

**An Analysis of the Depiction of Romantic Relationships in Western Cinema
Compared to Cultural Perceptions of Relationships**

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Section 1: Introduction

Throughout history, every aspect of society and/or culture has, in some way, been impacted by media, in particular, entertainment, and vice versa. In ancient Greek culture, plays, both comedic and tragic, became a mainstay of the social fabric, and this style of performance influenced how people saw the world, other cultures, etc. For a long time, the only window people had into the outside world was through stories told by other people who had experienced it firsthand. Thus, it comes as no wonder that storytelling is one of the oldest forms of communication; The weight and influence that stories can hold is universal across all cultures. In modern times, with the invention of electronic media, we've been gifted with a number of new methods of storytelling. Not least among these is the visual medium of film. Film has become one one of the most popular and widely received forms of storytelling, entertainment, and mass communication in the world since its inception in the late 19th century, so it's no wonder how influential it is in terms of influencing cultural perceptions across the world. While

this is absolutely true on a global scale, for this analysis, we will be focusing solely on western cinema.

One aspect of the global human experience that has existed long before there was anything even remotely close to resembling a television or movie theater, is the idea of romantic relationships. Ever since humanity left caves, we've been falling in love, engaging with the opposite (or the same) sex in a monogamous manner, and, for lack of a better word, dating. The way this has been done, the expectations and cultural norms surrounding the idea of romantic relationships, has of course changed over time, however. While in the middle ages, during the height of the feudal caste system, the idea of romantic relationships was less about love and more about convenience, prosperity, or solidifying the bond between two parties. Add to this the fact that the age gap in these kinds of marriages was completely unacceptable by today's standards, with daughters being married off at the tender age of twelve, and it becomes clear just how much cultural perceptions of romantic relationships have changed over time.

As we begin to look at changes in cultural perceptions of romantic relationships since the 20th century as well as how they're depicted in western cinema, we start to see some patterns. As particular trends in cinema emerge over the course of the 20th century and into modern times, we see a cultural evolution in many aspects of society, not least of which is the cultural perceptions of romance. During the Hollywood "code"

era, relationships were perceived much differently than they were today, for example. With the rise of Disney films, such as Aladdin, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, etc. the expectations surrounding romantic relationships, especially for girls and young women, began to change at a much younger age. The popularity of underground cinema to escape the confines of Hollywood's code at the time heavily influenced the counterculture movement and the free love ideals of the late 60s and 70s. Overall, western cinema and cultural perceptions of romantic relationships in western society have a symbiotic relationship with one another throughout history.

Section 2: A History of the Depiction of Romantic Relationships in Western Cinema

Since the inception of cinema in the west, romantic relationships have been depicted in all manners. According to a report completed in 2013, the earliest recorded romantic film was created by Thomas Edison in 1896, and was titled, *The May Irwin Kiss*. It was approximately eighteen seconds long, and was actually a scene from the "New York stage comedy." (Webb, 2013) What is so notable about this film is that it came at a time when public kissing was greatly frowned upon by Victorian society and as such, was regarded as extremely scandalous. This was a time where no such thing

as a “Hollywood code” existed, not to mention any kind of rating system such as the one later implemented by the MPAA.

With this freedom of expression, filmmakers were more or less free to film and display anything that they desired, resulting in films that became part of what would later be called the pre-code era. Among these films were many classic romance films that were unrestricted from any kind of boundaries, such as *It Happened One Night*, *Shanghai Express*, and *Laughing Sinners*. While none of these films are necessarily as explicit both with their detail of romance as modern films, by the standards of the early 20th century, they more than pushed the boundary. According to a book written by Linda Mizejewski, “*It Happened One Night* is the boilerplate for Hollywood’s favorite way of constructing the heterosexual couple.” (Mizejewski, 2011) It was a light-hearted romantic comedy that cemented Frank Capra as a major Hollywood director and Clark Gable as the go-to leading man. While it may not have been as boundary-pushing in terms of its content as many other pre-code films, the amount of influence it exerted at a time when cinema was an important escape in many people’s lives cannot be understated.

