SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO THE ANALYSIS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN MODERN COMEDIES

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ABSTRACT

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The present research takes a cultural prospective on the tensions in interpersonal relations based on the movies of the 90’s, such as *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *As Good As It Gets* (1997), and *You’ve Got Mail* (1998). The romantic comedy films of the 90’s were innovative in their genre, for they have touched upon serious drama subjects, hiding behind the “romantic” and “comedy” style. Through the prism of the semiotic analysis I try to analyze how cultural codes play into the formation of hidden conflicts in interpersonal communication, mainly loneliness. Umberto Eco’s theory of the openness of the “author’s message” permits to illustrate the many possibilities of interpretation by the audience of the given films and allows an in-depth analysis of the cultural situation.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarly research on romantic comedies has stated that allegedly the genre has died, vanished and been recycled into the light and easy bin. Popular understanding of the genre is that of a Friday night movie with family and friends that has its priorities in entertaining, without evoking real life dramatic experiences, emotions and feelings. Many researchers beg to differ. Celestino Deleyto (1997), who has written and published widely on romantic comedies as a genre, argues in one of his articles that “romantic comedy will survive as a genre”, underlying the importance of the deeper exploration of romantic comedies. He states that the genre in the 90’s was affected by the “divorce rate, single parenting, gay rights and the rise of the feminism” (Deleyto, 1997, p. 92). Johnson and Holmes (1998) in their research on romantic comedies as a genre argue that romantic comedies of the 90’s are more substantial than those of the 80’s and “appear to depict romantic relationships as having qualities of both new and long-term relationships; that is, to be both novel and exciting, yet emotionally significant and meaningful” (Johnson & Holmes, 1998, p.352). Romantic comedy as a genre has evolved much since early 1930’s, where the “screwball genre” was prevalent. Then in 1950’s the “particular form of the genre…was so-called “sex comedy” where sex was the terrain being fought over by female and male protagonists…” (McDonald, 1995, p.149). The romantic comedy films were innovative in their genre, for they have touched upon serious drama subjects, hiding behind the “romantic” and “comedy’ style. Thus they have “established the form of romantic comedy that still dominates today” (McDonald, 1995, p.150).
Steve Neale in his book *Popular Comedies* states that the romantic comedies of the 90’s, unlike the comedies of the late 70’s-early 80’s, establish “strong plot” lines along with “intricate dramatic situations” that were previously uncharacteristic of the genre (Neale, 1993, p. 25). Hence, at this stage, *You’ve Got Mail*, *Sleepless in Seattle* and *As Good as it Gets* can be seen as interesting case studies for several reasons. Firstly, these comedies address a wide variety of topics- from divorce traumas, love delusions to economic instabilities and the “ways of survival” (that is not a typical comedy style, after all). Secondly, they offer an innovative solution to the problems of “loneliness in relationship”- the ways in which characters overcome their inner loneliness situations and fight the societal norms and expectations. These are not the typical screw-ball comedies, though they might seem so at a first glance. What makes them unique is that each main character is living through some sort of personal drama that triggers an awareness of the character’s inner loneliness. In *You’ve Got Mail*, Kathleen’s personal drama is two-sided: she has lost her mother and as a result lost her direction and sense that made her question life priorities. The second side of her inner loneliness is that being in a long-term relationship, she is having an emotional affair (that states the obvious dissatisfaction with the current relationship) and the idea of “finding love online” in a technically bound, cold world triggers emotional reactions, one of which is loneliness (Johnson & Homes, 1998, p. 357). Loneliness thus plays a major role in the movie.

In the development of the romantic comedies as a genre, comedies of the 1990’s bring about “the emotional depth” that was not characteristic of the 80’s, and set the “rules of the genre” that are used until present days (Johnson & Homes, 2009, p. 45). Romantic comedies per se are an interesting subject to explore, along with other aspects of genre- such as masculinity and femininity (done by scholars such as McDonald (1995), Deleyto (1997) and Krutnik (1998)).
I will focus, rather, on how these comedy films portray loneliness, an aspect that has been overlooked in the research on comedies, and the creative solutions to loneliness these movies offer, that make these comedies special and unique. The characters in the movies, unlike people in real life, are able to overcome the difficult situations with the grace and easiness of the romantic comedy genre. These movies are special cases within the romantic comedy genre, for they bring out into the open what other romantic comedies, for the most part, keep hidden: the pressure of the societal norms that lead to loneliness and the ways that characters of the movies overcome loneliness.

**Research Problem**

The objects of this research are some episodes of the recent history of American cinematography - the cultural atmosphere of the 90s as it was represented in three comedy movies - whose plots are based on the idea of human loneliness, the search of ways to solve the difficult communicative situation (the inner loneliness leads to relational misunderstandings) and, finally, overcome this state of loneliness through the process of daily life when difficulties of communicative situations were realized. The material of this investigation is the artistic form – the structure of characters and communicative situations in the story and the plot of the three movies of the 90s: *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *As Good as it Gets* (1997), and *You’ve Got Mail* (1998).

**Research Questions/Objectives**

1) To research the artistic form (movie plots, dialogues) of comedy movies in order to interpret problems, challenges and successes in interpersonal communications

2) To demonstrate that these films of the 90’s have an interpersonally connected and less superficial communication structure that is difficult to find in the present day comedies
3) To show that these films have loneliness as a subtext of the interpersonal relations, which is also reflective of the world situation of the time (the appearance of internet and “chat rooms” that make the interpersonal interactions more difficult and unreal)

4) To demonstrate that the comedic portrayal of loneliness in these movies is important because it gives a completely different perspective on loneliness

The objectives of my research ask for particular solutions.

- To briefly analyze the phenomenon of loneliness and its evaluation (from positive to neutral and modern negative points of view) in the culture and modern society.

- To understand the artistic (and, finally, communicative) role of the artifacts of American culture used by the characters (books, emails, letters) in the three comedy films as a means to communicate well with the world: the movie of the previous epoch and actors as former and new role models (in Sleepless in Seattle), the “romance plot” of the main character’s creative activity (in As Good as It Gets), and bestsellers—the well-known books—as a “communicative code” to make a successful dialog with the world (In You’ve Got Mail).

Literature Review

Romantic Comedy

Steve Neal and Frank Krutnik in their book Popular Film and Television Comedy suggest that “comedy…is an aesthetic term…Its use in reference to non-aesthetic events and situations tends always to be explicitly metaphorical, in a way that the use of term “comic” is not…” (Krutnik & Neal, 1991, p. 16). The authors make an in-depth re-examination of the Comedic genre, starting from the idea that comedy per se is “genre with a happy ending,” and going into
depth exploring the “darker” side of the romantic comedies, the “deeper” issues that are being explored (Neal & Krutnik, 1991).

Two of the three films under analysis (Sleepless in Seattle and You’ve Got Mail) are "remakes of or allude to movies from the 1930s and 1950s" (Hollywood Divas, 2000, p.57). That fact indicates that the plot situations are embedded in the minds of Americans and they constitute a meaningful part in the system of American cultural values. The very fact that there are remakes of the films and millions of Americans of different generations watch them indicate that new interpretations are needed. J. McDowell underlines that:

   Romantic comedy - particularly modern (i.e.: post-70s) romantic comedy - has often been considered a purely escapist and conservative genre, accused of unquestioningly presenting unrealistic romantic fantasies for passive audiences. I'm interested in trying to complicate this view, in part because of my innate distaste for any such banally generalizing statements, but also because I believe romantic comedy to be a fascinating genre that is able to interrogate, often rather movingly and amusingly, dominant ideologies of love and romance. (J. McDowell, 2009, p. 23)

McDowell shows us the everlasting validity of the comedy of a genre that brings a huge variety of topics to explore. Catherine L. Preston in her essay shows the difference in romantic comedies of the 1970s and early 1980s and describes a general trend in romantic comedies of the 1990s. That shows the interest of the researchers in this type of films and their role in shaping modern American consciousness.

Tamar Jeffers McDonald in his research on entering change in contemporary romantic comedies underlines that new films continue to be made “barring the romantic comedy’s hallmarks: female-centered narratives charting the rockiness of the road to true love” that follows
the true romantic comedy pattern as “the initial mutual antipathy, the subsequent quest or embarrassing public gesture that stand as an apology and reestablishes the pair” (McDonald, 2007, 147). The romantic comedy as a genre has evolved much since the early 1930’s, where the screwball genre was prevalent. Then in 1950’s the “particular form of the genre…was so-called sex comedy where sex was the terrain being fought over by female and male protagonists” (McDonald, 2007, 149). The romantic comedy films were innovative in their genre, for they have touched upon serious drama subjects, covering up with the “romantic” and “comedy” style. Thus they have “established the form of romantic comedy that still dominates today” (McDonald, 2007, 150).

Loneliness

Loneliness is usually defined as “a self-perceived state in which a person’s network of relationships is either smaller or less satisfying than desired” (Jones, W., 1998). Loneliness, along the lines of romantic and comedy, is one of the main research objectives in my thesis. I study loneliness from communicative, psychological and sociological points of view. Margaret Mary in her book studies the problem of the individual who feels alone in the crowd. The author feels that the changes that are taking place in modern society “break down the old patterns of relationships on which the individual depends for inner security more rapidly than he is able to construct a new pattern that will satisfy his sense of purpose and belonging” (Mary, 1993, p.25). As a result the individual feels frustrated, adrift, and alone.

The inner loneliness of the individual that results in the loneliness in the crowd and loneliness under the “societal expectations” is studied by Seabstian Moore (Moore, 1989) and Jonathan Franzen (Franzen, 2004), both agree on the idea that loneliness is connected with the expectation violations. The theory of loneliness that explores the reasons and the triggers for
social and emotional loneliness, the adaptation to social norms and paradigms, and the
evaluation of “self” within the socio-communicative reality is presented explicitly in the article
*New directions in interpersonal communication research* (Smith, & Wilson, 2009).

Loneliness as a cultural phenomena (for example, American) is explored in books by
Slater (2001) and articles by Hudson & Herman (2002), where the factors that are contributed
to a lonely lifestyle in the US are explained and explored. They are viewed as a personal choice
(that however leads to loneliness) and as a form of compelling to the social situation, (Hudson
& Herman, 2002). Loneliness as the central component in a relationship of any kind is the
central issue for books by Dahlberg (2006) and Rokach (2007), where they explore the
“normality” of loneliness, the overcoming of “lonely” factors in relationships and the reflection
of social and emotional alienation in everyday life.

Thomas Dumm considers loneliness as a way of life (Dumm, 2008). A collection of
papers studies the anatomy of loneliness, thus taking loneliness to the “physiologic psychologico
level (Hartog, Audy, & Cohen, 1980). Hugh Holman presents his views on
loneliness as a “social character” in the book “The Loneliness at the Core” (Holman, 1995).
Margaret Mary studies an isolated individual (socially and spiritually) in the modern world
(Mary, 1993). Sebastian Moore is interested in the inner loneliness (Moore, 1989). Jonathan
Franzen explores postmodern loneliness (Franzen, 2004) along with Robert S. Weiss who
writes about emotional and social isolation in the world today (Weiss, 1983).

Interpersonal communication is also a topical problem which attracted attention of
many scholars. Several recent collections of papers related to the topic include (and not limited
to): interpersonal communication research and the ways of overcoming loneliness (Hargie &
Dickson, 2007). Loneliness is also analyzed as a part of the internal conflict that leads to
“miscommunication” and “misperception” in the interpersonal relations (Reid, Freiser & Kramer, 2006, p. 45). Interpersonal communication plays one of the most important roles in analyzing the conflicting situations within the movies. Not only is it important to the topic of “loneliness”, but it is also important for the understanding of the characters’ inner world, their perception of life and ways of interacting with the outer world. Johnson & Holmes (2009) in their article on the analysis on contradictory messages in Hollywood films, underline that interpersonal communication of the characters in the movies play the main role in romantic plot construction and development. In their article Johnson & Holmes (2009) analyze the romantic content of 40 romantic comedy films using basic methodology. Throughout their analysis, Johnson & Holmes underline that romantic comedies (romcoms) have unique “romantic dialogs” that depict romantic relationships as having qualities of “novel and exciting, yet emotionally significant and meaningful” (Johnson & Holmes, 2009, p. 135). Beukeboom (2009) in his research on interpersonal communication in movies underlines that certain communication patterns could be traced, such as the use of emotionally-colored adjectives. Renneberg, Heyn, Gebhard, & Bachmann (2005) in their article on facial expressions of the movies characters in interpersonal communication study the “facial expression of emotions, an aspect highly relevant for communication processes and a central feature of emotion regulation” (Renneberg, Heyn, Gebhard, & Bachmann, 2005). Lanigan (1994) in his article on “communicology” argues that “communicology is the study of human discourse in all its forms, ranging from the phenomenology of human gesture and speech to such semiotic mediations as art, film, and television, and now the faddish cellular telephone,” underlying the importance of the interpersonal communication analysis in films. Harries (1995) in her article on language, interpersonal communication and semiotic analysis argues
that “the social use of language represents an essential and not tangential arena of inquiry into the systematicity of language” (Harries, 1995, p.46). Andrew (1977) in his article on film analysis identifies the importance of the usage of the Semiotic analysis where films are concerned. He underlines that “art works are coded like dreams or like ideologically programmed reflexes,” underlying the importance of “decodification” in the film analysis (Andrew, 1977, p. 24).

Method

The method of the thesis research will include and not be limited to the analysis of the three given films As Good as it Gets, You’ve Got Mail, Sleepless in Seattle through the prism of a) interpersonal communication, b) inner personal conflicts in interpersonal communication, c) the specific artistic form, d) the contextual analysis and film critique, and e) a comparison of how loneliness plays into the romantic scenarios in the three given movies.

Through the critical analysis of the text, informed largely by the theory of semiotics, I will engage in close analysis of the movie plots and examine the manner in which loneliness is constructed (by the plot structure and the movie director) and how the movie characters use specific forms of interpersonal communication to challenge the meaning of loneliness. Furthermore, I will try to convey how the characters are aware of these social constructions and how they challenge them using specific strategies of interpersonal communication within the frames of the romantic comedy genre.

The main theory used for the analysis of the three given movies is the theory of semiotics. Christian Metz (1968), a film scholar and one of the prominent scholars of the Film Theory, in his book Film Language argued that “cinema is constructed like language” (Metz, 1968, p. 12). Metz argues that unlike the written word, film’s basic symbol is a screen shot that
could be interpreted or decoded in many different ways. Metz ideas were later expanded and revisited by the large film theorists, such as Raymond Bellour in “The Unattainable Text” (1975), who agreed with Metz’s theory. Stephen Heath (1981) was one of Metz’s followers and practitioners of the film theory, who argues in his book “Questions of Cinema” (1981) that cinema is concerned with representation that could also be interpreted as one of the “codes” in the film structure. The most famous semiotician and the “father” of semiotics is considered to be Umberto Eco, who put down the basis for the theory, in a way as a part of the Film Theory, in his “Theory of Semiotics” (1976), that was later called "Articulations of the Cinematic Code".

Main Concepts of Semiotics

In my analysis I use the approach which is closely connected with a well-known method of investigation of culture in general and any artistic work in particular such as a text, e.g. a subsequence of signs. This approach has a long history of existence but nowadays is usually connected with Umberto Eco’s semiotics of culture and his works devoted to the problem of literature, cinematography, and music. From Eco’s point of view, the “uncertainty” of intellectual results is in the nature of an artistic work, his concept of “open work” supposes that the receiver (reader or spectator) has his own freedom to interpret the text, both the text of a novel, a movie or a music piece, and this additional intellectual activity of the receiver is a part of the creative activity of the author. The great popularity of the three comedies, analyzed in my work, could partly be explained through this natural “participation” of the recipients – spectators - in the creation of the meaning of the plot. And a traditional “happy end” ought to be (due to this uncertainty) not the only way to happiness existing especially for the characters of the movie, but
a kind of “multiple choice” for every person of the audience having similar problems. The authoritative Harper Collins Dictionary of Philosophy defines semiotics as:

1. The study of (a) nature and kinds of signs, (b) what they mean, (c) how they are used, and (d) how they produce the intended effect or communicate the intended meaning. 2. Sometimes the term *semiotics* refers to a scientific method” (Peter A. Angeles, 1992, p.271).

In this brief description of semiotics the (d) point is of special interest for my work: the analysis of the production of a special effect on the spectator (or receiver) of the comedy film could be based on the art of the providing the “message” of the authors of the film by creating such a cinematographical “text” (in a broad meaning of the word).

Eco himself widens the subject and role of semiotics in the exploration of reality of human existence when he writes:

Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands in for it. (Eco, 1976, p. 7)

This statement supposes that this is possible practically for everyone to try to “read” the meaning of actual reality as a “subsequence of signs”, i.e. as a “text”, and this provides the understanding of the events of common life of a man as “a sign” of his destiny, the symbolic sense of the action of a man - as “a pattern” of his human nature and so on. All this makes using the method of semiotics in the analysis of the form and content (and their interrelation) of movies very productive because of “ready forms” of comprehension of “film reality” as a symbolic depiction of laws of human life (the problem of film content) and, to some extent, the reception
of the artistic form of the comedies. In both cases I am concerned with the problem of “decoding’ of life and its artistic portrayal.

The more extended and blurred definition of a semiotic approach to the phenomena of culture we can find in modern followers of Eco: “Semiotics is something, something by means of which we can conjure reality from illusion by the use of signs …” (Sebeok, 1991, p.2). In this understanding of a semiotic approach to reality the author underlines the epistemological result of the use of the method, and this is especially relevant to comedy’s plot structure: at the end of the film the main characters and we, spectators, usually achieve a new stage of understanding reality and ruling laws of human life, or, in other words, we are able to differ the system of common false (or simply superficial) values from the true sense of life (or to recollect the forgotten ideas of “common sense”) to re-establish the scale of values that permits a hero to reach true happiness and wellbeing in the end.

A Concept of Code in the Analysis

As a “technical” term of the Semiotic analysis of the content and form of movies the concept of code is the most important. Daniel Chandler mentions the social and cultural meaning of the concept:

The concept of the “codes” is fundamental in semiotics … codes organize signs into meaningful systems which correlate signifiers and signifieds. The convention of codes represent a social dimension in semiotics: a code is a set of practices familiar to users of the medium operating within a broad cultural framework. (Chandler, 2001, p.147-148)

Important for the problem of the thesis (loneliness as a social and interpersonal phenomena) is Chandler’s approach to the codes connections with the socio-cultural situation; his approach helps to analyze a comedy plot as topical for both the socio-communicative
situation (different social dimensions of the main characters, their non-equality in the aspect of social status are present in two comedies) and (what is more interesting for investigation) for the communicative conflict lying in the base of the problem of loneliness. The main characters’ behavior could be analyzed as typical for them as members of different social groups identifying themselves with the rules of a conventional way of living, as Chandler defines this:

Society itself depends on the existence of such signifying systems when studying cultural practice, semioticians treat as signs any objects or actions which have meaning to members of the cultural group, seeking to identify the rules of conventions of the codes which underlie the production of meanings within that culture. Understanding such codes, their relationships and contexts in which they are appropriate, is part of what it means to be a member of a particular culture”. (Chandler, 2001, p.154)

This affirmation clarifies the sense of social conflicts between the heroes and heroines of all comedies because it means- to understand the other person is to overcome the semantic borders of an alien cultural code: “We learn to read the world in terms of the codes and conventions which are dominant within the specific socio-cultural contexts and roles within which we are socialized” (Chandler, 2001, p.156). Moreover, in this trespassing of the social codes the external signs of these codes are very important, in the artistic space of a comedy film these external signs are represented visually, very brightly, almost persistently through the type of appearance of the actors, their dress code, hairdo, way of talking, moving, laughing: “We communicate our social identities through the work we do, the way we talk, the clothes we wear, our hairstyles, our eating habits,” D. Chandler concludes: “Language use acts as a key marker of social identity” (Chandler, 2001, p.156). And, of course, the role of the dialog, remarks of actors in the comedies are of huge importance in the aspect of the portrayal of different cultural codes
of their behavior and permanent slight underlining of the comic nature of the conversation between two different personalities. Comicality in these cases is created through “misconnection” between two codes of human conventional behavior.

