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From dreams to nightmares : Cross-generational romance in mainstream American cinema

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FROM DREAMS TO NIGHTMARES:
CROSS-GENERATIONAL ROMANCE IN MAINSTREAM AMERICAN CINEMA

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Bachelor of Communications (Film and Video)

This thesis is presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor
of Communications Honours

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the changes in cinematic depictions of romantic relationships in which there is enough age disparity that the couple could be mistaken for parent and child. These cross-generational affairs have significance within the ideology of the family unit, the heterosexual couple and the classic Hollywood ideal of romantic love. The way that these relationships have been portrayed on screen has changed drastically in mainstream American cinema from the 1950s to the 2000s, and these shifts reflect changing values and attitudes in society since all films exhibit certain ideologies. Through sampling several relevant films made between 1953 and 2008, this study will look at how cross-generational romance is presented as a fairytale dream in the 1950s, a subject for a bittersweet story in the 1970s and 1980s, and finally a nightmarish threat in the 2000s.

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INTRODUCTION

The depictions of cross-generational romance between older men and young women have changed significantly in mainstream American cinema from the 1950s to the 2000s. This shift is important to study since films are never just innocent visions, but rather reflections of how certain individuals perceive the world. As noted by Leonard Quart and Albert Auster in their book, *American Film and Society since 1945*, "fiction films reveal something of the dreams, desires, displacements and even issues confronting American society" since "the makers of films are touched by the same tensions and fantasies as everyone else" (1984, p.2). Indeed, all films exhibit certain ideologies, and it is impossible for filmmakers to escape having ideological viewpoints altogether (O'Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2005, p. 155). With this in mind, my research is concerned with how cross-generational relationships operate within ideologies of romantic love, the construction of the heterosexual couple and notions of the family unit.

The cinema medium has gone through a number of changes over its century of existence, and while the most noticeable differences are in its presentation and technical aspects, film historians have also noted changes in the content and the ways that stories are depicted. These changes are useful to study since they represent a change in the ideology of filmmakers and studio executives, and by extension, motion pictures serve to document the changes in the ideologies of entire societies since they are produced to cater to an audience. The American film industry has undergone noticeable ideological shifts over the past century. While homophobic films such as *Tea and Sympathy* (Berman & Minnelli, 1956) were

released during the first few decades of American cinema, in the twenty-first century the industry has become more open to positive portrayals of homosexual romances. Ménage-à-trois relationships have also become a more common subject. This increased openness can be seen in recent Academy Award winning films such as *Brokeback Mountain* (Ossana, Schamus & Lee, 2005) and *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (Aronson, Tenenbaum, Wiley & Allen, 2008). The fact that these films went on to win major awards shows acceptance, which signifies that dominant ideologies are not fixed and are capable of transforming over time.

Through studying a sample of relevant films I hope to pinpoint the changing values and attitudes towards cross-generational affairs over the past six decades. A comparison between the 1954 cross-generational romance movie *Sabrina* (Wilder) and the 1995 remake *Sabrina* (Rudin & Pollack), reveals that the age of the title character was increased for the later version. It is possible to conclude that this increase in age reflects societal anxiety over young women entering into relationships with significantly older men, and this concern can be further linked to psychology. Carl Jung wrote about the Elektra complex as a role reversal of Sigmund Freud's Oedipus complex. Both conditions explain the attraction that a child may have to his or her parent of the opposite sex, and this can be used to understand why a cross-generational affair may occur. It is however not my intent to make a judgment of whether love can exist between cross-generational couples, but rather to investigate what sorts of ideological views are expressed in motion pictures, and whether the films want us to believe that their characters are in love.

For the purpose of this thesis, I am using the term 'cross-generational' to signify romantic relationships between two characters where there is enough of an age

disparity that the couple could be mistaken for parent and child. I am also only examining love affairs between older men and younger women in order that the topic is not too broad and that my research stays focused. Since love is an abstract concept that cannot be approached scientifically, I have looked towards philosophy for a definition of its characteristics. In particular, I will be referring to the writings of Irving Singer who believes that “love is not *inherently* moral” (1984, p. 11) and “not *practical*, and sometimes borders on madness” (1984, p. 14). In other words, love can still exist between two persons even if the affair is socially unacceptable, as is the case with cross-generational affairs in American society today.

The methodology that I will be using in my investigation is qualitative research, with the method of purposeful sampling, as used by David Bordwell (1985, p. 10) for conducting research into Classical Hollywood film. Purposeful sampling, as Sharan B. Merriam notes, involves selecting a sample from which the most qualitative information can be learned (1998, p. 61). I am sampling films that will provide a perspective on mainstream American cinema from the 1950s to 2000s. As Curt Hersey (2002) defines it, mainstream films are motion pictures that have a universal appeal. Chapter One will detail the various approaches that have informed my research, such as formalism and psychoanalysis. I will explain how these help to identify the variables that affect the way cross-generational romances are depicted. Once I have established this, the next three chapters will respectively cover cinematic portrayals of cross-generational romance in the 1950s, the 1970s and 1980s, and the 1990s and 2000s.

The films that I will look at in Chapter Two include *Gigi* (Freed & Minnelli, 1958) and *Lili* (Knopf & Walters, 1953). These films, among others, represent everything that the Golden Age of Hollywood cinema was notable for: selling dreams and providing escapism. As noted in the documentary, *Thank Heaven! The Making of 'Gigi'* (Scott, 2008), *Gigi* was the last successful MGM musical of its era, since audiences were demanding grittier motion pictures. Indeed, the 1960s was a revolutionary decade for American cinema, as motion pictures started to challenge the Hays censorship code and the conventions of classical cinema in order to present something new and different to compete with the television medium. With the Hays censorship code still in place in 1962, Stanley Kubrick had to go to London to film *Lolita* (Harris & Kubrick), which portrayed the romantic love between a teenager and her stepfather as a relationship based on manipulation. Only British financiers were prepared to give Kubrick artistic control, and yet he still had to be careful with how explicit the film was (Cagin & Dray, 1984, p. 4). While films such as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Kramer, 1967) involved cross-generational affairs with the same nonchalance towards age disparity as in the 1950s, this was only on the surface since the issue was relegated into the background behind other concerns such as racism. The Hays Code was not lifted until 1968, and therefore it is more in the 1970s than the 1960s that a distinct change in treatment of cross-generational affairs between older men and younger women can be seen.

In Chapter Three, I will therefore be exploring 1970s and 1980s cinema, looking at how the cross-generational issue is treated with scrutiny in films such as *Manhattan* (Joffe & Allen, 1979) and *Great Balls of Fire!* (Fields & McBride, 1989). I

will follow this exploration with an investigation of the 1990s and 2000s in Chapter Four. I will look at how cross-generational romances nowadays tend to pose a threat to the characters, jeopardising their livelihood in films such as *The Crush* (Robinson & Shapiro, 1993) and *Ghost World* (Weisgal & Zwigoff, 2001). Finally, in Chapter Five I will reach a conclusion on the trends that are apparent.

The cinematic treatment of older man/younger woman cross-generational affairs concerns me as a film student since there is a stark difference in the way these relationships were dealt with six decades ago compared to today. Love has been a naturalised part of American cinema since its early years and yet the ideologies at play have changed. Thomas Schatz has commented on the Hollywood studio system developing out of the need to satisfy the demands on the “contemporary mass audience” (1981, p. 5). This is the reason why mainstream American cinema is so interesting to tackle. The films produced in this studio system have to reflect group thinking in order to be green-lighted. While an analysis of American independent cinema may reveal some alternative viewpoints, the films themselves could not account for the changing attitudes of an entire society in the same way that mainstream American cinema can.

CHAPTER ONE

READING CROSS-GENERATIONAL ROMANCE IN THE MOVIES

This chapter will detail the literature that has informed my approach to the subject and my subsequent research. I will outline the concepts that I have taken aboard and how I intend to use these ideas in my analysis of older man/younger woman cross-generational romance in mainstream American cinema. The first subjects that I will discuss are ideologies and the origins of motion picture romance. I will then delve into philosophical, psychological and formalist approaches, explaining how these help to support my analysis.

IDEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS

All films exert ideologies, offering a critical, compliant or contradictory attitude towards the social status quo at the time at which the film was produced, and these ideologies exist regardless of whether or not there is an overt political stance in the film (Corrigan & White, 2004, p. 400). As Nick Lacey points out, films do not “reflect reality” but are able to “represent reality from a particular political perspective” (2005, p. 163). Indeed, motion pictures are constructed, and as such, the perspectives of the filmmakers help to shape the film. According to *Cahiers du Cinéma* writers Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni (cited in Mast, Cohen & Braudy, 1992, p. 685), the majority of films made are the “unconscious instruments of the ideology which produces them”. In other words, ideologies are put forth by motion pictures even if it is not a conscious decision on behalf of the filmmaker. Comolli and Narboni (cited in Mast, Cohen & Braudy, 1992, p. 686) further identify that there are a minority of films that are not unconscious instruments, but are rather explicit and confrontational, offering a critique or “attack” on the ideologies.

However explicit or implicit a film's ideological views are, and regardless of whether or not a critique is offered, it is possible to examine the ideologies in a number of different ways. As Robert Stam points out, film analysis is "open to diverse influences", and can be written from an extensive range of perspectives (2000, p. 194). I have therefore decided to factor in three different approaches. My analysis takes into account philosophical views, psychoanalysis and formalism. Philosophy helps to conceptualise love without having to rely on personal definitions, while psychoanalysis assists in understanding the characters' desires. Formalism looks at the structures within films and how they position the viewer to react in a certain manner. Before delving into these areas, it is useful to consider the place of romantic love in motion picture history, and how the romantic couple has been idealised and naturalised since the first few years of Hollywood cinema.

SURVEYING ROMANCE IN THE CINEMA

Romance in mainstream American cinema has its origins in the conventions of courtly love, a code of practice founded in eleventh and twelfth century European literature. Dante's *Romance of the Rose* (1230) has been credited as establishing the movement, which was based on his real life experiences, yearning for a young woman named Beatrice who married another man (Mainon & Ursini, 2007, p. 357). Among the largest consumers of courtly love literature were female royalty, and these women took an interest in their gender having a central role in every tale. It is for this reason that the love of a woman became an integral part of character motivation (Schwartz, 2001). Courtly love was considered to be a noble force, as the yearning love that a man felt for a woman would inspire him to do good deeds in order to win her love (ibid). The woman in turn would only reciprocate his love after seeing his good deeds and finding him worthy.

This notion of love causing a man to become a better person can be seen in 1940s Hollywood films such as *Casablanca* (Wallis & Curtiz, 1942) in which the usually uncharitable Rick is motivated to help an underground leader due to his love for the man's wife. This notion appears in mainstream American romances still today, with films such as *Ghost Town* (Polone & Koepp, 2008) in which a misanthropic dentist helps ghosts with unfinished business after falling in love with a woman. With recent films such as *WALL·E* (Morris & Stanton, 2008), human romance has even been transported into the world of robots. True love is clearly still part of the dream that mainstream American cinema is selling. In 1973, Deborah Kerr, the romantic lead of such Hollywood classics as *From Here to Eternity* (Adler & Zinnemann, 1953), predicted that cinema would never "move far away from its romanticism of its early years" because as viewers, "we are all surely still entitled to our dreams" of living a fairytale life (cited in Kobal, 1973, p. 6).

Romance still exists in motion pictures today, but the depictions of certain relationships have changed. In the first few decades of American cinema, there were an abundance of films that showed relationships between older men and younger women without making an issue of the age difference, and hardly any that tackled a relationship between an older woman and younger man. This of course only reflects the social fabric of the time, and with the Second Wave of Feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, motion picture depictions began to change. In 1971, *Harold and Maude* (Higgins, Mulvehill & Ashby) portrayed the possibility of love between an older woman and younger man. *Harold and Maude* involves a young man who is obsessed with death, but finds a reason to live after meeting an old woman who lives life to the full. Maude can be considered as a liberating force and a role model

(Peary, 1982, p. 137) and the age difference allows her to be able to pass on valuable life lessons. Furthermore, since she helps and guides the suicidal Harold, Maude adopts the characteristics of a parental figure. The relationship between the two characters challenges notions of the family unit, as there is a romantic interest between the two individuals despite the fact that Maude is a surrogate parental figure. Since *Harold and Maude's* release, the ideologies put forth by motion pictures in terms of cross-generational affairs have significantly changed, and this change can be investigated through taking into account philosophy of love, psychoanalysis and formalism.

PHILOSOPHY AND FILM

Moral issues clearly arise with the concept of cross-generational love affairs, yet for the purpose of this analysis I am setting moral judgments aside. As Aunt May says in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (Greenhut & Allen, 1989), "for those who want morals, there's morality"; in other words, morality is something that an individual can choose whether or not to embrace. In *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, an optometrist hires a gangster to kill his mistress, and the film looks at his struggle to live with himself after committing such a heinous act. By the end of the film, he has come to accept what he has done, stating "we rationalise, we deny, or we couldn't go on living". As James Lawler remarks in his analysis of the film, the message conveyed is that "the individual should take responsibility for life" (Lawler, 2004, p. 39) and not rely on religion or a concrete moral code in order to determine what is right and wrong. Morality is not inherently bad, but it is subjective, and it is vital not to criticise these relationships as right or wrong, but rather to look at them from a detached viewpoint in order to understand the ideological concerns at hand.

With the concern over the morality of cross-generational romances in mind, I have turned towards philosophy in order to provide justification for cross-generational love that bypasses morality. I am investigating romance and the creation of the heterosexual couple, both of which spawn from the notion of two characters being in love. Two texts whose approaches I have found useful are *The Nature of Love: From Plato to Luther: The Meanings of Love* (1984) by Irving Singer and *An Introduction to Philosophy of Love* (1997) by Robert E. Wagoner. While Singer and Wagoner disagree on certain concepts, the differences help to broaden my appreciation of how love can be perceived.

Irving Singer takes on a philosophical view of love as a human characteristic that cannot be understood by scientific terms and yet which links human beings together in a very strong manner (1984, p. 8). Love is distinguished from desire, and relegated down to the basic principle of bestowing value onto something or someone (1984, pp. 3). Singer identifies that love is not always moral, practical or reciprocated, but it still exists and it is not necessarily bad for love to exist (1984, p. 14). Singer looks down upon moralising when it comes to love, stating that love has no clear objective (1984, p. 8) and morality is a significant factor with modern cross-generational affairs. In *American Beauty* (Cohen, Jinks, & Mendes, 1999), for example, a jaded older man resists the temptation to deflower his daughter's school friend, in what has been referred to as "a moment of moral triumph" (Keesey & Duncan, 2005, p. 83), yet this may have been his only chance to find love again. Singer also discusses how the act of love ignores the flaws and problems that the object of love may have, and how it is therefore not an objective means of evaluation, but at the same time the feeling is still meaningful (1984, p. 10).

Robert E. Wagoner also notes that romantic love ignores the flaws in the beloved, yet he views "genuine love" between two individuals as "otherworldly" and an "impossible love" (1997, p. 55). According to Wagoner, the yearning for the loved one is the only way that the lover knows that it is "true love", meaning that passion, rather than actual happiness, is the aim of romantic love (1997, p. 57). This is a slightly different view to Singer, who believes that love is a great human characteristic that "unites imagination, intellect, and feeling" between individuals (1992, p. 144). Singer and Wagoner remain comparable though since they both recognise that the impracticalities that can cause love to be anything but noble as in courtly love.

Wagoner also notes that the suffering that a lover goes through when yearning is what makes romantic love poignant. He views the way that modern stories of romantic love tend to end in marriage as ironic since it ends the passionate desire that made it exciting to begin with. While the 1950s cross-generational love stories end with the implication of marriage, Wagoner would view an open ending as more romantic because it suggests that the two lovers will still endure future struggles without the resolution of marriage. Wagoner further looks at the role of sexuality, debunking the distinction often made between lust and "true love" by commenting that they both feel the same for the individual. Wagoner's stance on romantic love is useful to consider in light of cross-generational romances, since these affairs are often ruled out as merely sexual attraction and not genuine love by the supporting characters. This again is a different perspective to Singer, who separates desire from love, but film characters often have trouble themselves with making this distinction.

PSYCHONALYSIS AND CINEMA

As Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink note, psychoanalysis has a “crucial role in the study of film” since it allows for analysis of depictions of sexuality (1999, p. 352). Sigmund Freud believed that the development of an individual was determined by what he described as the Oedipus complex, stating that elements of this complex would surface in an individual if not resolved. The Oedipus complex involves the attraction of a young boy to his mother based on instinctive rivalry with his father and a need to “consolidate his identification with the father and all that he represents” (Pietropaolo & Testaferri, 1995, p. 86). This concept stems from the myth of King Oedipus who killed his father and married his mother. As Freud states in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, “like Oedipus, we live in ignorance of the desires that offend morality” (Freud, 2004, p. 210), however the desires are still there even if we are not aware of them.