“The romantic comedy has emerged as one of our primary cultural stories of heterosexuality, and the ongoing influence of *It Happened One Night* speaks to the weight of this particular picturing of the couple: cantankerous, willful, needful of lessons

about compromise and love.” (Mizejewski, 2011) This film is so notable because in many ways, it laid the groundwork for how romance would be perceived in mainstream popular culture for decades to come.

In addition to *It Happened One Night*, there were many other films that were pushing the boundaries of how romance could be depicted on-screen during this pre-code period. One such example of a film that does this is called *Shanghai Express*. The film was released in 1932 and was directed by Josef von Sternberg, a renowned director of the time. It starred Marlene Dietrich and Clive Brook respectively. The film was intensely popular at the time, quickly becoming the highest grossing film of 1932. It follows two former lovers that meet on a train from Peking to Shanghai who inevitably rekindle the spark that they once shared. The film is so notable because, while it was very popular, it dealt with some taboo topics at the time, such as prostitution. Dietrich plays Shanghai Lily, one of the ex-lovers, who is now a courtesan. This was, of course, a scandalous depiction for the time. The film also cemented Dietrich as an international sex symbol.

As cinema progressed into the mid-to-late 30s and 40s, however, a bomb was dropped on the artistic freedom of filmmakers in the United States. It was referred to as the Motion Picture Production Code. Put into effect by Will Hays, president of the MPPDA, later the MPAA, and enforced by Joseph Breen, the code was a strict set of

guidelines filmmakers, directors, and producers alike had to adhere to in order to get their films approved and distributed. The code included plenty of specific articles concerning romance and the depiction of it, including “Excessive or lustful kissing, particularly when one character or the other is a ‘heavy’.” (Motion Picture Production Code, 1934) as well as men and women in bed together, first-night scenes, etc. Because of this, depictions of romantic relationships in cinema during this time became much more tame and controlled than they had been. However, there were of course several notable examples of influential movies from this time that had a hand in influencing cultural perceptions surrounding romantic relationships. Some of these included *Casablanca*, *The Philadelphia Story*, and *His Girl Friday*.

The first of these, *Casablanca*, contrasts with *It Happened One Night* as it would be classified as a romantic drama rather than a comedy. That being said it was no less influential. It created depictions of passionate romantic love as an exotic idea. According to a book written on the topic of love in cinema, “In *Casablanca*, screenwriters deliberately made the choice to change Ilsa’s character from American, as she was in the original play, to European.” (Todd, 2013) While it might not seem like a big deal, it plays toward this idea of exoticism as related to passion, something which began to permeate popular culture during this time.

Two years before the release of *Casablanca*, a film was released called *His Girl Friday*. The film was directed by Howard Hawks and starred Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell. The film follows a newspaper editor played by Grant who tries to lure his ex-wife away from her fiancé with a story about an impending execution. The film followed in the footsteps of previous examples such as *It Happened One Night*, providing a more comedic and light-hearted look at romance as an idea compared to something like *Casablanca*. In this way, during this time, there was a variety in the ways that romantic relationships were being depicted, even if the nature of the depiction had to be more implicit than in previous years.

During the late 1950s, while the production code was still in effect, it was faced with some serious competitive threats. The first of these came with the inception of television as a medium, meaning people did not have to leave the house to watch motion pictures. Also, an influx of foreign films threatened the code by offering viewers depictions they couldn't get under the rigorous purview of the production code. Because of this, more explicit films began to be made, including one very notable example, *Notorious*, by Alfred Hitchcock.

Despite being a brilliant suspense film that more than stands on its own merit, *Notorious* also features one of the most glaring and well-known attacks on the production code from a romance perspective in its famous kiss sequence, in which

Hitchcock skirts around the code's rule that a kiss cannot last more than three seconds by having the actors break the kiss every three seconds. The entire sequence lasts roughly two and a half minutes.