Using the aphorism of Deanna D. Sellnow, which expresses the essence of the influence of films on the audience, we can say that, in fact, the artistic form of “narration” or “narrative structure” of the plot of these comedies is represented as “the rhetorical power of popular culture.” She underlines that “rhetoric consists of the signs as artifacts to influence people about how to believe and behave” and we can use the analysis of its devices in our “decoding” of the artistic form of the movies to “read adequately the message of the comedy films of the 90s (Sellnow, 2009, p. 35).

Summary of Chapters

Chapter one is concerned with the introduction of the topic - loneliness as a form of hidden conflict in interpersonal communication through the prism of Sleepless in Seattle (1993), As Good as it Gets (1997), and You’ve Got Mail (1998)- and the reasons for choosing this topic.

Chapter two describes the topic of loneliness and how it plays out in the movies under analysis. Also, chapter two is devoted to the main concepts of semiotics: cinematographic codes in the investigation of content and form of the three comedies and music codes. The plots of the movies under analysis are presented in the chapter as well. Chapter three analyses the movie Sleepless in Seattle (1993) through the prism of the Semiotic theory. It includes: the cinematographic codes in the movie; the plot of the movie; the analysis of the main characters and their lonely situation; analysis of the plot structure; music codes. Chapter four analyses the movie As Good as it Gets (1997) and follows the pattern of the third chapter for the movie analysis: the cinematographic codes in the movie; the plot of the movie; the analysis of the main characters and their lonely
situation; analysis of the plot structure; music codes. *Chapter five* analyses the movies *You’ve Got Mail (1998)* through the prism of the semiotic analysis and follows the plan of the previous chapters: the cinematographic codes in the movie; the plot of the movie; the analysis of the main characters and their lonely situation; analysis of the plot structure; music codes. *Chapter six* is devoted to conclusions.
CHAPTER TWO

LONELINESS AS A HIDDEN CONFLICT IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

In the comedy films under analysis in this thesis - *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *As Good as it Gets* (1997), *You’ve Got Mail* (1998) - we can find the artistic portrayal of “mediations” in interpersonal conflicts, that are the existing artistic works (movies and books) which offer the characters answers for their quest. All three movies belong to the genre of comedy and comicality is a significant part of the form of the films. The analysis of the comicality reveals the mechanisms of the overcoming conflicts in the plot of the movie and, finally, shows the audience how to overcome loneliness. The brilliant portrayal of the complicated problems in the comedy films of the 90s gives us a possible escape from the complexity of human life. Even if the solutions are only theoretical, they remain a potential solution of the hidden (not on the surface, unclear) conflict between a character’s personality and the society. Comicality as an artistic principle of interpretation of reality creates a feeling of freedom from loneliness through the emotional release from a communicative conflict. Umberto Eco underlines that any form of art is “open” for interpretation. In *As Good as it Gets* (1997) this form of artistic liberation for the main character, Melvin Udall, whose loneliness is the most prominent in the movie, becomes his work- his novel writing. In *You’ve Got Mail* (1998) the emails that the main characters write to each other, as a form of artistic work, and the books that they read (the “ready” cultural codes inserted into the movies) become a form of freedom from loneliness.

The films under analysis are all comedies. Despite the genre of comedy, I argue that all of them have a leitmotiv of loneliness, and the blissful happy ending is only possible due to the inner search (for a romantic partner, for sense of life) and the lonely situation of the heart. Loneliness is the result of a special kind of miscommunication between a person and the society
(or actual reality) and the reason (or the root) of this miscommunication that exists in the soul of a human being in the form of hidden (or unconscious, unrealized) conflict (Kord, 2006; Hudson, 2003). Loneliness in the analysis of the movies is presented as a constant inner struggle of the characters, between what they desire their life to be like, their life possibilities and the societal demands that make those desires possible or impossible.

Significance

Two of the three films under analysis (*Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and *You've Got Mail* (1998) are "remakes of or allude to movies from the 1930s and 1950s" (Kord, 2000, p.57). This fact indicates that the plot situations are embedded in the minds of Americans and they constitute a meaningful part in the system of the American cultural values. The very fact that many Americans watch these movies indicates that new interpretations are needed. Another reason why these films are so important for the modern American cultural consciousness is given by Susanne Kord and Elizabeth Krimmer. Interpreting *Sleepless in Seattle* they write that the film "responds to our desire to feel embedded in a meaningful universe in which everything happens for a reason" (Krimmer, 2000, p.60). One more reason to interpret these films is the fact that "heroines reconcile us with abuse and take us on vacation from modernity" (Krimmer, 2000, p.71). Kord and Krimmer therefore underline the significance of the interpretation of the movie and the continuing relevance of it.

It is a common human desire to find a partner; the comedies I intend to study show what Martha P. Nochmision calls an "iconic couple" - a couple which gives more life to "a formulaic script and makes submission to cultural stereotypes seem like a party" (Nochmision, 2000, p.11). I chose these particular movies, because besides being a brilliant interpretation of the modern societal loneliness that people are bound to explore at some point of time, they were also highly
acclaimed by the audience – there were at least 100 million watchers of each movie (Krimme, 2000, p. 59, 66). This indicates that the movies respond to the need of the society even today and that they are very meaningful.

What makes these movies especially vital to analyze is that the artistic form of the movies is complex, which leaves a great deal of material for analysis. These movies (You’ve Got Mail, Sleepless in Seattle and As Good as it Gets) are immersed into the cultural context. They produce characters that are trying to comprehend the world through given cultural phenomena: text of books (You’ve Got Mail- Kathleen is trying to interpret her life based on the books she reads, and makes Joe read the same books as she does to “understand” and “interpret” her world); role models from movies (Sleepless in Seattle- the prominent theme of the movies is the quest to somehow reproduce the situation from a famous romantic drama that all of the characters watch); creative work (As Good as it Gets- writer, Melvin, is distancing himself from the world with his work, by writing 62 novels on love, but being totally isolated from the world, which is one of the most complex cases of the plot irony.)

My analysis follows the Semiotic approach to the investigation of the content and form of the three comedies to reach the most objective view of the raised problems (social demands for happiness versus personal loneliness; search for an “ideal” partner versus accepting the status quo) and to appreciate the artistic skills of the creators of the movies: actors, scriptwriters, directors. The interpretation of the movies will be done using the theory of Semiotics, and especially Umberto Eco’s theory of “cinematographic codes.” The so-called “cinematographic codes” were described by Umberto Eco (1968) in his work on Absent Structure, where he paid special attention to the problem of communication in the movies and named these specific forms
of cinematographic communication “audio-visual” codes according to Pasolini, a famous Italian film director.

In this thesis the analysis of the semantic parallels between audio and video forms of communication in the plot structure of the comedies will be done because the music code in all three films is a very significant part of the cinematographic communication and it is transformed into a type of a sub-plot or additional plot and plays a very significant role in the construction of film reality. The cinematographic language of the three comedies is enriched by the use of additional cultural codes: two of the three comedies are remakes of popular films, so the cinematographic language is more complicated but only for “experienced” spectators who watched the original of the comedy. Another additional cultural code belongs to the main characters’ picture of reality: they use a ready cultural code (the artistic reality of a well-known film, a famous book) to construct their own picture of the world they try to understand. The spectators are equal in the perception of this “double vision” of the world by the heroes. So, the film reveals itself as “a language built on the base of the other language, and they both determine each other” (Eco, 1968, p.166). The possibility of the expressiveness of the film language was open in the first part of the last century and film makers know them very well:

It was the Russian Formalists, however, who developed the analogy between language and film in a somewhat systematic way. … Tynianov spoke of the cinema as offering the visible world in the form of semantic signs engendered by cinematic procedures such as lighting and montage, while Eikhenbaum saw film in relation to “inner speech” and “image translations of linguistic tropes. (Stam, Burgone & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992, p.31) The cinema for Eikhenbaum is a “particular system of figurative language,” the stylistics of which would treat filmic “syntax”, and the linkage of shots into “phrases” and “sentences”
(Lewis, 1998, p.28). For this thesis Eco’s idea about content-form interrelation is of great importance:

When a code apportions the elements of a conveying system to the elements of a conveyed system, the former becomes the expression of the latter and the latter becomes the content of the former. A sign-function arises when an expression is correlated to content, both the correlated elements being the functives of such a correlation. (Eco, 1976, p.48)

The rich artistic form of the three comedies can be explored in the unity of form and content in combination with Eco’s idea of moveable connection of these two levels of the system of film-language. This can be explored through the analysis of the plot of the movie—the first layer; the inner world of the main characters—the second layer of the movie, or the “content of the former”, and the collapse of the two together. It is of importance to analyze the movies layer by layer, for only then the actual plot situations can be indicative of the inner conflict of the characters and thus they become significant, or acquire a “sign-function” in Eco’s words.

Movie Plots

Sleepless in Seattle (1993)

Sleepless in Seattle (1993) is a romantic comedy, starring Tom Hanks (Sam Baldwin) and Meg Ryan (Annie Reed). Sam’s wife passes away, and leaves him with his son of 9 years old. The theme of loneliness is predominant throughout the movie, while Tom Hank’s (Sam’s) friends are trying to set him up with other people to meet and “begin his life” again. However, the loneliness is brought about through the personal tragedy (the loss of Sam’s wife) and the “societal expectations” about his family situation. His son, devastated by the family situation, calls a radio station to talk about his dad and find him a new wife. Annie happens to listen to the
radio show and becomes interested in his story. Despite the fact that she is getting married, she believes that they could be soul mates. Here we see the allusion to “You’ve Got Mail” situation: while being engaged, she is still “lonely” in her relationship and searching for something more. In a brief summary, author Jack Hall describes Sam’s and Annie’s relations.

She even writes to Sam proposing they meet atop the Empire State Building on Valentine's Day. Back in Seattle, Sam has received hundreds of letters from women wanting to meet him. Jonah is excited by one letter in particular from Baltimore and will do whatever he needs to get his father and Annie together. However, old fashioned Sam wants his future love life to be based on meeting a woman the traditional way, and he, in turn, becomes infatuated with an unknown woman he spots a few times in Seattle.

(Hartil, 1999)

This quote proves to be important in the analysis of the relational situation of the main characters. Finally Annie and Sam end up meeting each other and the happy ending is bound to resolve their lonely situation. The movie is directed and written by Jeff Arch (story) and Nora Ephron (screenplay).

As Good As it Gets (1997)

As Good As it Gets (1997) is another romantic comedy, starring Jack Nicolson (Melvin) (a successful writer, who suffers from an obsessive compulsive disorder) and Helen Hunt (Carol), who is a waitress and a single mother, trying to raise her chronically ill son. Both main characters are single and find themselves in a complicated life situation. Melvin, who writes love novels for women, is single and is not openly looking for anyone, but he falls in love with Carol, who is a waitress at the restaurant he goes to and who is the only waitress who can stand his behavior. Through a set of situations (a trip together, in search of helping their neighbor to get
money from his parents; Melvin’s help with Carol’s medical bills), they fall in love “despite appearances.” The loneliness is not as evident in this movie, as in the other two, for it is masked under “life issues” of Melvin’s struggle with his disorder and Carol’s son’s illness. However, several attempts by Carol to find a man shows that under the hips of problems that she has, she is still “searching.” And the very “search” is what hints the viewer to the lonely situation she finds herself in. Melvin’s loneliness is that of being “strange” in the middle of “normal” people. Due to his disorder and bad character, he doesn’t have any friends nor do his neighbors like him. Their coming together (Carol’s and Melvin’s) is a way out of “loneliness” for both of them through acceptance of each other and their life situation (that’s where the title of the movie “as good as it gets” comes along). The movie is directed by James L. Brooks and written by Mark Andrus (story and screenplay).

You’ve Got Mail (1998)

You’ve Got Mail (1998) is a romantic comedy starring Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks. There are two storylines in this movie. Joe Fox (Tom Hanks) owns a big store chain that is trying to put down the little shop company that Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) owns that she inherited from her mother, and thus makes it much more personal to her and people around her. The second storyline is the romantic search for a perfect partner. Although already in a relationship, Joe and Kathleen go online and meet each other there. Really taken by each other, they start conversing via email. Without knowing who they are, they start a “romantic communication” in a virtual world, while competing with each other in a real world. Loneliness is a prominent feature in this movie, even though it’s a comedy. The problem of “loneliness in the crowd” becomes relevant since Kathleen misses her mother, Joe’s father has never really been a father figure to him, and finally they are both on a quest to find love. They set up a blind date, where he sees her but goes
away without letting her know, and thus they continue the “double” storyline. However, they
meet each other by the end of the movie and presumably have a happy ending. The movie is
directed by Norah Ephron and written by Miklós László (play) and Nora Ephron (screenplay).

These three movies may seem lighthearted at first and the label “comedy” throws them in
the “light and easy to watch” pile. However, I argue, that the semiotic analysis of the movies
permits us to trace the human problems especially in cultural communication that are vital for us
today, and one of those problems is loneliness. In my thesis, I study loneliness as a prominent
part of any human relations (Douglass, 1979; Nandy, 2003).
CHAPTER THREE

SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE (1993) THROUGH THE PRISM OF SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

*Sleepless in Seattle* is a remarkable comedy by Norah Ephron due to its common for the genre features (plot, situation) yet extraordinary sensibility to life events (that could only be achieved by a female director like Norah Ephron), filmed in the early 90s, that depicts the eternal search for love and happiness, and is one of the genre’s most characteristic films (Evans, 1995, p.188). Comedic and romance genres “do not consist only of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis that spectators bring with them to the cinema and that interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process” (Neale, 1996, p.160). The romance scripts have been invading movie screens since the cinematographic exposure to the audience. The audience is surrounded by “ideal romance” scripts whatever romantic comedies they watch (Galician, 2001; Rubinfeld, 2001) and heterosexual romance is “the standard fictional trope throughout many media forms” (Winn, 2007, p.248). Romance and comedy, that are the main genres that *Sleepless in Seattle* belongs to, could be seen as “fictional modes - that is, as ways of treating the narrative, or more precisely, as particular ways of imagining the diegetic world” (Glitre, 2006, p.9). Therefore, *Sleepless in Seattle* falls right into place in this romanticized screen world, but unlike the usual romcoms, it brings out to life the dilemmas most common to genres like drama: life versus death and love versus loneliness motifs.

While *Sleepless in Seattle* could be seen as a corny and old-fashioned comedy, it is quintessential to the genre of “romance” and therefore its contribution to the genre should not be undermined. The movie has been perceived as a “romantic comedy” but the accent is more on
“romance” than humor (Berardinelli, 1993). Needless to say, romance is the main motif in the movie, but the way it is played out and lived through by the characters makes the film unique.

A thorough semiotic analysis of the semantic levels of the film events and plot structure makes it possible to see the real complexity of the story and to read the inner sense of the events or to open the meaning of the screen destiny of the main characters, especially the female one: the movement from comfortable superfluous existence to following a deep spiritual necessity to be useful, to bring release from solitude to an unknown, unhappy man (and vice versa to an unhappy woman). The beauty of this sacrifice (leaving behind ones needs for another person) seems to be too serious (or profound) of a matter to the genre and plot of a modern romantic comedy, but the version of this analysis is that, supposedly, due to this implication of a serious content into typical genre of romcom, the film gains in its quality and popularity (total U.S. Cross: $126,680,884 - Kord & Krimmer, 2005). The big effect on the audience was reinforced by the craft of the script building and by the art of the actors playing the roles of unhappy male and happy female characters (Annie seems to be happy with her fiancé Walter, her job and her life). The philosophy of the film, of course, was very attractive for the spectators, and not only for female ones: Sleepless in Seattle comforts us with the promise that our lives are part of a larger destiny. In Nora Ephron’s romantic comedy, the magic truth of love is not the sole precinct of movie characters but, in fact, is available to everyone (Kord &Krimmer, 2005, p. 59). The semiotic approach (that is best suited to decode the symbolic messages of the film) is able to explain this feature of the film: an optimistic belief in a possibility of a true love for every spectator of the film. This optimism is based on a specific correlation between life and art in the form of two cultural codes in the plot of the film: the daily routine of the events of the film reality correspond with the events of the American classical movie with a speaking title An Affair
to Remember, and this immortal love story (for female characters of the film) the rules for happiness.

Before analyzing the film structure from a semiotic point of view, it is necessary to discuss the limits of interpretation according to the opinion of such a prominent and influential semiotician as Umberto Eco. In his 1996 lecture The Author and his Interpreters at The Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America he declared: “I think that a narrator, as well as a poet, should never provide interpretations of his own work. A text is a machine conceived for eliciting interpretations. When one has a text to question, it is irrelevant to ask the author” (p.1). He further states:

Some contemporary theories of criticism assert that the only reliable reading of a text is a misreading, that the only existence of a text is given by the chains of the responses it elicits and that a text is only a picnic where the authors brings the words and the readers the sense. Even if that was true, the words brought by the author are a rather embarrassing bunch of material evidences that the reader cannot pass over in silence, or in noise. (Eco, 1996, p.2)

As a result, Eco introduced the idea of boundaries of interpretation: “In my book The Limits of Interpretation I distinguish between the intention of the author, the intention of the reader and the intention of the text” (p.5). In relation to the problem of the thesis (loneliness as a hidden conflict in interpersonal relationships) this affirmation is connected with mutual intention of the audience of the film and supposes that some unclear mechanism exists to help to formulate or to make the “right conjecture.” Eco discusses this problem: “How to prove a conjecture about the intention of a text? The only way is to check it upon the text as a coherent whole. This idea, too, is an old one and comes from Augustine (De doctrina christiana): any interpretation given
of a certain portion of a text can be accepted if it is confirmed and must be rejected if it is challenged by another portion of the same text. In this sense the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader (spectator, in our case)” (Eco, 1996, p.2). The next idea of Eco is possibly more important for the problem of interpretation due to the wide audience of the film: “…when a text is produced not for a single addressee but for a community of readers, the author knows that he/she will be interpreted not according to his/her intentions but according to a complex strategy of interactions which also involves the readers, along with their competence of language as a social treasury” (Eco, 1996, p.2).

In the case of film interpretation, the spectators also bring their knowledge of the laws of life, poor or rich life experience, aesthetic “competence of language” of movies of the same genre (romantic comedy in this case). As a result, the interpretation of a popular film usually seems to be more homogeneous in comparison with reception and understanding of a popular new book. The cinematic code, described by Eco and other semioticians (Lotman, 1970; Kristeva, 2000), implies different devices to enrich the message of the film including popular actors, a special structure of the plot, a type of narration, potential of sound track and so on. But all this does not exclude the wide spectrum of interpretation. A semiotic approach helps to limit “infinite conjectures” of the film through the analysis of the structure of the plot, main characters from a semiotics point of view, cultural and musical codes and their roles in creating high semantic density of the film message. It is especially important to use the semiotic analysis for Sleepless in Seattle and therefore to interpret the plot, the characters and music as “codes” to fully grasp the depth of meaning of this movie that otherwise would be considered lighthearted and unoriginal.
Plot Summary

*Sleepless in Seattle*’s plot centers on the family dramas and quest for love and happiness as a way out of potential solitude. Sam Baldwin (Tom Hanks) is a desperately lonely man, who lost his wife to cancer about two years before and could never even think about dating again. His son Jonah (Ross Malinger), who is 8, misses his mother very much but feels even worse for his dad whom he wants to help get over his grief. On Christmas Eve, Jonah calls a radio station psychologist, tells his dad’s story and asks for help. Many women listen to the radio show across the country, including Annie Reed (Meg Ryan) from Baltimore, who is touched deeply by Jonah’s story. Annie becomes very taken by Sam and his story, although she has never seen him and she is also engaged. She even decides to write a letter to him (just like a thousand other women do) and thus becomes completely infatuated with him. From the point of view of semiotics the film analyzed as a text gives to a spectator the author’s message in a semantically significant form: the semantic density of the story is enriched through the inclusion of another cultural phenomenon, a cultural code (story, language and style) of another very popular film which becomes a subject of the film plot on an equal footing with the actual love story. As a parallel script to the reality of the film, the script of *An Affair to Remember*, a movie that all the characters watch at some point in time, is vital to the understanding of the movie plot.