This rationale of repressed desire has been used by the characters in cross-generational romance films such as *Harold and Maude*, in which a psychiatrist tells Harold that he can understand why he may want to sleep with his mother but not with his grandmother. Psychoanalytic film theory has developed the concept of an Oedipal trajectory, whereby the male protagonist in a classical Hollywood film resolves his Oedipus complex through finding a woman to love (Hayward, 2000, p. 261). Rather than project Oedipal desires onto his mother, these urges are contained, as the man is able to express his desires with a love interest, consequently reaffirming the family unit due to the implication of marriage and carrying on the cycle. This trajectory can also be applied to female protagonists, with similar ideological overtones about the importance of the family unit.

Carl Jung (1957, p. xxxiii) wrote of an Elektra complex, similar to the Oedipal complex but with application to girls. The girl has to instead consolidate an attraction to her father in order to become a heterosexual woman (Pietropaolo & Testaferri, 1995, p. 86) with an instinctive rivalry developing between herself and her mother in which she wishes the mother were dead. Since the girl cannot admit this attraction to herself, the father becomes principal instigator in her mind even though the advances are on her own behalf (Ashliman, 2008). This concept is necessary to consider since the cross-generational romances that I am analysing can be linked to a resolution of the Elektra complex, in the same way as the male protagonist resolves his Oedipal trajectory through finding a woman to love. Freud further believed that incestual desire was a part of "all human development" (cited in Gaylin, 1986, p. 133) that resulted from the Oedipal complex, and there are significant incestual overtones to many cinematic cross-generational affairs.

FILM FORMALISM

Formalist theory helps to decode the underlying structures that exist in motion pictures. While David Bordwell has written chiefly about Hollywood cinema rather than mainstream American cinema on the whole, Hollywood forms an intricate part of this mainstream bracket and therefore his views are relevant. Bordwell notes that Hollywood cinema claims to be realistic through the use of continuity editing and other techniques, and that it functions as a set of norms, which includes "heterosexual romance" often as the "motivation for the principle line of action" (1985, p. 5). Bordwell states that heterosexual romantic love figures as at least one line of action in the majority of classic Hollywood films (1985, p. 16) and that most classical narratives display strong degrees of closure whereby the fate of all the characters and outcomes of every conflict are resolved (1992, p. 83).

The significance of film endings is also discussed by theorist Richard John Neupert, who in his text *The End: Narration and Closure in Cinema*, remarks that a film's ending is the "final product of all the narrative's labors" and the "final address to the spectator" (1995, p. 32). Neupert comments on the importance of death and marriage to the end of a film, noting that the problems caused by women in Hollywood films tend to be resolved either by death or by marriage (1995, p. 106). Neupert further dissects filmic endings based on the degree of closure that they possess in terms of both 'story' and 'discourse'. Neupert explains the difference between these two terms as a matter of whether a story is being told or is merely unfolding, outlining that the classical fiction film is a discourse "disguised as a story", since the films have an appearance of unfolding without narrative intentions (Aumont & Neupert, 1992, p. 96). According to Neupert, the four classifications that arise are: 'closed texts', in which both the story and discourse are resolved; 'open discourses' in which only the story is resolved; 'closed discourses' in which only the discourse but not the story is resolved; and 'open texts' in which neither element is resolved (Neupert, 1995, p. 33). I will use these classifications to make distinctions between the endings of the films that I am sampling.

Focusing on characters and narration, it is possible to further examine the films that I have selected. According to Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White (2004, p. 217) film narration can be described as "the emotional, physical, or intellectual perspective through which the characters, events, and action of the plot appear". In other words, narration serves to show the viewpoint from which the filmmakers want their work to be interpreted. Corrigan and White single out two

primary forms of narration, noting that first-person narration implies “one person’s subjective point of view”, while third-person, omniscient narration comes across as “objective and detached” (ibid). They further remark on the ability of voice-cover narration to create “direct and flexible” contact with the viewer (2004, p. 220), thereby imposing the narrator’s perspective on the viewer. Corrigan and White also note the importance of characters in film narratives as their “wishes and fears” are responsible for the causal logic of the film whereby events flow off one another (2004, p. 224). Characters are a useful way of deducing ideologies, since they reflect the status quo of the world of the film and “social and historical assumptions about normal or abnormal behavior” (2004, p. 225).

Since I am mapping the changes in film narratives over a series of decades, it is also useful to consider the concept of the post-classical cinema, an approach to mainstream cinema concerned with challenging audience expectations. It is important to ascertain whether the films that I am analysing are classical or post-classical narratives since this suggests the attitude under the surface of a film. As Peter Kramer (2000, p. 73) notes, a liberal outlook and a degree of skepticism are among the most noticeable traits of post-classical cinema, which links to Comolli and Narboni’s notion of some films attacking their ideological origins.

CONCLUSION

When watching a film, the ideological views may not always be obvious, but through taking into consideration philosophical, psychoanalytical and formalist approaches to dissecting the material, the key ideologies can be deduced. A philosophical reading is useful for determining the ideological stance of a film

towards the possibility of cross-generational love existing, since philosophy helps to understand that love is not limited to conventional views. Psychoanalysis allows for conclusions to be drawn about whether the film is presenting the two lovers as actually in love or rather just drawn to one another based on a psychological need, or possibly both. Formalist film theory examines the structures within the films themselves, and using this theory it is possible to analyse how a film has been constructed to reflect ideologies. In this thesis I will be using all three of these approaches to explore the depictions of cross-generational romance over the past six decades, with a particular focus on *Gigi* from the 1950s, *Manhattan* from the 1970s, and *Ghost World* from the 2000s.

CHAPTER TWO

FAIRYTALE CROSS-GENERATIONAL ROMANCE: THE 1950s

In this chapter I will look at *Gigi* as an example of how films in the 1950s dealt with older man/younger woman cross-generational romances. The film was a MGM studio production, and while the story had been previously filmed in France in 1949, director Vicente Minnelli brought a whole new vision to the tale with a colourful production design and a musical treatment. Winner of nine Academy Awards, including Best Picture, *Gigi* was considered to be the “most original adult-oriented film musical” ever made at a time when the genre seemed to be falling into oblivion (Vogel, 2003, p. 209). As a film that clearly penetrated the public sphere, *Gigi* is useful to analyse for an insight into the ideologies that operated in terms of older man/younger woman cross-generational romances in 1950s mainstream American cinema.

Gigi is a musical, which Rick Altman cites as the “most escapist of the entertainment arts” (1981, p. 7). The film was designed to appeal to an audience interested in escaping from the problems of their own lives by immersing in a film. The characters however are not far removed from their intended audience. As Thomas Elsaesser (cited in Altman, 1981, p. 15) observes, all of Minnelli’s protagonists are “cunning day-dreamers” in that they confuse imagination with what is real and do not realise their problems since they are lost in their frivolous fantasies. *Gigi* features two such “cunning day-dreamers” who lead carefree existences, and the film is about them waking up to the realities of their world. Set in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century, the film involves a middle aged

playboy, called Gaston, and a vivacious schoolgirl, called Gigi, who during the course of the film come to realise that they love each other after it is suggested that they would make suitable marriage partners. Having only ever considered themselves friends, both Gaston and Gigi are initially in awe of the notion, but they both eventually submit willingly to the proposal. The film has been described as a fairytale story (Scott, 2008) with a relatively simple plot and happy resolution that presents cross-generational romances as non-problematic.

NARRATION AND PATRIARCHAL CONTROL IN *GIGI*

Gigi opens with an introduction by Gaston's uncle, Honoré, who addresses the viewer, telling us "this is a story about a little girl" as the camera pans across to reveal Gigi, dancing and playing tag with other teenage girls. This introduction implies the subjective view attributed to first person narration. Yet while Honoré is present at different points in the tale to carry the events of the film through, he is absent for the majority of the film as it adopts an omniscient narrative structure. While this structure implies objectivity, the film both opens and closes with Honoré and therefore the story is still filtered through his personal view. The control of the narrative belongs to the most authoritative male figure in the film, and with the film itself named after her, Gigi's destiny is clearly in the hands of the patriarchal system.

