

# **“WITH A KISS I DIE”**

## **Love, Suicide and Vulnerability: An Intersectional Feminist Film Analysis of Romantic Love in Contemporary Adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet***

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**Utrecht University**  
Faculty of Humanities  
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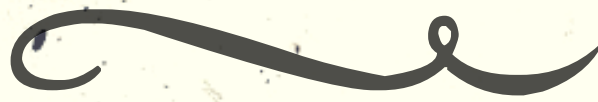


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**LOVE, SUICIDE AND VULNERABILITY**



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## ABSTRACT

Deconstructing the myths that characterize the romantic love discourse has been a major goal for several feminist theorists since these narratives actively promote asymmetrical power relationships. From this hierarchy, gender inequalities—which are especially harmful to women—emerge. Nonetheless, this discrimination does not only take place in relation to gender but also regarding race and sexuality. Hence, this study aims to analyse from a feminist and intersectional perspective the oppressive character of romantic love narratives in terms of gender, race and sexuality. The focus will be put particularly in contemporary film adaptations of the canonical play *Romeo and Juliet*—which is a cornerstone love story in western culture— emphasizing the importance of representations in mass media by pointing at the potential influence that they exercise on the viewers. Furthermore, taking the aforementioned play as a reference, this research project seeks to observe how romantic love narratives have been repeatedly associated with death and suicide. This provokes a correlation of love with violence creating ultimately the myth of suicide for love. In the end, what this thesis proposes is getting rid of the patriarchal conception of love so as to achieve a different and new conceptualization. For this reason, a personal feminist intervention with a number of suggested steps will be offered in the last section in order to achieve a different understanding of love through the embracement of the notion of vulnerability.

## RESUMEN

La deconstrucción de los mitos que caracterizan al discurso del amor romántico ha sido un objetivo principal para numerosas teóricas feministas, ya que estas narrativas promueven activamente las relaciones asimétricas de poder. Desde esta jerarquía emergen las desigualdades de género las cuales son especialmente nocivas para las mujeres. No obstante, esta discriminación no solo ocurre en relación con el género, sino que también sucede a nivel racial y sexual. Por ello, este estudio pretende analizar desde una perspectiva feminista e interseccional el carácter opresivo de las narrativas del amor romántico en términos de género, raza y sexualidad. El enfoque se pondrá concretamente en adaptaciones contemporáneas de la obra canónica *Romeo y Julieta*—historia de amor que es piedra angular en la cultura occidental— enfatizando la importancia de las

representaciones en los medios de comunicación y subrayando la potencial influencia que ejercen sobre el público. Además, tomando como referencia la citada obra, este proyecto de investigación busca observar cómo las narraciones del amor romántico han sido reiteradamente asociadas con el suicidio provocando una correlación entre el amor y la violencia y creando en última instancia el mito del suicidio por amor. Finalmente, lo que esta tesis propone es despojarse de la concepción patriarcal del amor para lograr una conceptualización nueva y diferente. Por ello, en la última sección se ofrece una intervención feminista y personal en la que se sugieren una serie de pasos para alcanzar una comprensión diferente del amor a través de la aceptación de la noción de vulnerabilidad.

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## INTRODUCTION

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Genuine love is rarely an emotional space where needs are instantly gratified. To know genuine love, we have to invest time and commitment. [...] "dreaming that love will save us, solve all our problems or provide a steady state of bliss or security only keeps us stuck in wishful fantasy, undermining the real power of the love- which is to transform us." Many people want love to function like a drug, giving them an immediate and sustained high. They want to do nothing, just passively receive the good feeling. (hooks, 2000, 114)

Romantic love [...] represents an ideology that enslaves women, a symptom of the demise of the public sphere, or a flight from social responsibility. (Illouz, 1997, 1)

As the selected quotes portray, love has been recurrently fantasized as a secular salvation functioning almost as a drug and, importantly enough, that conceptualization of love has been especially disadvantageous for women. When I was 8 years old I watched for the first time the film *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) made by the Australian director Baz Luhrmann. I remember being absolutely amazed by the romance and the passion of the story and, from that astonishment, my obsession with romantic love narratives began. At that time, I started meeting with one of my best friends almost every weekend to re-watch the film compulsively and we ended up even knowing the dialogues by heart. Whereas this practice lasted only for a couple of months, my fascination with the story was not that brief.

Luhrmann's film has been determinant in my life in multiple ways. Firstly, on an academic level as I got to know Shakespeare's plays at an early age. Since I deeply enjoyed his work he was one of the major reasons that encouraged me to initiate a bachelor's degree in English Studies. Additionally, this film also marked a starting point in my passion for cinema. Nevertheless, the most important contribution was made on a personal level, as this story was a significant input in my conception of love. Actually, now I know that the first time that I watched *Romeo + Juliet* was the very moment that the romantic love discourse entered in my mind where it stayed deeply enrooted for years. During my adolescence I consumed regularly romantic love films with hegemonic and monolithic portrayals of love and, as a result, I became a firm believer in the myths of romantic love. It was only when I grew up and I began to have my own knowledge and

experiences of love that I became aware of how reality clashes with fiction and how what it is described in films is not only unreal but problematic in several ways.