*An Affair to Remember* is a drama story, where love overcomes all obstacles and appearances. The idea that love conquers all becomes the slogan for both main characters: Annie invites Sam to meet atop the Empire State Building on Valentine’s Day. Jonah finds her letter and becomes especially infatuated with the possible romantic encounter between his dad and this woman. However, Sam being very conservative, prefers to meet his soul mate the old fashioned way, and becomes interested in the woman that he saw a couple of times in Seattle (where he
lives). Despite Jonah’s endless requests to go and meet Annie, he decides to date another woman and brings her over for dinner; that is when Jonah shows how much he despises the whole idea of his dad dating that woman.

Meanwhile, Annie decides to go to Seattle in hope of meeting Sam. As she gets off the plane she sees Sam who is at the airport at the time, and he cannot take his eyes off her. Their eye contact only lasts a moment, and the next time Annie sees Sam is near the bay, when Sam says “hello” to her. This whole scene seems to be intriguing, and it is almost as if everything was happening in a dream. Annie comes back to Baltimore and tells her friend Becky: “All I could say was Hello,” which is the exact phrase Deborah Kerr tells Carry Grant in *An Affair to Remember* – a movie that both Annie and Becky know by heart.

The turning point in the plot comes when Annie finds out that Becky mailed her letter. Annie receives a letter which Jonah wrote to her, to which Becky’s comment is “the ability to write is highly overrated.” The style of the letter, naïve and awkward, is very significant in such a story based on cultural phenomena like this – the form of expression of love is really “key words” for the heroine. Annie decides to forget about Sleepless in Seattle and move on with her engagement.

In the meantime Jonah, disliking his father’s choice in women, books a plane ticket to NY (with the help of his 8-year old friend) for Valentine’s Day, when Annie promised to meet them on the top of the Empire State Building (duplicating the exact scene from *An Affair to Remember*). On Valentine’s eve Jonah hops on a plane and flies to NY. At the same time, in NY Annie is having cold feet as she herself would diagnose her state of anxiousness and doubt. During her romantic dinner on Valentine’s Day, with her fiancé Walter (who is allergic to everything, therefore constantly sneezing or on the verge of getting sick), she looks out the
window and sees a heart forming of windows on the Empire State Building. She takes it as a sign and tells Walter everything: her infatuation with the person from Seattle, her anxiety about marriage and the whole idea that stands behind it – they, Annie and Walter, are not meant to be together. A happy ending seems impossible at the moment. And only the plot scheme and film language of the well-known old love story of *An Affair to Remember* transforms reality into a form of a fairy tale. Annie breaks up with Walter, and hurries to the Empire State Building, right before it is about to close, convincing the guard, who did not want to let her in, that she must go there just for a quick glance. To this the guard responds “Carry Grant?” – hinting to the leitmotif of the movie *An Affair to Remember*. Annie goes in, and while she stands there looking longingly at New York City, Jonah comes in with Sam. Startled, they talk and leave the scene, holding hands. The happy ending has finally taken place.

This inclusion of the “ready” movie plot of the old film into the actual reality has a specific artistic effect on the stylistics of the film: it produces, above all, a comic effect (trying to somehow re-leave all the meaningful moments of *An Affair to Remember*, Annie, however, lacks the tragicallity of the movie’s heroine and her desperation), creates comicality as a feature of the romcom genre. A semiotic approach clears the mechanism of the genesis of a comic effect. Eco in his well-known deep and partly ironical analysis *Casablanca or The Clichés are Having a Ball* (1994) investigates the clichés of the famous old film *Casablanca* (1942) and discusses the role of “Eternal Archetypes” in it. Despite the fact that Eco is writing about a clichéd old drama, his essay is an important artifact for the analysis of any genre: be it drama or comedy. The way Eco analyses *Casablanca* (1942) sets a transcendental form of analysis for the romantic genre and exemplifies his Theory of Semiotics (1960). Eco discusses the reasons for the popularity of the film: “What then is the fascination of *Casablanca*? The question is a legitimate one, for
aesthetically speaking (or by any strict critical standards) *Casablanca* is a very mediocre film. It is a comic strip, a hotchpotch, low on psychological credibility, and with little continuity in its dramatic effects” (Eco, 1994, p.260). This is a kind of polemic with the audience’s admiration of *Casablanca*. Eco continues his analysis of this “patchwork” of the script of the film and the aesthetic effect of this device:

 Forced to improvise a plot, the authors mixed in a little of everything, and everything they chose came from a repertoire of the tried and true. When the choice of the tried and true is limited, the result is a trite or mass-produced film, or simply kitsch. But when the tried and true repertoire is used wholesale, the result is an architecture like Gaudi’s Sagrada Familia in Barcelona. There is a sense of dizziness, a stroke of brilliance. (Eco, 1994, p.261)

For the analysis of *Sleepless in Seattle* the idea of the effectiveness of a “choice of the tried and true” is of importance, because *Sleepless in Seattle* uses the same principle of inclusion of the well-known cultural phenomenon of *An Affair to Remember* as a magic key to understanding the external world and the inner spiritual world (Annie’s fear to be left alone, yet her wish to follow her dreams; Sam’s fear to never forget his wife, yet his burning with to be with someone) by the characters themselves. The long-lasting social approval of *An Affair to Remember* affirms the values of true love for the audience of the movie of the 90s. Indeed, the persistent of “happy ending” is a common feature of most American comedies. Not only is it demanded by the genre, but by the audience appeal as well: a certain dramatic situation, or conflict, must get resolved by the end of the movie, as it does by the end of *Sleepless in Seattle*. There is another aesthetic effect (the effect of comicality): inclusion of the plot and stylistics of an old film into the new
one. The exploration of the artistic devices of *Casablanca* by Eco leads to revealing the paradox of this inclusion of numerous archetypes into the film plot:

Thus *Casablanca* is not just one film. It is many films, an anthology. Made haphazardly, it probably made itself, if not actually against the will of its authors and actors, then at least beyond their control. And this is the reason it works, in spite of aesthetic theories and theories of film making. For in it there unfolds with almost telluric force the power of Narrative in its natural state, without Art intervening to discipline it… When all the archetypes burst in shamelessly, we reach Homeric depths. Two clichés make us laugh. A hundred clichés move us. For we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves, and celebrating a reunion. (Eco, 1994, p.)

For the adequate understanding of Nora Ephron’s romcom (1) of interest is Eco’s idea about paradoxical combination of “a hundred clichés” that leads not to tasteless mixture, but creates “Homeric depths” and (2) of importance is the idea that “two clichés make us laugh.”

Despite the fact that the plot of *Sleepless in Seattle* uses many clichés, the clichés of three films only are most vital for they are the ones that give us the possibility of further character interpretation: the main one is *An Affair to Remember*, which gives the pattern of psychological behavior for the heroine of the film, the other two are mentioned in the plot of the film later. These are *Dirty Dozen* and *Fatal Attraction*. If *An Affair to Remember* is a life pattern for female characters in *Sleepless in Seattle*, then the male characters are emotionally related to another kind of film, like *The Dirty Dozen* or *Fatal Attraction*. This idea will be discussed in details later in the paragraph devoted to cinematic cultural codes in the movie. Now it is necessary to say that Eco’s idea “that the clichés are talking among themselves” seems to be fruitful, because a dialogue between female and male scopes of vision of truth in art produces a comic effect on the
spectator: all three films, adored and remembered by the characters, are not “truthful” or “realistic” from the point of view of common sense; they are built on fantastic realism or romanticism and demonstrate the enormous need in ideal heroic models of behavior (in love or war) for modern people, too. The comicality appears as a result of this repeated comparison of feminine and masculine types of thinking and a suddenly opened unexpected similarity between this need of a fairytale – a mutual cross-gender necessity to dream.

Plot Structure

The plot structure in this movie consists of a system of motifs--main themes and sub-themes that, coming together, form a vibrant and colorful scene of the movie. Just like in You’ve Got Mail (1998) the main motif of the movie is loneliness. “The enigmatic phenomenon of loneliness,” according to the precise expression of Karin Dahlberg, is, at the same time, “a common human phenomenon that belongs to everyday existence, but few attempts have been made to capture the phenomenon and its existential meaning without reducing its complexity” (Dahlberg & Karin, 2007, p.). The complexity of the phenomenon is shown in the movie by Nora Ephron. Two main characters are lonely in the plot, but the male one is unhappy; his loneliness is evident while the female character is absolutely happy (or perceived as such: from the outside she has all she needs to be happy: a handsome fiancé, a great job and a bright future plan) from a superficial point of view. The analysis of the plot structure from the position of semiotics when we read the sequence of the events of the plot as a text having its own symbolic meaning helps to establish that the unconscious eagerness to free oneself from this unnecessary position in life filled with loneliness makes the female character take risks and move the plot up to a happy end.

In the opening scene of Sleepless in Seattle we see Sam Baldwin and Jonah, his son, at the cemetery - not the usual kind of opening comedy scene. The spectator is taken aback by the
sad motifs that flow at us with the first words of the movie, spoken by Sam: “Mommy got sick and it happened just like that and there was nothing anybody would do.” This line brings about another prominent motif of the movie - death. But the tragic motif is only a prehistory here. The comedic structure of comedies is such that the conflict needs its resolution for a happy ending to thrive, therefore the spectator has a hope, that after these grievances there will be someone or something that would make Sam and Jonah feel better, feel happier. One of the main motifs of the movie, and an expected one, is romance. It is known that heterosexual romance “is the standard fictional trope throughout many media forms” (Winn, 2007, p.248), and with it, romance brings a certain pattern through which the movie’s plot must develop.

Rubinfeld (2001) in his book *Bound to bond: Gender, genre, and the Hollywood romantic comedy* suggests that there is a certain type of formula that a romantic comedy usually follows: a) an accidental meeting between a hero and a heroine that could lead to potential romance, b) internal or external obstacles to the recognition and declaration of their mutual love, c) the overcoming of these obstacles, and d) a happy ending, resulting in a wedding or a promise of one (p.345). *Sleepless in Seattle*, in this case, follows the exact romantic-story pattern, for it has: a) a chance meeting between Annie and Sam; b) their potential love is not only jeopardized by the distance (she lives in Baltimore and he lives in Seattle), but also by the fact that Annie has a fiancé and Sam has an emotional baggage that is hard to get rid of; c) through a number of intricate events (Annie flying to Seattle, Sam flying to NY) they overcome the obstacles with an easy grace of a romantic comedy of the early 90s; and d) a happy ending, as promised, takes place only by the end of the movie, on top of the Empire State Building - that symbolizes the epitome of the love story, as it is the epitome of the city.
The motif of loneliness in the plot structure is hidden or is not in the first place; in fact it is represented as the motif of a search for love. Stacey Abbott (2004) suggests that the search for love “is a key constructing element” in the genre and “is conceived of as integral to the search for social acceptance” (Abbott, 2009, p.8). Indeed, this motif of search is prominent in the movie. All of the main characters are searching for something - Jonah is searching for a new mom and, consequently, a wife for his dad; Annie is searching for the kind of love that is not present in her current relationship - the love that makes you do crazy things. In fact, the unconscious sense of actual and potential loneliness in the future forces her to find her real or true self. From the very beginning of the movie, the characters leave an unsettling feeling in the viewer - something is wrong with this perfect at first glance couple. A few factors hint at Annie’s doubts: in the first scene we see both driving in different cars, which is not the usual couple’s behavior. Then, before going inside the house to introduce Walter for the first time to her family, Annie turns to him and says: “Walter is quite a formal name, isn’t it?”- the subtext of which is Walter is not the spontaneous romantic guy Annie pictured herself to end up with. Walter’s character is portrayed with a lot of light irony, not sarcasm, for we mostly see him through Annie’s eyes and thoughts and they are dubious and judgmental, for the most part.

One of the main motifs in this movie, along with the motif of search, is the motif of destiny. Not only is destiny played out through the narration of characters’ lives, but also through Annie’s and Sam’s dreams and wishes, as a part of eternal search and “the longing of a perfect partner who is predestined to walk into our life” (Werder, 2006, 46). The motif, therefore, is not portrayed as something that happens to the characters in the movies, but something that they make happen. “Romantic movies frequently have this “Little Mermaid” motif…and the sacrifice may be seen in those moments when one partner dramatically leaves a familiar world for the
partner’s” (Winn, 2007, p.258). *Sleepless in Seattle* is a clear example of that, for Annie flies across the country, poised by not only the beautiful idea of eternal Romeo-and-Juliet-kind-of-romance, but by the hidden idea of self-sacrifice and her willingness to make an unknown and unhappy man happy and “belonging” to her happy destiny. This very complicated sense gives her strength to cross the country to only take a look at the man that she hopes to have “magic” with. The intrigue is raised by the idea that the person she’s going to meet is a complete stranger, which makes it more romantically bold and courageous, in the code of romantic movies.

From another point of view, a little bit more feministic, it could be seen as a very typical life situation for a “masculine” existential position in this masculine world with its privilege for male persons. Kristine Brunovska-Karnik and Henry Jenkins in their book Classical Hollywood Comedy (1995) mentioned, with a hint of irony: “Much postclassical Hollywood romantic comedy has been marked by an interest in melodrama... but from a point of view that sentimentalizes the male hero [for example, *Green Card* (1990), *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Frankie and Johny* (1992), *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993)]. These films, in fact, tend to appropriate the feminized genre of melodrama in the service of a suffering, beleaguered masculinity” (BrunovskyKarnik & Jenkins, 1995, p. 367). Eco’s idea about any artistic work as an “open” text permits an “endless number of interpretations”, in principle. Nevertheless, the semantics of the events of the plot of the movie is to convince the spectators that the female character reveals the potential heroism of her own nature, saves the male character from the loneliness which threatens him in liaison with an unsuitable woman and the heroine - from the hell of loneliness in her further marriage with Walter. Walter is sacrificed in the name of happiness of the main characters, but his future loneliness does not belong to the significant part of the plot and the
audience does not notice it, because the main interest in the plot structure is based on the necessary happy.

By the end, when the happy ending is about to take place, a sudden transformation of one character in the eyes of another takes place, which makes the resolution of the conflict situation possible. Evans and Celestino (1998) argue that in romantic comedies, individuals usually find resolutions by “losing parts of their self” (Evans, Celestino, 1998, p. 234). Annie, in *Sleepless in Seattle*, does lose a part of herself, leaving behind all she thought was right - her fiancé Walter and the illusionary perfect relationship that she had with him. Lowery (1995) notes that romance novels tend to have a romantic conflict resolution in a single moment of clarification when each partner recognizes his or her love (p.34), which makes Annie’s decision to metaphorically elope from her fiancé, from the semiotic point of view (semantics of genre), more than predictable due to the genre of the movie, since in romantic movies “relational decisions are more dramatic and sudden” (Winn, 2007, p.250). As a constant, over-lapping part of the romantic comedies (presented in all three movies under analysis - *Sleepless in Seattle, You’ve Got Mail* and *As Good as it Gets*) a happy ending does not disappoint the viewer. However, a happy ending is only possible in the light of certain circumstances. Bordwell (1982) suggests that three factors should be present for the happy ending to take place: “the motivated achievement of the goal; the convincing resolution of the ideological conflict which has previously prevented this achievement; and an epilogue that functions to represent the final stability achieved by the narrative: the characters’ futures are settled” (Bordwell, 1982, p.4). All of the three factors for the possible happiness are present in the movie, therefore a happy ending takes place.
Main Characters from a Semiotic Point of View

As was discussed earlier, the semiotic approach makes it possible to underline the hidden conflict (between the need to fulfill the societal norms and expectations of being happy and the feeling of loneliness that prevents the characters from doing so) in that feeling of loneliness that forces the feminine character to move the events of the plot from the beginning to the end. It is understood that the female person who has the most comfortable way of existing in this world and is up to all standards of happy living (from the external point of view) is dissatisfied because of the lack of “magic” in her relationship with the man she is going to marry. The uncertainty of this initial position of the heroine in the plot of the movie is provocative for the audience and a very difficult matter to deal with (her happiness now is connected with both Walter and Sam, and therefore one will inevitably be left unhappy). The choice of the two main actors from the semiotic point of view was very successful, because the type of the appearance, the way of behavior, the face expression, the manner of speaking and even the timbre of voice and tempo of speech are significant: these are a number of symbols representing for the audience that “pieces of life” which are of importance for the creators of the film. Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks meet the standards of a romantic comedy.

The image of a modern happy young woman created by the actress combines the well-known features of common feminine behavior, which is a little bit naïve. The type of appearance that represents for the spectatorship a nice looking, simple-hearted, familiar girl, in the old theatrical terminology is as an ingénue, a well-known theatrical character. From the semiotics point of view, this part of her image is semantically significant for the structure of the love-story; it allows us to interpret the following sequence of events of the plot: only naïve women could naturally believe in a fairytale of popular old cinematic romance and to act according to these
high moral standards. But the cinematic high moral standards demand another part of personality of the actress to be represented: “natural” self-sacrificing ought to be connected with spiritual depth and seriousness which contradicts the genre of a romantic comedy because the motif of self-sacrificing belongs to another genre of tragedy or drama or to a popular film genre of “sober-story”.

The image created by Meg Ryan is semiotically well-balanced between light-mindedness and coquetry, on the one hand, and tedious seriousness of pompous tragic image of the heroine of cited love-story (*An Affair to Remember*), on the other hand. Her character is exactly in-between these two polarities: 1) a naive and joyful, but not frivolous girl, and 2) ready to help or even rescue when needed, but not overbearing with moral virtues to make the audience sob. The psychological pattern of the heroine’s behavior happily combines both sides of her film character into the artistic embodiment of a little bit extravagant person in whom the combination of conflicting impulses and motifs of acting creates an interesting unity naturally reflected in this unreal, picturesque course of events of the plot of the comedy.

Meg Ryan’s art and forms of creation of the screen image were highly appreciated by critics. For example, Susan Kord and Elizabeth Krimmer (2005) wrote in the chapter “Sleeping with the Enemy. Meg Ryan”: “Clearly, the Meg Ryan heroine belongs to an era that knew nothing of today’s gender trouble. Because she is not really of our time, our feminist struggles cannot touch her. She does not avoid them; rather, they are simply not her problem” (p.57). The indisputable femininity of the type of appearance and actress’s mannerisms presuppose semantic activity of the plot structure and subsequence of the events of the story, the typical plot situations, the type of main male character, the image of love (psychological type of feelings) narrated in the movie and even the inevitable happy end: “Never a tomboy, the Meg Ryan
character is a master of female values and virtues. The realm of emotions and interpersonal relations is her true area of expertise. She is loyal and strictly a one-man kind of gal, although it may take some time until she identifies the right candidate. More interested in love than sex, she knows how to connect, to share, to communicate, and take care of others” (p.63). The authors of the book underline some firm ground of her attractiveness and constancy of these (desirable by the recipients of movies) features of a cinematic character. The authors describe this unchangeable image of “a really good woman” and true American the actress keeps in different embodiments of different female types:

Even when she agrees to spend the rest of her life on a French vineyard, there is something very American and apple pie about her. She is frank, honest, and willing to engage. She expresses her feelings openly and always says what is on her mind. Her optimism is relentless, and so is her capacity for denial. We cannot help but admire her desperate courage when she refuses to accept that she has been abandoned by her beloved fiancé, when she claims that her tiny little bookstore and the Fox Books megastore will complement each other most wonderfully, or when she insists that she is in love with her fiancé Walter long after we have realized that the two of them will never make it. In the usual Meg Ryan fare, the heroine will be mistreated, but she will never give up, and her stamina will be rewarded in the end. (Kord & Krimmer, 2005 p.58).

