Looking Through a Lens: A Viewer's Story about Love and the Movies

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Introduction: The Fall from Illusion

I never realized how much movies influenced my life until I saw James Cameron’s *Titanic* (1997) for the second time. It was early March 1998, I was studying in Prague and coping with a deteriorating relationship. Unannounced and against my wishes, my boyfriend of four years had traveled across Europe to convince me of “our” love. Once in Prague, he would not leave and neither one of us knew quite what to do given the situation. One night, I suggested we go see *Titanic*. I had already seen it with my friends in Prague and wanted to see it again despite my initial disappointment with the movie. As we watched, I cried from start to finish and held my boyfriend’s hand. As we waited for the tram to take us home, however, I felt ripped off. The love depicted in *Titanic*, transcendental and everlasting, was a sham.

Real life was not what was depicted on the screen, and I felt lead on. I was looking at my boyfriend, whom I once thought I would spend the rest of my life with, but who had just violated all sense of boundaries and respect in our relationship. I always knew that films were not an actual depiction of reality, but I believed that the essence of a movie could be realized in real life. My reality in Prague completely contradicted the one on screen, which was the first time that I saw movie’s depicted love as an illusion rather than as an ideal. As I grew more disillusioned, I realized that my definition of love itself was rooted in one of my favorite movies: Cameron Crowe’s *Say Anything...* (1989).

From watching *Say Anything*, I created a philosophy that was the basis for meaning in my life derived from love, honesty, and individuality as life’s most important elements. It was not a philosophy as defined by the rationale of Plato or Sophocles because it was highly influenced by my experiences as a teenager and reinforced by a teenage-themed movie. As a teenager, things are not always rational, and all the emotional experiences of the time influenced by perceptions,
and therefore, my philosophy of life. Philosophy, to me, is synonymous with ideals that I believe in and it enables me to define truth in my life. Truth, however, is not an objective reality, but one determined by my rational and emotional understanding of the experiences I encounter. I know that my philosophy and my concept of truth are extremely idealistic when applied to the world because they were borne out of a time when ideals were the basis for my struggle into adulthood. While experience has given me more perspective on life, idealism is still the foundation for what I believe in. An ideal is the only objective reference point in life to help understand the world around me and the world I live in.

*Say Anything* was my paradigm of love. I saw the relationship between the two main characters, Lloyd Dobler and Diane Court, as an ideal that I wanted to have in my life. I thought the relationship between Lloyd and Diane was different than the surrounding relationships of the movie and I, similarly, wanted to find something different than the divorced or arguing parents I saw around me. Especially as a teenager, defining myself as different from the adult world was a way to assert my independence and my individuality. With my experience in Prague, I felt like I had adopted a false belief system. I did not understand how a movie could have such an affect on my life. I realized that I saw my reality through a type of lens; my identity, my goals in life - all were extensions of my understanding of *Say Anything*. I did not know who I was anymore because I had made *Say Anything* a representation of my identity. I felt betrayed by my boyfriend because I truly believed he embodied everything I had felt and hoped for watching *Say Anything*. Now that our relationship was not following that ideal, I did not know how to let go of the failing relationship without letting go of the beliefs I constructed out of the movie that had guided my life. I had betrayed myself by building a belief system out of illusion, which ultimately failed.
For the past year, I struggled to understand what I had done and reconstruct an identity and a philosophy of life that was based on my reality as I experienced it. I am still struggling, and my thesis has become a medium for this exploration and resolution. I cannot reject my belief system entirely because it supported my actions for the past ten years of my life and was the basis for how I understood my experiences. The philosophy I constructed, however, was not due to *Say Anything* itself, but my reading of the movie. That reading style became a prototype for how I interpreted my life and reality, how I watched other movies, and ultimately influenced how I related to other people. After one year of trying to refute all that I had believed in, I do not regret forming such a reading style because it brought valuable meaning to my life. Through the help of my disillusionment, though, I hope to have some distance on a process that I have never been self-aware of.

I want to work through my reading style, using *Say Anything* as an example, and ultimately reevaluate the ideals I associate with the movie. What I have always felt as an avid movie-goer was that I derive personal meaning from movies by incorporating them into my reality and my identity. I came up with three premises to define how I achieve such incorporation. One, movies are text and most closely approximate human interaction due to projected human images. As a text, movies create the illusion of relating to another person. Two, movies are stories about experiences that in their presentation offer an interpretation of what those experiences could mean to the characters involved. Three, my reading style relies on identification as the route for attaining meaning from those texts. I view movies as I would listen to another’s story, i.e. I identify with the experiences depicted in an attempt to understand that experience and the characters’ actions. If I cannot relate, I find the story difficult to believe. Identification evokes memories, feelings, experiences, that are the viewer’s own, and gives a lens
to view and interpret those evocations. While I cannot truly equate watching a movie to having a relationship with another human being, the combination of visual images representing a form of human life and interpretations on various themes in society create a compelling rendering of our relationships. For ten years, I was like most people – unaware of my reading style. In trying to gain some self-awareness of a process that influenced my identity, I am trying to understand both myself and film as an affective medium. While I believe the three premises outlined above are relatively basic in principle, there are several aspects to my reading style that are not what most people think of when discussing film viewing. One, I watched *Say Anything* repeatedly. Two, when I watch movies, I watch myself through the lenses that they provide. Three, my reading style is not confined to the two hours of watching not only because I tend to watch movies repeatedly, but also because a movie becomes a memory that lasts long after the movie ends.

My experience in Prague accurately portrays my reading style and its affects. I entered the theater as an individual, but quickly became part of a mass audience. My viewing of *Titanic* was highly emotional as I cried from beginning to end because I identified with the suffering, the hope, and the humanity that was expressed during the movie. The movie evoked the belief that love could triumph over all obstacles because love gives meaning to life. It even made life immortal through love. I was overwhelmed by the visual images surrounding me. All of these aspects – the filming, the scenes, the story – encouraged my identification. Once I left the theater, I became an individual again. The images had stopped and I had only my memory of them. In the light, I faced my reality once more; the boyfriend, the breakup, the hurt feelings. In this case, I could not even attempt to associate the film’s evocation with my reality. I began to deconstruct what I believed when faced with this conflict and both the film and my reality
crumbled to expose the underlying illusion. I had come to the theater open to suggestion and left trying to understand the relevance, or lack thereof, to my reality.

By exploring my reading style, I hope to define a new theory of film viewing, one that tries to approximate the viewer experience. After my disillusionment, I tried to find a film theory that would explain what had happened to me, why I had been so influenced by a movie. I ended up reading Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1944). The essay criticizes popular film and its audience as manipulated by the film industry. It took the responsibility away from me and placed it on the evil machinations of the industry that produced the movies. At first I embraced their theory, but as time passed, I realized that I had to deal with film on the level that I experienced it. I could not blame anyone but myself. As I read more theory, I noticed that there was a lot of theory about film and the viewer experience, but none that ever accurately described my own experience. In creating my own theory, I want to respond to the analyses of film theorists, in particular Horkheimer and Adorno’s essay.

