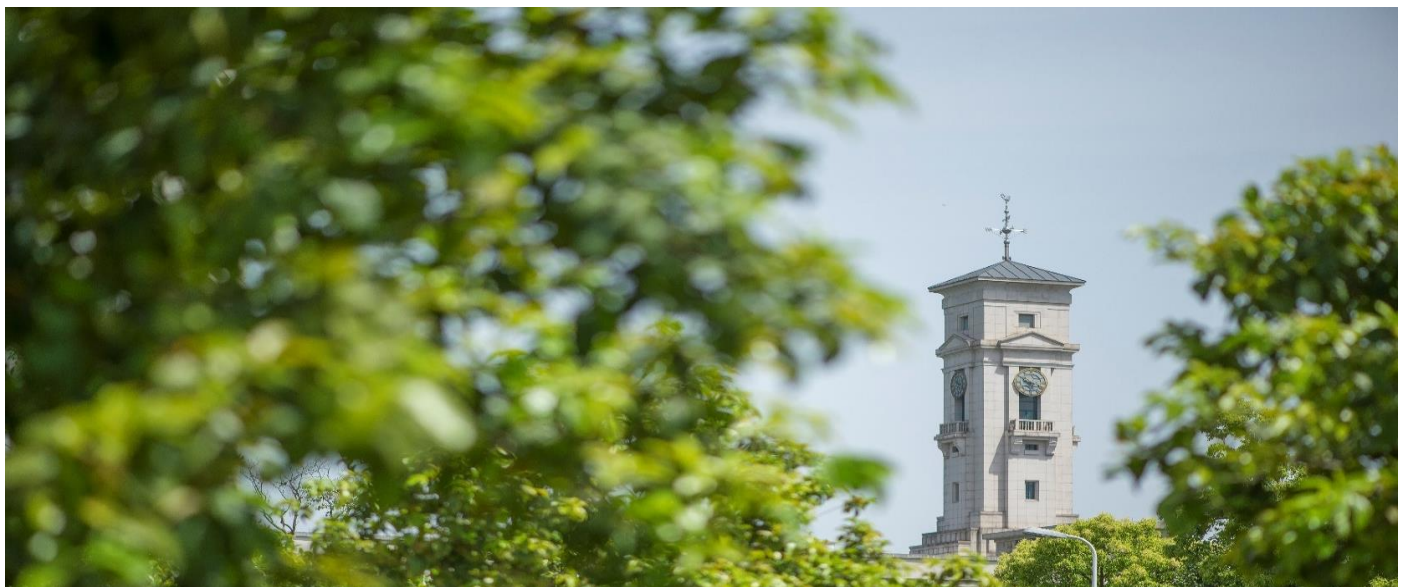


The emotional politics of limerence in romantic comedy films

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The emotional politics of limerence in romantic comedy films

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Abstract

‘Limerence’ describes the intensity of emotions often felt during the pair-forming stage of a romantic relationship, a period that is also the primary focus of many romantic comedy films. This article asks how filmmakers have used depictions of limerence to highlight spaces in which its potential for both disruption and loving care could be brought to political spheres. I look at a series of millennial romantic comedies that express emotional upheaval, vulnerability, and openness to change as qualities of relevance to both a romantic and political selfhood. These ‘political romcoms’ reveal a range of dynamic relations between notions of character competence, moral fibre, personality and deservedness, and invite investigation of complex emotions that modify a more generalised positive affect associated with romantic comedy cinema: humiliation as a comic device and the existential fear of rejection.

Keywords

romantic comedy, political emotions, existential feelings, liminality, love

When we discuss falling in love, we tend to use terms that point to a division in thinking and feeling. Consider, for instance, the phrase ‘my head wants one thing but my heart wants another’. The experience of falling in love is not simply a change in our thoughts about another; it is a marked biological shift, one that is felt. In the literature on the psychophysiology of pair-forming and attachment, the distinctive intensity of those changes is referred to as a period of ‘limerence’. Dorothy Tennov coined the term in *Love and Limerence*, referencing a pattern in subjects’ self-reported descriptions of falling in love: a state of intrusive obsessive thinking and intensity of passionate feelings toward a limerent object (a partner or love interest), typically lasting anywhere from a couple of weeks to several years.¹ The romantic experience of ‘being in love’ is distinguished from love as a long-term, pair-maintaining care for another’s welfare.² Because limerence is a space of intensified emotion more so than logical deliberation, it appears ripe for narrative representation, as storytelling modes introduce resources for representing phenomenal experience that argumentation might describe, yet not truly reflect the dynamic feeling of; but crucially, screen fiction also offers a simulative space for attaching meaning to one’s emotional responses, and then querying their relation to emotions we might experience in the world.