Another figure doing his utmost to oppose the code during this time was Otto Preminger. His films dealt with serious and somewhat explicit themes including sex, murder, rape, etc. One of the most applicable examples of this is the film, *The Moon is Blue*. This film follows a young woman who plays two suitors off of each other by claiming she doesn't intend on losing her virginity before marriage. Due to its themes rooted in sexuality and explicit (by the standards of the time) romantic description, it wasn't granted a production code certificate of approval, yet still offered realistic and influential depictions of romance.

All of these different factors played into the removal of the Motion Picture Production Code in the late 1960s. It was because of this that at this point, more explicit depictions of sex and romantic relationships began to permeate the medium. Some notable examples include *Last Tango in Paris*, *Harold and Maude*, and, going later into the seventies, films that appealed to younger generations in their depictions, such as the wildly popular *Animal House*. At the same time, western culture's conservatism in its treatment of romance was declining with the rise of the hippie and free love movements.

It was a golden age for romantic and sexual freedom, and that was reflected in the cinema of the time.

Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* was and remains, a controversial filmic depiction of a romantic relationship. It follows an American whose wife has just killed herself, who begins an anonymous sexual affair with a frenchwoman in Paris. According to a text written by Joan Mellen for the University of California Press, *Last Tango in Paris* is, "A startling visualization of the conflict between sexual freedom and the psychological repression of which we are all victims." (Mellen, 1973) The film was explicit in its depictions of such sexual acts such as its infamous anal sex scene. It became closely tied with the free love movement and the politics of the time, but its impact on how people perceived romantic relationships cannot be denied.

Without the production code for enforcement, there were plenty of romantic depictions that were different from anything that had been seen before. One such example of this is *Harold and Maude*, a cult drama by director Hal Ashby. The film follows a young man named Harold who begins a pseudo-sensual relationship with a much older woman, Maude. While the film wasn't huge for its time, it is notable in its depiction of the age gap between its two titular characters. While there is nothing explicitly sexual or romantic about their relationship, it is heavily implied that they have

romantic feelings for each other. This goes against all kinds of cultural norms when it came to the idea of a relationship by the standards of the time.

This same kind of depiction appeared in the famous Mike Nichols film, *The Graduate*. In this film, the protagonist, played by Dustin Hoffman, gets seduced into a steamy affair with his love interest's mother, Mrs. Robinson. Both of these films presented a taboo version of a relationship that had not really been seen before, that of a much older woman with a much younger man. These kinds of depictions had a huge impact on cultural perceptions of these kinds of romantic relationships. While even today they are considered somewhat taboo, they are received much more positively than they had been previously.

Another huge aspect of romantic depictions in film was aimed at a much younger audience, especially young girls. This came in the form of a company that has become a household name: Disney. Since the late thirties, with the release of the first animated feature film, *Snow White*, Disney has been instrumental in creating idyllic and unrealistically utopian ideas of romantic relationships, that, due to Disney's ever-increasing popularity, have been adopted into the mainstream public consciousness. This was contributed to by most Disney releases in the mid 20th century, such as *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, etc. This popular perception created its

own kind of pressure in terms of how romance was perceived, especially by young women, but this will be analyzed in more depth later on.

As cinema transitioned into the 21st century, there was a rise of different perspectives in terms of the content that was being produced in cinema. Add to this the rise of technology as an important aspect in people's lives, and perceptions of society as a whole were beginning to change. Queer cinema and depictions of non-heterosexual relationships in film were on the rise. One brilliant example of this is *Blue is the Warmest Color*, a French lesbian romance film from 2013. The film depicted a deeply emotional and raw tale of a young woman discovering her homosexuality with an enigmatic partner. The two begin a long and passionate relationship, and the audience follows them every step of the way. The film also happens to feature some of the most explicit, yet tastefully constructed lesbian sex scenes in cinema. The film was criticized for this on release as some viewers found it to be too indulgent.