Honoré is a key instigator in bringing Gaston and Gigi together, reinforcing the importance of family, which is central to the film's plot of bringing two potential lovers together. The narration by Honoré shows the power of the older generation to guide those younger than themselves, which is the supposed virtue of Gaston and Gigi's marriage. Honoré's subjective view of the world is in fact noted in the

way that Minnelli films Gaston and Honoré when they sing "It's a Bore". The song number is statically filmed, consisting primarily of cuts between Gaston and Honoré, who are seated throughout the entire tune. While the costumes and locations enlighten us to the beauty that Honoré sees in the world, the camerawork, editing and lack of choreography shows the boredom that Gaston finds in Paris.

Gigi is an example of classical cinema, with the norms of continuity editing and heterosexual romance that David Bordwell attributes to Hollywood cinema. While Bordwell states that heterosexual romance is commonly a key line of action in classical Hollywood films, it is in fact the *only* line of action driving the plot in *Gigi*. The sexual politics at hand establish the patriarchal ideology that was dominant at the time, with Gigi's purpose in life narrowed down to making a suitable wife. The film features a simplistic plot resolution with the characters only having to learn to overcome their differences to be content. *Gigi* is pure escapist entertainment, with a structure akin to a fairytale. Gigi herself is a Cinderella of sorts: a girl who has a chance to rise above her current status and find the true love of her life.

CHARACTERS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE COUPLE IN *GIGI*

There are six key characters in *Gigi*, of all whom are stereotypes, representing sets of values. Gaston and Gigi are the two potential lovers, presenting the astute dominant male and the spirited female who needs to be made submissive. Honoré is Gaston's uncle who advises him on love, while Gigi's grandmother and aunt take an active role in preparing her for the social mores expected of a married woman. Both represent the support of the family unit as a tool for guiding one's decisions in life. Lianne is Gaston's unfaithful 30-year-old girlfriend, and discovering her

infidelity allows Gaston to see the possibilities in Gigi. Lianne is set in opposition with Gigi, with a dichotomy in terms of young and faithful against old and untrustworthy. Gaston and Gigi's relatives are notable for guiding the cross-generational romance. It is only after Honoré and Gigi's grandmother watch them playing on the beach that they realise how well suited the two are for one another despite the age difference. They decide that the two are ready for marriage and they take measures to initiate an affair.

Earlier the characters actually recognise Gigi's immaturity and her unsuitability as a wife. The film portrays Gigi as needing the attention and care that a child requires rather than a prospective wife. Her grandmother has to remind her to brush her hair and wear an overcoat, and when Gigi first meets Gaston in the film, she is so unaware about sex and courting that she asks him, "do you make love all the time?", a question which he finds amusingly naïve. A key casual dialogue exchange reveals how the characters perceive Gigi as Gaston asks her grandmother if she has a telephone, to which she replies, "not until Gigi is old enough to have secrets and admirers". Despite Gigi's perceived immaturity, the characters in *Gigi* present that preparing an inexperienced female teenager and an unsettled playboy for marriage is natural in their culture.

The matching of Gigi and Gaston is considered normal behaviour to such a strong degree that age disparity is not an issue as long as they confirm to the ingrained structures of their patriarchal society. The film indeed suggests that a connection between the two is more important than age. Through the way Gigi and Gaston interact, their suitability for one another is recognisable even before marriage is suggested. In one scene they go to the beach to play tennis, and the film cuts

between their match and an upper class lady playing in the court beside them. While Gaston and Gigi run around the court and the camera tracks around to follow them having fun, the upper class lady is statically filmed as she stands still and does not move her body when hitting the ball. The lady is one of several caricatures of French nobility that appear throughout the film, serving to idealise the notion of Gigi and Gaston as a couple by comparison. The opening credits are even played over hand-drawn eccentric cartoons of Parisians, suggesting from the very opening shots that Paris is full of shallow individuals who do not find the same joy in life as Gigi does and Gaston aspires to.

There is an important scene in which Gaston takes Gigi to the ice-skating rink where he is “calling upon” Lianne. This scene is cut between Gaston and Gigi having fun talking on the side of the rink while Lianne and her ice-skating instructor move about on the ice, and in the cutaways to ice-skating, the instructor is seen eyeing Lianne affectionately. As these shots imply and as is later revealed, Lianne and the instructor are having an affair, and cutting Lianne’s infidelity against Gigi’s bubbly conversation with Gaston reveals that Gigi is better suited to Gaston than Lianne. This scene reveals an affirmation of the monogamous heterosexual couple as the ideological norm, since Gaston and Gigi are paired together with Lianne as an outsider at a distance. Lianne’s infidelity also suggests that older women are promiscuous while younger ones are trustworthy – this meaning that virginal, impressionable women are better marriage partners.

PAEDOPHILIA AND SUGGESTED INCEST IN *GIGI*

Despite the film’s success in 1958, *Gigi* is nowadays one of the most controversial Hollywood musicals from the period. The theme song “Thank Heaven for Little

Girls", sung by Honoré in admiration of the female sex, features such lyrics as "those little eyes so helpless and appealing". Furthermore, Honoré is looking directly into the eyes of a prepubescent girl who has sat down in a chair beside him as he sings the song, which begins with the words "each time I see a little girl of five or six or seven". There is a suggestion of paedophilia with this song, since Honoré is singing it in admiration of girls who are young enough to be his granddaughter. The fact that he is seated throughout the song and filmed in an unbroken take also suggests that he is too old and deceiving himself, lacking the energy of youth despite the joy that can be heard in his voice. Indeed, the theme song has been exploited to signify paedophilia, most notably in *Wag the Dog* (De Niro, Rosenthal & Levinson, 1997) where the song is played in a commercial designed to degrade the President of the United States who has been accused of initiating an affair with a teenage girl.

Gigi undoubtedly has overtones of paedophilia and incestual desire. Gaston compares Gigi to a prospective daughter, commenting that he would want his own daughter to have better manners. Later on, Gigi sings, "will I be your little sister?" and throughout the film Gaston is the only significant man in her life. He buys her chocolates and candy and takes the place of a parental figure in her life. Gigi's mother is an opera singer who is always off screen, never paying her any attention, and Gigi's father is implied to have passed away, so Gaston naturally fills a void in her life. Gaston and Gigi's union resolves her Elektra complex in that she becomes the wife of her surrogate father, and she manages to achieve womanhood and maturity through the marriage. The scene at the beach when Gigi's grandmother and Honoré decide to arrange the marriage has incestuous connotations, since

they are watching the Gaston and Gigi just like parents watching over their children.

In his analysis of the film, Raymond Bellour also notes that Gigi's grandmother and Honoré were once lovers themselves, and that Gigi and Gaston serve as surrogate children, which makes their union at the end of the film a reconstruction of "a nuclear family of four" (2000, p. 205). Steve Cohan further adds that Gigi and Gaston could possibly be blood relations since their relatives were once lovers (2002, p. 49). The incestual desires that surface in *Gigi* are dispelled through Gigi and Gaston's implied marriage and the symbolic remarriage of Gigi's grandmother and Honoré, who are brought back together by the prospective wedlock. The film resolves not only its story but also a broken family unit and an Oedipal trajectory.

OTHER TEXTS OF THE ERA

Comparing *Gigi* to other cross-generational romance films of the 1950s helps to show how it is a representation of attitudes of the time. *The Moon is Blue* (Preminger, 1953) attempted to challenge on-screen representations of courtship with a 22-year-old woman who announces her virginity to the 30-year-old man courting her, asking him not to try seduction. As Laura M. Carpenter notes though, the film merely reinforces the prevailing beliefs of the 1950s in terms of the virtues of virginity (2005, p. 36). The female protagonist in *The Moon is Blue* further remarks, "the girl is supposed to be half the man's age plus seven", suggesting, as with *Gigi*, that younger inexperienced women are better suited to older men. *Lili* (Knopf & Walters, 1953) and *Sabrina* (Wilder, 1954), both films of the time, provide supportive examples of the naturalisation and idealisation of relationships between older men and younger women. Both films are also named

after their female protagonist too, indicating an objectification of the young women.

Lili is a cross-generational romance film about “cunning day-dreamers”, with Lili even more naïve than Gigi. Lili is a French orphan who is taken in by a circus and she is unable to distinguish between Paul, a puppeteer, and his puppets, which manifest different sides to his personality. In a fantasy sequences towards the end though, Lili dances with life-sized versions of each of the puppets and they all turn into Paul. The puppets become both surrogate parental figures as well as her friends during the course of the film. There is an element of incestual desire at play since Paul is controlling the puppets that Lili has adopted as her family. This incestual desire is handled in a similar manner to *Gigi*, with Lili initially shocked at the suggestion by a circus magician that Paul could be her boyfriend, but by the end of the film she has accepted the notion.