This paper addresses some of the cinematic resources for representing limerent emotions, and the different ways in which audiences might be encouraged to draw meaning from those emotions, especially meanings that relate to a sense of political selfhood. In particular, I look at the presentation of limerence in *Two Weeks Notice* (Marc Lawrence, 2002), *The Girl in the Café* (David Yates, 2005), *Outsourced* (John Jeffcoat, 2006), and *Waitress* (Adrienne Shelly, 2007), among other ‘political romcom’ films (that is, romantic comedies with substantive political subtext, or prominently featuring characters whose occupation is political in nature). I have narrowed the field of the present study to films released in the first decade of the 2000s, as this decade in particular appeared to spur some search for political meaning in

popular English-language cinema.³ Prior scholars have achieved convincing renderings of the history and development of romcom genre tropes, their boundaries and limitations,⁴ while others have documented how principles that attach to notions of passion, coupling, and matrimony change across time and cultures.⁵ In this study, however, I would like to draw a clearer line between representations of loving emotions on screen and their social and cognitive referents.⁶ In life, one might similarly fantasise about the object of their desire, and romance genres at their best can facilitate a thinking-through of the cultural and biological causes of romantic feelings and the flights of fancy they incite, rather than merely propagating, uncritically, chimeric ideals of love.

Criticisms of the genre's most apparent fantasies of (primarily heterosexual) union might focus on oversimplification of complex emotions or simply a suspicion of its inherent wish fulfilment.⁷ This wish fulfilment is, of course, the province of the romantic comedy – but the formula is not necessarily the point. Reviewer Rich Cline wrote of *Maid in Manhattan* (Wayne Wang, 2002):

[w]hen we catch ourselves sighing at the end, we get mad that we've fallen for this same old formula all over again. But mad in a nice way.⁸

Feelings of co-romance are self-reflexive; as we trace the emotional path of limerence and respond empathically in kind, perhaps adopting for a short time the desires and goals of protagonists, we can be aware of the formula, and negotiate our relation to it (and nor does our pleasure entail credulity). Critiques of the romantic comedy will often chart its fantasies as if the audience were unaware of them, absorbed them without reflection, and as if the most obvious fantasies – of everlasting love brought about by sheer force of passion, persistence or destiny – were the most important point to make.⁹ In this article, I am interested in what is inferred of limerence using that fantasy as a template, assuming in the audience some distance by which they are able to make sense of rather than passively adopt these emotions and their attendant fantasies. Romantic fictions can be a way not only to mutually agree that limerent emotions are important, but also to probe an emotional state that feels, to those in its throes, so magical, wild, and uncontrollable. The emotions of limerence are intense because the primary interest they are directed toward – a romantic union – has the power to echo throughout our lives, and so high emotion matches high stakes. These emotions reinforce convictions and decisions that can profoundly shape the direction of one's life to come. Many will experience this process more than once. It is little wonder, then, that romantic comedy audiences would be interested in such representation.

Tennov's limerence is not necessarily marked by a limited taxonomy of discrete emotions, however, but rather an amplification of mixed 'stronger affective states', both positive and negative; the possibilities for an emotional 'high' may be matched by equivalent, devastating 'lows', and those emotions can be difficult to extricate.¹⁰ Neuroscientists have emphasised that

love is more than a basic emotion. Love is also a complex function including appraisals, goal-directed motivation, reward, self-representation, and body-image.¹¹

This heady mix of thoughts and feelings may be diffuse in their directedness, and difficult to pick apart; romantic comedy films tend to dramatise the work protagonists do in thinking through various life motivations and autobiographical narratives, before settling on a new self that (usually) accommodates a romantic partner. It is also important to note that the intensity

of what is sometimes called limerent ‘passion’ is not common to everyone when forming attachments, but it is clearly the model of romantic pair-forming that is under scrutiny in much screen fiction. In the romantic comedy film, limerence is most often taken to be a reliable precursor to genuine commitment or long-term attachment, although disappointment and failure might loom during an extended period of doubt mid-narrative.¹²

The political romcom analogises the inherent schism of limerence with changes in political ideologies and self-narratives. The present corpus reveals a unique range of concerns, discussed here in detail: liminal self-redefinitions that are applicable equally to romantic and political risk-taking, personality politics that work to separate morality and social competence indicators, and the underlying darker emotions admitted in comic benign violations.¹³ In the political romantic comedy film, the positive end point of limerence is not necessarily a shift in one’s identity to accommodate a new partner; this is merely a foil to look at emotions that may instigate accommodation of a new political identity.