Additionally, in contrast to the idyllic depictions of romance in cinema spearheaded by Disney, there were many films coming out in the 21st century that showed a darker, more somber and intellectual tone to romance and the idea of relationships. Two films that fall into this category are *Blue Valentine* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. These films depict with an intense degree of emotional

realism the heartache and pain that can be involved in romantic relationships and the end of such relationships. *Blue Valentine* follows a young married couple in a downward spiral as their marriage slowly disintegrates. It's a poignant story about love and loss, and much more realistic and raw than many love stories that came out previously.

This is true also of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, which mixes a bit of science fiction into the mix. The film follows two people who, after a painful breakup, undergo a procedure to erase their relationship from their memory. The film really explores the intricacy of relationships and loss. What's intriguing about this film in the context of social perceptions of romantic relationships is that the film was released in 2004, the same year another majorly popular, yet entirely different kind of romance movie was released, *The Notebook*. *The Notebook* is often considered by a mainstream audience to be the quintessential romance movie of the 21st century. It follows the popular hallmarks of the romance genre that *It Happened One Night* laid out seventy years ago, but does it for a new generation.

Overall, the 21st century is a melting pot of different perspectives when it comes to how romance is being depicted in western cinema. This also comes at a time when cultural horizons are being continually broadened in the west, so it comes as no wonder that these two things are playing into each other. The question becomes, to what extent do they play into each other?

Section 3: Pre-code films and social perceptions of romantic relationships

As previously discussed, the pre-code era in Hollywood allowed for more freedom for filmmakers to depict what they wanted to in their films. This, of course, also applied to how romance was depicted. One of the most important romance films of the pre-code era was *It Happened One Night*. A screwball comedy that was as impactful as it was funny and romantic, the film had some real depictions of romance and romantic moments that were lighthearted while still maintaining a sense of realism. “The third night together marks a turning point in the story. Again sharing a motel room separated by a blanket, they are only a few hours from New York and Ellie’s return to her husband. Both are obviously depressed about this. In a shocking moment, Ellie leaves her bed, pulls aside the blanket, goes to Peter’s bed, and declares her love for him. Audiences in 1934 must have gasped.” (Mizejewski, 2011) This is an iconic moment in the film, partially because, as Mizejewski states, audiences had never seen anything like this before. Society in the mid 1930s was very conservative when it came to the topic of romance and sexuality, and while the scene would not raise any eyebrows by today’s standards, the scene was controversial to say the least and began to change those standards that people had at the time. What was socially acceptable to depict in film when it came to romance was being pushed in a more liberal direction, so of course the Hays Code decided to clap back.

Another film that was expanding how people thought about romance and romantic relationships in the pre-code era was *Shanghai Express*. The film depicted a relatively common romance for the time, with nothing being explicitly shown that would be construed as controversial or different in its depictions of romance. That being said, the film dealt with implicit themes that were rooted in the ideas of prostitution, with one of the main characters being a prostitute that rekindles a romantic relationship with her male counterpart. Additionally, the film was surprisingly feminist for the time, giving the women quite a bit of power in the relationship compared to the men. “Though both may be ladies of ill repute, they are presented almost as sisters, sharing the same compartment, playing hot jazz on a windup portable phonograph, and displaying equal contempt for the film’s men, who are seen as either prigs or fools.” (Dixon, 2012)

Whereas many films in this era, as well as in code-era Hollywood, deal with depictions of heterosexual romance from a solely male perspective, where falling in love with the man at the end is the ultimate goal, Von Sternberg crafts his female characters with a refreshing sense of their own agency which is of course seen as well in his depictions of their romantic relationships. Dietrich doesn’t necessarily need a man, and both her and Clive Brook are seen as equals. This also came at a time during the Depression, when women’s roles were becoming more proactive out of necessity. “When Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president in 1932, he brought to the White House a different kind

of first lady in Eleanor Roosevelt. She took a more active role in the role than previous first ladies because of her assertive, capable, and active personality—she had been active as a settlement house worker before her marriage—but also because she needed to provide extra help for her husband, because of the limiting effects of his polio.” (Lewis, 2019) Women were becoming more equal to men in all sorts of cultural contexts, including that of relationships. Especially in the case of marriages, women began to earn money much more than they had been previously, partially out of necessity as the depression was in full swing at the time. As *Shanghai Express* demonstrates, depictions of romance in film echoed, or perhaps helped to inspire this change in perspectives.