The pressing need to understand my reading style and form a corresponding film theory comes from the influence films have on my life. The two genres that Say Anything falls into, teen and romantic, portray experiences that are most similar to my own. When I respond to a movie through identification, that movie becomes more compelling because of its relevance. That relevance, then, becomes the impetus for a movie’s influence. I am in the process of trying to understand my own experiences at this point, so it is consistent that most of the movies I watch fall into these two genres. I am only twenty-one years old and my teenage years are ones that I am still trying to understand. Given that my last relationship spanned from my senior year in high school until my junior year in college, there are elements from those years that are still
unresolved. I believe there is more to watching these films than just a two-hour fantasy: they
offer a promise of a future beyond the turbulent teenage years because they promote love and
individuality.

The creation of a film theory based on my experiences attempts to present my reading
style as a valid one for a more general audience. The new media hype over youth-oriented
movies illustrates the possibility that my reading style could extend at least to the teenagers in
society. “...Kids want to see something on screen that they see in themselves.”¹ Teenagers go to
movies where they can identify with the characters, where they can identify with the experiences
depicted because they are going through similar experiences themselves. Not only are teen
movies thriving, but teen-targeted television shows are increasing in popularity as well, such as
The WB's Dawson's Creek. These movies and television shows are shaping the way preteens
are projecting their ideas about the future, shaping the way teens look at themselves, and shaping
the way that post-teenagers are understanding their past.

Teen/love films cater to the development of a reading style similar to my own because
they present the needs and experiences relevant to teenage life, in particular to young women's
lives. Most of the cinema audiences for teen/love movies that I have seen were composed of
young women. The movie industry became aware of these demographics with the success of
Titanic, made so profitable by teenage girls.² The intended targeting of thirteen year-old girls is
especially relevant to my thesis because I was twelve years old when I first saw Say Anything. I

² “The phenomenal success of Titanic has opened industry eyes to the fact that young women can make or break a
movie.” Rachel Giese, “13 year-old girls rule the world. Teenagers are the fastest-growing demographic and girls
are a largely unexploited market. But will buying power really bring empowerment?” The Toronto Star, February
think the reading style that these girls are developing is similar to my own not only because of similar themes in current films like R. Lee Fleming’s *She’s All That* (1999) or Harry Elfont and Deborah Kaplan’s *Can’t Hardly Wait* (1998), but also because the girls are watching these films repeatedly. “In 1997...Fans, especially young women, not only came out in droves [to *Scream*], but came back again and again.”3 These films are teaching today’s girls about love and individuality, much as *Say Anything* taught me. Through repeated viewing, they absorb and incorporate these themes into their concept of self. Popular culture is defining identity.

Identification is a powerful way to understand the world and extends beyond gender, race, age, or experience; yet it is not the only way to read a movie. I do not always go to movies for a probing look at my own identity; I do not always seek a revelation. Like most people, I often go to movies to be entertained and to relax from a stressful day. There are limits to the applicability of my reading style. I watched *Say Anything* on video only and rarely watched it with more than one other person. In this case, *Say Anything* cannot be equated with the general practice of movie theater excursions. Watching a video is a different experience than watching a movie in the theater. However, the fact that both movies and videos contain similar images of human representations contradicts a strong division between film mediums because they can have similar affects on the viewer.

Because of this more universal affect on the viewer, I extend my theory to all images using the medium of film or video, the most important inclusion being television. In addition, while my reading style is rooted in the teen/lone genres, the three premises extend to all

3 Goldstein, *Newsday*. 
movie genres for me. Teen/love films, though, are the only movies that I consistently watch repeatedly, and their relevance to experiences I myself am dealing with again limits the applicability of my reading style. Repeated viewing is also different from watching new movies every week. However, with the recycling of similar themes and actors, watching the new blockbuster movie every weekend is not so dissimilar from watching the same movie repeatedly.

The concept that a depicted human image can evoke emotions and experiences in an audience dates back to Ancient Greece and the theory of catharsis in Aristotle's *Poetics.* Our emotional investment with a movie, heightened by the illusion of human interaction, produces a catharsis of such emotions as we come to understand the characters' actions and, more importantly, our own. I think that people are unaware of their reading style because it is something they experience every day, it is as common as their heart beat. Theories of film viewing that are abstract or psychoanalytical are almost easier to understand because they are purely rational. My theory, though, is rooted in tradition and experience, at once a product of society and my individuality, and I hope to illuminate its various aspects.

I. Style Analysis: Reading for Life

The importance of *Say Anything* for me lies in my interpretation and identifications. I made the movie a philosophy for my own life, not just Cameron Crowe's movie about teenage love. I gave the importance of love, honesty, and individuality, not the movie. *Say Anything* is about two people searching for someone to love, which will bring meaning to their lives. They look for someone who will define their identity as much as they themselves do. As a teenager,

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4 "...A tragedy is a *mimesis* of a high, complete action... in speech pleasurably enhanced... in dramatic not narrative form, effecting through pity and fear the *catharsis* of such emotions." Aristotle, "Poetics," in *The World's Classic Classical Literary Criticism,* ed. D.A. Russell and M. Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 57.
individuality is something to fight for but it is also something extremely isolating. With so many changes emotionally and mentally, feeling alone became one of the strongest emotions during my teenage years. Being able to find people to identify with became a life support. I do not think that the feeling of isolation goes away, though its cause might change – fear of death may become a subconscious motive to escape such isolation. Finding someone to love and to share life with gives life meaning because it takes away the loneliness of isolation that comes with being an individual. A partner is a reference point for identity and gives the feeling that we are part of something bigger than just ourselves.

*Say Anything* was a movie I domesticated during a period of time when I needed to belong. During my teenage years, I domesticated many movies through repeated viewing; I made them my own. There were periods in my life when I rarely watched *Say Anything*, other times when I watched it two or three times a week. Sometimes, I would not even watch the whole movie, just the first part. I first saw *Say Anything* when it came out on video in late 1989. Over ten years of watching, I think I have seen *Say Anything* roughly 100 times. It was a manifestation of what I felt inside and what I hoped to feel in the future. When I saw it as a twelve year-old, *Say Anything* was a representation of the future, one that I desired. I did not have enough experiences to tell me otherwise. An article by Emanuel Berman states that the ability of the VCR to allow repeated viewing creates a style of reading a movie that becomes more self-focused. “...[Through repeated viewing we] gradually decipher the secrets of the film’s impact and, in the process... compare and superimpose at will, externally and inwardly, in our quest to resolve the issues that the film stimulates in us... The VCR can become a tool of film analysis
evolving into self-analysis.” Domesticating *Say Anything* was a means to incorporate and reflect on the type of future I wanted to have. My desire to attain the ideal I saw on screen supported the cultivation of beliefs that resonated with that ideal. Domestication turned self-analysis into self-transformation.

Identifying with film’s images of human life allows the illusion of a shared experience. There is an appeal to the intimacy afforded by the camera because it probes universal aspects of life, and the viewer, in relating to people undergoing similar experiences, feels less alone in his experience of life. Walter Benjamin describes the “...desire of the contemporary masses to bring things closer spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.” Identification is a process that breaks down barriers between reality and fantasy, emotional and intellectual, male and female. Engaging with a film through identification offers a unique exploration of life and a subsequent unique insight into our own lives.