Liminal disruptions and the appeal to pathos

While falling in love is not necessarily a rite of passage, romance films often universalise limerence as a common experience akin to a rite of passage, and limerence is definitely a space of ambiguous identity and redefinition of the self perhaps not that far from Arnold van Gennep’s early descriptions of the liminal.¹⁴ Scholarly applications of ‘liminality’ have much expanded since their early use in articulating the communally deconstructive space between a forfeiting of stable identity and rebuilding of a new self during ritual practices; now, the term is popularly employed in reference to any space of transition.¹⁵ In any case, the romantic comedy presents limerence as a time in which the self is similarly redefined following a period of schism and redress. Most films do not simply portray a protagonist questioning a romantic versus a single personhood, they correlate the schism in identity with other personal qualities and convictions that must be reassessed: the relation of self to career, to family, to social class, or to gender for instance. These points of stable identification that have been developed in isolation from a limerent object now become uncertain, and must be rebuilt to accommodate what one has learned in the emotionally open space of new love.

The physical sites of romantic comedies have been explored for their liminal poetics, such as the transient symbol of the beach, a ‘liminal space which liberates characters to freely speak of love and sex’,¹⁶ and those physical sites become a ‘magic space of transformation’ for the lovers.¹⁷ Deleyto conceives of this magic as ‘a fictional space which represents the social space of fictional discourses on love, sexuality and intimacy’.¹⁸ Romcoms are fictions, of course, thus liminoid or narrative approximations of the liminal,¹⁹ but in Deleyto’s formulation that ‘magical’ space can only point back to fiction itself, rather than outward to the world. The spaces of limerence and liminality both indeed feel magical to us, and we might strive to represent those magical feelings in romance genres or in liminoid storytelling acts, but they are not simply fictions – the transitions under scrutiny are made up of emotions, behaviours, and bodily changes that are real, that are more than the sum of our fantasies. As such, the following readings begin instead from what Joseph Carroll calls ‘three core ideas in traditional humanism: individual identity, authorial intentions, and reference to a real world’.²⁰

The Girl in the Café examines precisely this liminal process against the background of a political event that promises schism, striving, and change but delivers none of it: a G8 summit in which political conventions are ritualised to the point of removal from the

challenges they are intended to address. In the film, British civil servant Lawrence (Bill Nighy), an employee in the office of the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Ken Stott), invites Gina (Kelly Macdonald), a Scottish student he met only days earlier in a café near his workplace, to the 2005 summit in Reykjavik. Their intense emotional space eventually bleeds into the proceedings of the summit, and Gina speaks up about issues of poverty Lawrence's colleagues are failing to adequately address. Margaret Stout writes that '[b]y giving her access to the political leaders, [Lawrence] opens the gate to many uncomfortable exchanges.'²¹ The movie makes the case that the romantic space of discomfiting vulnerability, self-questioning, and risk-taking in the face of rejection are emotionally charged dispositions that are transferrable to the political workplace. The liminality that is opened when we permit these disruptive emotions can cut through a formerly stable political self, fed in the emotional avoidances of habit; in this disruption, ritualised inertia allegedly transforms into action.

G20 historian Peter I. Hajnal describes this filmic depiction of the 2005 summit as 'enlivened by depictions of NGO advocacy and love interest',²² and it is this 'enlivening' that is key. As Stout observes, 'Lawrence has become so accustomed to this lifestyle and mode of interaction that he finds it difficult to assert himself even with coworkers and in his private life',²³ and he 'simply does not have the style or force to counter challenges'²⁴ to argue in favour of a proposed 'dramatic and daring package of measures'.²⁵ In order to make changes in both his private and his work life, Lawrence needs to break habits that are an accepted path of least resistance, and in order to break those habits, he needs a liminal space through which he might redefine himself. This redefinition of the self is symbolised in small movements and decisions: Lawrence goes to do up the top button of his pyjamas, but decides this is not the bold self he wants to exhibit, and undoes the button again. The camera lingers on his emotional turmoil in making these decisions, the hard work of resisting compulsions and reformulating identity. The mixed emotions of hope and fear that coexist, entwined, as Lawrence makes these decisions (connected as they are to his desire for a limerent object) are a vulnerability that becomes dispositional, permitting a similar self-questioning to feed into other parts of his life. Nighy makes these mixed emotions visible, and witnessing such an inner conflict externalised is key to a performance without which the emotional stakes would be less felt, and less known to the viewer. When they are transferred to the political arena, then, the underpinnings of affective struggle against visions of failure – common to both his personal and political undertakings – are clear.