From the point of view of common life, the actress represents a very sociable, reliable female character which is able to force the audience to trust her at first glance. The semiotic approach shows a possibility of such artistic embodiment of a woman to structurize the plot events and includes relevant emotional accents in the interpretation of life reality. Namely the Meg Ryan character makes it possible to create a special type of romantic comedy (not sitcom
only) with a specific kind of light irony and self irony and a huge dose of good humor. The authors of the book try to establish some laws of this actress’s specifics (actual topics, motifs and so on) in comparison with other prominent artistic portrayal of modern femininity:

Unlike Julia Roberts or Sandra Bullock characters, Meg Ryan heroines do not usually set out find their true identity. The Meg Ryan heroine is also not on a quest to liberate or emancipate herself. Rather, she already embodies a promise of wholeness and integrity. What few problems she has relate to her lack of self-esteem. She may not realize that she is fine the way she is. She tends to be far too nice and accommodating and hence is easily victimized by others. In many of her movies, the Meg Ryan character is the object of abuse and betrayal. (Kord & Krimmer, 2005 p.58).

The idea, that “Meg Ryan heroines do not usually set out find their true identity,” supposes that, from the semiotic point of view, the structure of plot, semantics of the main events, leitmotifs and additional motifs will not be concentrated on her individuality, and, as a result, the composition of the plot of the movie could have more than one center, but a sequence of such plot centers connected with the other characters of the movie. As a result, the structure of the plot is more “centrifugal” than “centripetal” in spite of the bright individuality of the actress. This is the reason why her comedies have such a good quality of “true life” analysis and are of interest for different audiences, not only for “sentimental women.” These other characters bring with them a more various, more multi-colored picture of the world; the presence of such an actress as Meg Ryan means the presence of a very interesting depiction of this “piece of life” or, in fact, very many different pieces of life creating very impressive mosaics of modern life:

“Other characters walk all over her: in Addicted to Love (1997), she is cheated on and abandoned for another woman; in You’ve Got Mail, her competitor drives her out of business; in City of
Angels, she is run over by a truck; in Courage under Fire, she is shot at by her own subordinates” (Kord & Krimmer, 2005 p.58). Paradoxically, but these comedies become a kind of “school of life” for the spectators due to this specific naiveté of the heroine:

Consequently, personal growth for the Meg Ryan heroine is often defined as a process of learning to stand up for herself. But no matter how hard she tries to fight back, her acts of self-assertion always remain harmless and cute. Even when she points a long, sharp knife at her arrogant and insulting competitor Joe Fox in You’ve Got Mail or when she shouts in frustration that all men are bastards in French Kiss, we are more inclined to feel protective toward her than threatened by her. Frequently, schoolgirl outfits of plaid skirts and white blouses emphasize her childlike innocence. She possesses a “Jeffersonian purity” (You’ve Got Mail) that keeps her from harm.” (Kord & Krimmer, 2005, pp.58-59).

If “personal growth for the Meg Ryan heroine is often defined as a process of learning to stand up for herself,” the movies with this actress at center stage are transforming into the process of understanding the laws of life, as a kind of form of epistemology, but this process has at the same time the quality of the achieving an optimistic result, because the type of character includes the semantics of “salvation” of the others, the world: “If she has any kind of power at all, it is usually the power to save others. The Meg Ryan persona can be counted on to rescue her man. She will come to his aid in every possible way: financially and sexually (French Kiss), emotionally (You’ve Got Mail), when he is lonely (Sleepless in Seattle), and when his life is threatened (Courage under Fire). More often than not, she trades protection for redemption” (Kord & Krimmer, 2005 p.60). From the point of view of semiotics, the type of heroine which Meg Ryan represents is immanent to the films with a real and inevitable happy end:
But no matter whether she rescues her man or her man protects her, Meg Ryan heroine always embodies the promise of reconciliation with patriarchal structures. Her sunny demeanor helps to gloss over sadism and abuse of the worst kind. When the Meg Ryan heroine sleeps with her enemy, we cease to perceive mistreatment and injustice. Watching Meg Ryan allows us to partake of her wholeness and integrity and to let go of the gender wars that define our own time – at least for a while.” (Kord & Krimmer, 2005 p.59).

In fact, this type of heroine has an exclusive “healing” influence upon the audience of romantic comedies. At the same time, her role in the plot of *Sleepless in Seattle* is more active and productive from the point of view of concentration of the events. The idea of the authors of the book that “watching Meg Ryan allows us to partake of her wholeness and integrity and to let go of the gender wars that define our own time” emphasizes that this type of character could play an active, metaphorically speaking, “masculine” part and really plays it in *Sleepless in Seattle*. In comparison to the female character of Meg Ryan the main male character of Tom Hanks is shown as having a feminine quality of passivity and readiness to submit to his own destiny. And the actor’s evident and undoubted masculinity is only complementary to the activeness and true heroism of the main female person. This change of the semantic positions of femininity and masculinity in the plot of the romantic comedy is not so evident for the spectatorship but it adds more variety to this multi-colored picture of modern life. In aspect of the key problem of loneliness in the plot of the film this mixture of feminine and masculine attitude toward the world creates new patterns of the psychological behavior. It “reopens” for the audience the heroic potency of femininity and the need to be protected of strong independent male person.
Style

From the semiotic point of view, the style of this movie is created by using some different code systems, named by Eco the “cultural code” (Eco, 1970). The semantic density of film style is based on the inclusion of the “ready” cultural phenomena – the reminiscences of previous very popular films. Some parts of these films, such as the phrases from dialogs, types of behavior (a heroic one, preferably), unreal scenes the great love are well-known and represent another “magic world” of the old movie with its stylistics for a huge part of the audience. But for the creators of the film these cultural codes are very productive in the creation of the soft humor of the scenes. This comical effect is created by a stylistic combination of diverse quotations from various film genres. The main characters communicate through ready, existing in culture, but different film texts which mismatch (An Affair to Remember for the female characters and Dirty Dozen for the male characters). This non-coincidence of additional patterns of behavior later, in another romcom You’ve Got Mail will create a kind of comical sub-plot. But here this stylistically diverse level of artistic representation of the cinematic world is given only as a sporadic opening of the essence of female and male role models. Both models are concerned with romantic attitude towards world and they play an important role in the main characters’ perception of life situations.

Cinematic codes in the film are connected with three films – one is significant for the female characters, the other two - for male “brotherhood.” The ideal realm of high feelings of true and heroic love is opened for women characters in the old love-story An Affair to Remember, which is very popular with several generations. References to this movie are numerous in Sleepless in Seattle that include several clips from the old film. For the female character of Meg Ryan this film is the very truth, the absolutely undoubted explanation what true
love could be. When Annie watches *An Affair to Remember* with her friend Becky, she says: “Now that was when people KNEW how to be in love. They knew it! Time, distance… nothing could separate them because they knew. It was right. It was real. It was…” (*Sleepless in Seattle*, 1993).

To show that *An Affair to Remember* is a desired pattern for people of different generations the reference to this film is made by minor characters: Jessica, a friend of Sam’s son Jonah, cries when she watches the film, a security man in the Empire State Building says that *An Affair to Remember* is one of his wife’s favorites. *An Affair to Remember* is emotionally retold by the wife of Sam’s friend at dinner in his house in Seattle. The cited examples show that *An Affair to Remember* is a life pattern only for female characters in *Sleepless in Seattle*. Male characters are emotionally related to another kind of film, like *The Dirty Dozen* or *Fatal Attraction*:

> Sam: Although I cried at the end of “*The Dirty Dozen*”.
> 
> Greg (Sam’s friend): Who didn’t?
> 
> Sam: Jim Brown was throwing these hand grenades down these airshafts. And Richard Jaeckel and Lee Marvin [Begins to cry]
> 
> Sam: were sitting on top of this armored personnel carrier, dressed like Nazis…
> 
> Greg: [Crying too] Stop, stop!
> 
> Sam: And Trini Lopez…
> 
> Greg: Yes, Trini Lopez!
> 
> Sam: He busted his neck while they were parachuting down behind the Nazi lines…
> 
> Greg: Stop.
> 
> Sam: And Richard Jaeckel – at the beginning he had on this shiny helmet…
Greg: [Crying harder] Please no more. Oh God! I loved that movie.

Sam: Didn’t you see *Fatal Attraction*?

Jonah (Sam’s son): You wouldn’t let me!

Sam: Well, I saw it and it scared the shit out of me. It scared the shit out of every man in America. (*Sleepless in Seattle*, 1993)

There is no romantic conflict between dream and reality as the two spheres of human activity here; the high moral standards of romantic heroic behavior, the intense feelings of well-known movie’s characters are alive for the participants of these dialogs. The reminiscences of the old films are effectively given to the spectators in the form of dialog, the semantic density of the film texts is increasing, the naïve trust in beautiful people is common, and this is a feature of the whole generation. The author’s message becomes more complicated and blurred: the inner child is alive in the souls of the adults, and this is the real ground for spiritual interrelation. The “exit” or, metaphorically speaking, “exodus” from loneliness is possible because of this similarity of people. The comic effect arises due to this juxtaposition of female and male involvement in hidden romantic dreaming about true love, a sensible and self-sacrificing way of living.

**Musical Codes in the Plot Structure**

_Musical Codes_ in relation to Eco’s idea of an “open work” is closely connected with the idea of the author’s message to the audience, the complex and blurred content of this message could be enriched with musical codes. Musical codes in the form of well-known popular songs bring more “text” to the actions or dialogs of the characters, the nice melodies of a typical romcom sound-track create a specific atmosphere of relaxation, increasing the sense of trust to the actual plot movement and instilling the belief in happy evolution and happy ending of the
events in the spectator’s mind. For example, Eco (1979) affirms that in the movie the accompanying music has a very precise character of “pastoral” music in compliance with the genre of a romantic comedy. In *Sleepless in Seattle* the plot structure is enriched with an old popular song from the “key old love story”, which provides almost permanent presence of the stylistic trace of the story based on high standards of true love in the plot movement. The permanent repetition of the well-known lines of the poem is transformed into a kind of sentimental mantra and its influence on the audience has a similar effect of a spell.

*An Affair to Remember* is the theme song of *Sleepless in Seattle* and there are clips from the 1957 film *An Affair to Remember* starring Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr, and directed by Leo McCarey. The song creates an emotional background of *Sleepless in Seattle*: “Our love affair is a wondrous thing/That we'll rejoice in remembering/Our love was born with our first embrace/And a page was torn out of time and space/Our love affair, may it always be/A flame to burn through eternity” (Adamson & McCarey, 1957). It is remarkable that in fact the words of the song are not sung, the viewers hear only the melody but the general cultural background leaves no doubt the message is received. The song is introduced when the heroes at the opposite ends of the country ponder on their lives. The song connects them and foreshadows happy changes. Other songs which accompany the action are illustrations of heroes’ moods and they also foreshadow future plot development.

*As Time Goes By* comes in the episode when Sam flies to Seattle to start a new life: “Oh yes, the world will always welcome lovers/As time goes by” (Hupfeld, 1931). As Annie drives her car after a dinner at her parents’ we hear *Jingle Bells* and *Sleigh Ride* that create a holiday atmosphere for both the heroine and the spectators: “Oh, what fun it is to ride/In a one horse open sleigh” (Pierpoint, 1857) and “It’s lovely weather for a sleigh ride together with you”
(Parish, 1948). One of the key songs (also used by Nora Ephron in You’ve Got Mail) Over the Rainbow (H. Arlen and E.Y. Harburg) is introduced in the episode after a conversation with a radio talk show hostess after which Sam remembers happy moments with his deceased wife: “Somewhere over the rainbow/Skies are blue/And the dreams that you dare to dream/Really do come true” (Harburg & Arlen, 1930).

Jeepers Creepers (H. Warren and J. Mercer) and In the Small Hours of the Morning (D. Mann and B.H. Hilliard) go in line with Sam’s melancholy state cause by sad reminiscences about his wife but at the same time the key lines of the songs signal the present, the continuation of life (all the verbs are in the present tense): “It’s gotta be sunny to me, when your eyes look/Into mine” (Warren & Mercer, 1938). The next song proves that Sam is awakening back to life and it comes Sam is going to ask Victoria, a co-worker, for a date. The song is Back in the Saddle Again (G. Autry and R. Whitley): “I go my way/ Back in the saddle again” (Autry, 1939). Towards the dénouement the density of signals of happy changes becomes higher: “Bluebird, bluebird this is my lucky day/ Now my dreams will come true” from Bye Bye Blackbird (Henderson & Dixon, 1926). The song A Wink and a Smile tells us about the characters’ feelings: “But when I saw you, I knew/ We go together, like a wink and a smile” (Shalman & McLean, 1993).

When Annie comes to NYC for a final conversation with her fiancé Walter the spectator hears Stand by Your Man (B. Sherrill and T. Wynette): “Stand by your man/And show the world you love him/Keep giving all the love you can/Stand by your man” (Sherrill & Wynette, 1968). The song signals that the decision making moment has come, but the problem is the heroine does not know which man she should stand by. On the outside she is choosing a man but in reality she is making a choice between future hidden miscommunication with Walter or saving a lonely man
and having a life full of dreams. Annie’s choice is supported by *A Kiss to Build a Dream on* (B. Kalmer, H. Ruby and O. Himmerstein): “Give me a kiss to build a dream on/And imagination will thrive upon that kiss” (Kalmer, 1969). The final answer to Annie’s (and Nora Ephron’s) question is in the final episode of the film supported by *Make Someone Happy* (B. Comden, A. Green and J. Styne): “Love is the answer/Someone to love is the answer” (Comden, 1960). When the credits go the same idea is repeated for the spectator: “When I fall in love it will be forever/Or I’ll never fall in love” from the song *When I Fall in Love* (Heyman & Young, 1952).

The use of all of these classical pieces that in itself are very much of a cliché, forms a specific response from the audience, following Eco’s idea, that do not only fulfill the function of a romantic background, but at the same time, they provoke the feelings that are inscribed in the characters’ lines and add an extra layer of meaning to what is said (or not said) and done (or not done). The leitmotif of a set of love songs of the movie is connected with the problem of release from the sense of loneliness through the feeling of true love: “Love is the answer. Someone to love is the answer” (Comden, 1960). The analysis of the genre, plot structure, stylistics, the semiotics of the main characters of *Sleepless in Seattle* as an “open work”, according to Eco, leads to the idea that romcom genre is deeply rooted in the American cultural tradition with its necessary optimism, belief in the bright future and internal brotherhood of all people. Then, the topic of loneliness, this serious and “enigmatic” problem, receives its natural and old-fashioned solution in the bright world of romantic comedy.
CHAPTER FOUR

AS GOOD AS IT GETS (1997) AND THE COMICALITY OF SOLITUDE

As Good as it Gets (1997) is another remarkable comedy under analysis. The movie is ranked number 149 on Empire's "The 500 Greatest Movies of All Time" and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture and won for Best Actor and Best Actress. The problem of loneliness in diverse forms, both male and female, is urgent in its plot, perhaps even more urgent than in the two rom-coms analyzed in the last two chapters of this thesis. A sharp form of the plot structure in the movie ironically represents a picturesque depiction of an ugly, grotesque loneliness of a male character, a successful egocentric writer, Melvin Udall, on the one side, and a more naturalized, common loneliness of a female character (based on an absolute, altruistic self-sacrifice for her family), portrayed by a single mother Carol-the-waitress, on the other.

The problem of loneliness is not as apparent in the plot, which is devoted to the representation for audience of the bright and colorful types of NY inhabitants, at first glance. But the awkwardness of living alone is evident and undoubted by the audience due to a sarcastic form of narration in this comedy. Sarcasm is felt through the comments the heroes make in relation to each other. For example, when Melvin's gay neighbor interrupts Melvin's writing, Melvin bursts out with a sarcastic soliloquy:

Never, never, interrupt me, okay? Not if there's a fire, not even if you hear the sound of a thud from my home and one week later there's a smell coming from there that can only be a decaying human body and you have to hold a hanky to your face because the stench is so thick that you think you're going to faint. Even then, don't come knocking. (As Good As It Gets, 1997)
From the beginning of the film the audience can see and realize that a long-lasting state of loneliness leads to a strange, half-pathological eccentric form of behavior for the male person and a total destruction of hopes for a happy personal life for a “normally” self-sacrificing heroine. The problem of loneliness in this movie is shown not as one of many problems of a successful person living in a big city that the main characters have to solve until the end of the comedy. On the contrary, overcoming loneliness is a question of urgency both for male and female characters because if the male and female characters continue to lead their present life, it will lead the male character to madness and the female character to despair.

Kilzer (2005) correctly defines the specific features of the comical genre in the film: *As Good as it Gets* is an “enchanted mixture of romantic comedy and biting social satire” (Kilzer, 2005, p.250). This new, sharpened, even satirical interpretation of “the enigmatic phenomenon of loneliness” could be explained, partly, due to the change of the scope or mode of awareness determined by taking a gendered approach to exploring social problems. Unlike *You’ve Got Mail* (1998) and *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) that were directed by a woman (Norah Ephron), this movie was written and directed by a man (James L. Brooks), which brings different ways of interpreting life situations.

It is all the more interesting, for it is a comedy that Brooks directed. Williams (2001) suggests that a comedy “consists of a romantic couple whose romance is blocked by the existing social order” (p.341). In this comedy not only romance is “blocked by existing social order,” but the lives of the characters themselves. Each and every character in this movie has a life-versus-self dilemma that is being played out in many intricate situations, meaningful meetings and coincidental truths. The problem of loneliness, in fact, is hidden in the depth of the plot overwhelmed with many pleasant and funny little events that are very characteristic of the
picturesque portrayal of daily life of the NY inhabitants: the daily routine of a famous writer, a successful artist, their neighbors, an attractive sociable waitress in a Manhattan café, the customers of this café, a modern psychoanalyst and his patients, and the daily life of Brookline. These little events reflect different processes of social and cultural life of NYC. According to modern issues of the genre the portrayal of diverse aspects of life is common for a modern romantic comedy. Thus, Gilter (2006) suggests that meanings of Hollywood romantic comedy “are far from stable, therefore, and certainly contingent upon industrial, historical and cultural processes” (Giltre, 2006, p.21). In this sense, a modern comedy movie has a topical flexible form, reflecting trendy tendencies in cultural and social life, investigating strange and intriguing ways of living, connected with fashionable places, picturesque characters, funny and attractive types of behavior.

As Good As it Gets, as a comedy, is about relationships in our hectic world and is a response to the societal demand. Even though “diegetically, Hollywood romantic comedy is a flexible genre, virtually unlimited by time or space” (Jagendorf, 1984, p.18), As Good as it Gets takes a direct stance on location, placing a big emphasis on New York as the central part of the movie and making it not only a background scenery, but one of the characters as well. As Good as it Gets is set in NY, where all of the main characters live, and it becomes one of the main characters: main characters meet in NY, they date in NY, and they suffer, grieve and find joy in NY, making the city a meaningful place for the spectator, instead of a background scene.

As a postmodern artistic work, this film resembles all the superstitious and subjective opinions of the period. As Good as it Gets is based on postmodern principles. The author's subjectivity is not seen because reality is shown in a pasticcio way (a work or style produced by borrowing fragments, ingredients, or motifs from various sources) As Good as it Gets has very
distinct features of a postmodern romantic comedy because reality is shown as a patchwork which includes separate scenes that are of value to the audience (Melvin’s analyst, the pediatrician, Simon’s guests, the bandits who assaulted Simon). Many scholars write about specific qualities of romantic comedies. For example, Fred Pfeil (1998) and Christina Deqli-Espost (1998) concentrate on postmodern traits of the films. Deqli-Espost (1998) outlines major characteristics of postmodernism, saying that “the term 'postmodernism' has fluctuating meanings. It maintains volatile, mercurial definition that applies to our changing times... the debate over the conception of that which may be considered postmodern and its many shapes and modes of expression is nonetheless far from being exhausted” (p.3). She also mentions that postmodernism uses parody and pastiche (Deqli-Espost, 1998, p.4).

In the rom-coms discussed in the two previous chapters the pasticcio could be interpreted, according to Eco’s theory, as a “cultural code” that was helping the main characters to find a role model for the ideal behavior of the two people in love. But in As Good as it Gets the love plot is constructed differently. Umberto Eco, talking about romantic relationships in postmodern communicative situation, suggests:

The past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her ‘I love you madly’, because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, “As Barbara Cartland would put it, “I love you madly”’. At this point, having avoided false innocence, he will nonetheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes
along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same (Eco, 1985, p. 227).