**II. Movie Analysis: The Constructs of Experience**

The construction of *Say Anything* sets up parameters for the viewer experience. From the first scene on, the film visually and aurally encourages the viewer to identify. *Say Anything* opens with three teenage friends sitting around a bedroom talking about graduation. By the opening scene, it is obvious that the movie’s target, or intended, audience is people close to the teenage years, assuming the movie revolves around teenagers who just graduated from high school and are facing all the questions and fears that result. In addition, at least two of the actors

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of this movie are popular actors of the time: Lili Taylor and John Cusack. Ione Skye will eventually be added to the list as well. They are young actors known for playing teenagers and they are popular with the youth culture of the time. Using popular actors encourages viewer identification among the movie’s target audience. The focus on white suburban teenagers reflects the demographic assumptions for that audience. In addition, none of the characters are too rich or too poor, just standard middle class. Subduing the kids’ wealth is another way to include as many lifestyles as possible within the target audience.

What is subtler in the opening of the movie is the background of the scene: teenagers just hanging out and talking. The opening scene reflects the realistic circumstances supporting almost every scene in the film - driving in the car, sitting around in a bathrobe, graduating, taking phone calls - scenes that occur to the general public on a daily basis. Enhancing the realistic tone of the film, are the seamless interactions between actors. The actors deliver their lines as if they are actually engaging in a discussion. Their dialogue contains sentiments that teenagers would commonly say. The ease with which the actors relate to one another conveys the feeling that they are all friends in real life; and, in fact, the actors who portray Lloyd and his sister Constance are brother and sister in real life. Realistic scenes encourage identification and help to create a consensus among the movie’s audience. *Say Anything* allows everyone to fit in with the images on screen. No one is left out. This feeling of fitting in among a teenage audience has tremendous appeal. The filming itself encourages identification; nothing is too bright or too loud so there will not be any distractions from the words and actions of the characters. Almost every scene is shot at the same eye-level as the characters on screen. It puts the audience “right there,” almost as another character in the scene to enhance audience involvement.
Another aspect encouraging identification is the music supporting the scenes. The movie is nearly "wall-to-wall" music, which is common for movies targeting teenagers. Music was extremely important to my identity when I was in high school. The bands I liked distinguished me from other people, somehow represented my identity. Music was also a way to connect with other people. Finding people who identified with the same music was an important way to reinforce my identity at the time because it validated my personal choices. The soundtrack to Say Anything features popular music from the late 1980's. It offers representations of each character (Lloyd likes loud music, Diane likes more subdued music...etc.) and comments on the actions it supports. Just as popular actors would increase viewer identification, popular music would encourage identification as well and make the film more compelling to its teenage audience.

Say Anything sets up a relationship between the projected images and the social reality surrounding the viewer. It promotes from its first scene onward a coming of age movie that will resonate most strongly with an audience going through a similar experience in real life. Its theme and actors would attract an audience ranging predominantly from 13-25. Most of the audience members are about to enter teenage life, are going through it currently, or have just gotten out and are trying to figure out what happened. My teenage years were spent rebelling against my parents in order to establish my own identity, and assert my individuality. I was fighting for my personal freedom and held on to ideals to support my struggle. I was experiencing various aspects of relationships and beginning to understand love and what I wanted from love. The themes in Say Anything, and most teenage movies, largely promote these values and therefore reinforce that struggle for identity. The way those values are presented in a movie can greatly influence a kid’s perceptions of himself and the world around him when the images projected on the screen resonate strongly with his understanding of reality.
Another element of *Say Anything* that plays off the audience’s real-life experiences comes from the external relationships that comment on and provide the context for Diane and Lloyd’s budding relationship. The supporting characters embody a cynicism about love after experiencing betrayals, pain, and the negative aspects associated with love. Diane lives with her father after having to choose between her parents in divorce court five years earlier. Diane’s father eventually betrays her trust by lying about his theft. Lloyd lives with his sister who is a single working mother after her husband ran out on her and her son. Lloyd’s best friend, Corey, tried to kill herself after she found out her now ex-boyfriend was cheating on her the entire relationship. The reality supporting these failed relationships lies in the nearly 50 percent divorce rate\(^7\), and the common failure of teenage relationships. Such a stark reality contrasts the idealistic love that Lloyd and Diane find in each other. The filming and the movie set up identifications through their realistic approach in order to give realism to the developing fantasy of the central love story. This contrast draws more attention to the differences it presents, namely the way the relationship differs from social expectations, and encourages viewer exploration of the value of those different experiences.

The construction and filming of *Say Anything* present obstacles separating Lloyd and Diane. The first and obvious problem is the fact that they do not know each other. The second problem is the distance hindering the two characters’ ability to get to know one another. Diane is the class valedictorian and “Brains stick with brains. The bomb could go off and their mutant genes would still form the same cliques.” This distance becomes visually apparent at graduation. Diane stands at the podium giving the valedictorian speech while Lloyd sits among the rest of the

\(^7\) In 1989, there were 1,157,000 divorces out of 2,403,000 marriages. (48%) U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998* 118\(^{th}\) edition (Washington, D.C. 1998), 111.
graduating class in the bleachers. Another dividing line between Diane and Lloyd are their seemingly conflicting interests. Diane’s scenes are usually with her dad or at the Nursing Home, which is owned by her dad. Lloyd’s scenes are usually with his friends, Corey and D.C., or practicing kickboxing. It sets up the differences between the adult world and the teenage world, the brain and the athlete. The divisions between the two are merely devices to heighten the triumph of the couple once Diane and Lloyd prove that they are right together. At the same time, the movie cannot separate them too much or else the relationship will be less believable. In order to begin a relationship, the two must find some middle ground, or one must go to the other side of the line.

Another parameter set up for the viewer experience lies in the gender ideology working in Say Anything: the male pursues and the female is the target. Lloyd’s ability (or duty?) to assert his identity is stereotypically male and contrasts with Diane’s stereotypically female need for security. Lloyd asserts his (male) authority over Diane, i.e. what he believes in is the truth, while Diane is misguided (as a female dependent on a patriarchy) by the lies of her father. Diane is also misguided by her own ambitions. She is the typical ice queen - too smart for her own good. Her individuality is too strong. While Lloyd likes Diane the way she is, he also drags her down to his level by bringing her to the graduation party. She accepts that she missed out, and questions her own ambitions. I wonder if this does not present a negative view of women who have ambitious goals in their lives. It is an ideology that is still prevalent today.

While the first part of the movie sets up the external situations and obstacles that provide the backdrop of the relationship, the love story begins when Lloyd teaches Diane how to drive her car. For most of the opening section of the movie, Lloyd and Diane spend relatively little time with one another. The opening section serves to define their identities and bring the two
into a common space where they can learn about each other. I stated earlier that *Say Anything* was my paradigm love story, and that depiction of a relationship begins once the two characters stop talking.

**III. Movie Analysis: The Experience of Love**

The first thing that sprang to mind the last time I watched the driving scene was the fact that Lloyd replaces Diane’s father at this point. After graduation, Diane asks her father to teach her the stick shift that weekend. Obviously, he did not and Lloyd fills the gap. The substitution represents the future since Diane cannot live with her father forever. It is quite a realistic scene of the awkward driving lesson, they’re just going around in circles. When they stop, they kiss. It is the first kiss of the movie, though I do not take it to be their first kiss. The scene initiates a series of physically intimate scenes of increasing emotional intensity. I feel that one of the most effective evocations of emotion is the crescendo of passion that begins with this first awkward kiss.