Section 3: Code-era Hollywood and cultural perceptions of romance

In the latter half of 1934, the Motion Picture Production Code began to really be enforced by William Hays and Joseph Breen. Whether such depictions of romance as are found in the motel scene from *It Happened One Night* are partially to blame for this can be speculated, one thing is for sure: The freedom American artists and filmmakers had to depict what they wanted would not be the same for the next decade or two. As such, many depictions of romance in film during this time played into the general conservatism experienced by American society during this time.

During this time, such light-hearted romantic movies as *His Girl Friday* and *The Philadelphia Story* were quite popular. While these films were what could be generally referred to as romantic comedies, the depictions of romance that they contained were tame thanks to the specific rules the Hays Code outlined. Specifically, a kiss couldn't last longer than three seconds, a man and woman could not be depicted in bed together, etc. So while these romance films were very popular, they were confined by an overall social stigma surrounding the topic of intimacy within romance. This in itself, however, says something worth noting about cultural perceptions of romance at the time. Romance was an important aspect of popular culture, but interestingly enough, the idea that any kind of romantic interaction would contain or lead to any sort of intimacy was strictly taboo. It's an intriguing contrast that certain aspects of romantic relationships were glorified and others were simply ignored or cast aside in social expectations of society and popular entertainment culture.

Another aspect of the code-era was found in the depiction of the romantic drama and passionate romance. The film *Casablanca* was released in 1942, at the height of the code-era. It was by no means a light-hearted film, and was fairly heavy in many of its themes and depictions. What remains so notable about *Casablanca's* depictions of romantic relationships is that it helped solidify the western cultural concept of passionate love or romance as exotic. "Within the actual texts for passionate love

stories, cinematic conventions immerse the audience in a new exciting place, almost from the beginning.” (Todd, 2013) *Casablanca* is no exception to this. The film even goes so far as to not just set the romance in an exotic place, but make the main love interest of European origin rather than American, as she was in the original play. This played into, and helped establish a common convention, not just in popular media, but in western culture as well, of exoticism and passionate love going hand in hand. This has been a theme throughout western society since. All sorts of popular media have contributed to the idea, such as depictions of exotic latin lovers, or the steamy french love interest depicted in *Last Tango in Paris*. To this day, it’s a cultural perception that has been popularized by film and pop culture.

While the Hays Code was strict in determining how much intimacy could be shown in any given romantic scenario, some directors deliberately fought back against the restrictions. In 1946, Alfred Hitchcock released a groundbreaking film titled *Notorious*. The film was by no means a romance film; rather, it was a spy movie, a thriller, a suspenseful drama. That being said, like most Hollywood films of the time, it carried a throughline of a romantic relationship between the protagonist played by Cary Grant and his new recruit, played by Ingrid Bergman. Like most great auteurs, Hitchcock was not very appreciative of being told what to do, and so he looked for loopholes through the Hays Code. He wanted to depict the passion and intimacy of the

romance between the two lovers, but the Hays code prohibited depicting a kiss longer than three seconds, so what does he do? He writes in a passionate two and a half minute kissing sequence, but has the actors break the kiss every three seconds. This was a depiction of romance that hadn't been seen before in the cinema. In fact, it was later published as the "longest kiss in cinema history." This was one way in which filmmakers tried to reclaim their artistic freedom, and offered a window into how social perspectives of intimacy within romantic scenarios were starting to loosen.