The postmodern attraction to “intertextuality” and striving for using numerous quotations as representation of “ready-made” life solutions from the previous films, books and plays do not work in the artistic space of As Good as it Gets. The reason for it lies in the script or the nature of both main characters. The author’s message in the film is connected with another interpretation of the problem of communication and miscommunication between two people paying romantic interest to each other. Firstly, “the languages” of Carol and Melvin are different as they correspond to their respective different social positions in terms of gender, their level of education, their destiny and so on. Carol is not “a very cultivated woman” by Eco’s terms, the scene in which she is composing a thank-you note reveals that she knows nothing or very little about “the art of writing,” worldly games or seduction with ready words or effective quotations from romantic films or books. Her strength is lying in this lack of art, she exclaims: “Why can’t I have a normal boyfriend? Just a regular boyfriend, one that doesn’t go nuts on me!” Only her mother, representing the position of common sense in the plot of the comedy, helps her:

“Everybody wants that, dear. It doesn’t exist.” This explanation clarifies the plot situation on the whole: there are no ideal people, in principle, role models are irrelevant for the present, life is irregular, but is full of surprises, pleasant ones, too. Accordingly, Melvin’s existence seems to be not so dark, after all. The contemporary romantic love scene “grapples with the difficulty of speaking of love in an age when the language, the conventions and the values of heterosexual union lack the integrity they once possessed” (Evans & Deleyto, 1998, p. 29). The happy end of the movie is based on “the celebration of mind” or “pure practical reason.” Melvin goes toward living based on the principle “as good as it gets,” Carol – “like people do.” They break out of the
prison of loneliness. Although the actual phrase “I love you” is never pronounced in the movie, the gestures and the actions of the characters speak the words.

NYC as a cultural phenomenon in this film is meaningful because this city gives an endless number of possibilities to meet different people whom you can choose to communicate with. NYC as a city which does not sleep gives you a chance to change your life. The film begins with Melvin's repeating the lines from a famous song about New York "If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere." The film starts in the morning and ends in the early hours of the morning in "the city which does not sleep." In the previous two films analyzed in this thesis NYC plays a different role. In Sleepless in Seattle (1993) New York is only a meeting place and a romantic reminiscence from the cinematic past. In You’ve Got Mail (1998) New York is also of importance but still it is only a rich back-drop because the heroes meet on the Internet and communication develops largely through emails. This might have happened in any other city.

Plot Summary

The main character, Melvin Udall (Jack Nicholson), a writer with an obsessive-compulsive disorder, lives in Manhattan and is hated by all of his neighbors. Due to his petulant character, he has no friends or lovers and very few people can stand him, one of whom is Carol (Helen Hunt), a waitress in a restaurant he goes to. Melvin is portrayed in the movie as a character who is trying to grow and develop, for he is in the constant search of reasons for him being this way (his talking with his psychiatrist) and ways to solve it. Carol is a single-mother of an 8-year old boy, who lives in Brooklyn and works in Manhattan as a waitress. Carol lives with her mother in a tiny apartment, and is in constant search for a date. As she eagerly admits to her co-worker when she asks Carol if she is ready for a date, “ready is not my problem.”
Another prominent character that becomes vital to Melvin’s and Carol’s lives is Melvin’s gay neighbor, artist Simon (Greg Kinnear). Simon’s lifestyle is very flamboyant; he is a promising artist and has an art manager boyfriend. As these characters are clearly set up as foils to one another, Melvin and Simon almost never interact and dislike each other most wholeheartedly. Another main character in the movie is Verdell, a tiny Brussels Griffon dog (played by newcomer Jill, after a 15-week training program). Verdell is the one that brings Melvin and Simon to their first conversation, after Melvin’s nonchalantly shoving of Verdell down the garbage chute for barking outside. The clash of all of the main characters is a prominent form of interaction among them in the movie.

When Simon goes into the hospital after a bad mugging incident, Melvin has to take care of his dog, Verdell, and that is when the two clash. Verdell, after days of mutual dislike, becomes some sort of a friend to Melvin that he can’t let go of when the time comes to give him back to Simon. Melvin is cornered into driving Simon and Carol to Baltimore, so that Simon could ask his parents to give him money to pay his medical bills. Simon is now broke and is about to get evicted from his fancy apartment. During a hotel stopover, Melvin tries to make his moves on Carol, in a very odd way of his, and for a moment melts her heart when he tells her, “You make me want to be a better man.” However, he goes on ruining everything, and the three come back home with a lot of emotional baggage. Melvin insulted Carol several times without realizing it. First, he was not complimentary about Carol's dress when he said, "I don't get this place. They make me buy a new outfit and let you in a housedress. I don't get it". Carol was offended when Melvin said he had invited her to the restaurant because he was afraid she might have sex with Simon. "I'll never forget you said it", says Carol. Melvin's plans for greater intimacy are ruined; Carol's hopes for romantic relations are not realized. Only Simon regained his creativity but his
future is still uncertain. The trip itself turns out to be a moment of reflexivity for all of the main characters: Simon decides not to ask his parents for money, Melvin tries to understand Carol better and Carol starts seeing Melvin in a completely different light. During this trip we see Melvin and Carol getting really close, and once in NY Melvin decides to contact Carol again. Since Simon, his neighbor, had no place to stay, Melvin had moved all his stuff to one of his guest rooms. This act of kindness touches Carol deeply, so when Melvin comes over and asks her out, after a few “wise cracks,” Carol says yes. In the last scene we see Melvin and Carol entering a bakery store at 4 am, leaving the spectators with a scent of the potential happiness.

Plot Structure

It is understood that films generally “have been a rich source of information for illustrating to viewers both appropriate and inappropriate ways to relate to other human beings” (Natharius, 2007, p.179). Many film genres, romantic comedies not excluded, portray a certain stereotypical pattern for the relationship to evolve and develop, and therefore set a standard for heterosexual romance (Natharius, 2007; Galician, 2004). As Good as it Gets, unlike other movies under analysis, has a hard time falling into a comedic genre, but it does set a certain standard in heterosexual relationships. Following the rom-com patterns, As Good as it Gets and its interest in the interpersonal couple relationships “inevitably leads to some conventional themes and tropes. Themes include the nature of love, courtship rituals and marriage, identity, liberation transformation, renewal, and the relationships between individuals and society” (Giltre, 2006, p.18). These themes underlined here could also be considered part of the movie’s motifs. As Good as it Gets diverges from typical rom-com in that it has a gay character wonderfully played by Greg Kinear who won Oscar nomination for his role.
The plot is based on several ongoing motifs that are recurrent in the movie. Every character lives a very emotional inner life, which makes it more interesting and inevitable for all of the main characters to clash upon each meeting. The main conflict in this movie is the conflict of “wish,” “want” and “can.” It is a conflict among realities as the characters experience it, and what they want out of life. Melvin, a sociopath with anger against people, subconsciously wants to be with someone that understands him, but he only has a psychoanalyst for his confessions. Carol, a waitress, who lives with her mom and her sick son in Brooklyn, wants to find a man who would take her away from the life situation that she finds herself in. Simon, a gay artist, lives in his own world of beauty, not knowing the world outside his studio. Simon has to confront reality. Simon's assault causes him to lose his creativity which he later regains.

Overcoming one’s personal weaknesses is one of the main motifs in the movie. Whether it concerns Melvin and his compulsive disorder that makes him lead the lonely lifestyle that he does lead, Melvin must overcome his mental illness to gain some control in his life. However, despite his mental illness, certain traces of his character play well into his lonely condition in life – he obviously and openly dislikes people. A parallel could be drawn to the movie *Groundhog Day* (1993) where Phil (Bill Murray) has to overcome his negativity, his attitude towards life and people and become a better self to finally proceed with his life. Phil’s day repeats over and over again, and the only way to go to another day is to make someone happy – a very traditional and logical way out of loneliness. Loneliness, on the other hand, is presented within all of the motifs in the movie, for it is interconnected with the motif of search (both Carol and Melvin, even though Melvin unconsciously, are looking for someone to be with), the motif of overcoming one’s weakness and the motif of acceptance. The topic of loneliness has its own spiritual space in the life of the characters and its own representation in the structure of the plot. The authors of the
film demonstrate to the audience the hidden influence of the state of loneliness by all actions of the characters and show the audience of the film different reasons for this state of permanent unhappiness, half-realized by the people who experience this solitude. When Melvin walks on the street, he tries to avoid any accidental physical contact with passers-by. He repeats all the time “Don't touch! Don't touch!” His feeling of loneliness leads him to repulsion for people around him. Carol is a single mother; she seems successful on her social scale. She does not believe in great love, she never plans anything ahead. Her loneliness is revealed in her contacts with other people. When she meets the doctor who is going to help her son, the audience feels that she saw little kindness. The lack of goodness in Carol's life makes it difficult for her to write a thank-you letter to Melvin.

Simon is ignorant of life because of his loneliness. He is guided by the laws of beauty. He invites a handsome man as a sitter; the topic of his picture is loneliness: a single man with no one around him. Simon's loneliness is revealed when he speaks with his mother on the phone. He is afraid to talk with his parents about the money he needs badly and refuses to take it because he does believe in their help. When the heroes leave the boundaries of their loneliness, the audience is happy: Melvin gives Simon a room to live and work in, Simon convinces Melvin to declare his love for Carol and that’s when she realizes the depth of her feelings to Melvin.

To make the idea of the film more expressive and shockingly affective for the audience the creators use some paradoxical artistic conditions for its realization, using the device of the estrangement of the plot structure. Firstly, the inner loneliness drama is played out in an overcrowded city center of NY, Manhattan that makes the drama even more intense placing the characters in an opposition: solitude versus inner life in the overpopulated city. Secondly, the heroes are, at first glance, completely successful professionally: a successful writer adored by
feminine audience, and a very successful, on her social level, waitress, appreciated by her colleagues and customers of the café. Thirdly, the two types of loneliness, which are represented in the plot structure, are inwardly in contradiction. I should mention here that portrayal of a woman as being happy with a poverty job which does not allow her to provide proper medical treatment for her son can be viewed as ideologically conservative.

Loneliness of the writer Melvin is voluntary; he himself chose to be in that state. Sometimes he acknowledges that it is not 'normal' and he tries to 'develop' as a person by seeing an analyst. Melvin aggressively defends his own world, his privacy, and this is reasonable and understandable for the audience: he needs time to keep up his status of a successful popular writer, to compose his numerous novels about ideal love. The philosophical and ethical ideal for Melvin is a famous American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson who is well-known for his concept of self-reliance and, naturally, for his appreciation of loneliness or solitude as the freest state for a person. Here is a well-known aphorism by Emerson, “It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinions; it is easy in solitude to live after your own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.” Melvin could choose to stay alone and therefore to be free from the societal opinions and, in a way, norms. But in his solitude we can see the lack of this “perfect sweetness,” moreover, his solitude is transformed into alienation from the whole world, which he perceives as possibly antagonistic toward him. Several of the film episodes clarify his attitude towards the world that borders with disgust: he locks his door thoroughly with several locks; he washes his hands with very hot water and several new bars of soap every time he returns from the street. Melvin is proud of his isolation from the people and confesses to the “ugly little dog” when Melvin had to take care of it: “Nobody’s ever been here before.” The comicality of the situation arises when Melvin has an
imaginative dialog with this little dog — the first visitor in his apartment — and pronounces the name of Emerson: “We do not want any company. I’ll read you Ralph Waldo Emerson.”

The plot structure of *As Good as it Gets* includes the scenes of Melvin’s work on the novel; the film situations show the audience that awkward Melvin’s isolation from the world is compensated through his creative activity and the dialogs of his characters contradict his own practices: “He made the girl happy. And what a girl! You saved my life, she said. You’d better make it up to me” (*As Good as it Gets*, 1997). The comic effect on the audience is produced by the contrast between the awkwardness of Melvin’s behavior in reality and a successful communicative situation and the heroic action of his personage in his sixty-second novel which is being composed.

Due to the genre of romantic comedy the main male character returns back to people, to the flow of life and plot events. But the initial situation of voluntary loneliness makes the task of the natural refusal from it very difficult from the point of view of the plot structure. Melvin’s loneliness is voluntary, he values it. Loneliness is forced on Carol, she wants to get rid of it. The authors must explain it by plot events and it is rather difficult to show logically and convincingly for the audience why Melvin rejects his loneliness which suits it. The episodes with the dog help solve this problem. In fact, his affection for the dog returns Melvin to people. The main female personage experiences another type of loneliness. The origin of her loneliness is unknown to the audience, but there is a number of plain superficial social explanations of it for a mid-aged single working mother (unhappy marriage, deception, treachery). Carol’s loneliness is very typical, Melvin’s loneliness is a matter of choice. The problem is not only in the plot construction, because two destinies of a man and a woman lie in different social levels, but in a different nature of solitude: willingness of it for the male character and unwillingness for the female one
problematizes the combinations of the plot situations due to their heterogeneousness. The destiny of the writer is treated ironically in the plot; the life of the female character is shown sympathetically. This can be viewed as antifeminist in that it normalizes and stereotypes a working class woman. It presupposes different approaches to the interpretation of the main characters. The choice of the performers is of importance.

To produce the artistic embodiment of such a sharp, ironical interpretation of the forms of modern loneliness in the crowd in such a mega polis as NY, the creators of the film had to find the actors who were able to manage all evident seriousness and hidden humor of the plot situations. The main character, waitress Carol, who is played by Helene Hunt, has a strong character and a recognizable type of a modern working woman, a NY inhabitant. Laura Winn (2007) underlines that Carol “is a much more self-assured Cinderella than we commonly see, and it is actually Melvin’s change from acerbic recluse (sometimes literally growling at others) due to Carol’s influence that concerns the bulk of the movie” (p.34). Carol’s character is not uncommon for the comedic movies by itself, but the way it is portrayed and played out is very new and refreshing. Carol is obviously a very strong woman who knows what she wants. Winn (2007) further underlines:

Carol is clearly not out to “save” a charming beast with her all-powerful love. Nor is she looking to be saved. She is simply a broke single mom trying to raise her asthmatic son, and it is merely Melvin’s exposure to a “better person” that opens up the possibilities for change in his own mind” (p.35)

Carol’s character is being portrayed as real, and true to life, or at the very least, a very grounded one. Carol’s character is that of a very strong and determined woman. She obviously knows what she wants and has a very clear idea of what is right and what is wrong. Carol
“counters Melvin’s insults with the speed and accuracy of a machine gun: “When I saw you when you first came into breakfast, I thought you were handsome,” she explains, and then pauses in barely perceptible melodramatic fashion before sending a sharp look in his direction. She delivers the punch line with dryness and charm: “Then, of course, you spoke.” That hits home!” (Kilzer, 2005, p.250). Kilzer underlines what a strong and witty character Carol is, the kind that would make a great counterpart to a strong male lead. Nicholson is not exactly a handsome hero for a rom-com. Besides, the audience is aware of Nicholson's previous roles (e.g. The Joker in Batman, the crazy loon in The Shining, a mental patient in One Flew Over the Coo coo’s Nest).

From the point of view of semiotics such type of a female character described by Kizler demands a special plot structure because the 'heroic potential' of Carol (evident for the audience) needs a complex of plot situations where the character could show her essence (an episode where Carol gives up her date to take care of her son, an episode in a Baltimore hotel where she helps Simon to return his creativity, an episode in the cafe where she teaches Melvin to behave). The comedy style is limited in expression of such true serious behavior (the way Carol cares for her son is wonderful, she is ready to sacrifice her personal happiness and her job to help him), especially of a woman, but a sarcastic approach of the authors of the movie to human weaknesses (an episode with a thank-you letter, or an episode where Carol packs hotel toilet articles) and, at the same time, their belief in the power of love and kindness permits them to compose a very hard task. The authors demand from the heroine not only understanding of the other and compassion for the difficulties of his living, but openness to total changes of her own life and willingness to be happy with a very strange hero. Melvin’s strangeness and alienation from the world are depicted by Williams and Zenger in a colorful way: “Melvin exhibits stagey outrageous intolerance towards a gay man, a black man, a Panamanian housekeeper, a Jewish
couple, and women— in short towards many identities that have been historically “othered” in Western societies” (Williams & Zenger, 2007, p.27). Melvin's anti-politically correct behavior has become a cultural standby, with TV shows such as “Curb your Enthusiasm” or reality shows “Jersey Shore” and the like. It seems to enact a culturally repressed tendency to be like Melvin’s forerunner, “Archie Bunker,” another TV character who exhibited such overtly unacceptable behavior and yet who is culturally beloved because he addresses the undercurrents of ideological rebellion against liberal acceptance of a diverse population in the U.S.

The task for the heroine is to return Melvin to people, make him accept the world once again, bring to a close his fear of others and his disbelief in the environment, and, in fact, to cure him, in spite of his psychiatrist who is unable to do this. Williams and Zenger (2007) investigating the problem of gender in As Good as it Gets affirm half-ironically and half-jokingly that “As Good as it Gets implicitly engages with gender representation as it appears to struggle to redefine what it seems to be a white male in a time when whiteness and masculinity have come under concerted attack by feminist and race critics” (p.27). Carol has to save the hero with his strong masculine position toward the public world, the hero, who looks at people of all colors, genders and social positions in society absolutely misanthropically and, moreover, is very content with his (Melvin’s) negativism. These contradictions are the source of comicality transforming this situation, very complicated in real life, into a cascade of plot events which prompt the audience to laugh or smile, or to sympathize with the characters.

The Main Male Character in the Plot Structure

Melvin Udall (Jack Nicholson) is a writer who has written sixty-two books about love; yet the irony of his life is that he himself has no one to love. The plot irony is in the situation when Melvin, a specialist in love matters (he is ready to define love in his sixty second novel)
falls in love for the first time. Melvin changes places with the hero of the novel which he is writing. The complexity of this situation creates a comic effect. The device when two characters exchange their positions is very well known. American literature gives a similar device in the novel *The Prince and the Pauper* by Mark Twain. In one of the first scenes Simon, his neighbor, gives a precise characteristic of him: “You don’t love anybody, Mr. Udall.” Melvin’s interactions with other people are only doomed to running into his neighbors that cannot stand him and the daily chitchat with Carol, a waitress in a restaurant in Manhattan, where Melvin has lunch. At the beginning of the movie we see Melvin as an “eccentric, selfish, and irritating and embittered misanthrope who tyrannizes and terrorizes those around him,” as Annette Kilzer points out (Kilzer, 2005, p.250). It is vital to the character’s development that Verdel, Simon’s dog, once he is forced to take care of it, is the first to bring out humane traces in him. It happens after Melvin dumps the dog into the trash chute of the apartment building. Up until Verdel comes into Melvin’s life, we see Melvin as a loner and a stranger to all. The first time we see him smiling is when he sits at a café and watches Verdel play with kids on the street. A smile here is a code, a ray that gives a possibility to look into Melvin’s character and see the kindness that could be in him. This scene is also vital, for it is the first time that Melvin tries to have a personal conversation with Carol:

MELVIN: How old are you?

CAROL: Oh, please...

MELVIN: If I had to guess by your eyes, I'd say you were fifty.

CAROL: And if I had to guess by your eyes. I'd say you were kind. So, so much for eyes. But as long as you bring up age... how old are you?

MELVIN: Otherwise, you're not ugly.
CAROL (laughs out loud): Okay, pal... I accept the compliment, but go easy – my knees start a-knocking when you turn on the charm full blast (As Good as it Gets, 1997).

However, Melvin, in his usual manner, does not last long enough and his niceness is sprinkled with irony and sarcasm. The crucial moment in the development of Melvin’s character and the turning point in the plot development come when the writer goes to his psychiatrist without an appointment and the doctor refuses to see him. Melvin comes out of his doctor’s room and says what would become the theme and the title of the movie, “What if this is as good as it gets?” Melvin does not answer this question, directed inwardly, but the actual posing of it shows the audience that Melvin has come to a certain transformative realization in his life. The acceptance of his life situation – through the phrase As Good as it Gets - sets the movie to a completely different mode. In a certain way he realizes that the only person who can actually stand him is Carol. His uncommon self-awareness is seen in the following lines:

CAROL: Do you have any control over how creepy you allow yourself to get?

MELVIN: Yes, I do, as a matter of fact...