What follows are two scenes that continue the rise of emotional intensity as Lloyd and Diane walk in a park. The first scene is of a bright summer day. Everything is light, and the camera is somewhat distanced from the two, which gives a sense of privacy to the moment. The two walk along casually and, after a pause, they begin to kiss. The second scene cuts in at this moment. It depicts the two kissing more passionately. It is raining and the two are drenched. The camera pulls in closer on them, adding to the feeling of passion increasing between the two. There is no dialogue during the two scenes, the only sound is soft instrumental music. There is no longer any awkwardness between Diane and Lloyd as their intimacy increases. Watching these scenes brings out all the memories of what I have experienced and the hope of everything I wish to experience in a relationship.
The buildup of the kissing scenes leads directly into a dark, close-up scene where Lloyd and Diane make love. The movie later implies that the two are virgins, which enhances the feeling of purity in their love for one another. In a society where I find sexual frankness in opposition to intimacy and value of sex, *Say Anything* offers a depiction of sex as supported by love. In fact, sex itself is not portrayed, which enhances the importance of emotion as the basis for sexual intimacy. What I find beautiful about this scene is Lloyd shaking with emotion. He is completely wrapped up in the moment where these two characters are completely in sync. For me, this scene represents sex in its purest form because it is supported by genuine emotion. Other people might feel differently based on their own experiences or beliefs and I know that in many ways this is not a realistic depiction of a teenage sex life. As I stated earlier, though, when I saw *Say Anything* as a twelve year-old, I had no real-life experiences to compare with the sex scene. The scene’s importance came in my desire to recreate it in my reality.

The other aspect that enhances the feeling of this scene is the music. Peter Gabriel’s song “In Your Eyes” plays on the car radio and defines the moment. Associating an experience with a song is a common occurrence during the teenage years because being able to associate an experience with a song (or movie) increases the significance of that experience in shaping identity. For me, the song enhances the scene and, subsequently, the value of the characters’ actions. The music and intimacy of the scene are the two elements that are most important to me when I watch this scene. I choose to ignore external elements, such as the car and the beach, because they distract my attention from the more important emotional experience of the scene.

Following the sex scenes are two confrontations. The first confrontation is between Diane and her father when she comes home after spending the night with Lloyd. For the first time, Diane has to defend her love for Lloyd, her actions, and her identity. As a woman who
faces similar choices over the physicality of a relationship, I strongly identify with Diane at this moment. She tells her father the truth, and defends her actions by saying, “I never get nervous around him.” While this might seem like a weak answer, it is one that makes sense as a teenager. Body image, especially being a woman, influences how I perceive myself. The body automatically defines identity, and the teenage years are ones where your body changes significantly. Intimacy represents a person’s acceptance of another’s body. Being able to feel comfortable around another person is extremely important, especially as a teenager when one often feels awkward. Emotionally and physically, there is a need to fit in, to be accepted by loved ones.

By telling her father the truth, Diane incorporates her experience into her reality. She tells her father “It always feels good to tell you the truth because if I can’t share it with you, it’s like it didn’t happen.” Diane presents the value of the previous scene: life has meaning when it is shared. Experiences are real when experienced with another person. Telling someone else is a form of sharing that experience, it is another form of communication. As I noted, the kissing scenes contain no dialogue. Likewise, the sex scene has very little dialogue because the experience it depicts is emotional and physical. The confrontation between Diane and her father is the psychological understanding of that experience, which helps Diane understand her experience and its significance. This psychological understanding of an experience mirrors the increased awareness of reality and experience during the teenage years because of a need to make coherent sense of things.

In contrast to Diane’s confrontation with her father, Lloyd’s confrontation with Corey and D.C. does not have similar relevance to teen life. Lloyd is too perfect as he shares the letter he wrote expressing his feelings for Diane. Lloyd does everything right, says all the right things.
This perfection makes him less believable, which makes the relationship less believable. As a female viewer of a genre that largely targets women, however, seeing the average guy find meaning in love and commitment in a relationship is gratifying. Lloyd is an ideal, one that inspires the women to love him and trust him. It is a more appealing choice to love him when the other choice is represented by the lying, cheating, stealing, and irresponsible men in the external relationships.

The continued confrontations between Diane and her father illuminate her need for security as well as provide the first conflict between the adult world and the teenage world. Diane’s father begins to question Diane’s feelings for Lloyd. As he does, he undermines her confidence in those feelings because she trusts her father. I mentioned that Diane had to choose between her father and mother in divorce court. She chose her father because “it just felt safer that way.” Lloyd represents something unknown to her, and she does not trust it yet. Diane’s father asks her “What do you have in common? You’re going to be part of an international think-tank and he’s going to be...kicking punching bags...You owe it to yourself to get on that plane with no attachments, no strings, because after you get over there [England] things are going to change. People change.” The reprimand reminds Diane, and the viewer, of the distance between the two set up at the beginning of the movie and plants the seed of doubt about her actions.

I always passed this comment off as the social view, the limiting view of the surrounding cynicism; but now I find some truth in the parental realism. I never wanted the father to be right because he represented everything that I was rebelling against in my own life. The comment presents the choice Diane must face: her father, or Lloyd. If she chooses her father, she chooses safety, patriarchy, and the past. If she chooses Lloyd, she rebels against her father and chooses risk, love, and the future. In my interpretation, I ignored the possibility that things would or
could change as an automatic response to adult criticism. As a teenager, I fought hard to define my identity in reference to those around me and to assert it through my actions. I saw Diane’s final choice, Lloyd, as a reinforcement of my rebellion. I saw Lloyd and Diane’s relationship creating a different reality than the external social view. I did not realize that at 16, 17, 18, 19, 20...there would be a lot of changes in my identity as I gained more experiences. I thought the identity that I constructed at sixteen was the identity I would have for life. I could not escape the fact that I myself would change, which would automatically change how I perceived my reality.

In some ways, I now think that Lloyd goes to England to prevent things from changing. It is an appealing viewpoint for a teenage audience, but it falsely draws a sense of security.

Influenced by the faith she has in her father’s wisdom, Diane breaks up with Lloyd. I find the breakup scene to be the second climax of the movie, the first being the sex scene. The movie shifts from an incredibly intimate point to its antithesis between the two characters. They lose all forms of communication. She, in effect, chooses her father again. I have a hard time identifying with Diane’s actions because she chooses her father, and therefore defends a patriarchy that she depends on. Out of all the scenes, this is probably the one that I take the least away from. I do not associate the breakup scene with my understanding of *Say Anything* as a paradigm of love because I want to believe that their love could escape the pain and betrayal that all the external relationships encountered. Instead, Diane and Lloyd break up and Diane faces the betrayal of her father. There is still an element of pain that Diane and Lloyd have not been able to avoid. My reading of the movie and the relationship, however, influenced an interpretation of this scene to be a result of external forces, namely Diane’s father, that work to undermine the relationship.

The breakup scene does not quite fit into my conception of the movie also because I see it as one of *Say Anything’s* many plot devices. Instead of evoking my own experiences, I see it as a
construction to create a universal catharsis of joy once their relationship triumphs. For the audience, the breakup serves as a temporary doubt to make their final triumph sweeter. It is as if the triumph of their relationship was their fate and doubt serves the same purpose in this romantic comedy as false hope serves in a romantic tragedy like Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet.* Ultimately, I still manage to create an understanding of the scene that influences my identity. If Diane and Lloyd have to fail, it makes them stronger as individuals and strengthens their relationship. Failure makes a stronger identity because it requires the questioning of beliefs and, consequently, strengthened identity. Particularly relevant in Prague, I found myself facing a failed relationship, which necessitated a reevaluation of all my beliefs as a result. Hopefully, I will become a stronger person because of it.

