated encounters to construct a perfect romantic evening, are unsuccessful. And the attempts of *Bedazzled's* (2000) Elliot (Brendan Fraser) at union with the woman of his dreams (Frances O'Connor) through a demonic pact all end disastrously. Something forced and artificial about these men's advances betrays their inauthenticity. The stolen sentiments of Patrick's phone messages are ignored; Phil gets his face slapped again and again; while Elliot finds himself cast as a drug dealer, an under-endowed sports star, and a homosexual sophisticate, unable to express his love for Alison. These films depict a complex and fragile heterosexuality, existing in a narrow space between passive inaction and too-active intervention. But although differing significantly in tone, style and structure, it does seem that within romantic comedies -- and possibly across Hollywood more generally -- successful heterosexuality cannot be bought, forced or fooled. Any dishonesty, supernaturally-facilitated or otherwise, must be made good in order for true heterosexual love to run its natural course towards invariable consummation.

## Heterosexuality, Difference and Gender

Writing about the characteristics of heterosexuality, Richard Dyer offers some relevant points on its construction and conception. The first principle of heterosexuality Dyer considers is the attraction of individuals who are, in at least one respect, different from each other (1997: 264). Heterosexuality's ability to overcome the seemingly irreconcilable divisions of class, distance, nationality and so forth, detailed above, while suggesting its own natural irrepressibility, simultaneously reinforces this key component of heterosexual relationships. Difference characterizes protagonists within what Thomas E. Wartenberg terms the "unlikely couple film" (2000: 309), a common formation within the romantic comedy genre. One reason Annie (Meg Ryan) and Walter's (Bill Pullman) relationship fails in *Sleepless in Seattle* is that both characters are too similar. Lacking the difference so fundamental to heterosexual union, this sameness is exemplified by their first meeting, ordering identical sandwiches at a delicatessen counter. According to the heterosexual truism of opposites attracting, *Groundhog Day* pairs a cynical misanthrope with a liberal optimist; *A Life Less Ordinary* (1997) joins a cleaner with the daughter of a rich businessman; *As Good as It Gets* brings together a selfish neurotic obsessive compulsive with a generous altruistic single mother caring for her sick son. Sally takes forever to order a meal; Harry spits grape pits at a rolled-up window. Sally never gets annoyed; Harry rants about every little thing. Sally likes to snuggle afterwards; Harry just wants to leave. Gradually, these differences in philosophy, class, disposition and manners produce the healthy relationship founded on the mutually-beneficial variance of differently-characterized partners. Nonetheless, given that the majority of screen time depicts the sexes bickering, emphasizing their incompatibility, and expressing their mutual dislike of one another, the overriding impression may be of heterosexuality as problematic rather than idyllic union.

Dyer goes on to elaborate how, as the extremes of difference within romantic comedy partnership attest, this is frequently conceptualized as complementary opposites (a defining quality of what Dyer elsewhere terms "The Austen model" of heterosexual relationships [2002: 119]), and more specifically, opposites of gendered characteristics (1997: 264-5). Accordingly, these differences of personality frequently constitute an expression and implicit validation of the essential gender difference founding heterosexual coupling. Familiar constructions of masculinity and femininity are certainly evident in Cordula Quint's discussion of *You've Got Mail*, where he is a "dynamic, opinionated, self-assured" corporate businessman with the predatory surname "Fox"; while she is the "[c]ute, endearing, childlike, blonde" owner of a small children's bookshop. This contrasts the big, aggressive, ruthless male with the small, child-like, literary female, heirs to respectively patrilineal and matrilineal retail dynasties (2004: 86). Frequently opposition between intended partners is conspicuously and explicitly gendered. In *What Women Want*, Nick is a "tough chauvinistic prick", while Darcy (Helen Hunt) is the "man-eating bitch Darth Vader of the ad world", depicting both potential partners as antagonistic to the other sex while aggressively characterized by their own. In *How to Lose a Man in Ten Days*, she is a journalist for *Composure* magazine, a *Cosmopolitan*-style publication preoccupied with "fashion, trends, diets, cosmetic surgery, salacious gossip", while he is (another) advertising executive specializing in "alcoholic beverages and athletic equipment". The 1960s sexcom pastiche *Down With Love* (2003) teams a womanizing playboy with a feminist author; while the similarly knowing *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003) pairs a divorce lawyer whose "Massey pre-nup" protects the financial interests of men, with a gold-digging serial divorcée. These two romantic comedies employ over-determined gender coding, ironically acknowledging their historical debt to the films of Day, Hudson and Sturges, while simultaneously reproducing and utilizing the same generic conceptions of heterosexual coupling.