Jack Nicholson, as the main character, uses a wide spectrum of actor’s devices and demonstrates a real virtuoso performance in this role, making the audience believe in this incredible transformation of the beast into a sweet prince. The powerful self-irony of the actor’s performance is combined with childishness and boyishness in his acting. This combination of two opposing ways of behavior - of an egoistic rude person and of a capricious child or a naïve school-boy - justifies the radical change in the main character that seems to be unrealistic, unbelievable in a different film space or in another actor’s interpretation. Nicholson psychologically motivates different states of his hero. Melvin hates the whole world from the very first scene when he shuffles Simon's dog down the garbage chute and when he quarrels with
his neighbors. He is acting like a capricious selfish child when he insists that Carol stop caring for her son and return to the cafe to serve him. He is helpless like a child when he tries to express his love to Carol and relies on the help of his new friend Simon. Of course, the motif of love is commonly used in such types of comedy plot situations due to the belief in the transformative power of this mysterious feeling of love.

Love, as a permanent motif not only of *As Good as it Gets* but of romantic comedies in general, is given the centrality in the battle between self and life. Love here is presented not only from a romantic, comedic point of view, as for example in *An Affair to Remember*, but also as a platform for rebirth of the characters. It is as if “romantic love has, in the course of the past four centuries, gradually absorbed into its own experience all other known love experiences” (Evans & Deleyto, 1998, p.5), and is personified in the movie in all its glory.

**The Motif of Love and Loneliness in the Plot Structure**

The motif of love is closely connected with the motif of loneliness in the plot of the movie. In fact, these two create the boundaries of the plot situation: the motif of loneliness is initial, its development signifies that the plot events are flowing from the very beginning of the story until its climax. The motif of love is complementary in the genre of rom-com to the initial motif of loneliness. The appearance and realization of this motif in the plot structure means that the climax (the most intense feelings of loneliness and despair) is over and all dramatic events will be transformed into something more pleasant for the main characters. For example, the climax of the situation of loneliness for Melvin happens when nobody cares about the state of his mind and soul. To his shout “HELP!” nobody reacts, even his doctor. And this is the turning point in the plot development; Emerson’s idea of self-reliance naturally replaces this childish dependence on a wise adult like Melvin’s psychiatrist. But the resolution of this inner conflict for
Melvin does not mean returning to himself (though this is characteristic of Emerson’s style of thinking), but this is his “exit” to the outer world and to Carol’s love.

According to Evans and Deleyto, “the modern perception of romantic love as the place in which identity is constructed or reconstructed relates it to Michael Foucault’s views of sexuality,” according to whom “we understand sex as the space in which we expect to find out the ultimate truth about ourselves” (as cited in Evans &Deleyto, 1998, p.3). Indeed, sex (or the absence of it) plays an important role in the initial miscommunication between the characters. This miscommunication is a source of comicality as well as any other conversation on sexual topics in the comedy:

CAROL: I don’t think I can wait until tomorrow. This needs clearing up.

MELVIN: What needs clearing up?

CAROL (strong and true): I’m not going to sleep with you. I will never, ever sleep with you. Never. Not ever.

MELVIN: I’m sorry. We don’t open for the no-sex oaths until 9 a.m.

This unusual dialogue provokes the spectator’s interest in the plot movement because it destroys the trivial sequence of sexual topics and proposes something new and unpredictable. In fact, the two main actors’ performance is a form of permanent oscillation between seriousness and comicality that creates the sense of novelty and becomes more intriguing for the audience.

Carol’s disclaimer at the beginning of their relationship, “I will never, ever sleep with you,” that was meant for the things to be “easier” between them brings on an air of tension and uncertainty. Carol and Melvin’s relationship is complicated through a set of obstacles: class, social position, attractiveness and character that stand in their way of a perfect ending to a dramatic scenario. Evans and Deleyto (1998) underline that “the project of a life together for the
two characters with which the film predictably finishes is based on the mutual awareness of each other’s ‘new’ selves. If there had ever been dissociation, romantic love and self-identity are back in their traditional partnership” (p.4). This “dissociation” is very prominent in Carol-Melvin relationship, for they are in a constant quest for their identities through the “wise cracks” and names that they give each other. This novelty of a very complicated communication between the two characters is defined in Jonathan Rosenbaum’s flattering evaluation of the skillfulness of the two leading actors: “Whether or not these characters add up to coherent individuals, what Brooks manages to do with them as they struggle mightily to connect with one another is funny, painful, beautiful, and basically truthful—a triumph for everyone involved” (Rosenbaum, 2009). Of course, this struggle to connect, skillfully described by Rosenbaum, could be interpreted in many different ways, according to Eco’s popular idea about every artistic work as being “an open one.” The openness of the meaning of this struggle for connection or, in the context of this analysis, a struggle for love of both main characters, could be and is interpreted as a gender struggle.

Loneliness is the initial state of Melvin and Carol. Plot development goes through a number of situations which lead the heroes to a happy end. On her way to future happy love (inevitable from the point of view of the genre) Carol has to overcome obstacles as a single mother who has to share the apartment with her aging mother. Her first unfortunate date on a Friday night shows the audience her need for love and her loneliness when her date does not take place. On her way to love Carol has to overcome typical female fears. For example, when Carol interprets Melvin's help to her son in a trivial way, she goes to Melvin's apartment at night to tell him that she will never sleep with him. Her female dreams are revealed in the last scene when she says "Why can't I have a normal boyfriend? Just a regular boyfriend, one that doesn’t go nuts on me!" Carol dreams of normal human relations.
Melvin, for his part, feels great in his loneliness at the beginning of the film. His behavior (he washes his hands with a new bar of soap and hot water and repeatedly turns the key in the lock every time he returns to his apartment) indicates that he considers the world around him dirty and dangerous. His way to happy love is conditioned by a typical plot development in rom-coms. He has to overcome typical male ambitions. He believes that the whole world belongs to him and all are obliged to fulfill his desires. Melvin insults the waitress and customers. It is interesting to note that his first experience of love is not to a human being but a little dog that he tries to feed. In his relations with Carol Melvin reveals positive male qualities. To help Carol's son he pays enormous medical bills. Though he is reluctant to leave NY Melvin agrees to drive Simon to Baltimore and later makes a generous gesture - he gives Simon one of his rooms to leave and work in until Simon's situation improves.

The script of the film brings us to this conclusion due to the evident initial misogyny of the male character. As an example of Melvin’s misogyny they quote this episode: “When a gushing female fan asks Melvin “How do you write women so well?” he tells her: “I think of a man. Then I take away reason and accountability” (p.27). The episode with a female fan interpreted by Williams and Zenger (2007) from the semiotics point of view has a specific artistic purpose as a part of the plot, reflecting the film creators’ position towards the world. The first artistic purpose is to create a comic effect combining some of Melvin’s characteristics that are needed for further plot development: he is short tempered, but his admirer is too naïve, too sweet and importunate; then, the spectator can presuppose that Melvin is not fond of his own creative activity. The second purpose of the episode is to reinforce the sense of a spiritual chasm between Melvin and the heroine and thus to add more interest to Carol’s task, because, according to Rubinfeld’s formula that a romantic comedy usually presupposes the overcoming of the
obstacles and a happy ending, (c) the overcoming of the obstacles and (d) a happy ending, “resulting in a wedding or a promise of one” (Rubinfeld, 2001, p.345). So, the episode analyzed concerns the heroine as well: looking at the admirer of his talent Melvin will realize what a rare type of woman Carol is. Later he will confess to her that she is “the greatest woman alive.” In fact, this semantically rich episode is not an exception, but the rule for this plot structure.

Style

Contrary to the previous comedies under analysis As Good as it Gets is not built on the previous masterpieces of romantic movies. The first two movies by Nora Ephron are culturally connected with classical romantic comedies of the previous decades while As Good as it Gets is devoid of such connection and has postmodern characteristics. But the semantic density of the film narration is deep and based on the creative activity of the main characters. Namely, the process of composing a text (Melvin's sixty second novel, Carol’s thank-you letter which she writes with great difficulty) enriches the plot structure with new semantic shadows and gives very important details to the character’s portrayal. Williams and Zenger (2007) affirm: “The focus of As Good as it Gets is on the emotional interactions among the characters, not on literacy, but scenes in which people compose texts and read them appear as integral parts of the narrative throughout the film” (p.27). Melvin is composing a novel, Carol is writing a thank-you letter to him. Simon is creating a picture in which he transforms reality. He transforms a handsome looking street bandit into a pensive man who thinks of the world destiny. From the point of view of the leitmotif of the comedy this scene is of enormous significance. The reason of the main characters’ solitude reveals itself in this process of writing. He composes love novels never experiencing a feeling of love. In fact, Melvin has written sixty two love novels which indicates that the problem of love is the key issue of his life. Semiotically, the process of text
creation symbolizes the revealing of some hidden but significant features of a person. A person could be defined as “text”: a sequence of signs, an immanent or inherent part of the whole culture (interpreted as an enormous text or the hierarchy of texts in semiotics). In fact, the text created by Melvin (the audience sees Melvin finishing his love novel) can be viewed as successive opening of his qualities - naivety, a romantic view on life, self-confidence, egocentrism. Carol's text (in fact, she is writing a novel in her thank-you letter) can also be viewed as a text of her personality. Her loneliness is very deep and she saw little goodness in her life. Simon's text is reflected in his picture. He is naive, egocentric. He lives in the world of beauty. Beauty for Simon is a measure of truth. The beauty of a man he is portraying personifies spiritual beauty for Simon.

Melvin is in the process of finishing his novel and is self-satisfied; he thinks he knows everything about human interrelations. At the beginning of the film he is finishing his sixty second novel and the trivial formulae of human living fill his text: “now he was able to define love. Love was…” At this moment he is suddenly interrupted by a knock on his door. In fact, from the semiotic point of view, all the events have their symbolic meaning. And this knock is a sign of destiny, because only after Melvin had opened the door and descended to the common people living nearby he began to cure himself from his solitude which was transformed into a form of spiritual liberation. From this turning point the text of his destiny is written by the others and his symbolic and real recovery is based only on the degree of his openness and readiness to accept the help of people that surround him. Melvin is involved in the life of other heroes. He has to help Carol and Simon with their problems.

Carol, on the contrary, tries to write her thank-you note very thoroughly, she tries too hard, she becomes desperate with the inability to express her good feelings in an adequate way.
Her sense of loneliness, pride and low self-esteem prevent her from a clear expression of her gratitude to Melvin. To be clear means to be brave to say something, to verbalize thoughts that were hidden from her. The plot of the film is typical for a comedy, where, as it is well-known, every desperate situation could be happily resolved in the context space of the story. In a postmodern film the authors very often take an existing plot and use it in a new setting. A postmodern work offers a multiplicity of points of view and the audience is free to make a certain choice independently. In this respect this romantic comedy follows postmodern principles. The rom-com proves the rightfulness of different people in the united picture of the world. There is no dominating idea. The immediate help comes from another semantic position, that of common sense. Carol’s mother helps her to overcome her pride and have fun. The popular catchphrase from the movie – “like people do” – clarifies the essence of the problem. Carol firstly denies the use of this common reason for meeting other people, but at last she “goes out like people do” and this simple presence of the friendly careless crowd on the street where she walks with her mother cures her despair and calms her. Thus the comicality of the situation is revealed to the spectators.

Carol’s mother who embodies common sense in the film takes her daughter out. They walk in a cheerful crowd, greet people, go to a restaurant and Carol’s despair which she felt writing a thank-you letter to Melvin looks not directly connected with her life situations. There is nothing tragic in her world. Her feeling of loneliness prevents Carol from communicating with other people. The walk she takes with her mother easily solves the conflict and shows the comicality of the situation.
Musical Codes in the Plot Structure of *As Good as it Gets*

Ian Inglis (2005) in his book *Popular Music and Film* notes that “in a filmic context, lyrics often perform tasks such as “speaking” for a character, thus establishing or underlining character traits” and “like dialogue then, the lyrics can assist in the movement and development of the narrative” (p.112). Similar the films analyzed in the previous chapters, the relation of song lyrics to plot development and characters’ traits in *As Good as it Gets* is similar, but, unlike the two rom-coms by Nora Ephron, James Brooks’ movie uses musical code in a different way.

Nora Ephron’s films include musical episodes into the plot structure preferably as accompaniment to the feelings and thoughts of the main characters (the so-called non-diegetic way of music representation, or “mood” music balanced with the scene dialogue). In James Brooks’ film the inclusion of musical episodes is rather connected with the real singing, for example Melvin’s singing, or listening to jazz. Inglis (2005) underlines that the “diegetic sound is any sound presented as originated from source within the film's world” (p.114). These mostly diegetic sounds in *As Good as it Gets* do not add more sentimentality, they do not create emotional background, they are more submissive to the comical atmosphere of the film, but they enrich the film content, clarify the essence of the characters and embellish the dialogues with additional irrational feelings needed in the scene.

*Always Look on the Bright Side of Life* (Eric Idle) is the leitmotif of the author’s optimistic message to the spectators. It is played three times in the movie: the first time when Melvin was given a dog to take care of and he is unhappy about it, the second – when the dog was taken away from him and Melvin cries, the third - in the end of the movie: “If life seems jolly rotten/There’s something you’ve forgotten/And that’s to laugh and smile and dance and sing/Always look on the bright side of life” (Idle, 1979). The function of consolation of this song
exists not only for the main character: the situation becomes better as a whole. For example, Melvin calms Verdell the dog, it agrees to take food from Melvin, they become friends and the idea of the song really works.” *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life* becomes a motto for the audience.

The creation of a comical effect is more evident due to diegetic sounds in another episode in *As Good as it Gets* in the part of the film plot, also connected with a crucial episode in the life of a supporting character, desperate artist Simon, who has to go to Baltimore to ask his parents for money. At the beginning of the trip to Baltimore when everyone hopes for the best we hear *Y.M.C.A.* (Henri Belolo and Victor Willis): “Young man, young man there’s no need to feel down/ Young man, young man pick yourself off the ground” (Belolo & Willis, 1978). This song also references Simon's gayness. The singers, The Village People, were notoriously gay and the YACA’s hidden role in the 70s as a safe but covert meeting place for gay persons still ‘in the closet’. What is special about the choice of music in *As Good as it Gets* is that the choice in the central part of the film is made by the film character. Before driving to Baltimore Melvin carefully selects the musical soundtrack of their trip to and from Baltimore. One of the first songs on the way to Baltimore is *Days Like This* (Lewis Lebish and Walter Coleman): “When no one steps on my dreams there’ll be days like this/ When people understand what I mean there’ll be days like this/ When you ring out the changes of how everything is/ Well my mama told me there’ll be days like this” (Coleman & Lebish, 1967). These long lyrics are equally significant to all three characters; all of them are in search for happiness.

In the crucial scene in a Baltimore restaurant *Everything my Heart Desires* (Phil Roy and Peter Blakeley) gives the right signal to the spectator: “Everything my heart desires is here/ Is here with you/ With you…” (Blakeley & Roy, 1996). On the way back to NY, after Melvin’s
relations with Carol seem ruined (Melvin offended Carol by unpleasant comments on her dress and suspicion of Carol having sex with Simon), Melvin tries to restore good relations with For Sentimental Reasons (I Love You) (William Best, Deek Watson), he says “This one has a meaning”: “I’ll give you my heart I love you and you alone were meant for me/ Please give your loving heart to me” (Best & Watson, 1945). Melvin reveals here his hidden willingness to get rid of loneliness and his thirst for tenderness and appreciation of the beloved woman. The words from the same song are sung in the end: “I think of you every morning/ Dream of you every night/ Darling, I’m never lonely/ Whenever you are in sight” (Best & Watson, 1945). Another specific feature of the film is the fact that the musical codes are transmitted not only directly through the song lyrics but through instrumental pieces composed by Hans Zimmer.

The soundtrack’s titles also convey musical codes which are deciphered in the plot development: A Better Man (Melvin tells Carol: “You make me want to be a better man”), Humanity (Simon tells his sitter: “If you stare at someone long enough, you discover their humanity”), Too Much Realty (Carol’s date says before he leaves her: “Too much reality for a Friday night”). The film’s music codes include instrumental versions of well-known songs (non-diegetic sound of film). The spectator hears the melody of the songs he knows and receives the message to decipher the code sent to him. Examples of these instrumental versions include: Hand on My Heart (Judith Owen): “You’ve got a hand on my heart/ You know how to hurt me…/ I’m just willing you to love me” (Owen, 1996). Climb on (A Back That’s Strong) (Shawn Colvin): “But you don’t have to stand up all alone/ Just put your hand in mine” (Colvin, 1992). My Only (Hector Pereira and Phil Roy): “This is the end of everything/ Good bye my only/ I hang my head and I give in/ Goodbye my only friend” (Pereira & Roy, 1997). All these well-known songs make the audience think about a hidden spiritual life of this author of popular
romance novels and a comical contradiction between his creative activity, his need to be loved, and the external awful way he treats people. But what is most significant and funny for the future of plot development is Melvin’s citing of some lines from famous Frank Sinatra’s song *New York, New York*: “New York, New York/ Start spreading the news, I’m leaving today/ I want to be a part of it - New York, New York/ These vagabond shoes, are longing to stray/ Right through the very heart of it - New York, New York” (Ebb & Kander, 1980). From this hymn to the New York City Melvin chooses the most significant lines: “And if I can make it there, I'm gonna make it anywhere” and addresses them to the little dog: “This is New York. And if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere” (*As Good as it Gets*, 1997). With these words he throws the dog into a garbage chute. The semantic density and ambivalence of the scene is evident: from the first scenes of the film the audience has to know that action takes place in New York, that NYC is the place of great possibilities. And all these initial effects are possible due to the inclusion of short lines form the popular song.

The chapter analyzes the problem of loneliness in *As Good as it Gets* in diverse forms, both male and female. Loneliness is presented within all motifs of the rom-com for it is interconnected with the motif of search, the motif of overcoming one's weaknesses and the motif of acceptance. The motif of love in the film is closely connected with the motif of loneliness. Similarity with and difference from Nora Ephron's films are investigated. Contrary to *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and *You’ve Got Mail* (1998), *As Good as it Gets* (1997) is not built on the previous masterpieces of romantic movies.

The main conflict in *As Good as it Gets* is the conflict of "wish", "want", and "can". The chapter studies how the comic effect is produced on the audience as well as the sources of comicality. Love is given the centrality in the battle between self and life. Love is presented not
only from a romantic, comedic point of view but also as a platform for rebirth of the heroes. The motif of love is closely connected with the motif of loneliness.

Postmodern features of *As Good as it Gets* are discussed. In the film the process of composing a text enriches the plot structure with new semantic shadows and gives very important details to the hero's portrayal. Musical codes in the plot structure of *As Good as it Gets* are also studied. In James Brooks’ film songs enrich the film context, clarify the essence of the characters and embellish the dialogues with additional feelings needed in the scenes. Musical codes are transmitted not only directly through the song lyrics but through instrumental pieces as well. The soundtracks’ titles also convey musical codes which are deciphered in the plot development.

The three romantic comedies of the 90s analyzed in this thesis have much in common. The common features include deliverance from loneliness and supportive reality giving the heroes a chance to find true love. All three comedies lead the heroes from loneliness to reunion with other people. Another common feature is an optimistic look at life itself. The romantic comedies under analysis realize the main principles of American cultural tradition, mainly: optimism, freedom, equality.

All three comedies are created in the epoch of postmodernism but there is difference among them. The two romantic comedies by Nora Ephron are deeply rooted in American cultural traditions and reinterpret love stories existing in American cinematic history. *As Good as it Gets* has more features of a postmodern romantic comedy. It presents a number of points of view and gives the audience a kind of multiple-choice to choose from.
CHAPTER FIVE

LONELINESS AND DREAMS THROUGH A CHAT WINDOW IN YOU’VE GOT MAIL

Hollywood romantic movies have become integrated and rooted in American society and culture (Celestino, 1998; Mcdonald, 2001). You’ve Got Mail (1998) is an American romantic comedy released in 1998 by Warner Bros. Critics consider it an interesting remake of the film The Shop Around the Corner (1940), in which two letter-writing lovers are completely unaware that their beloved is in fact the co-worker with whom they share a certain degree of hostility. It is well-known that there was also a 1949 musical remake (In the Good Old Summertime) starring Judy Garland. You’ve Got Mail updates the concept of letter exchange to the use of e-mail and takes these movies to a new level of interpersonal understanding and emotional depth. The movie thus becomes a great interpretation of the original script.