And when they take risks, both Gina and Lawrence suffer genuine rejections: Gina is thrown out of the conference and Lawrence is excluded from his colleagues' deliberation at the crucial moment of decision-making. But of course, although their influence is disavowed and Gina is dismissed as making the case 'rather too emotionally', their intervention is infectious. Following these extemporised appeals to pathos, the G8 summit determines to move the elimination of poverty to the top of their agenda. In rhetorical terms, it is clear that the appeal to pathos had been excised from the summit's rituals in favour of a logos (disimpassioned reasoning) and especially ethos (the appeal to existing authorities rather than their revision); this is because of the power emotion has to move us not to conviction, but to action, by providing a felt stake to our reasoned agenda. This action is terrifying for the same reason approaching a love interest is terrifying – the consequences of rejection, including social ostracism, are equally emotionally aversive. The film is not really suggesting that the G8 will change the world only when a passionate outsider intervenes. Rather, it is making a point about the kind of emotional reinforcements that prime openness to positive change in one's life, and perhaps too a change in behaviours and beliefs beyond the safe space of the cinema:

the conditions of vulnerability and openness that are important in pursuing new love are similar to those we require in reassessing the relation of our ideologies (rehearsed in narratives both interior, like self-narratives, and shared, like cinema) to our effects on the world.

While the equivocal conclusion of *The Girl in the Café* decentres the importance of any potentially lasting union between its romantic leads, *Outsourced* offers an interesting comparison between limerence and arranged marriage – but also situations in which we expect our ‘effects on the world’ to be greater than they are. When male lead Todd (Josh Hamilton) learns that female lead Asha (Ayesha Dharker) has been engaged to a family friend since she was a child, he tells her that the flouting of her ‘right’ to choose her own partner is crazy. She retorts: ‘Some people would say that America’s 50% divorce rate is crazy.’ Asha describes the experiences of female friends who have had love affairs prior to their own arranged marriages, and reminds him that their period of limerence together is still important to her, even if not in the way he expected. At this, he has to reimagine his centrality and relation to her romantic life – another redefinition of the self. Similarly, during the film’s climax, Todd learns that he is not so central to the livelihood of the Gharapuri call centre staff under his management; they are unfazed when their employer moves order fulfilment operations from India to China, as they are professionalised to the point where they do not rely on his stewardship. *Outsourced* uses a cross-cultural romance to destabilise presumptions of American unidirectional influence, and an associated ethnocentricity that must be revised throughout the picture.²⁶ Both as a man and as an American, Todd is forced to forfeit his solipsism.

The transitional spaces of the film, which all entail opportunities for liminal schism in self-identity, are fourfold: a global labour market in transition, the individual’s career in transition, a tandem cultural transition that requires an openness to the new, and again, the vulnerable space of limerence.²⁷ *Outsourced* presents a different view of the limits of limerence. Here limerence does not exist to merely draw people together to conjugal ends, but to offer spaces of attraction across divergent lifeworlds. In that vulnerable receptivity to intersubjective learning that is at the foundation of a truly, equitably transactive romance, cultural centrism is no longer feasible. Sensitivity to another’s cultural context and emotional space begets accommodation of the needs and desires of others; this is equally true of the mutual care that is involved in loving a partner, as we come to intimately learn of their subjective experiences, and we learn to display a deference to their emotional vicissitudes, allowing for a bidirectional emotional contagion.²⁸ Even the scene of the first kiss in *Outsourced* represents a model of transaction, as the pair pull apart, wordlessly check in with one another, noting that the other is experiencing pleasure rather than regret, and embrace again.

What both films speak to is the generalisability of emotional states across parts of our lives: not only are emotions contagious between individuals, and both romantic transactions and performed fictions subsist on their contagion, but the emotions we feel in one part of our lives might inform our responses to challenges elsewhere.²⁹ It is not that politics *needs* more emotional appeal; it is that behaviours that match conviction to striving are inherently emotional, as is any adherence to a cosmopolitanist, transnational, or generative caring about the wellbeing of strangers, in which responsibility is not targeted to loved ones but liberalised across borders.³⁰ Limerence is not in itself liberalised care – indeed, it can be a time of self-absorptive thinking – but it *is* a period that can pave changes regarding who our caring attention is directed toward. It is this disturbance in the locus of our care to accommodate

others, and potentially also new goals and responsibilities, that the political romcom is interested in analogising; audiences are ultimately invited to question how strikingly uncontrollable emotions drive controllable changes in whom we care for.

These two films present two transnational fantasies, and two spaces of global transition. Both films incorporate scenarios permitting their characters to stand against economic narratives offered by American figureheads: in *The Girl in the Café*, of American growth being the world's growth, of reducing poverty as an impossible ideal, and of other global problems (in particular security) as more important than the preventable casualties of poverty. A background of friction between nations is presented (through which the UK emerges, unlikely though it may seem, as heroic battler for the world's downtrodden). *Outsourced* is ultimately about the fact that 'culture' is neither containable nor contained – and neither are desire, love, or self-narratives that are founded on any of these transient qualities.