Dyer's third point on heterosexuality's construction suggests the gendered difference of the heterosexual relationship "is in fact power imbalance" (Dyer, 1997: 265). This is a point observed by many feminist critics. For example, Rich describes heterosexuality as "a political institution which disempowers women" (1993: 227). Similarly, Sheila Jeffreys describes heterosexual desire as the "eroticised subordination" of women to men (1993: 305). Regarding male supremacist sexuality, sadomasochism and heterosexuality as intimately connected,

Jeffreys states uncompromisingly: "The demolition of heterosexual desire is a necessary step on the route to women's liberation" (312). Despite recent changes in sexual mores and demands for gender equality, Jackson warns: "claims that a more egalitarian form of love is emerging seem absurdly over optimistic and wilfully neglectful of the continued patriarchal structuring of heterosexuality" (1999: 121). Criticism of institutional heterosexuality, and of romantic comedy conventions frequently coincide, oppressive or traditional gender power relations being frequently identified within the genre. For Krutnik, 1950s and 1960s romcoms depict a battle between "'aggressive' male virility and a 'passively resistant' female virginity" (1990: 59), while "nervous comedy" *Starting Over* (1979) is understood as blaming erosions in heterosexual certainties upon a corruptive narcissistic feminism (63). According to Neale, romantic comedies may express commitment to equality within relationships, but true balance between male and female power is unusual. More commonly, the male partner is privileged as more knowledgeable than the female partner, *Green Card* (1990) cited as an illustrative example (1992: 293-4). Similar notions of female passivity and helplessness, masculine power and authority are seemingly reproduced across the genre, from the corporate raider/prostitute relationship of *Pretty Woman* to the senatorial candidate/hotel maid pairing of *Maid in Manhattan*. *Love Actually's* relationships include romance between English author Jamie (Colin Firth) and his Portuguese servant girl Aurelia (Lúcia Moniz), a woman prepared to jump into freezing water to retrieve the spilled pages of the writer's manuscript. There is the relationship between British Prime Minister (Hugh Grant) and his tea lady Natalie (Martine McCutcheon), the PM being chivalrously prepared, and authoritatively positioned, to jeopardize trans-Atlantic relations when his staff's honour -- and his own masculinity -- is compromised through the arrogant advances of a lecherous American President (Billy Bob Thornton). Throughout *Love Actually*, men are active, women passive or reactive. The only confident romantically-active woman is Harry's (Alan Rickman) secretary, Mia (Heike Makatsch) who, in representing a potential disruption to the comfortably successful heterosexual marriage with children, is depicted in comparatively unsympathetic terms. Constituting the inappropriate partner, or female equivalent of the un-reconstructed Phil or Nick, Mia appears to transgress the acceptable boundaries of female heterosexuality.