Section 4: Post-code films and the rise of sexual freedom

In the late 1960s, The Hays Code, which had been under threat for about a decade at this point, was completely abandoned as the MPAA began working on a rating system instead. This offered a newfound freedom for filmmakers to depict what they liked compared to the restrictions they had been used to working under. This newfound freedom came at the same time as a rise of freedom of sexual expression and the "free love" movement, a social perspective that influenced a lot of artists and filmmakers. During this time, the youth especially disregarded the concept of marriage as the ideal for romantic relationships. "Many among the counterculture youth sided with New Left arguments that marriage was a symbol of the traditional capitalist culture which supported war." (Goldman, 2014)

Because of the radical direction the hippie counterculture was taking ideas of sex and romance, filmmakers followed their lead, and without the Hays Code to stand in their way, depictions of romance in film became much more radical themselves. One of the most infamous examples of this new direction filmmakers were going with these concepts was the Bernardo Bertolucci film, *Last Tango in Paris*. “The film's raw portrayal of sexual violence and emotional turmoil led to international controversy and drew various levels of government censorship in different venues.” One scene in particular stands out in which Marlon Brando rapes Maria Schneider’s character using a stick of butter as lube. While not necessarily a film created with the peaceful tenants of the free love movement in mind, there can be no doubt that the film was created in a cultural context of political, social, and sexual contrasts. Despite this, the nature of the gender roles in the film’s depiction of the central relationship are problematic and don’t quite fit into the attitudes of the time. Perhaps this can be attributed to Bertolucci’s own political beliefs. “Bertolucci ultimately shares with Sam Peckinpah, despite their political differences, the idea that the successful relationship between a man and a woman occurs when the woman is passive and the man as furiously domineering as a stud bull.” (Mellen, 1973) Despite this, the idea of sexual freedom is a significant theme in the film, and it comes at a time when such themes are prevalent throughout western culture.

Section 5: Disney films and their cultural impact on perceptions of romance

Ever since *Snow White* was released in 1937, Disney has been making a name for themselves with their adaptations of classic romantic fairy tales, such as the aforementioned *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Cinderella*. One aspect that remains consistent about most animated Disney films coming out in the 20th century was the concept of “Disney princesses” and the love stories surrounding them. These films were obviously aimed at younger children, especially girls, and presented idyllic and to some extent, unrealistic depictions of romance and relationships. It was these films that helped coin the concept of “happily ever after,” a somewhat problematic statement. A study was completed in 2008 at the University of Wisconsin, the goal of which was to determine the effect Disney films had on girls’ perceptions of gender and love. The study talks about common themes in Disney films and states, “The first common theme suggests that marriage/love is the goal of Disney heroines. Snow White is ‘wishing for the one she loves to find her,’ Ariel gives up her voice and risks her freedom to win over Prince Eric, and Cinderella is granted only a few hours to charm the prince before returning back to rags.” (Tonn, 2008) In other words, for all these heroines, the ultimate goal becomes shaped by love, romance, and inevitably, the male love interest or for lack of a better term, prince charming.

The ultimate results of the study are interesting in themselves. According to the study, "When asked why they enjoyed Disney films when they were younger there were two common responses "they sent out the message that everything will work out happy in the end..." and "...the dreams coming true really made me feel like I could dream too". (Tonn, 2008) This begins to explain exactly why this perspective on romance gained the amount of mainstream attention that it ultimately did. However, by depicting romance as the end all be all when it comes to happiness in a woman's life, the presentations are more than a little problematic.

The fact that Disney is one of the biggest commercial companies for children's entertainment plays into the massive amount of cultural impact their stories and depictions have. Another conclusion of the study was that, "Question six asked participants to examine where they thought their ideas of romance came from. Fifty percent responded both their parents and TV/movies, 30% responded with just movies/TV, and 20% responded with just their parents. These responses correspond with past research that young children learn about romantic behaviors by observing their own families, but because the topic of romantic love is typically not discussed until adolescence many of their ideas are likely to come from media sources." (Tonn, 2008) This demonstrates the effect that media, particularly film and television have on people's

perceptions, in this case when it comes to the role of romance and romantic relationships in people's lives. Another study that found similar ideas. "For example, Galician (2004), author of a critical analysis of romantic media, argues that people seek romantic content in the media in order to see relationships that appear to work despite all obstacles." (Hefner, Wilson, 2003) This could also suggest that people specifically look for depictions of romance that are as idyllic as possible in comparison with anything they've experienced.