As discussed in chapter two, semiotics portrays film reality as a representation of some cultural code, based on the system of symbols interpreting reality of human life and transforming it into something understandable for the spectators. The spectators’ understanding is possible only because a symbol is a part of this transformed reality, analyzed and evaluated in the process of human communication. Thus film reality is totally symbolic, but for the purpose of the analysis only the most significant scenes, collisions of characters revealing meaningful conflicts, motives, subjects and heroes’ concepts of life are selected.

For example, one of the main conflicts of a character in a romantic text is the conflict between dream and reality; the beginning and the end of any text are known as the most significant semantic positions connected with the author’s message. From this point of view the analyzed movie is typical for the romantic concept of reality that presupposes a certain way the plot must develop: initial conflict, the realization of the characters’ of their inability to fit into the
common standards of happiness, or to be happy the way the society tells them too; development of the conflict; conflict escalation and its realization through the romantic need of another person. The beginning of You’ve Got Mail (1998) implies the unresolved inner conflict between the main character and the world based on the feeling of loneliness in the crowd. The musical code helps to reveal it for the spectator.

The opening scene of You’ve Got Mail (1998) shows New York City being formed through bytes and megabytes of the computer, until transformed into something as real as the main character’s, Kathleen Kelly’s, window. The transformation of the city is accompanied by the tune that says: “If I only had company to share a cup of tea with me.” The metaphor of constructing reality is a leitmotiv in the motif structure of the movie that manifests itself through email interaction and desires of the main characters as well as their hope for a better future through the constructed realities of their dreams.

The main theory used for the analysis of You’ve Got Mail (1998) is the theory of semiotics. Christian Metz (1968), a film scholar, in his book Film Language argued that “cinema is constructed like language” (Metz, 1968, p. 12). Metz argues that unlike the written word, film’s basic symbol is a screen shot that could be interpreted or decoded in many different ways. Metz ideas were later expanded and revisited by the large film theorists, such as Raymond Bellour in “The Unattainable Text” (1975), who agreed with Metz’s theory. Stephen Heath (1981) was one of Metz’s followers and practitioners of the film theory, who argues in his book “Questions of Cinema” (1981) that cinema is concerned with representation that could also be interpreted as one of the “codes” in the film structure. The most famous semiotician and the “father” of semiotics is considered to be Umberto Eco, who put down the basis for the theory in his “Theory of Semiotics” (1976), that was later called "Articulations of the
Cinematic Code." The semiotic approach permits the audience to see another (or secondary) hidden conflict: between the impressive industrial power of computer society and the little space of private idyllic cozy life. A cup of tea is a symbol of unity of the hidden conflict, and the representation of the older symbolic language of the Second World War period and the well-known song “Tea for two.” The symbolic language of the film reveals itself as loaded with cultural codes from the very beginning of the film, even before the real action. Eco (1976) states, “In culture every entity can become a semiotic phenomenon. The laws of signification are the laws of culture. For this reason culture allows a continuous process of communicative exchanges, in so far as it subsists as a system of systems of signification” (Eco, 1976, p.28). This statement is very fruitful for the analysis of form-content interaction in the film as text.

This “continuous process of communicative exchanges” in the space of a movie can be depicted on all levels of the film. “The laws of signification” as “the laws of culture” could be seen even in the plot summary; they are more evident in the plot structure, reflected brightly in the main characters (everything is semantically significant in them – type of appearance, voice, clothes, way of moving). As for each of the three comedy films, for You’ve Got Mail there are a number of specific, but understandable codes which create the uniqueness of the movie as a result of the artistic inventions of the group of creators (the movie is unique for it uses specific artistic codes for the creation of the inner life of the characters: books that the main protagonists are reading, movies that they are watching and the letters that they are writing to each other- all become a part of the ‘artistic code’ in the Semiotic interpretation of the movie). This makes possible to conduct a selective analysis of the most prominent features of the semantic structure of this second sample of the creative activity of Nora Ephron.
Plot Summary

Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) is involved with Frank Navasky (Greg Kinnear), a postmodernist newspaper writer for the New York Observer who is always in search of helping the oppressed part of the society. Frank is devoted to his typewriter, as much as Kathleen is devoted to her laptop and email account, where she logs on constantly in hope of getting another email from “NY152” – the screen name of Joe Fox (Tom Hanks). The most important for the understanding of the laws of the existence of the leitmotif of loneliness in the film are: the scene in book store, at a party, a night scene. Joe belongs to a rich Fox family that owns a very profitable book business that is opening one of their stores just around the corner from Kathleen’s store, and that will eventually put her out of business. Kathleen owns an independent bookstore called “Shop Around the Corner” that her mom owned before her. This situation evidently supposes the existence of a serious social conflict between the main characters. But in a comic form the social conflict is initially repressed in the story because the first place is given to the social problem of loneliness hidden under the mask of the problem of sociability (chat rooms and email become a form of “impersonal” communication as Kathleen Kelly points out in the movie, “The odd thing about this form of communication is that you’re more likely to talk about nothing than something” (You’ve Got Mail, 1998)) revealing itself as a search of modern forms of communication in such a trendy society as the population of NYC of 1998.

One of the central conflicts in the system of motifs in this movie is focused on Kathleen’s and Joe’s ability to interact with each other, while being obvious rivals. The irony of this communicative situation is in the fact that Kathleen and Joe create a new, unusual and more dangerous form of social loneliness through constructing a powerful illusion of mental closeness: they converse with each other via emails without ever giving out their personal details, thus not
ever knowing who they really are. This very complicated communicative situation is fruitful in the genre of comedy. It produces a number of typical comical scenes: the situations in which the heroes wear masks, the “communicative” masquerade and the interest of spectators which lies in the field of intensive expectation of a possible revelation of the truth about both main characters’ unwilling or willing deception. Firstly, a conflict between daydream and reality creates a system of plot events. On the surface the heroes have a very good, comfortable daily life and only dream about a better understanding in the form of ideal communication with an unreal, spiritual personality: Kathleen is dating Frank and is seemingly happy, yet she devotes her inner energy to the online relationship with Joe through which she is trying to fill the void that her current relationship has. Secondly, a conflict between lie and truth, deception and sincerity creates a system of motifs: an epistemological collision helps to move the action of the comedy through perturbations and up to the happy end – the full understanding of the Other and Self. Kathleen and Joe are rivals by day and “email lovers” by night which creates a double story line, where the parallel life stories (online relationship and real life dramas) move in the same direction, that result in a conflict (climax of the movie plot), followed by a happy ending.

The first time that Kathleen and Joe meet is at her store, when Joe passes the time with his brother and aunt, Mat and Annabel, two young children. Obviously enchanted by her, he asks her name and does not give out his last name, not to “spoil” the first impression. They do meet again later that day at a book store party for critics and book-business people. Kathleen finds out who he is, confronts him, and he belittles her existence with the killer businessman instinct. Joe and Kathleen continue to converse via email, and they get to the point of wanting to meet each other. They set up a date, to which Kathleen shows up with a “Pride and Prejudice” book and a rose to be recognized among many. Joe, too scared and embarrassed to go alone,
brings his colleague and friend Kevin for moral support. He asks Kevin to look through the window and see if she’s there and if she’s pretty. Getting a positive answer, he goes in and sees Kathleen Kelly, his rival, there. After a thoughtful pause, he decides to go and talk to her. Again, only Joe knows at this point the real side of the story. Kathleen, not expecting to see him, becomes mean and defensive and in the end drives Joe away. Kathleen begins a media war against Fox books, following the advice from “NY152” and Frank (Kathleen’s partner and a writer from the New York Observer), but it doesn’t help and her store goes under. Allowing time for their electronic relationship to recuperate, Joe visits Kathleen while she is sick, and for the first time makes a favorable impression. Joe discovers that Kathleen has broken up with Frank, almost at the same time he himself has broken up with his girlfriend Patricia. During his visit Kathleen confesses that she is crazily in love with a certain man from the Internet and that’s when Joe decides to take action. He tries to “bump into her” regularly, and finally they become friends. By the end of the movie, when Joe and Kathleen feel a mutual attraction, he decides that it’s time for their online relationship to come out into the open and sets up a date with her. However, he does try to convince her of his, Joe’s, feelings before she goes on a date, to see if she will be able to feel anything for him. The ending scene of the movie is Kathleen waiting in the park, and Joe coming from distance with his dog, Brinkley. They kiss and the movie ends.

A semiotic approach makes it possible to see here, even in a brief summary of the plot, a symbolic sense of this sequence of different episodes: a permanent change of two principal states - balancing between truth and lie, openness and closedness, a mask or the “open face” of the partner of the dialogue, everyone’s playful or true existential positions. On a more profound level of communication – the inevitable conflict between real and ideal, the imaginative picture of a heavenly happy world with composed human beings, based on the eternal archetypes – the
embodiment of all the best possible qualities, from the one side, with rude reality of daily life and real man and woman with common real characters, a mixture of pleasant and unpleasant features or simply real ones. The message of the film multiplies the shades of meaning, according to Eco’s idea: “…I am saying that usually a single sign-vehicle conveys many intertwined contents and therefore what is commonly called a “message” is in fact a text whose content is a multileveled discourse” (Eco, 1976, p.57). Films by Norah Ephron are full of shades of meaning, ambiguities and multiple plot layers that make her film so fascinating and out-of the ordinary. Romance and comedy, the genres with which Norah Ephron operates, “can also be understood as fictional modes-that is, as ways of treating the narrative, or more precisely, as particular ways of imagining the diegetic world” (Glitre, 2006, p.9). Winn, following the idea of romantic genres being prone to hidden messages, suggest that “in romantic movies, relational decisions are more dramatic and sudden” which makes the plot seem more intense and meaningful (Winn, 2007, p.258).

This revelation of “a multileveled discourse” is possible to see in the analyzed episodes. The semantic level of the conflict between characters (ideological, emotional, ethic and social contradictions) has its own resolution in the plot. The second semantic level is a conflict between a person and reality (a romantic view), a contradiction between the sense of freedom in the dreamy “virtual” world and realization of the idea of necessity. For Kathleen, the realization of this idea of necessity comes when she breaks up with Frank, understanding that she had never loved him and was trying to fill in the emptiness of their relationship with her online relationship with Joe. For Joe the crucial realization comes during his talk with his father, where he understand that “the one person that fills your heart with joy”, as his father puts it, is Kathleen. The realization of necessity is possible only if another hidden conflict is solved, which is an
evident childish dreamy position of both characters conflicting with the demand of life to be adult in the thoughts and actions and to accept the real portrayal of the partner. Also, such conflicting motifs are present in the movie as the topic of masquerade, falsehood and sincerity in communication, the true and wrong decoding of reality by the main characters.

It is possible for the spectators to receive this type of “multileveled” message due to the cultural codes well-known from everyone’s daily communicative practice; a complex form of the film makes it possible, too. These cultural codes and communicative practices of the main protagonists are based on the literary examples that both (Kathleen and Joe) find compelling and suitable for their life situations that in return influence their behavior. The communication in the film is not one-leveled: the audience receives the explicit messages- the dialog of the main characters, and implicit messages- phrases and expressions from the cultural artifact that they are using (Pride and Prejudice and The Godfather) that enables the unconscious comparison of ways of behavior between the main characters and the characters from the books that they are reading. The plot structure analysis underlines regularity of this endless multiplying of semantic structures intimately connected with permanent evident or half-realized conflicts of daily life.

Loneliness as an existential and communicative problem has an inner disagreement lying in the foundation of persons’ relation with the outer world. But the plot structure of the comedy is concerned with more superficial structures, so, special attention has to be paid to it.

Plot Structure

The plot structure, from the point of view of Eco in his “Absent structure”, is “an important part of semantic analysis” (Eco, 1968, p.403). It concerns “not only written narration, but oral tales, intrigues of films, comics’ plot and so on”. Eco based his approach on the theory of the prose of Russian formal scholar of 20th century Boris Tomashevsky (Tomashevsky, 1925,
For the analysis of the plot structure of the movie it is of interest to take into consideration Tomashovsky’s thoughts on the composition of a plot, parallel plot movement, the significance of a final plot situation, special devices of the reinforcing of the sense of situation, modeling the profound impression on the recipient, reader, in our case – spectator (Tomashovsky, 1925, pp.243-256; Eco, 1968, p.404). Tomashovsky’s and Eco’s theories, along with other scholarship, are still prominent today in terms of the Film Theory research. Along with such female scholars as Suzanne Cord, Elizabeth Krimmer and Laura Winn cited earlier, they encompass the semiotic analysis as a vital part of any film scholarship. In any case, the investigation of the plot structure involves the analysis of a system of motifs, the principle of composition of the plot. The material analyzed could be described adequately through realizing the role of the leitmotifs and the meaning of the parallel structures of the plot.

The plot structure of this movie consists of a system of motifs that integrate life realities of the main characters. The main, prominent motif of this movie is loneliness that is a part of different aspects of life. Loneliness is constructed through a system of signs that give certain, differentiating meanings to the analyses (Danesi, 2000, p.24-56). Loneliness is seen as an inner conflict of the main characters with the outer world. For Kathleen Kelly, her sense in life was constructed through her mother’s will to leave her the shop. The inner loneliness is constructed through the “wish” and through the “can”. The contrast between what the heroine wants and what she was given as a road to follow creates a strong inner conflict that has its impact on her real relationship with her boyfriend (Frank Navasky) and her search for another, potential ideal love. It is represented in her dialogue with Frank, when they are mutually breaking up:

FRANK: What about you? Is there someone else?
KATHLEEN: Oh, somewhere out there, I'm sure. Somewhere. In cyberspace.

*(You've Got Mail, 1998)*

Kathleen’s “hope for something else” triggers the unsettling feeling of misplacement in her life that could be seen as a deeply rooted loneliness. In the semiotic analysis of this situation we could see loneliness as a system of codes (cultural codes such as books, popular culture), and main motifs (such as loneliness, love, quest for love, as a reflection of the cultural code accepted by Kathleen) that constitutes it: the inability to have what one wants, the illusionary wish to find a perfect partner, and expectation violations (NY152 does not come to her date, he turns out what Kathleen thought he wouldn’t be).

Deleyto in his book “The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy” points out that comedy follows a certain pattern of comic evolution and that “there can be little doubt that a happy ending is a recurrent convention of the genre…” (Deleyto, 2009, p.24). Steve Neal and Frank Krutnik, following the discussion of the plot evolution in romantic comedies, suggest that “a happy ending implies an aesthetic context” (Neal & Krutnik, 1990, p.17). But for the happy ending to take place, there must be a certain conflict that gets resolved (as a sign of possible freedom from restricted circumstances), that makes the happy ending possible.

Therefore, if a mandatory step in the plot evolving of romantic comedy is a happy ending, we must acknowledge the necessity of conflict as a step in the plot evolvement. The motif of loneliness has to be released through another motif – a motif of friendship and love that as we see in this particular movie, will be a release, a way out, liberation for the inner conflict of the main characters. As a result, the initial communicative situation of loneliness transforms into successful communication, the inner contradiction (between what the protagonist wants and what the protagonist can have) that caused the state of loneliness was overcome.
Another motif presented in the film is the motif of search. It is clearly represented in one of Kathleen’s letters to Joe, where she talks about “sending a message into the void.” The idea of conversing with another person online, and being infatuated by him, is very similar to being in love with a fictional book character (Kathleen, in one of her letters, admits her love to Mr. Darcy from “Pride and Prejudice”). Kathleen and Joe try to get to know each other through the “meaningless” emails that they both send and through the written manifestation of each other’s thoughts they construct a certain “real” character inside their minds, so that when Joe goes to meet Kathleen in a cafe for the first time and Kevin looks at her and confirms that she is pretty Joe exclaims “She had to be! She had to be!” (You’ve Got Mail, 1998)

Main Characters from a Semiotic Point of View

From the point of view of modern semioticians (Eco; Mertz) the protagonists of the text, especially cinema protagonists are a system of codes, every feature of their image in the movie could be interpreted as a sign or a combination of signs. Daniel Chandler, a modern scholar, writes about social codes of the character: “We communicate our social identities through the work we do, the way we talk, the clothes we wear, our hairstyles, our eating habits … and so on. Language use acts as a key marker of social identity.” This notion is very important for our comprehension of the protagonists’ story in the movie. The audience tends to compare their life experiences with the movie plot and the events of the character’s life in a film. So, we have to actualize our own life experience to understand the alien life of another person. And Daniel Chandler is right: “We learn to read the world in terms of the codes and conventions which are dominant within the specific socio-cultural contexts and roles within which we are socialized” (Chandler, 2001, p.154, 156). Eco suggests that in culture “every entity can become a semiotic phenomenon. The laws of signification are the laws of culture. For this reason culture allows a
continuous process of communicative exchanges, in so far as it subsists as a system of systems of signification” (Eco, 1976, p.28). In the process of identification of the sense of the history of the protagonist we have to compare (consciously or unconsciously) our life experience and the picture of a human life aesthetically transformed by the creators of the film. So, the shown reality will have more density of significance than reality of our biographical life. Every detail (hair-do, dress-code, manner of speaking) is more important in case of the protagonist’s life than in ours. In real life the expression of the face could be occasional, in the film plot the expression of the face of the character is a part of a system of conventional codes. For example, a light smile on the face of Kathleen at the beginning of the film is significant in relation to the image she constructs (a good-natured woman): to the plot situation (she does not know about the life situation which expects her), to the development of communication with others (a smiling face motivates the sense of communicative situation - a good contact with friends and colleagues in the book-shop and justifies the unexpectedness of future business misfortunes). And Meg Ryan has a variety of expressions to convey every instance of her character’s life.

To analyze the main characters we can only choose the hypersematic plot situations according to the formalist approach to the film destiny of a protagonist as a part of plot development. The purpose of this analysis is to reveal the artistic embodiment and semantic evolution of the leitmotif of loneliness in the plot situations of the comedy. We need to investigate the artistic sense of some clue scenes of the plot development. They are internally connected with the topic of masquerade, falsehood and sincerity in communication, the true and wrong decoding of reality by the main characters. This is a subject of semiotics, as modern scholar Thomas Albert Sebeok mentions: “Semiotics is something, by means of which we can conjure reality from illusion by the use of signs …” (Sebeok, 1991, p.2). This belief of the author
in epistemological power of the method justifies itself in the aesthetic system of the plot structure of the film, in the chain of the most important scene in which the main characters participate. The most important for the understanding of the laws of the existence of the leitmotif of loneliness in the film, as mentioned earlier, are: the scene in book store, at a party, a night scene.

A crucial moment in the development of the main characters is their meeting in reality at a, what would seem, dinner for literary critics and book store owners. This is a typical crisis in the plot movement. The moment is crucial because the social masks of the characters meet, while the inner characters are still hidden. The characters meet without knowing that the other person is their friend from the chat room. However, even in this meeting Joe shows a little bit of himself: “The reason that I came into your store was because I was spending the day with Annabel and Matt and I was buying them presents. I’m the type of guy who likes to buy his way into the hearts of children, or his relatives” (You’ve Got Mail, 1998). Kathleen seems to be taken by rage when she finds out that Joe was her rival and was presumably spying on her at her bookstore, but her gestures show the opposite - she “invades” his space by taking the caviar garnish from his plate; a gesture that is both intimate and familiar. Joe, however, taken by a businessman killer instinct, crashes her ideas about the book business. What is also vitally important about this scene is the unexpected appearance of Joe’s and Kathleen’s partners. Mocked by Joe and Kathleen through non-verbal gestures, they appear as antagonists of the two main characters. In other words, they give an impression that those are absolute opposites with whom Joe and Kathleen should be. Not only are Frank (Kathleen’s partner) and Patricia (Joe’s partner) are a lot more grounded, but they seem to be living in the present moment, while Joe and Kathleen are always searching for an alternative possibilities, through their email interactions.
Loneliness becomes especially prominent in the “night scene” that follows the dinner scene. Distancing themselves from their partners, perhaps without even realizing it, they go online to write to each other about the emotional scene that both have experienced. The idea of sharing an emotionally important event with someone else, a person they met in a chat room, and not with their present partners, throws them in the circle of lonely behavior, and that becomes a semantic code of their actions. The restaurant scene was an emotionally important even for both Joe and Kathleen since both came in there to meet the person they were falling in love with, yet both had to put on the invisible armor and defend themselves from the judgment of the other. This even is made all the more important when Kathleen and Joe write about it to each other, analyzing their feelings and behavior at the café.