The scenes that directly follow explore the sadness, anger, and pain associated with a failed relationship and hurt feelings, which add to the realistic nature of the movie because most relationships as a teenager do not work out. Exploring the aftermath of a breakup draws sympathy and identification because everyone knows what that pain feels like. If the relationship were perfect and without conflict, it would lessen the viewer identification just as Lloyd’s perfection does. The scenes take place mostly in Lloyd’s car as he drives around late at night in the rain. He questions all his actions during the relationship, has his own doubts. The scenes mostly focus on Lloyd’s grief to create a psychological understanding of the experience similar to Diane’s defense of sleeping with Lloyd. He makes all those unknown feelings, all the confusion surrounding a breakup, more accessible by voicing them.

Lloyd goes to the local Gas ‘N Sip to commune with some of his guy friends to see if they have any answers to his current dilemma. What he finds are a bunch of guys who are afraid of getting hurt, and who are only interested in the meaningless relationships found at a kegger. One
of them says “I was in love once. I got hurt really bad. I never want to go through that again.”

They represent the external situations contextualizing the relationship and the fear of engaging in meaningful relationships because of the possibility of failure and pain. Lloyd defends himself and his love for Diane to what I picture is the male portion of the audience: he felt satisfied when he was with Diane, he trusted himself because of their love. Diane Court was different than girls he could meet at a kegger, and that has meaning for Lloyd. None of the guys understand his situation. For me, though, Lloyd is every girl’s dream. Lloyd is not like every other guy who thinks he knows so much but just sits around at the Gas ‘N Sip “…on a Saturday night completely alone drinking beers with no women anywhere.” Lloyd rejects the attitude of the guys who hang out at the Gas ‘N Sip because he recognizes the value his relationship had in his life. I do not know if Lloyd persuades the male audience to identify with him, but maybe underneath their teenage superficiality, those teenage men want to be able to take such a heroic stance on love.

Lloyd becomes a hero when he stands outside Diane’s rooms with a boombox playing “In Your Eyes.” In many ways, I think this moment accurately portrays the ambiguous border between teenage love and obsession. Lloyd will not let go of Diane. This scene might even serve to exacerbate the real-life result of guys who think that they can hold on to their girlfriends through this technique and win. In watching Say Anything, however, I try to separate Lloyd’s action with the obsessive actions of my previous boyfriend, though I realize that there is very little dividing them. In essence, I believe that love does need a hero, and Lloyd fulfills that role. I always feel that Lloyd somehow maintains a respectful distance because he does not follow Diane wherever she goes, he does not confront her directly. In contrast, I read the screenplay of Say Anything and Lloyd actually tells Diane that he will not go away, he basically threatens her
with his love. This would have been a mistake to include in the final version of the movie because that kind of obsession would ruin the purity of their love and discredit Lloyd’s beliefs.

The next major scene revolving around my interpretation of love in Say Anything comes when Diane returns to Lloyd. After confronting her father about the money he stole from people in the Nursing Home, she faces the betrayal of her father; the person she stood up for and defended, the person she told the truth to but who lied to her in return. Anyone in her situation would feel like the ground they walked on had just fallen through. It was how I felt throughout my disillusionment. Diane faces two choices: either she must set out on her own, independent of everyone around her, to find her own truth, or, she must find another reference point to stabilize her sense of truth. By choosing Lloyd, she chooses the latter; but she does not change the truth she lives by. Throughout the entire movie, Diane is dependent on a man. Her reality is defined by sharing her experiences with the two men of the movie, and her goals in life are supported by those two same men. I want to feel that Diane rejects the patriarchy of her father for something more individual with Lloyd. I want Diane to be able to follow an independent existence. I do not, however, see Lloyd as simply a replacement for Diane’s father to create a sense of security when Diane leaves home. I believe in the ideal of their love as ultimately positive, this is their definition of truth as they found it.

What I find compelling in this scene is Lloyd’s need for validation. When Diane shows up, Lloyd asks her “One question: Do you need someone or, do you need me?” He illuminates the desire of teenagers and adults alike to feel needed as an individual by those they care about. Her positive answer confirms the value of Lloyd’s identity. This scene, for me, is the realization of their love because they have struggled and come to the final affirmation of the value of their relationship. Nothing else matters but their love for each other. Following the makeup scene is a
quick shot of the two sleeping together in Lloyd’s bed. The movie returns to the value of intimacy in love. For me, it is a symbol of intimacy and caring that I keep in the back of my mind as something I hope to find in my own life.

The scene of Lloyd and Diane on a plane to England closes *Say Anything*. Lloyd tells Diane, who is afraid of flying, that when she hears the smoking sign go “ding,” she knows everything will be okay. The movie itself ends with the “ding” and evokes a sense of hope that my life will, similarly, be okay. As I mentioned earlier, the movies of the teen/love genre present a promise of a future. Such a promise of love and security makes the future less uncertain. The final scene of *Say Anything* literally portrays Lloyd and Diane going into the future, facing its uncertainty together. Diane mentions that no one thinks that their relationship will work out. Lloyd tells her she has “just described every great success story.” They have succeeded in breaking through the barriers that divided them to find something pure.

In many ways, I had wanted to make Diane and Lloyd’s relationship a universal ideal, not just a personal one. I spent most of my teenage years thinking I could change the system, change the people around me. *Say Anything* reinforced that struggle with the promise that I would be successful in advocating change. I found, though, that I could only find something different for myself and be successful as an individual. I could not impose my own vision on those who believed otherwise. Idealism is strong as a teenager – represented in the belief that first love will be forever, that we can change the world we live in – and teen movies largely promote that idealism and tell us that we will be successful in our efforts. They promote the ability to find individuality without conforming and the ability to define reality and identity on my own terms. Social consequences of such individualistic change come slowly, if at all.
The final scene shifts the camera angle from eye-level, which encourages identification, to an angle from the position of the smoking sign, which creates the impression that Diane and Lloyd are talking to the audience and telling us that everything will be all right. There is no music, and for the last part, the two characters do not even speak. They are waiting to see what the future holds for them, just as we are. The scene ends abruptly with the “ding” and the audience is left to wonder if everything did, in fact, work out for them. Appropriately, the credits role with the Nancy Wilson song “All for Love.” I never questioned the fact that things did work out for them. The parallel could be drawn that I myself experienced what happens when the plane lands abroad through my experience in Prague; but what happens when Diane and Lloyd arrive in England does not even matter to me when I watch the film because the importance of the final scene lies in the hope that with a combination of love, honesty, and individuality, meaningful relationships can work out.