In *Sabrina* (Wilder, 1954) the age disparity is even more significant than with *Gigi* and *Lili*. The 22-year-old Sabrina finds a potential love interest with Linus, a man who is even older than her father. While Linus initially rules her off as “the last of the romantics”, he himself is a romantic at heart, despite his declared permanent bachelorhood and workaholic lifestyle. “Nobody walks alone by choice,” he tells Sabrina, and his eyes show the repressed desire even if his words do not. While Sabrina is initially infatuated with Linus’s brother, she nevertheless eventually realises that Linus is a perfect match for her, remembering the kindness he showed her when she was a child. As a surrogate older brother figure, there are also incestuous overtones to *Sabrina*, and having such a significant age gap makes the story even more akin to a fantasy tale than it already is. The film is narrated as

a fairytale with the words "once upon a time", and an idyllic boat ride at the end suggests a happily ever after ending.

These other films from the 1950s reflect the same ideological underpinnings as *Gigi* and therefore some generalisations can be made. In the 1950s, older man/younger woman cross-generational romances involved the construction of a couple with partners who do not initially see the romantic possibilities with one another. There are strong incestual overtones but these are contained by the romantic pairings. It is worth noting that *Sabrina*, *Lili* and *Gigi*'s mothers are all absent in the films. This further shows the dominance of patriarchy, and the ideological stance that father figures are all that are necessary for the development of a girl. Virtuosity also seems to come from these young girls who are able to rejuvenate bored old men and lonely bachelors. All three of these films additionally play out as versions of the Cinderella fairytale as a young girl rises above her status, finds true love, and lives happily ever after.

THE CLOSURE OF THE COUPLE IN 1950s CROSS-GENERATIONAL ROMANCES

Gigi possesses the strong degree of closure that has been attributed to classical narratives. We know that the Gaston and Gigi will live happily ever after since they depart on an idyllic horse carriage ride and the music swells up. In *Sabrina* the lovers depart on a similarly filmed serene cruise, both of which are metaphors for marriage. Rather than see the couples marrying one another, these rides present more significance from a symbolic perspective. They show the characters departing from the story that we have seen unfold as they become part of the background. They have become at one with society due to their embracement of heterosexual romance and reaffirmation of the family despite their age disparity.

Gigi furthermore not only closes but also opens on a horse carriage ride, albeit with two different individuals. The similarity between the film's opening and closing scenes reveals a return to harmony and order in the world of the film. It also shows how right from the very first scene, the objective of *Gigi* was to bring the two characters together. The marriage union allows the problem of Gigi's immaturity to be resolved, as she progresses from girlhood to womanhood. This is a 'closed text' and the film's ending also follows the conventions of classical cinema with problem resolution resulting from the characters learning to accept one another since they both have to dispel their own reservations before they agree to marriage. The film sends a Utopian ideological message about the possibilities of cross-generational love with a strong degree of closure that gives the impression that the romantic couple will live happily ever after.

CONCLUSION

While mainstream American cinema from the 1950s offers a positive view of cross-generational love, the way that the affairs are depicted in these films are problematic. The films that I have examined all come from the Hollywood studio system, which is based on selling dreams and the "cunning day-dreamers" are part of the intended appeal. *Gigi* makes every effort to show us that the two protagonists are perfect for one another since they interact so well. Gaston even admits to Gigi's grandmother, "I have a better time with this outrageous brat of yours than anybody in Paris". While the age difference is a concern for both parties in *Gigi*, with Gaston singing "she's too infantile to take her from her pen" and Gigi bluntly stating that "it won't work", the relationship does work out in the end. The age disparity however functions as a major instrument in maintaining the dominance of the patriarchal system. Men are able to influence not only the central

relationship but also the entire transformation of the girl, as can be seen with Honoré's control over the unfolding narrative. This is too much of a fairytale type of story, and while cross-generational romances were depicted as viable and problem-free in 1950s cinema, two decades later 1970s would offer an alternative take on the matter in an era when the 1950s mode of filmmaking was starting to be challenged.

CHAPTER THREE

BITTERSWEET CROSS-GENERATIONAL ROMANCE: 1970s AND 1980s

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw severe social change in America with the emergence of the Second Wave of Feminism. Feminists challenged the sexist traditional values that existed at the time, manifested in films such as *Gigi*, leading to a significant impact on American culture (O'Dea Schenken, 1999, p. 264). One of the affected areas was the motion picture industry, and the 1970s saw a shift towards post-classical cinema (Kramer, 2000, p. 73). While in the 1950s, women were often portrayed in the media as child-like, by the late 1970s women started to be portrayed as independent (Bentz & Mayes, 1993, p. 24). By the time *Manhattan* was released in 1979, women were protesting their right to make their own decisions, as opposed to feeling forced into relationships by a male-dominated society (Olson, 1999, p. 360). Cross-generational affairs were under public scrutiny to such an extent that the film received a R-rating in America, much to director Woody Allen's dismay (Vaughn, 2006, p. 43). Nominated for two Academy Awards including Best Screenplay, *Manhattan* was nevertheless one of the biggest critical successes of its time and is commonly regarded as Woody Allen's best film. It is an important part of 1970s mainstream American cinema that can be seen as reflecting the changing attitudes of the era. In this chapter I will look at *Manhattan* as an example of cross-generational romance in 1970s and 1980s cinema.

Manhattan centers on an affair between Tracy, a schoolgirl, and Isaac, a man more than twice her age. The film involves the trials and tribulations of the couple, as

they both acknowledge that their affair clashes with societal norms. *Manhattan* has been described as a “nervous romance” due to its concern with anxiety brought on by the pressure to conform to heterosexual ideals in a post-feminist age in which women are more liberal and gender roles have become unclear (Deleyto, 1998, p. 130). Indeed, there is a role reversal from the 1950s with Tracy and Isaac’s affair. Isaac is the insecure and more immature of two, while Tracy is down-to-earth and in touch with her feelings. There is a bittersweet nature to *Manhattan* because while the characters are always unsure of their future and current fluctuating relationships, the enrichment that they take from their time together is still evident.

NARRATING THE NERVOUS ROMANCE IN *MANHATTAN*

Manhattan opens with voice-over narration by Isaac, however the rest of the film takes on a more objective appearance. A frenzied style develops whereby the events are shown from not only Isaac’s point of view, but also from the perspectives of the supporting characters. While the voice-over allows for direct and flexible contact with the viewer, the multi-lineal narrative structure suggests a fragmentation in Isaac’s thinking, and therefore his testimony requires evaluation. *Manhattan* is an example of post-classic cinema with a structure that challenges conventional Hollywood cinema. The skeptical view of life that the film adopts is also one of the chief distinguishing factors of post-classical cinema. In terms of cross-generational affairs, the voice-over allows us to see the affair in the romantic black and white that Isaac perceives it. *Manhattan* is indeed filmed in nostalgic black and white, turning almost every scene into a romantic image with the grime of the city covered in shadows (Shumway, 2003 p. 174). The fragmented narrative structure however serves to counter the romanticism of the photography and the

narration, as it reflects the torrid and unsteady nature of Tracy and Isaac's affair. *Manhattan* subverts the "direct and flexible" attributes of voice-over narration since it only ever appears at the beginning of the film. This decision prepares the viewer for more challenges in the film to come as the narrator abandons his position.

Alternatively, the scenes where the film cuts to show us the supporting characters discussing Isaac's affair could be interpreted as him imagining what they might be saying since the opening narration implies a subjective view. The opening narration is taken from a novel that Isaac is writing, rather than it being an introduction to his relationship with Tracy. This is significant since it shows a further fragmentation in that the opening lines of the film are not directly related to the affair. These lines serve to show us Isaac's love for Manhattan, which he describes as "his town". The city remains the only constant throughout all the affairs that take place in the film, and yet Isaac describes it as a metaphor for "moral decay". *Manhattan's* narration indicates a conflicted personality, and by extension, it pinpoints to Isaac's life being set on edge due to his anxiety over his cross-generational affair that he has trouble rationalising.