Attachment, ideological conviction, and personality politics

Romantic comedies tend to end in the re-establishment of a stable identity, usually (but not always) in partnership with a limerent object. *Outsourced* is interesting because the stable identity has involved a shift in thinking about one's place in the world, rather than one's place with a partner, and the space of limerence is used to demonstrate 'openness' to ideological shift. The question here becomes: after a period of identity schism, how do we then reattach to new convictions and once again stabilise our political identities? *Two Weeks Notice* draws equivalence between two types of 'attachment': devotion to a partner and commitment to a political ideology.

While the two films explored so far are interested in transnational politics, this focus is relegated to the background of *Two Weeks Notice*, whereby we might infer commentary on a transatlantic partnership in the accents of its leads.³¹ Its politics are mostly localised around New York City development deals. *Two Weeks Notice* inverts the rags-to-riches archetype at its conclusion, which sees celebrity property developer George Wade (Hugh Grant) giving up his riches to be with the proudly moralistic activist lawyer Lucy Kelson (Sandra Bullock). *Two Weeks Notice* is interesting as it reformulates some of the messages of compromise that engender many political comedies; it is ultimately George who must change. The key political tension of *Two Weeks Notice*, on the surface and within expository dialogue, is the responsible use of money and power, but its subtext entails a personality politics.

The visual humour of *Two Weeks Notice* sets up a character point that will become integral to this personality politics. The opening scene emphasises the hard work of a minority in long shots presenting the figure of Lucy not in the midst of a larger protest, but on her own in the middle of a construction site, corralling two friends to follow her lead. A later scene sees an entire baseball stadium pointing and booing at her. She is clearly constructed (comedically) as a loner, and George continues to articulate her social isolation as a character flaw, culminating in a demonstration of the very resentment she most struggles with in her life as a moralist:

You're too perfect! You're too wonderful; none of us can keep up with you ... no one wants to be preached to. No one wants to live with a saint, saints are boring.

The film argues that resistance is fatiguing and alienating work. She will later admit that she finds these things true of herself, and at the same time wonders if anyone truly has the

capacity for change. Of course, the film will show us that people can change their political identities – but the open question concerns what emotional drivers attract one to what Lucy calls ‘the voice in my head, pushing me to do better’, and leads one to form an ‘attachment’ to that political conscience. Again, audiences are invited to question the emotions that drive attachment both to other people and the ideas they represent.

And so here, I want to turn to look at the way personality traits come to carry moral and political weight in the romantic comedy. The evolutionary psychologists’ take on romance cinema has appealed to ‘preferred psychological and physical traits in the mating game’,³² in many cases assuming some manner of ‘core of female mating psychology’.³³ Leaving aside the evidence for diversity in mate selection among people of differing gender and sexual identities, notions of an ‘average’ gendered spectator enacting pancultural, panhistorical, fantasies through film³⁴ trivialise the importance both of niche constructions in which diverse social behaviours can become attractive, and the fact that resistances to norms can be a kind of signalling of relevance to mate selection.³⁵ The evidence is not borne out in the films themselves, in which moral traits tend to become attractive and overwhelm charismatic personality traits positioned as more ‘conventionally’ appealing. Social psychologist Bogdan Wojciszke finds that, ‘[w]hen forming global evaluations of others, the perceiver is more interested in their moral than competence qualities, construes their behaviour in moral terms, and his or her impressions and emotional responses are more strongly based on morality than competence considerations.’³⁶ The romantic comedy villain, or the ‘other choice’ partner in a film like *Crossing Delancey* (Joan Micklin Silver, 1988), will often show signs of great social expertise in their charm and aplomb, but this is eventually overturned by their lack of more important capacities, like generosity, which have more moral substance.

The works of James L. Brooks, which tend to follow the classic formula of a protagonist stuck between two competing love interests, intervene against the conflation of morality and social competence. *How Do You Know* (2010), for example, opens with a young girl outperforming her aggravated male counterpart on a baseball pitch. The child is revealed to be a younger version of female lead Lisa Jorgenson (Reese Witherspoon), now a professional softball player, and although the scene is never referred to again explicitly within the narrative we are encouraged to read the rest of the film with its resonance in mind: the characters have absorbed gender roles earlier in their lives, in which men should be competent and adulated sportspeople and will be upset if they are overshadowed, while women have become so used to this position that it is part of the fabric of their lives. As is common across the directorial work of Brooks, *How Do You Know* gives Lisa the choice between two men: star pitcher Matty Reynolds (Owen Wilson) and financial executive George Madison (Paul Rudd). Matty is at the top of his career, a sweet but self-obsessed celebrity, while George is about to go to prison for his father’s (Jack Nicholson) corporate crimes. Ultimately, she finds herself attracted to the man who might ordinarily be considered the inferior proposition: George, whose morality outweighs markers of his competence (he is financially ruined and has no job). George is likewise attracted to Lisa because of her competencies that are not traditionally feminine (including her sporting prowess). Thus, *How Do You Know* works to subvert our associations of gender identity with competencies, morality, and their rewards.