The story of *Romeo and Juliet* lead me to enrol in English Studies and it was actually during my time at the university when paradoxically I started to realise how toxic and problematic is the discourse of romantic love as well as the story of *Romeo and Juliet*. I was lucky enough to learn from some of my professors about feminist theories and the crucial importance of embracing the term feminism. For me, feminism symbolizes a threshold that I crossed during my university years and it allowed me to see the world differently. For instance, as aforementioned, it helped me to realize that not only the depictions of love in mainstream films are indeed fictional but also that they are, in most cases, highly problematic on different levels. This is precisely where my inspiration for this study emerged; on a personal level my aim is to deconstruct the discourses that have been enrooted in my own understanding of love. On an academic one the goal is to provide a feminist understanding of love where its asymmetrical power relationships and inequalities—in relation to gender, race and sexuality—are analysed and contested through an intersectional approach. Furthermore, one of my major motivations for undertaking this research is also to reflect on the importance of representations in mainstream films and media and the potential impact they have in society.

Through looking at four contemporary film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*—*Romeo + Juliet* (1996), *West Side Story* (1961), *Private Romeo* (2011) and *Warm bodies* (2013)—this thesis explores how romantic love, suicide and death are represented and correlated in these narratives. The main research questions are the following: How has romantic love been described historically by non-feminist scholars as well as by feminist theorists? Which are the possible repercussions of conceiving love in such a way? To what extent are mainstream films part and parcel of the perpetuation of romantic love myths? Moreover, all these inquiries lead to ask more specific inquiries: How do contemporary film adaptations of the canonical play *Romeo and Juliet* portray love? How is the relation between love and death depicted and to what extent do they promote the myth of suicide for love? Are there any significant subversions in the narratives? And ultimately: Are there new possible ways of conceiving the notions of love and suicide? These questions will be answered throughout this thesis being the overall goal to deconstruct mainstream cinematographic representations of love, suicide and death.

This research project is divided as follows. Chapter 1 works as a general introduction to romantic love tackling how it has been defined by non-feminist scholars

—such as Sigmund Freud or Jean-Paul Sartre —and also by feminist theorists including Eva Illouz (1997a, 1998b, 2012c) and bell hooks (2000). Secondly, it will trace to Ancient Greece the origin of some of the most relevant myths that define this way of conceiving love such as Plato's theory of the soulmate. Afterwards, it will engage with the potential problematics that emerge from romantic love discourses applying an intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1989). This will be achieved by pointing out the inequalities that romantic love narratives promote in terms of gender, race and sexuality. To conclude, by following the work of bell hooks (2000) and Coral Herrera (2010) I will suggest a feminist new way of understanding love that breaks with the already mentioned asymmetrical power relationships.

In chapter 2, I will point out at the potential relevance that mass media representations have on the collective imaginary by elaborating on Stuart Hall's (1997) work on representation as well as on Michel Foucault's notion of discourse. I will observe this on a particular mass media commodity, films, by analysing specifically how their depictions of romantic love simultaneously recreate and create the myths that shape that discourse (Galician, 2004). Furthermore, I will focus particularly on teenagers who due to their lack of experience are the viewers who are potentially more influenced by these narratives. Finally, this chapter aims at highlighting how representations matter and how they are potentially determinant of how people understand love (see, for instance, Bachen and Illouz, 1996)

Chapter 3 is dedicated firstly to analyse through an intersectional perspective how particular myths of romantic love are (re)produced in specific contemporary film adaptations of the canonical play *Romeo and Juliet* — *Romeo+Juliet* (1996) and *West Side Story* (1961). Secondly, the goal will be to study the unequal, oppressive and asymmetrical relationships in relation to gender, race and sexuality in these narratives so as to highlight how homogenous these representations tend to be. The gender unbalance will be studied in *Romeo + Juliet* —, the racial issue in *West Side Story* and, ultimately, sexuality in *Private Romeo* (2011). The goal is observing if these narratives provide a subversion from the original play.

In chapter 4, I will elaborate on the historical relationship between love and death and how this connection has been crucial in theories such as Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. Furthermore, I will focus particularly on suicides by examining the myth of suicide for love which has been portrayed and glamorized in several artistic manifestations. The story of *Romeo and Juliet* is extremely useful for this purpose; hence,

I will analyse the four endings of the selected films to observe how death and suicide are represented and if there is any subversion in relation to the original play. Moreover, I will engage with the possible repercussions that this so-called glamorization of violence in films may have on viewers.