CHARACTERS AND MORALITY IN *MANHATTAN*

Manhattan opens with a disturbance of the "boy meets girl" romantic plotting, which has been described by Raymond Bellour as a pattern that "organizes, indeed constitutes the classical American cinema" (cited in Wexman, 1993, p. 4). The film omits Isaac and Tracy's first meeting as they are in a relationship from the first time we see them together. It nevertheless still takes Isaac the entire course of the film to realise that he is genuinely in love with Tracy, despite her constant pleas

for him to take their relationship more seriously. The film introduces Tracy and Isaac as they have dinner together with Isaac's married friends, Emily and Yale. From the first time we encounter them, the film's thematic starting ground is already alluded to as Emily and Yale represent a possibility of what Tracy and Isaac could become. Isaac constantly makes light of the age difference existing between himself and Tracy, commenting, "I'm dating a girl who does homework" and "I'm older than her father", bringing incestual tones to their relationship. As the film progresses we see that this is more than just casual remarks. When Isaac is alone without Tracy he voices his concern over the age difference, and when he is alone with Tracy, it becomes a nervous habit, with Isaac jesting that they are fine together "as long as the cops don't burst in". Sander H. Lee further comments that this nervous compulsion is due to Isaac's fear of what others would think of him falling in love with Tracy, hence Isaac passes off the relationship as purely sexual (2002, p. 72).

The various supporting characters in *Manhattan* try to justify the affair between Tracy and Isaac since they realise it defies social norms. Isaac is concerned himself and he lets the advice of the other characters influence his decisions. Isaac is not a typical romantic hero with his large glasses, balding scalp and stunted height, and realising this he blinds himself from his true emotions, relying on what others tell him. Mary, who is having an affair with Yale, explains to Isaac that the "little girl" is a response to Isaac's "sexual humiliation" after Isaac's wife left him for a lesbian lover. At Tracy's age she is "no possible threat at all", Mary remarks. Indeed, while Isaac denies that this is why he is attracted to her, he tells Tracy "you're a kid, you don't know what love means", which shows that he indeed perceives her as a non-

threat. He later however admits to Yale that the affair is not serious, and with Mary's comments in mind, Isaac breaks off the affair with Tracy.

The characters in *Manhattan* in fact represent a moral battleground, each standing for a different set of values. Emily represents traditional virtue and honesty, since she is the only character who is not having an affair outside of marriage or social convention. She is also the only character who sees that Isaac and Tracy are meant to be together, telling Yale in private that Tracy is "a bright girl" and announcing, "I don't think seventeen is too young". Tracy represents the liberated young woman of the 1970s, with such socially defiant suggestions as "maybe we're meant to have a series of relationships of different lengths". At the same time though, Tracy takes her affair with Isaac very seriously, which represents the dilemma between liberal thinking and liberal attitudes. Mary on the other hand is a fully liberated woman, refusing to commit to any sort of relationship. After breaking off with Yale, Mary takes up with Isaac, but then she starts seeing Yale again behind Isaac's back. Comparatively, Mary's infidelity is no worse than Lianne in *Gigi*, however Mary does not come off as a simple bad character. Likewise, while Tracy is as faithful as Gigi, she is more complex since she breaks the virginal virtuous mould by admitting to Isaac that she has had three affairs before him.

The film's battle of moral stances culminates in a scene set in Yale's classroom as he shares a vehement argument with Isaac over morality and the affection that they both have for Mary. Yale points out, "you're so self-righteous; we're just people, we're just human beings, you think you're god". Isaac responds by pointing to a skeleton model he is standing next to, announcing that he wants to be thought of well once he has passed away. When Isaac exits the scene, the camera lingers on

the skeleton, emphasising that once we die all that is left is our bones, as opposed to any intellectualism. Yale's words do not initially penetrate Isaac's anger, but as Isaac is lying alone on his sofa reminiscing about the aspects of life that make it worth living, he suddenly rationalises that he is in love with Tracy, however "not inherently moral" or "not practical" it may be. The theory of sexual desire feeling the same as loving desire also comes into play as Isaac has to eventually realise that while he is physically attracted to Tracy, there is much more than this to their relationship.

OTHER TEXTS OF THE ERA

While its frankness with the cross-generational love is rather unique, *Manhattan* is a good representation of how films in the 1970s and 1980s tended to present a grey area without definite moral judgments when dealing with older man/younger woman relationships. Both *Great Balls of Fire!* (Fields & McBride, 1989) and *Circle of Two* (Van der Kolk & Dassin, 1980) focus on the positive aspects of their cross-generational affairs, while at the same time taking into account moral implications, leaving it up to the viewer to decide what stance to take towards the relationship. The films from this era also display a strong affinity to the codes and conventions of courtly love, and yet the notion of courtly love as a wondrous force is debunked.

Circle of Two involves the affection that Sarah, a teenage girl, develops towards Ashley, an ageing artist. Ashley reciprocates her love in only words and not actions, because he knows that it is considered morally wrong. Even though he never tries to initiate any sort of relationship, responsibility is still placed on his shoulders, and he is dismissed as a "ridiculous" man by Sarah's parents. Sarah's friends on the other hand have no issue with the relationship. One of her friends initially comments that Ashley is "robbing the cradle" but then changes her mind

to say that Sarah is “robbing the grave”. While both of these terms have negative connotations, the implication that both parties are responsible in a relationship is important. Sarah’s friends ultimately end up accepting the affair, commenting on Ashley’s good physique for his age, and they are happy to go on a boat ride with him. The positives of the relationship are also visible in the characters, with Ashley finding inspiration to paint once again. Sarah also finds hope for true love after her former boyfriend indicates that he is only interested in her for sex. The film shows their romantic connection as akin to courtly love with the renewed inspiration that Ashley acquires from Sarah, and yet the film ends with them apart.

In *Great Balls of Fire!*, a connection is presented between Jerry Lee Lewis and Myra despite an age disparity as they find common ground with their love for music and a mutual desire to break free of the chains of society. An early scene has Jerry Lee playing piano and singing to a crowd, and as he locks eyes with Myra, she swoons under the realisation that his singing is directed at her. All of the supporting characters however reveal the inability of society to accept the affair. A key scene late in the film has Jerry Lee playing at a concert with an unenthusiastic crowd. After Jerry Lee complains about the lack of applause and excitement, somebody pushes a cradle on stage from behind the curtain and criticisms of him “robbing the cradle” and other words to that effect are shouted from the crowd. While the connection between Myra and Jerry Lee is clear, and according to the principles of courtly love she inspires him, the film highlights how society is ignorant of their emotional connection.

AMBIGUITY AND BITTERSWEET ENDINGS

The ending of *Manhattan* is an ‘open discourse’, because while the story has reached a concluding point in that Isaac finally realises that he is in fact in love, the narrative

is still open. It is a bittersweet ending because while we are unsure of whether they will stay together, the film also has shown us the benefits that the two characters achieved from their time together. The ending evokes a mixture of sadness and regret, and yet at the same time there is satisfaction in knowing that the two lovers did experience happiness at one point, even if it was temporary. *Manhattan* ends on a shot Isaac smiling, followed by a short montage of the architecture of the city, similar to how the film opens. This provides the same type of circularity as with the horse ride in *Gigi*, however the ideological apparatus of idealised love from Hollywood from the 1950s films is overthrown with the two lovers apart.

As with *Circle of Two* and *Great Balls of Fire!*, there is also a subversion of courtly love principles in *Manhattan*. The film ends with Isaac rushing to see Tracy before she leaves for London, and in a traditional romance there would be an expectation of the two of them staying together. By the conventions of courtly love, Isaac's run presents what he perceives to be an act of heroism, as indicated by the romantic classical music soundtrack that accompanies these scenes. Isaac has done something to heal the rift in their relationship and reaffirm their love, and yet Tracy decides to still go to London, saying that "six months isn't so long". The film ends without a sense of closure, since the realm of possibilities is left open in terms of their relationship. This grey area in terms of cross-generational romances is common the 1970s and 1980s. The films on this subject have a realistically complex perspective, examining both the connections that the characters have, as well as the plausibility of their love being accepted in society.

This sort of ambiguity and bittersweetness can also be seen in *Circle of Two*. While the ending has the two lovers separated as she ascends an escalator, there is still a

degree of uncertainty. Their locking facial expressions show their love for one another, and while based on the dialogue we are led to believe that she will just go away, there is still the possibility of her turning back as the end credits of the film roll. While the film ends on Ashley's blank stare as he walks away from Sarah, the shot immediately preceding this shows their matching eyelines, and therefore it feels that they are together even though she is ascending away from him. It is also a bittersweet ending because the matching eyelines reminds us of the joyous moments that they once shared together even if they never rekindle them again.