Complicating comedy; complicating emotions

Jermyn and McCabe find that critics of the romcom often neglect the genre’s potential for:

a messy take on love. In among the genre's most cherished romantic exchanges and couples are countless moments of awkwardness, shame and grief ... For a genre so frequently critically dismissed as simplifying, commercializing and propagating conservative romantic ideology, the romantic comedy spends a remarkable amount of time demonstrating how painful and damaging its processes are.³⁷

One reason that the romantic comedy retains its lowbrow status might be a presumption that its comedy is light, and does not match the gravitas of real-world limerent emotions – and perhaps, therefore, cannot be properly political.³⁸ Of course, scholars have noted too that the 'comedy' component in romantic comedies is rather less discussed, and harder to come to terms with.³⁹ I argue, however, that the comic mode is where we might locate those places where romcoms admit complication; humiliation and the potential for failure are focal points of humorous events and performances, and comedy both admits these threats and subdues them at the same time. In Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren's terms, we might call these emergences of humour 'benign violations', as they produce laughter by exploring potentially violating circumstances and emotions, but presenting them in such a way that their threat is deflated.⁴⁰

Much of the humour in *The Girl in the Café* arises from a recognisable hesitancy represented in performances: the difficulty the pair experience in pushing through embarrassment and social awkwardness is part of the appeal. The audience must have those potentials for failure – and their felt meaning – in mind for the humour to work, as well as feelings of affectionate support for the bravery of risk-taking, which is ultimately connected to the risk-taking required in progressive politics. They make jokes that fall flat, followed by unexpected silences; as in the aesthetics of much socially-awkward comedy, this might make viewership feel like 'hard work'.⁴¹ Given the foregrounding of deliberation regarding the self we want to be in the world, existential feelings are always lurking within the romantic comedy. Hope for fulfilling partnership is often presented as fragile, and imagined consequences of romantic failure undercut positive self-image, a common feature of limerent negative affect.⁴² Existential feelings tend to be discussed as the domain of the art film rather than 'genre' cinema,⁴³ yet rejection, for instance, might connect with feelings of mortality and the end of the self, and entail the very opposite of those feelings positioned as desirable. That is, in the romcom, we are always aware of the potential for 'loss of hedonic pleasure and of connection with others',⁴⁴ even after a limerent period. As Gina says towards the end of *The Girl in the Café*: 'the nice bit's over – the rest is just disappointment and my past catching up with me again'.

Waitress is an interesting example of a romantic comedy that admits depressive existential feelings into its deliberative dialogue. *Waitress* begins looking like a romantic comedy, but features some shocking depictions of spousal abuse that truly puncture the comic mode. The representations of infidelity begin as humorous, but gradually give way to confessional monologues about the depression underscoring it. During the climax, protagonist Jenna Hunterson (Keri Russell) gives birth to a baby girl and feels an instant deep affection she was not expecting, but the emotion also provides the impetus for her to express deep loathing for her abusive husband Earl (Jeremy Sisto). Soothing, inspirational music plays as she gazes on her newborn, while doctors restrain a husband brimming with violence in the background. Here, love is proximate to its opposite, and positive and negative affect not only co-exist, but have a strangely causal relationship. The love between mother and child effectively resolves what Grindon calls a 'women's ambivalence' toward romantic love that forms the film's dramatic arc.⁴⁵ The propinquity of the benign and violating not only register as humour, the

audience must also work to reconcile such negative affect alongside the sentimental mode, through which we appreciate Jenna's new identity with her child and without the need for a male partner's validation – a political commentary drawn from the emotional conflict.⁴⁶

Drawing meaning from such a blended affect can provide the romcom its emotive weight: positive and negative valences experienced so close that they are hard to tell apart, and in turn blended with the mixed emotions of an uncontrollable limerent fixation.⁴⁷ The viewer might also experience dissonance between appreciating the risks the characters take in sparking romance, often involving humiliation, awkwardness, or existential fear of rejection, and the flow of the actors in representing the mixed emotions of romance so fluidly and assuredly.