IV. Movie Analysis: Philosophizing through Film

From Lloyd and Diane’s relationship stems a series of sentiments that I extracted for my own philosophy of love and individuality. Lloyd’s individuality and his need to assert that individuality among his peers are inspirational to me. Diane’s expression of fear and her need for stability strongly resonate with my own feelings. Ultimately, Lloyd and Diane’s use of honesty is one of the most important values I take away from the movie. It is an honesty primarily used with loved ones and the value of being candid with another person is similar to the value of being intimate. All the elements that influence my philosophy are ones that hope to find companionship with another person. In this sense, love and relationships, to me, are the foundation of all individual pursuits.
There is a paradox in the teenage years with the need to fit in and the need to assert individuality. Diane embodies individuality in her intelligence. She is valedictorian and a Reed Fellowship winner, which makes her the “…one brilliant person who is so special that they celebrate you on two continents.” She is so far out of reach from everyone that anyone would have to drag her down in order to have a relationship with her. By taking a risk and going out with Lloyd, Diane finds a world that she has ignored because of her academic pursuits. After the graduation party she tells Lloyd “Nobody knew me before tonight…I feel like I fit in for the first time.” Fitting in takes away the isolated feeling accompanying a confusion over identity, a rebellion against parents (a.k.a. the former identity), and the hectic changes of the body and the outside world. Fitting in creates a safety net of people as right is distinguished from wrong. Even if those distinctions are illusory, they must be drawn and defended in order to assert identity. Once the teenagers enter the real world, outside of high school, whatever identity they have formulated so far will be tested.

In expressing her identity - her hopes and fears - Diane finds an audience that finally identifies with her. During her graduation speech, Diane speaks of her fear of the future. She gives a speech entitled “Soaring Ahead” but only talks of a desire to retreat from that same future. “I’ve glimpsed our future and all I can say is…Go back!” The future is unknown, at least for most of the graduating class. While Diane’s future is determined temporarily by her fellowship, I interpret “the future” to mean something bigger than academic life. Maybe Diane realizes that there is more to life than academic achievements, that she cannot be a student all her life. The future holds a world of uncertainty because she must leave the security of her father, find a husband, and support herself. “…With that training net of high school gone, what’s going to happen to us? We all know what the answers are…But what if that doesn’t happen? I have to
be honest, though. I have all the hope and ambition in the world, but when I think about the future, the truth is, I am really...scared.” There is the possibility of failure represented in the future, and her calculated ambition to be the best in the country leaves a lot of room to fall. Her expression of fear resonates with her audience, which leads to Diane’s feeling of fitting in. It also has the converse effect: it allows others to finally identify with her, which makes them feel not as isolated in their own fears.

Lloyd concentrates on his current desire to assert his individuality. His career counselor side-lines Lloyd at the graduation party and tells him that, statistically, Lloyd must choose a career. He responds “Look, I’ve got to be honest with you, I’m looking for something bigger than that [community college]. I’m looking for a dare-to-be-great situation.” Lloyd does not define what that situation is, or what it means to him, but he views himself as greater than what seems expected of him. In many ways, his desire to be great represents an inadequacy that both he and Diane’s father feel in being able to support her. Lloyd must prove himself worthy of Diane’s company, a feeling of sufficiency is obviously not there. Diane’s father needs to steal money from other people in order to give her everything. This inadequacy is consistent with the external situations - all the men have either left or betrayed the women in their lives. Lloyd is determined that he will not buy into that social view, and has to differentiate himself from those that hold that view, namely the women.

In proving himself to the female audience, Lloyd asserts his identity as something different from the rest of his gender and his peers. In an early scene, Lloyd’s sister reprimands him for being more of a playmate than an uncle to her son. Her remark depicts Lloyd as someone who does not like to commit, who just wants to have fun, and seems to extend to her overall impression of men in society. Lloyd retaliates. “...Remember this - you used to be fun. You
used to be warped and twisted and hilarious and I mean that in the best way. I mean it as a compliment...I'm sorry that T-I-M [her son's father] left you, but I am not T-I-M!” Lloyd comments on the effect that the failure of relationships has had on the women, particularly the failure of men. Reinforced later in the Gas 'N Sip scene, Lloyd rejects this social image of maleness and pursues what he believes in.

Similar to Diane’s fear of the future, Lloyd fears death and the ultimate question “What is the meaning of life?” At one point, Diane invites him to stop by the Nursing Home and Lloyd initially declines. “You get to be thinking about how short life is and how maybe, maybe, everything has no meaning...and I don’t need to think about those kind of things.” Lloyd fears the possibility that there is no meaning to life. The underlying fear of death is expressed in Lloyd’s desire to avoid the reality of death, and in Diane’s fear of flying. Death is the final and completely individual experience in life; it is the ultimate unknown. The desire to share my life with someone as an answer to the question “does life have meaning?” is rooted in Lloyd’s comment and in Diane’s dependence on Lloyd in the plane scene. Sharing my life not only gives meaning to life, but provides proof of existence, proof of a reality.

Diane and Lloyd use honesty to break down the barriers dividing them from other people. For Diane, there is a need to fit in with her peers as she acknowledges an identification with others. For Lloyd, honesty is a test to see if he has what it takes to be great. Whenever Lloyd is especially honest with Diane he exclaims “I said it!” Honesty enhances the intimacy between Diane and Lloyd and also serves to separate them from other teenagers as well as the failed external relationships. There is a considerable potential of failure in being so forthright.

Especially as teenagers, people never say anything outright for fear of isolating themselves from their friends. Peer pressure is very strong, which makes people say things they do not think are
true. The ability to speak honestly with one another strengthens Diane and Lloyd’s ability to achieve something different from the external social reality.

Together, Diane and Lloyd anchor one another, give perspective to the other’s reality. Lloyd tells Diane’s father “What I want to do for a living is be with your daughter.” It is not a career, but a life just as Diane’s love for Lloyd gives meaning to life beyond academic structures. The love they bear for one another defies all social expectations and assumptions. The love, honesty, and individuality that blend into Diane and Lloyd’s relationship defend the idealism that supports their actions. The promise of a future lies in Diane and Lloyd graduating from teen life, but differentiating their adulthood from their parents. It reinforces the teenager’s struggle for individuality and offers a comfort that the future will be better.

V. Theory Analysis: Evolutionary Film Theory

In creating my own theory of film viewing, I need to recognize flaws in my reading style and address the issues raised by Horkheimer and Adorno’s essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” Part of my reading style relies on a method of differentiation as a means of determining right from wrong, reality from illusion. Differentiation automatically prescribes value and meaning to the objects it separates. However, there are problems with differentiation. It is a form of selective hearing that can obscure the definition of truth when derived from a movie. I never, ever, heard Lloyd’s line at the prison where he says he should “do all that stuff that I’ve been avoiding in a big way.” I never realized that his dare-to-be-great situation was fulfilled in his pursuit of Diane. I always thought he was able to search out that situation with Diane by his side. It was my own interpretation, one that made distinctions between good and bad and suppressed the aspects that I did not want to hear.
One problem with a reading style that uses movies to evoke experiences for the purpose of resolution lies in the possibility of ignoring the need to resolve other experiences. Most films deal with conventional themes, which begs the question - Do viewers only learn how to deal with similar experiences? Or, do they always create a similar interpretation even for dissimilar situations? Movies can be limiting if an individual uses them as a medium to interpret experiences. In my case, it developed a reading style that always focused on identification. Of course there are other ways to understand experiences, but movies are so prevalent in the visual images of everyday life and seem to be increasingly important in how we learn about life and each other. The film industry is targeting girls and teenagers alike who are searching for understanding about themselves and the world they are recognizing for the first time. All movies, regardless of current trends, give us a lens to look through in order to attain some understanding of the lives we live and the world we live in. The affect of such a lens on an individual makes me wonder sometimes, “How would I have reacted in Prague that night if I had never seen Say Anything?”