Furthermore, Dyer goes on to argue: "Complementarity of difference seems to need to become male domination and female subordination for a relationship to be consummated" (1997: 266). Even in films where female characters hold authority, her power is frequently relinquished or compromised before the film's end. The small bookstore-owner is forced into liquidation; the "man-eating bitch" quits her job in despair; the feminist author reveals her feminism a charade designed to ensnare the object of her heterosexual desire. As Quint's discussion of *You've Got Mail* concludes: "men and women who are going to love each other must first fulfil very specific and constraining gender roles" (2004: 90). Nevertheless, many romantic comedies offer more complex negotiations and explorations of gender relationships. Writing about heterosexuality's reflection in Hollywood musicals, Dyer observes more equal interactions in early mirroring or complementary dance routines, before the surrender of the female partner's independence and control (1997: 265-6). Within romantic comedy, the domination of women by men, described elsewhere by Dyer as "The Cartland model" of heterosexual romance, exists together with a less-common "New Woman model" where couples are brought together by what they have in common, rather than by their difference (2002: 119-20). Given the prominence of oppositional gender formations, such transformations often require a softening of traditional masculine characteristics within male protagonists. So, Phil must become genuinely more cultured, caring and altruistic, more like Rita, before his relationship with her is satisfyingly consummated. The union of Nick and Darcy involves Nick becoming more sympathetic to women's feelings through his ability to eavesdrop on their thoughts. *The Wedding Singer's* Robbie (Adam Sandler) is already feminized, in his personal desire to get married, his devastation after being left at the altar, and through his knowledge of the wedding industry. *Pretty Woman's* Edward (Richard Gere) must abandon aggressive corporate raiding and turn to reconciliatory shipbuilding in order to win Vivien's (Julia Roberts) hand. And even though he rescues her, she rescues him right back. While tempting to regard such

transformations as indicative of contemporary developments in sexual relations, Andrew Britton's study of Cary Grant (1983) suggests a feminization, even a bisexualization, of the hero implicit in classic screwball comedy narrative trajectory. Furthermore, Britton argues that aspects such as rebellion against patriarchy, recovery of infantile drives, and the liberation of polymorphous energies are harder to identify in recent generic examples, suggesting contemporary romantic comedies represent a conservative turn in Hollywood cinema. Nevertheless, it is notable that while eroticized power difference is one component of many romantic comedies' heterosexuality, across the genre it is by no means the only model being adopted.

### **Heterosexuality as Socially Validated**

If women's domination by men is only partially evident, the centrality of marriage and procreation -- another fundamental aspect of academic accounts of heterosexuality -- is even harder to identify within romantic comedy cinema. Certainly, the hegemonic heterosexuality described by Jo VanEvery as founded upon "lifelong, monogamous, cohabiting relationships, legally sanctioned through marriage and producing children" (1996: 40) is almost entirely absent from the screen. As Shumway argues, within such films marriage constitutes the end of romance, being the desire for bliss which marriage is configured as satisfying (1997: 385). Romantic comedies concentrate on courtship, the chase, the first moments of intimacy, rather than the daily realities of long-term heterosexual relationships, and many examples of the genre present rather negative perspectives on marriage itself. *Intolerable Cruelty* depicts the institution as largely a source of income for serial wives and cynical divorce lawyers; while *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, despite the marriage ceremonies it contains, ends with a proposal *not* to get married. Early in *Forces of Nature* (1999) Ben (Ben Affleck) is told by his grandfather that he married out of fear, not attraction. "Don't tie yourself down," he warns. "Even if you love a woman, it fades. Marriage is a prison." Ben's final decision to return to his fiancé confounds expectations and generic conventions. *One Fine Day* does not end in marriage, or even intimacy between protagonists, but with the couple falling asleep together on the sofa. Because these films frequently close on the union of hero and heroine, the romantic comedy is not only devoid of marriage but also of procreation and acts of vaginal penetration identified as strong components of heterosexuality (see Richardson, 1996: 6-7). Indeed, sex acts of any form are notably excluded from romantic comedy heterosexuality, at least between leads. Sex is an activity indulged in only by non-central characters, or between protagonists and other inappropriate partners on the path to true non-sexualized heterosexual consummation.