This account contravenes notions of romantic comedies as lighter or emotionally insubstantial entertainment. Even their more absurd and fantastic situations, such as the trope in which a couple-to-be, while striving to overlook their mutual attraction, somehow encounter one another undressed, have violating subtext. In *The Proposal* (Anne Fletcher, 2009), for instance, the naked encounter signifies all of the private shames the lead characters are keeping secret from one another. But what is truly interesting about these absurd situations is that they point to one of the most important conflicts we navigate in romcom spectatorship: that *believable* romance is to be balanced with the confected strains of performance gags. In comedy that is centred on portrayals of romance, we appreciate the skill of emotional lifelikeness and of comic artifice at the same time; comedy effectively highlights the space between an emotional verisimilitude we expect from romance and its fabrication. The first encounter of *Two Weeks Notice*, for instance, is satisfying as its humour and romantic potential arrive together. We witness evidence of an initial accord between the characters that takes both by surprise, and a comedy of dashed expectations in their gradual realisation that they may have mutual interests, where they were expecting conflict; we might appreciate Bullock and Grant's comic timing, which can cause us in turn to reflect on their fabrication of that something more that is romantic feeling. In its best moments, we are able to apprehend calculated comedy and lifelike accord at the same time; they are indivisible. As Adam Phillips puts it, '[I]overs, of course, are notoriously frantic epistemologists, second only to paranoiacs (and analysts) as readers of signs and wonders';⁴⁸ the romantic comedy puts us in the critical shoes of the lover, searching for signifying details that may connect our imaginative passions with the possibility of a lived counterpart.

Conclusion

My partner is seldom impressed by romantic comedies, and I tend to watch them alone. She stresses – and I have to agree – that given all of the complications in the relationships explored in these films, with their precarity, irrational escalation of conflicts and flaunted neuroses, it looks unlikely that they will last. That is, the notion that depth of feeling at the beginning of a relationship (limerence) is a good indicator of suitability for long-term attachment appears questionable. And it is true too that Hollywood gets it wrong with many of the romantic conventions it relies on: opposites, for example, do not necessarily attract. We are more likely to choose a partner based on matching ideologies.⁴⁹ But are those limerent emotions valuable for other reasons? We should recall that not all films end in a long-term union, even if they do end happily;⁵⁰ consider *Outsourced* or *Waitress* as examples. At times, the experience of limerence which opens up potentials for political awakening is taken to be a happy occurrence of itself, an autotelic intimacy for its own sake or what Shumway terms a 'pure relationship', perhaps one that is presented as positive because its intimacy feels alive.⁵¹ The conditions of a lasting union become less important than the

conditions of becoming a better person – and in the examples under scrutiny, this usually means a person more alive to their political effects on the world.

Love is mysterious because its agents are so often invisible: they are pheromones and genetic diversification, personal affinities and inexplicable intrigues that draw us to another, as well as cultural narratives we have absorbed about what is attractive in a potential mate. These invisible factors are buttressed in emotion that drives us to form partnerships, and that emotion comes bubbling to the surface and is fleetingly visible; its vagaries make it a challenge to portray. That challenge is unique, and recognising the skill with which filmmakers and performers meet such a challenge is part of the pleasure of romantic comedy spectatorship. We recognise the difficulty of portraying the emotive surfaces of a process so submersed (and yet so personally meaningful) at the same time as we might appreciate the particular challenges of comedy, which admit potential emotional violations into the film world – the erosion of self-image, the fear of rejection, the social disgraces, the existential ruminations failure might entail. Loving feelings are mixed with darker emotions that seem to contradict the positivity of romance. Their threatening nature is acknowledged and then made benign in filmic humour, and these benign violations are then balanced with the forward-looking, risk-taking vulnerability of putting oneself on the line for the hope of love, a prizing of inter-personal connection that some scholars have characterised as a point of potential resistance rather than adherence to the depersonalisation of market logics.⁵² Both hope and courage can equally be applied to the political self, and it is equally difficult to portray the kinds of emotions that might truly disrupt a stable political self-identification, or call us to act on our principles.

We denigrate the romantic comedy on behalf of its fantasies; its fantasies are ever-present, and often acknowledged both within the films themselves and by their devoted audiences.⁵³ But love is not just a fantasy, it is also a real thing in the world, and romantic comedies can show us representations of our fantastical desires, in which a limerent object becomes larger than life in our heads or associated with other qualities both desirable and unattainable, and those parts of desire that are true: when our inner fantasies connect in wondrous ways, so often summarised with that connotation to scientific credibility, ‘chemistry.’ The word chemistry strangely tells us that we recognise biology at work in between performers; they have found some approximation of limerence, and we are already primed with critical work in keen awareness of the connections between its fabrication and its embodiment. In the romcom, limerent emotions arrive at us already metonymical and ready to be extended to other conceptual spaces, but our interrogation of equivalences between emotional states – of the actor, of the lover, of the moral actor, of loving the moraliser – is alive to an affective morphology, the way our emotions do not remain contained in one lived context, cannot be called real or unreal, and in multiple, complex, multi-causal ways, inform how we behave among others.