CONCLUSION

Mainstream American cinema of the 1970s and 1980s offers an uncertain and complex view of cross-generational love, which can be seen in films such as *Manhattan*. The characters are of great importance for providing both positive and negative criticism of the affairs, and the fragmented narrative structure of the nervous romance allow for a deeper look into the characters. Conventions of courtly love are subverted, with inspiration still a key, however age disparity relationships in the 1970s and 1980s provoke discussion rather than keen acceptance. There is a shift in the depiction of romantic love as well as society's prevailing attitude towards older man/younger woman affairs. On one level, *Manhattan* details a specific relationship between two individuals; on another level, it explores attitudes towards love in a changing post-feminist social climate where happy endings may no longer be possible but love can still exist. It is a distinct progression from the unrealistically uncomplicated extremes of the 1950s. It is also different to the depictions that the 1990s and 2000s would bring, with cross-generational romances taken to an extreme on the opposite end of the scale.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE THREAT OF CROSS-GENERATIONAL ROMANCE: 1990s AND 2000s

The 1990s marked an increase in the anxiety over the nature and role of the family unit, with media depictions of culpable children who were capable of vicious acts, including murder, under the right circumstances (Harwood, 1997, p. 179). At the same time, media coverage over incidents of child abuse also led to panic over paedophilia in the mid-1990s (Marsh & Melville, 2009, p. 61). This changing social climate, wherein children were starting to be seen as both at risk and a danger, has given way to several films over the past twenty years in which under-age girls pose a threat to their potential cross-generational lovers. These films work on the stigma of paedophilia, presenting it as a literal danger, with a young woman who is capable of seducing older men. The independence of the woman in the 1970s and 1980s is taken to a new level in these modern films. The girls are not only the instigators but are also mal-intentioned in movies such as *Hard Candy* (Caldwell, Higgins, Hutton & Slade, 2005). *Ghost World* is one of the most interesting films to analyse in this light because while the young female protagonist causes pain and suffering, she is not presented as evil or psychotic. It is actually an atypical example, but nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay at the Academy Awards, *Ghost World* is one of the most acclaimed older man/younger woman cross-generational romances of the decade, and this acceptance makes it an interesting case study.

Ghost World is based on an underground comic book and the film is set in a world full of hyperbolic characters. The film focuses on Enid, a recent high school

graduate who has trouble relating to everyone else around her except for her best friend Rebecca, until she meets Seymour, a middle-aged record collector. Enid is drawn to his pathetic nature, and as the film's screenwriter Daniel Clowes has noted (Seitan, 2002), Enid sees a little of herself in Seymour. A connection between the two becomes even more apparent as Enid discovers that they both appreciate the finer aspects of music and both have trouble relating to humanity. Despite the differences in genre, the story of *Ghost World* follows the same "boy meets girl" dynamics of *Gigi*. The film introduces us to two characters who are perfect for one another, and yet it takes almost the entire course of the film for them to realise it. This plot formula is subverted though in *Ghost World*. Despite finding out that they are well suited to one another, the film ends with the potential lovers apart, and both of them have suffered. The cross-generational romance in *Ghost World* is depicted as a destructive force. Seymour is hurt by their affair and Enid appears more isolated from everyone around her than ever before, especially Rebecca.

CHARACTERS INSECURITIES

Ghost World features omniscient narration, which serves to make us an observer, passing judgment over Enid and Seymour from an outsider's perspective, and they seem perfectly suited to one another on the surface. Enid and Seymour however are both uncomfortable about entering into a relationship together. They display vulnerability and conceal their emotions since they are afraid of being hurt. In one scene, Enid and Seymour discuss his inability to find a girlfriend. As Seymour remarks on not having a girlfriend for four years, the camera focuses on Enid's hand in a close-up as she rubs the dust off a gramophone. This is a point-of-view shot with the implication that Seymour is thinking of Enid as a prospective love interest even if he is not verbalising it. The rubbing of dust is also symbolic of Enid

and Seymour's interactions and the rejuvenation that Enid's youthfulness will bring about in him. Seymour shows a genuine fascination when Enid announces that she has a crush on someone. When Enid reveals that her crush is a former classmate, Seymour's interest turns to disappointment, and at the same time the film cuts to a long shot representing the proximity between the two characters. This is indeed the distance that Seymour realises exists between them. The fact that Enid wants to find a date for Seymour without thinking of herself shows how she deceives herself out of the possibility too.

Enid and Seymour both repress their deeper emotions because they are afraid of what others may think. Seymour finds a girlfriend his own age later in the film and he expresses concern over Enid meeting this other woman. When Enid asks him why he is worried, Seymour announces that his girlfriend would not understand how he would know somebody "so young". The film's melancholy music starts to swell up at the same time that Seymour announces this, indicating that the age difference is the main factor that will keep Enid and Seymour apart. Earlier on, Enid is more than happy to introduce Seymour as her "friend" to a former classmate, causing him to drop the ice cream he is making. Enid smiles, knowing that she was able to shock him. This scene shows an understanding of the stigma placed on age disparity relationships and the panic it can cause. It also reveals Enid's inability to take any relationship with Seymour seriously since she exploits his age difference for shock value. Furthermore, Enid and Seymour actually met through a prank that she played, responding to an advertisement that he placed in the personals and then watching as he turns up to discover that the date is not real. This is an even further subversion of the "boy meets girl" pattern than in

Manhattan, as the two potential lovers meet as the result of a nasty practical joke instigated by the young woman.

DESTRUCTIVENESS AND BOUNDARY TRANSGRESSION IN *GHOST WORLD* AND OTHER TEXTS

Similarities can be drawn between *Ghost World* and other films from the 1990s and 2000s, which helps to show how the film is a product of the times, with the destructive and detrimental consequences of older man/younger woman cross-generational romances. There is a degree of danger to Enid as she ends up hurting and alienating those who she cares the most about. While Seymour manages to form a steady relationship with a woman his own age, he ends the affair after Enid signifies that there may be a future with her, however she is confused and emotionally unstable, later changing her mind. Enid ends up ruining Seymour's life as he loses his job after a controversial painting that she borrowed is published in the newspaper, and the film ends with Seymour consulting a psychiatrist. The melancholy music score starts to build up, and the film concludes with an emphasis on the detriments of their time together. This is especially noticeable when compared against *Circle of Two* and *Manhattan*, both of which end with eyeline matches to remind us of the connection between the characters.

A similar degree of destructiveness is also seen in *The Crush* (Robinson & Shapiro, 1993), involving a teenage girl whose obsession with her parents' 28-year-old tenant, Nick, brings out murderous instincts that she may have never realised she had. Nick shares great chemistry with the girl, and even comments that everything would be different "if you were ten years older". The film however does not stop at showing why Nick avoids an affair because of the age gap. *The Crush* in fact goes as far as to show that having an affair with a teenage girl can be dangerous as she

resorts to framing him for rape and assault after he refuses to enter into a relationship with her. Dominique Mainon and James Ursini suggest that *The Crush* plays with the dynamic that if love knows no boundaries then the lovers logically have no boundaries either (2007, p. 306). In other words, ill effects result due to the fact that the lovers transgress societal boundaries.

A more extreme example of the supposed dangers of cross-generational romances can be found in *Poison Ivy* (Ruben & Shea, 1992) in which the younger girl substitutes herself in the place of the ailing wife of the middle-aged man who she desires. *Hard Candy* (Caldwell, Higgins, Hutton & Slade, 2005) is noteworthy too for showing the dangers of teenage girls, as a mentally disturbed teenager sets about ruining the life of a man who she suspects of being a paedophile. Both of these films involve the teenage girl as the instigator, and therefore the transgressions of the family unit are lumped onto the responsibilities of a culpable female child rather than a mentally stable male adult, such as Isaac in *Manhattan* and Ashley in *Circle of Two*. This is a severe ideological change from the 1950s, and one that *Ghost World* embraces. It is Enid's childish pranks that set her relationship with Seymour into motion. The notion in the 1990s and 2000s is that young women are too independent and transgress social boundaries to such a strong degree that they cause problems for the men who would have been their lovers in a traditional 1950s narrative.