All the blind spots influencing my interpretation of Say Anything became painfully prominent in my disillusionment. After watching Titanic, I searched for another outside source to create a sense of meaning to the reality I found myself in. Instead of questioning all ideologies, I looked for the first one that made sense and tried to adopt it. Just as Diane needed another man to depend on after her father failed her, I searched for something to replace Say Anything and create a new philosophy. Knowing that I was to write an honors thesis the following school year, an old friend recommended I read Horkheimer and Adorno’s “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” In addition, I looked at the psychological research done on film audiences because I wanted to understand my own psychology as a member of that
audience. From these two references I tried to undermine further the ideals I constructed from *Say Anything*. In effect, though, I was reading Horkheimer and Adorno’s essay just as I had read *Say Anything*: looking for some sort of truth that I identified with.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s essay promotes the film industry as a mass manipulator. All movies are part of a monopoly that restricts creativity and undermines the intelligence of the populace. "...There is the agreement – or at least the determination – of all executive authorities not to produce or sanction anything that in any way differs from their own rules, their own ideas about consciousness, or above all themselves." This concept of a monopoly weakened my belief that movies were a form of art and a form of social commentary. I began to see all my reactions to films as a product of Hollywood manipulation – an intended brainwashing of the individual in order to boost profit. Horkheimer and Adorno criticize the film industry’s attempt to "...control...the individual consciousness" through movies. I was looking for someone to blame for the illusion from which I had based my reality, and the culture industry fit perfectly.

The culture industry presented the illusion of truth in movies for the purpose of profit. "This promise held out by the work of art that it will create truth by lending new shape to the conventional social forms is as necessary as it is hypocritical. It unconditionally posits the real forms of life as it is suggesting that fulfillment lies in their aesthetic derivatives." I realized that movies had become my exploration of truth in my desire to incorporate them into my reality. Reading Horkheimer and Adorno reinforced that disillusioned feeling accompanying my second viewing of *Titanic*.

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9 Ibid., 121.
10 Ibid., 130.
Through the lens of Horkheimer and Adorno’s essay, I began to understand the influence of film on a cultural level, which gave a cause to and lessened my individual turmoil. I began to augment Horkheimer and Adorno’s 1944 essay by viewing the monopoly of the film industry as impossible to avoid. Everywhere around me were film images advertising useless objects, affecting my body image with skinny women, publicizing the new blockbuster movie. When the essay states that “no independent thinking must be expected from the audience,”\(^{11}\) I began to actually see the culture industry monopoly in every aspect of my life and in society around me. I began to take on the elitist viewpoint of the essay, I became one of the few enlightened who watched the sad spectacle of ignorance. “...[Amusement] is little more than a magic-lantern show for those with their backs to reality.”\(^{12}\) The imagery of Plato’s “Simile of the Cave”\(^ {13}\) began to make more sense and I became one who adjusted to the light once released from the prison of the dark, illusion-filled cave.

As I read about mass psychology, I found psychological proof for the theory that film viewing is a passive act. The premise behind collective psychology is that when the individual becomes part of a mass, his intellectual capacity changes.

…This collective mentality reduced all persons in the crowd to intellectual mediocrity and heightened emotionalism; acts of collective irrationality and irresponsibility were the inevitable outcome...All forms of social aggregates—whether juries, sects, or mobs—displayed qualities which were always morally and intellectually inferior to those of individuals comprising them.\(^ {14}\)

Anyone entering a movie theater becomes subject to this collective psychology, which supports Horkheimer and Adorno’s argument that the heightened emotionalism allows for the masses to

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 137.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., 143.
accept false ideology from the culture industry. The psychology also attests to the cause for passive viewing: the evocation of emotions. I think the reason why movie viewing is categorized as passive is due to the stereotype that emotions are largely feminine. Being a woman, I disagreed that emotions were a passive act and began to see emotions as part of the viewing experience. I agree that the way movies promote their themes is through evocation of emotion, but feeling, identifying, sympathizing, these are not passive. I found that emotions were as much a part of my critical thinking as my ability to rationalize. Instead of being someone who is denied critical thinking by the culture industry, I began to see movie viewing as an engaging activity.

As I struggled with Horkheimer and Adorno’s truth, as I saw it, I began to feel that while much of their essay enlightened certain aspects of film viewing, I could not fully believe in their argument. The reason why I could not fully accept the essay was the same as the reason why I could not fully reject my own belief system: it did not resonate with my own experiences. I was largely unsuccessful trying to watch movies without my willing suspension of disbelief. I did not feel like someone who was duped into believing an ideology that was not my own, and I did not feel like someone who was willing to be manipulated by a false ideology for the sake of fantasy either. I could not identify with Horkheimer and Adorno’s patronizing critique or with the ignorant masses they depicted. There was only one problem: the issue of objective truth. “As naturally as the ruled always took the morality imposed upon them more seriously than did the rulers themselves, the deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success even more than the successful are. Immovably, they insist on the very ideology which enslaves them.”15 I

15 Horkheimer and Adorno, 133-134.
could not refute Horkheimer and Adorno's comment with another theory about an objective truth.

I never recognized the ideology functioning in Say Anything. I did not see the contradictions in the ideals I took from the movie and the ideology it reinforced. I never saw the gender ideology present in the characters' actions. However, the ideals that I took away from the movie were my own, based in my own ideology that failed to make these associations with female ambition or male dominance. I was not raised with a notion of gender bias in the world, and as a teenager, with identity in flux and male and female friends, I could make a constellation of identifications from all the characters based on what I believed in. The way I read the film does accept Diane's need to reach out beyond her academic ambitions not because her ambitions are flawed, but because life without love is meaningless.

I forced myself to come up with my own concept of truth, my own theory of viewing, because then I would not be able to blame a movie when I made mistakes. I found that truth was relative to the beliefs held by the individual. Truth was based on my experiences and my understanding of those experiences, which made it highly personal, highly influenced by emotions, but ultimately my own. I do not know if my belief system is a direct result of the movies and television I have watched since I was little. That would exclude all the influences of my parents, my friends, my school teachers, and my own feelings. Even though my ideas about love and individuality were influenced by Say Anything, my own experiences confirmed the associations I created with those ideas over the years. The concept that truth is individual creates another cause for the desire to find consensus. We want others to agree, we want to identify because otherwise we lead a lonely existence. As much as I want to pursue individuality, there is something frightening in its isolation.
Slowly, I began to unravel the fortress I had constructed with Horkheimer and Adorno in order to take into consideration realizations and experiences that had given meaning to my life. I could not adopt an external form of truth; I needed to explore the film theories, the movies, and myself through my experiences. I began trying to understand how movies could convey such powerful meaning. “As Plato pointed out, to ignore the real world because of shadows on a cave wall is a terrible mistake. In the case of film, however, these illusions are, if we deal with them correctly, means toward a more profound understanding of ourselves and society.”16 Films are a medium of human expression. Engaging with a film is a form of communication where the viewer is part of a dialogue between the film images and his evoked experiences.

Supporting my viewing style as more than merely individual was an article by Emanuel Berman, “The Film Viewer: From Dreamer to Dream Interpreter”, which comes the closest to describing my own viewing experience. Berman argues that the impact of a movie comes from “…the way the visual images of the film, in interaction with the spectator’s personal history both as an individual and as a film viewer (past cinematic experiences), arouse deep identifications that can make film viewing such a powerful affective experience.”17 The experience of a movie largely comes from identifications, which are enhanced by the visual images and our own beliefs. The experience of a movie can be a vicarious life experience as visualized through another’s eyes, i.e. the camera’s.