Finally, the political romcom attaches value to these ineffable emotional states by elaborating on some of their more positive consequences: a vulnerability through which we are open to the new, attachment to hopeful ideas (the idea of a partner or the idea of goodness in the world), risk-taking behaviour that strives to translate those hopes and desires into reality, the courage to follow through in acting on those things we care about, and a sensitivity to others in the world that is required to build any human system that lasts. These values are easy to belittle as elements in a common fantasy, but they are indeed virtues of great importance to our own thriving, and communal thriving in situations that require coordination of the goals and desires of many. The political romcom wonders at the mystery of the elusive connections

between how we feel and how we act; it looks at the way love and political generosity both require selflessness, and thinks through the emotional qualities that underscore selfless behaviours. These are qualities that are worth celebrating – they are not just fantasies, they are emotions, traits and behaviours that exist in the world.

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¹ Tennov 1979.

² Ibid., p. 71.

³ Perkins 2012; King 2009.

⁴ Grindon 2011; McDonald 2007.

⁵ Illouz 1997; Shumway 2003.

⁶ This emphasis on psychology presents somewhat of a departure from the more constructivist views in affect theory after Ahmed 2004.

⁷ See in particular Illouz 1997, suggesting that these contemporary notions of romantic love are deeply connected to capitalist consumerism.

⁸ Cline 2003.

⁹ For a look at some of the genre's reflexivity, see McDonald 2007.

¹⁰ Reynolds 1983, p. 108.

¹¹ Ortigue et al. 2010, p. 3544.

¹² In fact, some anthropologists have emphasised that limerence is 'a "cultural model" that North Americans take for granted when becoming romantically involved', and this is distributed in cultural narratives of love, like film. Lipset 2015, p. 165.

¹³ C.f. McGraw & Warren 2010.

¹⁴ Gennep 1909.

¹⁵ C.f. Thomassen 2009.

¹⁶ Jermyn & McCabe 2013, p. 612.

¹⁷ Deleyto 2009, p. 31.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁹ Turner 1982.

²⁰ Carroll 2011, p. x.

²¹ Stout 2012, p. 138.

²² Hajnal 2014, p. 201.

²³ Stout 2012, p. 80.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Stout 2012, p. 138.

²⁶ Briam 2010, pp. 388-389.

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- ²⁷ The film also selectively frames Hindu gods as liminal symbols of destruction and renewal, as Asha introduces Kali and Shiva as arbiters of profound global and personal change.
- ²⁸ C.f. Hatfield 1993; Moss-Wellington 2018.
- ²⁹ Hatfield 1993.
- ³⁰ C.f. Rapport 2018.
- ³¹ Similarly, a power dynamic is discernible between Macdonald's Scottish accent and Nighy's English accent in *The Girl in the Café*, and the film invites us to read a background of divergent experiences that attach to their elocution.
- ³² Kramer 2007, p. 153.
- ³³ Ibid., p. 138.
- ³⁴ Such as Grodal 2009, pp. 56-78.
- ³⁵ For further explanation of the niche construction perspective, see Day et al. 2003.
- ³⁶ Wojciszke 2005, p. 155. See also Strohming & Nichols 2014.
- ³⁷ Jermyn & McCabe 2013, p. 614.
- ³⁸ For an elaboration of this argument (which remains complicated by comic modes such as the satiric), see Grindon 2011, p. 78.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 70.
- ⁴⁰ McGraw & Warren 2010.
- ⁴¹ Duncan 2017.
- ⁴² Leggett & Malm 1995, p. 60.
- ⁴³ Eder 2016.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 81.
- ⁴⁵ Grindon 2011, p. 181. The social phenomenon of women's ambivalence is documented in Schäfer 2008.
- ⁴⁶ For more on the gender politics of narrative sentimentality, see Howard 1999.
- ⁴⁷ For further discussions of mixed emotion and film, see Larsen & McGraw 2011.
- ⁴⁸ Phillips 1994, p. 41.
- ⁴⁹ Buston & Emlen 2003.
- ⁵⁰ Deleyto 2009, p. 29.
- ⁵¹ Shumway 2003, p. 79; 139.
- ⁵² Ibid., p. 232, in some contradistinction to Illouz 1997.
- ⁵³ McDonald 2007, pp. 94-95.