The emails that the main characters send to each other are an important cultural code in the semiotically significant analysis of the movie. The letters perform a part of the liberation from the realities of daily life. The two main characters (Joe and Kathleen) are bound to daily interaction with other people (including their partners) and sending emails to them is a form of connecting to their inner selves and a way of distancing from their present relationships. An important moment in Joe-Kathleen’s online relations comes when Kathleen, after accidentally bumping into Joe online, asks him for business advice. The irony of the situation is that Joe himself gives Kathleen an action plan against him and his competition in real world. He says: “You're at war. "It's not personal, it's business. It's not personal, it's business." Recite that to yourself every time you feel you're losing your nerve. I know you worry about being brave, this is your chance. Fight. Fight to the death.” (You’ve Got Mail, 1998)
Interestingly, the dialog includes a “picture inside the picture” situation, for Joe is quoting “The Godfather” almost after every other line. The heroine’s question clarifies the sense of this parallel not only for her, but for the spectators, too:

KATHLEEN : What is it with men and The Godfather?

JOE: The Godfather is the I Ching. The Godfather is the sum of all wisdom. The Godfather is the answer to any question. What should I pack for my summer vacation?

"Leave the gun, take the cannoli." What day of the week is it? "Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Wednesday." And the answer to your question is "Go to the mattresses."

(*You’ve Got Mail*, 1998)

In this passage the movie follows a Shakespearian tradition of “theatre inside theater” performance, where a play (a movie, in this case) is referencing another movie as a vital part of understanding the world, the character itself and the meaning of the symbolic life that surrounds the character. The way each character communicates with the world through symbols that form a system of meanings, the worldview that is characteristic of the state that they find themselves in. The world here is performing the role of a field of action - the main characters struggle through it and with it in search of their ultimate goals - love, career success and peace of mind. What is interesting and makes both characters alike is that their field of action - their semiotic system of symbols and signifiers - collide in a lot of points. Kathleen and Joe are both in a book business, they are both passionate about reading, and as Kathleen says herself, she “gets lost” in a lot of books. Their life, however, was imposed on them – Joe has inherited and works as a part of Fox family business and Kathleen took over her mom’s store.
Style

The style of this movie is very characteristic, for from the Semiotic point of view, the film’s cultural codes are intricate and incisive. The main characters communicate through different code systems, one of which is the “cultural code” (Eco, 1970). A given cultural code is built into the film - the main characters look at the world not through their own eyes, but through the prism of the books that they read - through the book events that are connected with other heroes, written by other authors. The plot conflict, therefore, comes to be more interesting and complex, any situation has a double side to it. The conflict in the given romantic comedy is not only between the characters, but between texts as well. Characters are not only guided by the texts, but seem to try to follow their plots in their real life. For Joe his guiding text is the book “The Godfather,” whose main hero is a strong person in the mafia that goes over a lot of people to get to the top, following the motto that Joe always follows “It’s not personal, it’s business”.

Kathleen’s text is different from Joe’s and a lot more feminine than his; it’s the “Pride and Prejudice” book where the entire plot is connected with senses, with feeling, with everything that is personal. And when Joe comes to visit her and quotes his favorite line from the “The Godfather,” she answers “What does it mean? I’m so sick of this. For me it is personal.” In comparison of these two books, the heroine of “Pride and Prejudice” loses to the hero of the “The Godfather,” from the “sensitive” point of view. The contradiction of what the character wants and what the character can have inevitably leads to loneliness. Kathleen moves from inner loneliness to actual, perceivable one - Kathleen loses her store, breaks up with her partner Frank, and remains alone.

However, the breaking point in the plot story comes when Joe, having won everything, realizes that he is actually alone and lonely. He realizes that wining Kathleen in her business
meant nothing for he came to complete loneliness himself. In other words, due to his victory, the state of loneliness becomes prominent in his life. This turning point can clearly be seen in Joe’s talk with his father on their boat. Joe’s dad had just broken up with his third wife and talks about Joe’s nannies that he had affairs with. He is very optimistic and says “Then I get to meet someone new. That’s the easy part.” To which Joe responds “Oh, right, a snap to find the one single person in the world who fills your heart with joy.” To what his dad responds “Don’t be ridiculous. Have I ever been with anyone who fits that description? Have you?” This is the turning point in Joe’s inner conflict situation, for he realizes that if he does not do anything about his life, he will end up just like his dad - alone. At the same time he realizes that “a single person in the world” who fills his heart with joy is Kathleen and from that point on we see the reverse of the movie plot. Joe decides to win Kathleen over and this time it is very personal to him. The comic resolution from this timely conflict is therefore connected with a simple idea – that it is impossible to be happy on your own, the possibility of happiness comes from being with another person, and therefore he must make another person happy to be happy himself. His inner loneliness problem therefore is released through the realization of what he wants and what would really make his happiness possible.

Musical Codes in the Plot Structure

Eco (1979) underlines that semiotics studies all cultural processes of communication and musical codes (Eco, 1979, p. 8-10). Music, according to Eco, represents, on the one hand, the problem of a semiotic system without a semantic level (or a content plane); on the other hand, there are music “signs” (or syntagms) with an explicit denotative value: trumpet signals or entire “texts” possessing pre-culturalized connotative value (“pastoral” or “thrilling” music, etc.) In different historical eras music was conceived as conveying precise emotional and conceptual
meanings established by codes, also known as “repertoires” (Eco, 1979, p. 11). According to Eco’s idea of an “open work” the author’s message could be enriched with musical codes. In the movie the accompanying music has a very precise character of “pastoral” music in compliance with the genre of a romantic comedy. The usage of popular songs is a constant device which supports plot development. As a result, the semantic density of the film’s text is increased. Moreover, the songs’ lyrics interact with the contents of events, creating a different sub layer that is meant to help the audience understand the essence of the movie. A close analysis of the types of semantic interrelations of the songs’ lyrics (permanent influence of a “pastoral” emotional component remains the same) gives a possibility of establishing a variety of additional meanings and connotations.

You’ve Got Mail (1998) starts with Harry Nilsson’s The Puppy Song with the lines in which the verbs are used in unreal present: “If only I could have a friend/Who sticks with me until the end” – explanation of the facts. The song’s major message is expressed in the following lines: “But dreams are nothing more than wishes/ And a wish’s just a dream you wish to come true/ Dreams are nothing more than wishes/ (Your wish will come true)” – that reflects promise (Nilsson, 1969).

Cranberries’ Dreams accompanies the episode when the heroes walk to their bookstores in the morning and the heroine reads her email to her email friend NY152: “I hear nothing in the streets of New York just the beat of my heart. I have mail from you!” (You’ve Got Mail, 1998). The key phrase of the song is: “It’s never quite as it seems/ ‘cause you’re a dream to me”- which could be interpreted as a warning (O’Riordan, 1997).

Rockin’ Robin by Jimmie Thomas supports the whole episode of entertainment when Joe Fox takes the children of his relatives on a tour of New York. The city is meant as a cozy
“supporting” context of the film. Inner conflicts do not come to the surface because life is carefree and full of fun: “Cause we’re really gonna rock tonight” – which could be interpreted as a promise of a happy future (Thomas, 1972).

When Joe brings the children to the Shop Around the Corner the heroine is happy (“Let Fox go to hell!”) and she smiles at Joe, the song Never smile at a Crocodile (written by Frank Churchill and Jack Lawrence) sounds as prompting for further action: “Never smile at a crocodile/ No, you can’t get friendly with a crocodile/ Don’t be taken in by his welcome grin” – which underlines an evident warning (Churchill & Lawrence, 1955).

The Dummy Song (Lew Brown, Billy Rose, Ray Henderson) is the background music of the episode when Joe and Kathleen meet in a supermarket and the heroine displays her aggressive attitude to Joe: “I get more loving from the dum-dum-dummy/ That I ever got from you” – reinforcement (Brown, Rose & Henderson, 1944).

A viewer gets another sign from Tomorrow (Charles Strouse, Martin Charnin) when a child sings at a family gathering: “I love ya tomorrow/Tomorrow/You’re only a day away!” - which underlines prediction (Strouse & Charnin, 1977). Harry Nilsson’s Remember covers two episodes when Burdie (Kathleen’s bookkeeper and friend) watches the Fox’s bookstore window and when Joe offers advice to Kathleen in his email (“I’m great at advice”): “Dream, love is only in a dream, remember / Remember life is never as it seems. Dream” – that offers the viewer (and the characters in the movie) the clarification of their situation (Nilsson, 1966).

The lyrics signal that the dreams of those working at the Shop Around the Corner will never come true and it is doubtful that Kathleen will take Joe’s advice. Later, after an unsuccessful attempt to turn a dream into reality, Kathleen returns from the café (where Joe did not come to meet her) and the sign of further plot development comes through Johnny Mercer’s Dream:
“Things are never as bad as they seem/So dream, dream, dream”- that comforts the spectators with a promise of a brighter plot development (Lory, Hogan, Yocum & Hopper, 1951).

The melody of Harry Nilsson’s *Remember* in the episode of the last days of the Shop Around the Corner (a viewer sees the notice “All Stock 40% Off” in the shop window) implies the motif of loss of cultural memory and values of the past when Kathleen comes to bid farewell to her now empty shop. *Remember* connects the past, the present, and the future: “Remember life is just a memory/Remember close your eyes and you can see/Remember think of all that life can be/Remember”-that implies foreshadowing (Nilsson, 1966).

*Lonely at the Top* by Randy Newman accompanies Joe’s conversation with his father after several dramatic episodes in both men’s lives: Joe left his girlfriend and his father divorced his wife who left him for her lesbian partner: “I’ve been around the world, had my pick of any girl/ You’d think I’d be happy but I’m not/ Ev’rybody knows my name/ But it’s just a crazy game oh, it’s lonely at the top”-that portrays reinforcement of the state of loneliness (Newman, 1979). This conversation is a new stage in the plot development and his father’s question (irony): “One single person in the world who fills your heart with joy… Have I ever been with anybody who fits that description? Have you?” - is a turning point in Joe’s life. The answer to the question is in the next song *Signed, Sealed, Delivered* (Stevie Wonder, Lee Garrett, Lula Hardaway): “You got my future in your hands/Here I am baby/Signed, Sealed. Delivered, I’m yours”-that predicts, or at least hints at, the happy ending (Wonder, Garrett & Hardaway, 1970). This is a semantic boundary after which Harry Nilsson’s *I Guess The Lord Must Be In New York City* signals overcoming of the state of loneliness: “I’ll say goodbye to all my sorrows/And by tomorrow, I’ll be on my way/I guess the Lord must be in New York City”-that could be interpreted as foreshadowing (Nilsson, 1969). This song accompanies the episode prior to the
final resolution of the conflict and the final episode is supported by *Over the Rainbow* (E.Y. Harburg and Harold Arlen): “Somewhere over the rainbow/Skies are blue/And dreams that you dare to dream/Really do come true” – that explicitly states the promise of a happier life (Harburg & Arlen, 1930). Besides the additional meanings and connotations, the role of another concept can be singled out: continuing dreaming as a form of existence. The concept of “dream” is present in the fifty per cent of all songs of the film; twenty five per cent go for the concept of “now” and, equally, twenty five per cent for the concept of “tomorrow.”
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Modern cultural situation includes the concept of loneliness in the circle of the most important problems of human communication because despite the speedy development of different ways of interconnections or interrelations between modern people (such as all types of computer links through the Internet or others) the problem of loneliness stays significant and, paradoxically, partly irresolvable for our contemporaries mostly due to its unclearness and, possibly, too many components creating variability for modern cultural consciousness.

The spheres of human thoughts which are connected with the problem of loneliness, its comprehension, recognition and possible resolution are well-known. These are special fields of philosophy, religion, social psychology, psychoanalysis, philosophical literature, such serious type as the literature of existentialism (Sartre, for example) or modern authors devoting their works to the problem of “loneliness in the crowd.”

From a common point of view, the problem seems to be at the same time psychologically intriguing and intellectually somewhat unclear for modern scholars. This is evident from metaphorical names/titles of most of books and papers devoted to the problem, for example, there are books named *The Anatomy of Loneliness*, or *The Loneliness in the Core, The Pursuit of Loneliness: American culture at the Breaking Point, Paths of Loneliness: The Individual Isolated in Modern Society* and the books defining loneliness even more poetically: *Alone in Space, Embracing Solitude* or with medical exactness, *Loneliness -- an American epidemic*. This addition of expressive definition to all attempts to define the phenomenon of loneliness demonstrates that the concept of this state of human solitude remains enigmatic from the point of view of rational investigation until nowadays.
“The enigmatic phenomenon of loneliness” according to an apt expression by Karin Dahlberg attracted, possibly due to its enigma (providing a wide field for creative activity and imagination of script-writers), many prominent producers of American movies. As it is well-known, the list of the famous directors includes such renowned names as Stephen Spielberg, or Steven Sodenbergh. These movies are known as very serious works devoted to dramatic aspects of human life (such as, for example, Solaris directed by Steven Sodenbergh).

In fact, the genre of romantic comedy that was investigated in this thesis is, from external point of view, in direct contradiction with “the enigmatic phenomenon of loneliness” as the basis for profound thinking on inevitable imperfectness of human life. The main feature of comedy genre is the happy resolution of all life conflicts of heroes; a happy end is an obligatory condition for the movie to satisfy the expectations of the audience. In this strong semantic relation between the audience and the author’s message this expectation of a happy resolution of the plot could be compared to the common human need for consolation, for soothing hard life impressions on the audience. The authors of the comedy film have to give the fullness of genre embodiment to the audience and, simultaneously, save the seriousness of the interpretation of the problem of loneliness. This could be realized only if romantic comedy is constructed on such events of the plot that convince the audience that the comedy’s conflict could be resolved, even if naivety of this resolution was evident both to the authors and the audience.

The great success and stable popularity of the three romantic comedies under analysis make researchers think that the “author’s message” (in Eco’s terms) is not merely acceptable for the audience but permits to see something new and very attractive. It could be something new in the comedies’ plot structure or in the performance of the actors – in their art of the creation of the
images or in additional positive impressions from films due to nice music, art of a cameraman, and computer design in the construction of the shots.

The three romantic comedies of the 90s, despite the diversity of plot situations, characters, events and artistic devices, have much in common, especially in the interpretation of reality. These similar features concern mostly two aspects: (1) the search for the true self of the main characters and (2) the supportive world picture around them. The friendliness and supportiveness of the surrounding circumstances and events play a special role in the film message: it affirms the effectiveness of positive thinking that helps the characters find ways to happiness. From a common point of view, loneliness is evaluated mostly as a wrong position of the person, so, the development of the comedy plot must develop from initial solitude of a character (as a wrong attitude toward the world) to the reunion with other people.

This plot scheme seems to be a little bit artificial, but in the artistic space of the film this outer world is represented as full of blessings, kindness, friendliness and love. The role of this fairytale space (in all three comedies of the 90s) is played by New York as a special place of adventures, sudden changes of the heroes’ intentions, and happy endings to the stories. NYC is undoubtedly mythologized, due to its special role in the plot of the three comedies. Umberto Eco in his analysis of Casablanca mentions that there is a special function of myths in the film (“this dance of eternal myths”- as he metaphorically describes the semantic structure of Casablanca) (Eco, 1986, p. 45). New York plays the role of such reincarnation of the eternal myth—it embodies the archetype of Promise Land in Sleepless in Seattle and the archetype of Wonderland in the other two comedies. The magic influence of the film image of New York on the audience could be explained by the peculiarities of the semantic structure of comedies. The reinforcement of the impression of the image of NY on the audience in all three films is prepared by the
cinematic tradition – the previous aesthetic evaluation of NYC in romantic comedies (analyzed in the chapters). Eco explains this effect in *Casablanca*:

But precisely because all the archetypes are here, precisely because *Casablanca* cites countless other films, and each actor repeats a part played on other occasions, the resonance of intertextuality plays upon the spectator.” (Eco, 1994, p. 264)

This “resonance of intertextuality” enriches the image of mythologized city of New York (every character of the three comedies becomes happy in this place). This is possible due to a very long tradition of admiration of this City in cinema, literature and, especially, lyrics devoted to the “glorified” place. And this is in one accord with the atmosphere of joy of life and laughter created by the genre of romantic comedy. The optimistic look at life events is very attractive to the audience of the movies of the 90s; it suggests that there is something in human existence that permits to believe in the future and this belief, in its turn, could be based on the bright side of human nature. Lonely heroes are called out from their solitude to be acclaimed by the external world but only after their acknowledgement of the laws of common daily life and agreement to do “like people do.”

The three romantic comedies devoted to the topic of loneliness belong to the epoch of the 90s and they belong to the history of the cinema. At the same time, the analysis of “the craft of fiction” of these three films has reopened the very good artistic quality of these works and permitted to explain the substantiality of the popularity of these rom-coms during a long period of time. The investigation of the content and form in their correlation proves that these films resolved the collision between a serious idea of loneliness and comical interpretation of it. They are not only the most successful embodiment of the laws of the rom-com genre, but they
represent the realization of the main principles of American cultural tradition: optimism, the presupposition of spiritual freedom of man, the idea of equality of genders and races.

The analysis demonstrates that the films reestablish the system of traditional moral values: the need and possibility to be happy, the search for true love and its inevitable finding, the values of naivety as purity in human relations as well as traditional simplicity in the interpretation of complicated psychological situations. But maybe the most valuable matter is the idea lying in the foundation of the plot of the films: a special sense of belief in the world, the trust in daily life and unity with common people, the like-mindedness of the main characters which is being revealed in the flow of the plot events in every comedy.

The comical interpretation of the events of the hero’s life is not in contradiction with the serious obstacle the main characters have to overcome – to get rid of solitude. Every film consists of a number of communicative situations, very specific and diverse at the same time. It gives the audience a huge spectrum of possible psychological resolutions, successful and unsuccessful, and this plays a role of a cheerful hand-book of life for the audience. But this educational content of romantic comedies is not evident without a special analysis because the didactic idea is in visible contradiction with the main purpose of every comedy – to entertain the audience, but very often all the three works are the source of wisdom in the audience’s attempt to try to understand or decode the message of the authors of the films.

The analysis of “the author’s message” permits to realize the specific feature of the comedies: they are deeply rooted in the tradition of American culture. They interplay with the artistic devices of the most popular American films, books and songs. And this sets a new problem. As postmodern works, the three comedies have a dense concentrate of quotations,
allusions, stylizations and parodies of the cultural past, revived in the rich form of romantic comedy.

In relation to the topic of the thesis, it was established that it was possible for the audience to receive multileveled message due to the cultural codes well-known from everyone’s daily communicative practice. Well-known quotations, songs, comic situations from previous popular romantic comedies and melodramas are included in this daily communicative practice unconsciously and are not so influenced by daily routine, but in the artistic space of the film they create a new understanding of the problem and the big picture of life.

Loneliness as an existential and communicative problem was analyzed in the thesis as part of the plots of the films; however the half-realized conflicts of daily life in the movies need further investigation. This problem is of importance both from the point of view of the creation of a rich, complex form of the film in the genre of modern romantic comedy and for the modern communicative theory that is trying to investigate all hidden conflicts of daily life to optimize the communication. The materials analyzed in the chapters permit a comparative analysis of comedies of different genres and epochs.

The investigation of the numerous forms and reasons for modern human solitude and the actors’ performance give scholars a verity of topics for exploration. The richness of artistic devices in creating the images of lonely people gives more impulses to differentiate more human types in a variety of psychological situations. The comicality as the main principle of interpretation of the serious life situations gives more freedom not only for the characters of rom-coms but even for the investigators in their search for a more optimistic view on the laws of human life.
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