Portrayals of Romantic Anxiety in Film

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Abstract

Viewers’ interpretations of characters with anxious attitudes in romantic relationships can affect their opinions on what constitutes appropriate relationship behavior. This paper analyzes the impact of media on people through a literature review and offers an explanation of different portrayals of romantic anxiety in film: the language used to describe characters and characters’ ends. The films studied - Sunset Boulevard, Sid and Nancy, Hard Core Logo, Burnt Money, and The Hustler - all showed a pattern where a character with romantic anxiety was mistreated by the storyline or other characters, and most of these characters meet their end through suicide or murder. The impact of these types of negative portrayals have not yet been explored, but similar studies find that viewers watch films to learn the norms of their community (Levy, 1990), and negative portrayals of romantic anxiety could lead to negative effects for anxious individuals. Further studies using questionnaires and focus groups are recommended in order to better understand the impact of these messages, viewer awareness, and sources of exposure.

Introduction

- The relationship dynamics films promote can affect viewers’ behavior in their own relationships, especially as many people - particularly teenagers - watch films as a way to learn how to behave in the world (Levy, 1990).
- Popular media tend to negatively portray individuals with romantic anxiety, describing them as needy, clingy, and desperate.
- Media often suggest those with romantic anxiety need to ignore their anxiety in order to be in a happy relationship.

This can be extremely harmful to the self-views of an anxious person and can lead to their modifying their behavior.

Methods

Characters were assumed to have anxious attachment when they displayed some of the following hyper-activating behaviors in an attempt to attain care, support, and attention from their attachment figure. This shortened list is here to illustrate some of the criteria. This is based on Levine and Heller’s (2010) work:

- A desire for intense closeness early in the relationship (e.g.: wanting to move in together, seeking a lot of physical reassurance, desiring to spend all their free time together)
- Vocalizes anxiety and fear of rejection (e.g. asking partner to stay with them, fearing their partner traveling, asking about previous partners, works hard to please partner)
- Strongly desires romantic companionship
- Resorts to protest behaviors (e.g. acting distant or busy when angry, provoking jealousy in the partner, many attempts to establish/reestablish contact)

Conclusion

Stories matter because humans are social creatures, need stories in order to make sense of things, and look for a narrative most strongly when things do not make sense (Wood, 2001). Wood (2001) argues that the hardest narrative to accept is the one they must create themselves, as the media does not endorse it. This narrative is one that encourages leaving - it’s one that requires the victim to believe they are worthy without a man, that they are not disloyal, that they can love and not forgive themselves. Levine and Heller’s work about anxious attachment suggests these stories are harmful and affect people’s behavior.

Results

- All the anxious characters are treated with cruelty by the objects of their affection or by those observing the relationship.
- Gillis tries to be transparent about his feelings for Desmond, and thus ridicules her, is aggressive towards her, dismisses her, and ignores her complaints.
- Spungen is insulted, yelled at, and pushed away by Vicious, who only becomes interested at first because she can get him drugs and work as his runner.
- Tallent and Dick’s relationship is referred to as being like that of a “ranked-up white trash married couple in a trailer park” by their manager and a journalist, and we often see their explosive fights (Haeberl, Dennis, & MacDonald, 1996).
- Packard and Angel are treated more gently by their partners, but others find them disturbing.

Desire remains unfilled.

Baker (1998), in his novel about his screenwriting process for the film, remarks on one scene: (Joe chooses a) 1950s Technicolor romance about a self-destructive musician who goes to the brink of death for love, but is delivered unto a happy ending with Doris Day (a weirdly idealized Billy Tallent). Billy’s scorn for Young at Heart warns Joe not to expect a happy ending to this renewed courtship. (p. 105)

In The Hustler, despite their relationship, Felsen keeps Packard at a painful distance. When she questions why he’s interested in her, he doesn’t reassure her, just kisses her. When she asks why he wants to visit her later in the day, he again doesn’t answer her, and even after she suggests they shouldn’t be together, he simply says he’ll move in with her. This sort of behavior is typical of him. For example, this dialogue exemplifies the pattern:

Packard: I love you, Eddie.
Felsen: You know, someday, Sarah, you’re gonna settle down... you’re gonna marry a college professor and you’re gonna write a great book. Maybe about me. Huh? Fast Eddie Felsen... hustler.
Packard: I love you.
Felsen: You need the words?
Packard: Yes, I need them very much. If you ever say them I’ll never let you take them back.

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