The manipulative and dangerous possibilities of teenage girls are also evident in the 1997 remake of *Lolita* (Kassar, Michaels & Lyne), in which the title character exploits her stepfather through sexual advances, managing to convince him that she loves him as more than just a parental figure. The film plays out on notions of

incestual desire with Humbert's admitted obsession over his stepdaughter. There is also strong degree of the Elektra complex to be read into *Lolita* since the film features the death of the mother as well as the young girl becoming the lover of her adoptive father. The 1960s version kept the sexual content very implicit, only suggesting that Lolita and her stepfather had sex towards the end of the film when Lolita talks about getting a "hotel room". The remake however has many sexual scenes and allusions to the physical nature of Lolita and Humbert's relationship. This follows the trend of contemporary films in looking explicitly at the deeper issues, such as incest and paedophilia, which come with cross-generational affairs.

The Elektra complex is interesting to consider with *Ghost World* since the complex involves the instinctive rivalry between mother and daughter, and Enid's mother has passed away. Part of the complex involves the wish of the mother to be dead so that the girl can take her place, and Enid's Elektra complex is unable to be resolved since she is unable to express the instinctive rivalry. There are also elements of incestual desire at play as since Enid takes to mothering Seymour by trying to find him a date. Indeed, when Enid phones up during the date to see how it is going, Seymour quickly hangs up, telling his girlfriend that it was his mother on the phone. Enid and Seymour's relationship has dual incestual overtones as Enid is young enough to be Seymour's daughter while at the same time she takes the place of his mother. The Elektra complex and incestual desire are evident in several 1990s and 2000s films, as they present the negative effects of an unsatisfied Oedipal trajectory.

UNHAPPINESS, DEATH AND CLOSURE

The final address to the viewer in *Ghost World* is one of futility, showing that such relationships are far more complex and full of problems than in the films from the

1950s. While Seymour and Enid are finally brought together and make plans to “start a whole new life” together in a “new place”, Enid runs away from home the next day and abandons Seymour since she is not sure if a relationship with him is what she really wants. The film constantly balances Enid on the verge between adulthood and childhood, and yet she ultimately does not mature. The film’s final shot is of Enid riding on a metaphorical bus ride. This is a break in the film’s linear structure. We are earlier told that the bus no longer takes the route in question, and the bus ride represents Enid slipping back into childhood fantasy, shying away from responsibility as she lets an imaginary bus driver take control of her fate. This is a distinct change from the earlier *Gigi*, where the young girl matures and her fate is resolved by marriage. *Gigi*’s problems are however far less complex than Enid’s and easier to resolve. *Ghost World* is an ‘open text’ with uncertain character fates and no sense of closure since both Enid and Seymour’s plights are left hanging.

While *Ghost World* is an unmistakable product of the changing representations of cross-generational romance in the 1990s and 2000s, its non-committal ending is less topical than some more recent films such as *Venus* (Loader & Michell, 2006) and *Elegy* (Rosenberg & Coixet, 2008). Both of these films end with one of the potential lovers dead or dying. Jessie in *Venus* only begins to reciprocate Maurice’s affections after she is told that he is on his deathbed, while *Elegy* only brings two cross-generational lovers together at the end after Consuela finds out that she has malignant breast cancer. In *Gigi* and the 1954 version of *Sabrina*, the suggestion of marriage resolves the two stories, whereas in the 2000s, death is the solution, and as Neupert points out, these are two common ways for films to resolve the fate of

female characters. If however passion, rather than fulfilled happiness, is the greatest possible outcome of love, as Wagoner professes, then one might not see these more recent films as pessimistic but rather celebratory with love that lasts until death and a yearning that continues on even once the story is finished. However, while the couples have their brief moments of happiness, they must ultimately suffer as a result of the affair, whether it is through pain, as in *The Crush*, mental torture, as in *Hard Candy*, or being reduced to the act of murder as in *Lolita*. Cross-generational affairs are depicted as destructive, with death as the extreme consequence. In the 1990s and 2000s, repercussions are centerfold, a distinct change from the 1950s promise of everlasting happiness.

CONCLUSION

A changed view of cross-generational romance can be clearly seen with the films of the 1990s and 2000s. There are strong degrees of taboo desire, with the relationships frequently portrayed as a socially unacceptable transgression rather than actual love. While the remake of *Sabrina* still ends on the suggestion of marriage, the increase in the age of the title character means that the age gap is not as significant, and therefore the film cannot be lumped in the same category as these other cross-generational romances. In the films with relationships between older men and much younger women, the man ends up scarred by the affair. The younger woman also frequently suffers, and it is often suggested that she was mentally unbalanced or a cunning manipulator to begin with. This is the opposite extreme from the 1950s in terms of the way women are depicted, and yet ideologically, patriarchal viewpoints are still at work, since the man is the victim of a woman who is violating the family unit and socially acceptable behaviour.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

There is a noticeable change in the ideologies that motion pictures are putting forth in regards to cross-generational romances, and this reflects a change in social mentality since films are a “powerful and significant” part of our “cultural fabric” (Quart & Auster, 1984, p. 2). The three examples that I chose to explore in depth, *Gigi*, *Manhattan* and *Ghost World*, all follow a similar pattern, and they are therefore comparable as representations of how similar stories have evolved over the past few decades. While one film is a Hollywood musical and the other two are post-classical texts, all three films present characters who spend the entire course of the film finding out that they are in love. The varying ways in which the films are constructed though shows a different ideological operation at work in each case.

In *Gigi*, the cross-generational romance is beneficial to both Gigi and Gaston. He finally finds a girl who he does not regard as a “bore”, and Gigi finds someone to take care of her and who she can take care of too. The supporting characters endorse the affair, and while there are some psychological undertones, these are resolved. In *Manhattan*, the connection that the characters share is also evident, but their affair undergoes a lot more scrutiny from both themselves and the supporting characters alike. Strong psychological angles are thrown in that cause us to question whether or not the couple are actually in love, and the ambiguous ending leaves the question hanging of whether or not they can be happy together. In *Ghost World*, the characters connect to each other based on their mutual inability to relate to the conformist community in which they exist. They seem a

perfect match for one another, and yet the lowdown ending suggests absolutely no hope of the two potential lovers living happily ever after – a complete reversal of the 1950s closed text endings.

Contemporary cross-generational romance films tend to be more complex, and while there are common elements throughout, the romantic interest is dealt with in different manners across these films. Death ends the affairs in *Venus*, *Elegy* and *Hard Candy*, while following on from Irving Singer's notion that love "sometimes borders on madness", *The Crush* ends with the girl in psychiatric care, and Humbert is driven to murder at the end of *Lolita*. None of these endings project any hope of happiness for the lovers, and indeed, while the 1950s depictions of cross-generational romances may have been naïvely blissful, the films of the 1990s and 2000s have reached the opposite extreme. In both cases though, there is a clear ideology at work in terms of women and their place in society. The virginal, subordinate young woman of the 1950s is sanctified, while in the 1990s and 2000s the young woman is a manipulative seductress with too much power and control, resulting in humiliation and suffering for the older man.

Cross-generational relationships present a challenge to the notions of the family unit and the construction of the heterosexual couple. This concept of romantic coupling has developed from the conventions of courtly love, by which the man initiates the affair and has to prove his worth. The sexually active younger woman in modern cross-generational romances defies the conventional position of the woman. As the instigator, she threatens to destroy the concept of family with her transgressive behaviour, seen most notably in *Poison Ivy* where the younger woman tries to substitute herself in the position of the older man's ailing wife. By

contrast, if the younger woman allows herself to be dominated, she instead supports the construction of family, as is seen in the 1950s cross-generational romances. While the fairytale-like 1950s portrayals are unrealistic, there is perhaps even less credibility with the way that cross-generational affairs are handled in mainstream American cinema today. The 1970s and 1980s perhaps offered the most down-to-earth view of these relationships, with films such as *Manhattan* and *Circle of Two* suggesting that cross-generational affairs are possible but complicated.

Cross-generational romances warrant further investigation since there are other areas that I have not covered which also deserve attention. There is another whole spectrum to look at with older woman/younger man relationships, and non-American cinema may offer a different perspective. Surely not every relationship with an age disparity is really dangerous and doomed, and yet this is the ideological surface that mainstream American films today are presenting, at least in terms of older man/younger woman affairs. It is worth keeping in mind Deborah Kerr's 1973 quote that mainstream American cinema will never "move far away from its romanticism of its early years" and its production of "dreams". The films in the decades since have proven her wrong, at least in terms of older man/younger woman cross-generational romances. While the ideological apparatus may have not changed in that the power and place of the woman is still a concern, American cinema today is no longer selling dreams but nightmares instead.

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