The limited presence of matrimonial union in contemporary romantic comedy is the subject of much discussion amongst genre critics. Evans and Celestino argue the idea of lasting heterosexual monogamy has become ironic, a source of parody, "as if the films were afraid to feature a wedding between their protagonists as the culmination of their love" (1998: 7). Evidence of such tensions, Madison observes the underlining of fairy tale references in *Pretty Woman* (1995: 227), a film which, Celestino Deleyto writes, "did not so much suggest that what was narrated might be true, but invited us to recognize, in an age of lost innocence, the cultural and filmic mechanisms that made it possible, not in reality but in the cinema" (2003: 170). While *When Harry Met Sally* and *Sleepless in Seattle* recall the romantic cinema of previous eras, Kate (Meg Ryan) of *Kate and Leopold* speculates that romance is just Santa Claus for grownups, suggesting that traditional heterosexual ideals only exist in a mythical fictional past. Successful heterosexuality, these films propose, belongs to fairy tales, old fashioned movies, romantic comedies, and the relationships they depict must be imbued with irony to make them palatable for contemporary audiences. Krutnik views these tendencies as symptomatic of recent erosions in heterosexual values and conventions. Such self-conscious strategies attempt both a revalidation of heterosexual intimacy and the romantic comedy genre itself, ignoring or disavowing the current precariousness of heterosexual monogamy, relationships based on traditional gendered roles, and "the whole romance thing" (1998: 29-30).

While changes in heterosexual practices, the social status of heterosexuality, and the depiction of different-sex relations in popular culture deserve acknowledgement, such accounts may overestimate the extent of heterosexuality's decline as the natural, inevitable, compulsory sexuality. Despite the successful political challenges of the 1960s and 1970s, heterosexuality still enjoys a privileged position within Western cultures. References to fairy tales and classic romantic comedies within these films serve to reinforce this privilege, irony itself expressing a complacent authority and security available only to more dominant social groups. Stories about heterosexual courtship and coupling, these films tell their audiences, have always existed. Heterosexual narratives, and by extension, heterosexual people have a heritage, a culture, a history. The validating significance of such a history is evident in gay and lesbian theorists' attempts to reclaim a queer past. Laura Gowing (1997) asserts the importance of challenging the historical invisibility of queer relationships; while Rich points to the debilitating experience of living "without any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning", a condition associated with isolation, self-hatred and suicide (1993: 239). The impression that heterosexuality has such a cultural continuity conversely instils a sense of community, self-satisfaction and self-preservation, perpetuated by these films' albeit-self conscious citation of their sources as narratives of "universal" romance.

The problematization of matrimonial union and lasting relationships within contemporary romantic comedies, either through absence or irony, might not indicate an erosion of heterosexuality's centrality, but rather a shift in the source of heterosexuality's hegemonic validation as the primary model of sexual relationships. While the marriage may be absent within contemporary romantic comedy, marriage's function as a public, communal, celebratory endorsement of heterosexual coupling finds symbolic representation in many film's closing scenes. Charles (Grant) and Carrie (MacDowell) of *Four Weddings*' agreement not to get married constitute a nonetheless-authentic and binding act of solidarity against a constructed marriage-centred culture. Moreover this exchange occurs beneath the heavens, which bestow approval on the couple's union with a heavily-primed bolt of lightning. Protagonists' final embraces frequently take place in highly public spaces. *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001) ends as Bridget (Renée Zellweger) and Mark (Colin Firth) kiss on a snowy street corner; in *How to Lose a Man* it is a traffic-jammed bridge; in *Sleepless in Seattle* the couple finally meet atop the Empire State Building, a location sanctioning their union according to romantic comedy lore via *An Affair to Remember* (1957), while bestowing statutory endorsement upon a relationship inaugurated at a national monument. *Hitch* (2005) ends with Alex (Will Smith) getting himself publicly run over by Sarah's (Eva Mendes) car, his declaration of love immediately followed by a concluding sequence showing the hero and heroine celebrating at someone else's wedding reception. Frequently this public consummation occurs before a cheering gathering of anonymous onlookers. *The Wedding Singer* has Robbie serenading Julia on a Las Vegas-bound aeroplane, surrounded by approving passengers, crew and 1980s rock singer Billy Idol. George's (Hugh Grant) love for Lucy (Sandra Bullock) in *Two Weeks Notice* is reportedly expressed in a speech delivered at a construction ceremony. *Love Actually* sees public endorsement of the relationship between the Prime Minister and Natalie, caught embracing on stage at a school Christmas play; while Jamie's proposal of marriage to Aurelia is preceded by a journey from her home to place of work, accumulating increasing numbers of interested individuals along the way. In both *Notting Hill* and *Maid in Manhattan* the heterosexual relationship is cemented during a press conference, witnessed by both those present and a general public of television viewers. *America's Sweethearts* (2001) stages a reproduction of the marriage climax, as actress Gwen (Catherine Zeta-Jones) announces her intentions to re-marry actor Eddie (John Cusack), only to be publicly rejected in favour of sister Kiki (Julia Roberts), all accompanied by the appreciative murmurs of an attendant press junket.