Regardless, Disney's influence on cultural perceptions about romantic relationships can be boiled down to this: Disney has perpetuated the idea, especially amongst impressionable young girls, that romance and finding the perfect relationship should be the number one priority in a woman's life. For a number of obvious reasons, this is a very toxic outlook on life.

Section 6: Modern western cinema and romance

As society moved into the 21st century, a lot of things changed, not only in film and television, but in society as well. Technology became an important everyday aspect in people's lives, and this had a cultural impact on how romance was perceived. With the inception of online dating and app designed around this purpose, such as Tinder and Hinge, the face of romance was much different amongst the millennial generation

than it had been previously. The 21st century saw the rise of hookup culture as well as a generational decrease in overall attention span. A study was completed at the University of San Diego in 2005 examining how exactly depictions of romance in modern film impacted teenagers and their perceptions. “Half of teen characters in the films expressed their motivation to be in a romantic relationship. These sentiments were shared by young men and women alike, and were typically expressed in party or lunchroom conversations. For example, in *American Pie*, all of the main teen characters seemed entirely preoccupied with romantic and sexual relationships.” (Stern, 2005) In other words, modern films romantic depictions directly translate to perceptions within millennial culture.

One film that broke the mold in how these relationships were being presented was *Blue Valentine*. *Blue Valentine* was an independent film from writer/director Derek Cianfrance, starring Ryan Gosling and Michelle Williams as the main characters. The film follows the couple, a relatively for lack of a better word, “ordinary” married couple whose relationship is really in a desperate downward spiral. It’s a raw, emotional, and neo-realistic film that depicts the darker side of love, something that directly opposed more light-hearted and stylized films, such as *The Notebook* and Disney movies of the 90s and before.

The film even handles its depiction of sex in a mature and thoughtful manner. A review published in the Huffington Post states, “There is sex, including a scene where Ryan Gosling is performing oral sex on Michelle Williams at the beginning of their relationship. Was it consensual? Yes. Was it a glimpse of an incredibly intimate and vulnerable moment for the couple? Yes. But while it’s a scene (man performing on woman) that doesn’t get portrayed on film very often, and though it’s certainly sexual, it is by no means exploitative or gratuitous.” (Levkoff, 2011) Much like every other aspect of the relationship that is central to the film, the sexual aspect of it is meticulously and maturely constructed, written, and acted. Despite this, however, the film received an NC-17 rating from the MPAA, meaning that absolutely no children under seventeen were allowed into the theater to see it. For a lot of films, this rating is a death sentence, as it completely negates one of the biggest movie-going populations in the country. Thankfully, *Blue Valentine* garnered enough interest to become a cult classic and the refreshing realism in its romantic depictions received a relatively wide audience thanks to its presence on streaming platforms such as Netflix and Hulu.

Section 7: Conclusion

To conclude, media and entertainment are huge forces in the general population's everyday lives, and as such, the impact that they have in a cultural perspective cannot be denied. This goes for romance and the concept of romantic relationships as well. Expectations and norms surrounding romantic relationships, while parts have remained consistent over time, other parts have evolved, and the influence of entertainment media certainly played a part in that. According to Hefner and Wilson's study, "In terms of uses and gratifications, our study demonstrated that there was a positive relationship between watching romantic comedies with the motivation to learn and endorsing romantic beliefs. This supports previous work that found that people often seek out romantic content in order to learn about relationships." (Hefner, Wilson, 2003) In other words, people look to media, in particular film and television, to learn about romantic relationships, and apply that to their everyday lives. Whether this is a positive or negative conclusion can be argued, but the fact is that romance, like most content, needs to be handled in a responsible manner in film in terms of its messages, so people's perceptions of it are healthy.

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