Through Berman’s essay I also began to understand the possibility for the creation of my reading style. At its basic level, watching a film is a communication of a representation between

17 Berman, 193.
a filmmaker and a viewer. Most film theories usually stand on either end when speaking of the possibilities of an affective viewing experience. Either the viewer adopts the projected images or the viewer projects his own experiences as an interpretation of those images.

The encounter between a film’s (and indirectly, a filmmaker’s) emotional universe and a viewer’s psyche creates new significance. This significance is not an absolute property of the film itself (its hidden “true meaning” finally deciphered) or of the viewer (interpretation as “mere projection”), but rather may be seen as an intersubjective discovery residing in the transitional space opened up by the new encounter.18

This transitional space that Berman proposes as an alternative to other film theories supports my ideas about film viewing. I found that my experiences were evoked by a film’s images and that those images gave an interpretation to those similar experiences, which posited a possible interpretation for my own. Film viewing became a means for understanding myself because I could subject my experiences to the interpretation of the movie. While I did not have similar experiences when I first watched Say Anything, as I gained those experiences, I revisited the film that to me was the standard of the future I wanted to live. As I changed, my interpretation of the movie changed because that transitional space was being occupied by my own different experiences.

Say Anything, however, could not offer a model for me to emulate in my desire to attain a similar reality. I thought that I was looking for an external representation of life that I could achieve myself, but what I found was an introspective evocation of emotion and experience. That evocation became the value of the movie experience for me.

Entertainment offers the image of “something better” to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don’t provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes – these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that

18 Ibid., 205.
something other than what is can be imagined and may be realised...Entertainment does not, however, present models of utopian worlds...Rather the utopianism is contained in the feeling it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organised.19

Say Anything is an emotional utopia for me when I watch it. It evokes the feeling of love and individuality within myself that inspires me to want to find my own version. One problem I have with Dyer’s quote above is its reference to an escapist theory about film viewing. “With the willing suspension of disbelief comes the problem of escapism. But to ‘escape’ from the world is not always to be free of it, nor is it always an evasion or avoidance of confrontation.”20 In fact, I believe watching movies is a direct confrontation with identity and the world, not an escape to a world where the viewer dreams of a better life. I think movies as an escape are just that, a temporary need for relaxation and entertainment in order to take the viewer’s mind off of other things. Movies as a world of alternatives and hopes, however, are not an escape but a catalyst, a reminder to the viewer.

In this sense, I think movies contain an element of nostalgia as they evoke memories. When I watch teenage films, I am reminded of the freedom I felt, and the conviction I felt throughout my rebellious phase. I still tend to identify more with the character, e.g. Lloyd, struggling to make himself a better person than with the person searching for academic excellence. My style of reading focuses on its application to life not to school. (I realize the irony of such a statement in an honors thesis.) In some ways, this nostalgia evokes emotions from my past and brings them into my present to reevaluate my life. In other ways, movies are still a

projection of the future for me as I hope and wonder what will be in store. *Say Anything*, and most other movies, offers the hope that I can be successful, that I can be a strong individual and remain a part of the society I live in. It is a promise of love. I wonder what I will think when I am on the other end of my life span.

**Conclusion: Storytelling**

A story bridges the internal world of the self and the external world of society as it provides a narrative of that personal world for a general audience. The oral tradition of storytelling is as old as Plato’s illusion of truth in projected images. Stories offer distance from an experience that we can safely identify with in order to attain some coherence in our lives and some meaning from our stories. Movies are one of the best mediums for storytelling because they provide moving pictures to enhance the images, the words, and the sounds that encourage identification. Films not only represent this aspect of story telling, but also incorporate it into their plots. The cover of the movie jacket for *Say Anything* states “To know Lloyd Dobler is to love him. Diane Court is about to get to know Lloyd Dobler.” How does she get to know him? By telling her story and listening to his. Stories are how we learn about one another, and in the process come to an understanding of ourselves. Movies are a large part of that understanding. A movie’s ultimate impact comes when the influenced interpretation of experiences becomes part of the stories I tell of my experiences. Movies are large-scale stories about universal experiences, and they offer a model to help mold our own stories about our own experiences.

Once I create my own story, I can gain some objectivity about the experiences it describes. In trying to represent our internal worlds through stories, we communicate part of our identities. Nothing can accurately represent what goes on in our minds and bodies; but there is a need to create approximations to communicate with others so that we do not lead such an
isolating life. We need to be known, we need to know others. People in our lives create our understanding of reality, society, and even individuality. Over time, the stories we tell accumulate into an external representation of our lives. We choose the words we say to one another, sculpting our stories to give a particular interpretation of our thoughts and actions. When we become storytellers, we derive some sort of truth from our experiences because we find a common reality with others by sharing a piece of our own. When we find someone to identify with our stories, our understanding of those experiences is reinforced or expanded upon.

I realize that at the beginning of all this I stated that I could no longer return to Say Anything for the answers to my life; yet that is exactly what I have just done. There is so much in the movie that I find relevant to my life. Indeed, over the past ten years, everything has becomes applicable at one time or another. The value of watching Say Anything repeatedly over the years was not only to reinforce my own identity as well as understand its changes, but also an escape from the isolation I felt as a teenager. When everything was cynicism and colored black, Say Anything gave me hope that things would work out well. Lloyd says at one point when he presents the movie Cocoon to people in the Nursing Home that “I hear it makes you very happy so I figure that’s a good thing to see, a film that makes you happy.” Say Anything, though, was much more than a movie that made me happy. It influenced a realization about what I wanted to achieve and what I wanted from life. Last year in Prague, I thought I had been searching for truth through movies, but I was searching for truth in myself.

I never knew that my teenage rebellion would cease. Part of the problem with rebellion is its blind rejection of the adult world, the parents, in order to assert the teenager’s own definition of adulthood. Total acceptance or total rejection does not work to produce a stable truth or identity. Diane’s rebellion, leaving her father for Lloyd, is lessened by her need to resolve her
differences with her father. In dealing with the situation at hand, without rashly denying something she knows to be true (her love for her father) she and Lloyd enter the adult world. I had a second rebellion with my experience in Prague, but disillusionment was its own lens. I needed to find a synthesis that was my own; a philosophy and definition of truth based in my reality. It was a rite of passage out of the realm of my teenage years and into a new stage of life as I enter the real world.

What I am left with now is a story, one that in many ways emulates the story of any movie. By telling my story, I create my identity to present to my audience; a representation of my identity for others as well as for myself. It is an attempt to break through the limitations of individuality and share part of my life with another. By telling my story, I become less alone because someone else has tried to understand the reality as I see it. All my experiences encapsulated by a series of stories become a reference point for my reality, they create a coherence that I need at this point. This is the story of my experiences as a teenager. Although I changed as a person, the ideals I believed in then are the same as those I believe in now. The teenage years are so formative because our identities are in a state of flux, and what we eventually determine influences us permanently.

In reading my thesis, I hope you can find some relevance to your own experiences as a teenager and to the identity you formed during that time. Analytically, I hope my thesis gives you some insight into the style of reading I present as well as your own personal reading style, however similar or different. Ultimately, I hope my thesis gives you insight into the ideals that you live by. I said earlier that truth is relative, it comes down between the better story-teller. This is my truth, and I hope it offers some revelations about your own.
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