When these couples finally come together they do so before an audience, both diegetic and non-diegetic, and it is tempting to regard the former as an attempt to interpolate the latter. The synchronistic positioning of male and female protagonists, along with the crowd, represents the culmination of the couple's fated union; while the rapturous applause which greets their clinching embrace is further testimony to the validity of their affections. A



populist humanist politics is at play here, society being represented by this nameless gathering of everyday men and women who register their enthusiastic approval of heterosexual romance. If the history of gay and lesbian sexuality is characterized by invisibility and the complex negotiation of public space (Gowing, 1997), romantic-comedy heterosexuality is a visible and uninhibited expression of different-sex couples' right to conduct their relations in full view. As Dyer observes "heterosexuality has a public dimension, it is not just a private affair" (Dyer, 2002: 118), and these open declarations of love, acts which would be radically transformed if conducted between gay male or lesbian characters, reiterate heterosexuality's social, cultural and legal sanctioning. In such circumstances the absence of traditional marriage ceremonies seems immaterial, given the continued emphasis upon components of marriage which maintain heterosexuality's hegemonic authority. This indicates a sexuality which -- far from suffering a crisis of confidence -- no longer considers it necessary to rely upon state enforcement for a validity self-evident in its widespread popular endorsement. As the example from *Four Weddings* illustrates, contemporary romantic comedies attempt to have their (wedding) cake and eat it too, constructing a romance which transgresses the institutional, while managing nonetheless to accumulate all the benefits of a communally-approved sexual identity.

### **Conclusion: Deconstructing Heterosexuality**

As indicated by the incorporation of new models of masculinity into different-sex couplings, or the evocation of marriage's commitment, social endorsement and institutional approval without the necessity of the wedding ceremony itself, romantic-comedy cinema constitutes a process of negotiation between broad generic conventions, specific textual requirements, and contemporary constructions of sexuality, gender and social relations. Despite elements which variously reflect, reproduce or reinforce heterosexuality's dominant status and constructions, there is undoubtedly much within romantic comedy conventions which complicates straightforward critical conclusions. After all, the different-sex coupling takes an entire film to be created, and if union is achieved before the film's ending then it must be split up again to allow for a suitably climactic ending. If a celebration of heterosexual romance is these films' goal, that union must be complicated or deferred for as long as possible. Paradoxically, while being "all around", heterosexual love is simultaneously extremely rare and fragile, both normal and extraordinary. As *Notting Hill's* Will (Grant), experiencing a fit of self-pity, tells his married friends: "I think you've forgotten what an unusual situation you two have. To find someone you actually love, who'll love you, I mean, the chances are always miniscule." Krutnick suggests within many recent romantic comedies heterosexual conventions are acknowledged as a "necessary lie" (1998: 20), evident in the number of films founded on deception: *HouseSitter* (1992), *While You Were Sleeping* (1995), *The Truth About Cats and Dogs* (1996) (31). And in a critique of Hollywood romance employing psychoanalysis -- a theoretical perspective both problematizing and universalizing heterosexuality -- Lapsley and Westlake (1992) argue that Hollywood cinema presents the illusion that romantic union between complementary sexes can fill the void which characterizes the human condition. Implausible happy endings, the unfeasible inflation of romance's reconciliatory abilities, and the perpetual deferment of a consummation which necessitates immediate closure, they argue, give lie to this illusion. From such perspectives, the romantic comedy genre undermines rather than reinforces Ingraham's (1996) "heterosexual imaginary", emphasizing instead of concealing its tenuous constructed nature.

Heterosexuality is not quite the sole taken-for-granted sexual identity the above analysis suggests, otherwise romantic comedies would not trouble so explicitly to characterize their leading men and women as heterosexuals. The recently-estranged, absent or inappropriate different-sexed partners frequently mentioned in romantic comedies' opening sequences suggest heterosexuality is no longer, if ever, assumed. *Love Actually*, in introducing its many protagonists, asserts their orientation through various references to dead wives, future wives and stag night prostitutes. Mark's (Andrew Lincoln) obsession with Juliet (Keira Knightley), rather than best friend Peter (Chiwetel Ejiofor) is not presumed by the film's characters, neither is the heterosexuality of

Danielle's stepson (Thomas Sangster). Romantic comedies, like all cultural texts, contain queer elements and moments. *Sleepless in Seattle* may be structured by heterosexual inevitability, but the fact that Sam and Annie never meet until the final moment means their strongest on-screen relationships are with same-sex friends. *As Good As It Gets* ends with Melvin (Jack Nicholson) and Carol (Helen Hunt) buying bread rolls together, but only after gay artist Simon (Greg Kinnear) has moved into Melvin's apartment; the film's most heartfelt declarations of love being between Carol and Simon, and Simon and Melvin. In *Love Actually*, the homoerotic charge of rock star Billy Mack's (Bill Nighy) final meeting with manager Joe (Gregor Fisher) is not lost on the characters themselves, and Billy's final line, "Let's get pissed together and watch porn," is not the unambiguous affirmation of male heterosexuality it is probably intended to be. While heterosexual love may be constructed as preferable to homosocial male friendship, Deleyto (2003) cites several recent romantic comedies -- *Muriel's Wedding* (1994), *Clueless* (1995), *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* (1997) -- where female friendship is afforded a centrality which eclipses or marginalizes heterosexual coupling. Homosexuality and lesbianism, as alternatives to a nonetheless central heterosexuality, cannot be exorcized simply through the exclusion, marginalization or editing of gay-identified characters.

Heterosexuality within these films may be critiqued, albeit momentarily, as despondent protagonists' romantic aspirations are temporarily stalled. One notable sequence from *Bridget Jones's Diary*, emphasizing the oppressiveness of "compulsory heterosexuality", has Bridget attend a dinner party consisting of "smug married couples". The pressure to get "sprogged up", the stigma attached to unattached individuals, and the casual bullying of independent women by a successfully heterosexual majority constitutes a critical representation of heterosexuality as smothering, dominating and arrogant. *The Wedding Singer*, suggesting the artificiality and insincerity of heterosexuality's most sacred institution throughout, features a drunken Robbie singing "Love Stinks" while identifying large sections of the wedding guests' exclusion from an implied heterosexual ideal. Finally, *Love Actually's* "body doubles" storyline exposes the fabrication of cinema's athletic and aesthetic heterosexuality, the sterile processes of heterosexual cinematic representations, and the awkwardness of heterosexuality, actually, in comparison.

Heterosexuality, along with other majority or central social formations, remains an under-theorized identity construction within film, media and cultural studies. This paper has illustrated how a genre founded on the romantic union of different-sex protagonists reveals ways in which this invisible, default, apparently characterless identity might be explored and interrogated. Romantic comedy's representation of heterosexuality as natural and inevitable, as founded upon mutually reinforcing traditionally gendered coupling, and as endorsed by society, reflects and arguably reinforces central conceptions and constructions of the dominant sexuality. Certain elements of the genre, such as the ambivalent attitude towards marriage, indicate a more selective incorporation of these values. Equally, the privileging of heterosexuality within the genre should not overshadow moments which contradict or interrogate that position. In illustrating key tenets of heterosexuality as broadly evident across romantic comedy cinema, this paper is necessarily short on specific focused textual analysis, which -- like Bridget's uncomfortable dinner party -- might reveal a more complex, nuanced depiction of heterosexuality transcending such overarching structures and formations. It is hoped this paper will contribute to a more intensive investigation of the representation, construction and conception of heterosexuality in contemporary popular culture.

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