To conclude, in the last part of the thesis I will elaborate a feminist intervention as an attempt to provide new ways of understanding love, death and suicide through vulnerability. Conceived in five steps plus a feminist tool, this intervention will be presented as a way out of the hegemonic way of understanding these concepts that have proved to be not only detrimental for women but for any individual who does not fit into the normative categories in terms of race and sexuality. This entails a reconceptualization of vulnerability which will be based on the work of Judith Butler (2016) and Margrit Shildrick (2009). The term vulnerability has been defined from a unique patriarchal angle and, for this reason, it is crucial to provide — as Butler and Shildrick offer— a feminist counter narrative. It is through the reconceptualization of vulnerability as a source of resistance (Butler, 2016) where new ways of visualizing love, death and suicide can emerge. And this goal can only be achieved by breaking with the current asymmetrical power relations and hierarchies in which these concepts are held.

Through the study of films my major aim with this research project is to point at the problematics within the discourse of romantic love and the four films selected will be useful to illustrate the mythological conception of love in western societies and culture. Therefore, the first vital step to take is to provide an analysis of these narratives highlighting the necessity of raising awareness of how homogenous, unequal and pernicious the mainstream idea of love is. Secondly, to underline the relevance of representations and how they embody a potential influence over the audience.

My motivation does not come only from a personal debt with my younger self — who was hopelessly devoted to the idea of true love— but also from the fact that I consider an urgent necessity to provide different and feminist ways of understanding love. Furthermore, in this project, I do not want to simply deconstruct the romantic love discourse and the myths present in these films, rather I aim to construct something afterwards. That is precisely the goal of my final feminist intervention. Because, in the end, who loves you will not make you suffer, because killing yourself for love should not be conceived as a beautiful naive way of demonstrating your love for someone else and because love should be represented in mainstream films in a more equal and realistic ways. And most importantly because depictions of violence are recurrently associated

with representations of love and this relation should be understood as something potentially dangerous. As Shakespeare states in *Romeo and Juliet* “these violent delights have violent ends”. Undoubtedly, films have an enormous power, and for this reason, viewers should collectively demand a more diverse representation in order to write new stories; those that are outside asymmetrical power relationships.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE MYTH OF ROMANTIC LOVE

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Everyone wants to know more about love. We want to know what it means to love, what we can do in our every-day lives to love and be loved. (bell hooks, 2000, xxvii)

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“All you need is love” praises The Beatles’ famous song. This saying has been commercially exploited in contemporary western societies becoming nearly an aphorism. Albeit, is indeed love so powerful and significant? Throughout history humans have concentrated their intellectual and economic efforts on technical and scientific advancement; among other things developing technologies, finding new planets or discovering methods to cure diseases. Therefore, it could be claimed that, after all, love is not so pivotal for humanity, at least in terms of “advancement”. Or is it? While on the one hand “love has caused academic anxiety” (Morrison et al. 2012, 507) fading into a consequent theoretical oblivion<sup>1</sup>, on the other, it has been highly relevant as a constant source of artistic inspiration in western culture. Perhaps the reason behind this relegation of love to a non-relevant position in academic works finds its explanation in the patriarchal system<sup>2</sup> that structures the world where “emotions have been subordinated [...] and associated with the body and the feminine” (507). To provide an illustration, Sara Ahmed maintains that statements such as “love is blind” reinforce the idea that to be emotional is to be “less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgement” (in Morrison et al, 507). In other words, by following this patriarchal “logic” love has been understood exclusively as something irrational and automatically linked to the feminine.

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<sup>1</sup> Even though over the last decades more academic studies focused on love have proliferated— for instance Eva Illouz or Helen Fisher’s works— this is a new trend and not a historically relevant topic. As Helen Fisher argues at the beginning of the second chapter in her work *Anatomy of Love*, “despite the hundreds of thousands of poems, songs, books, operas, dramas, ballets, myths and legends that have portrayed romantic love since before the time of Christ, despite the countless times a man or woman has deserted family, friends, committed suicide or homicide, or pined away because of love, few scientists have given this passion the study it deserves” (1992).

<sup>2</sup> Feminist theorists claim that the so-called patriarchal system is perceivable in an economic and cultural dimension. Teresa L. Ebert explains “patriarchy is the organization and division of all practices and signification in culture in terms of gender and the privileging of one gender over the other, giving males control over female sexuality, fertility, and labor” (1988, 19). Other relevant theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir stated “economically, men and women almost form two castes; all things being equal, the former have better jobs, higher wages, and great chances to success than their new female competitors; they occupy many more places in industry, in politics, and so forth” (1949, 29).

However, as aforementioned, it should be taken into consideration that love has been an artistic inspiration for centuries. In Ancient Greece, for instance, stories about love were already common. Indeed, as Mary Lou Galician (2004) claims it is during this historical period where “many of the myths about sex, love, and romance that influence us” (50) emerged. This historical trace of love in the arts means that contemporary western discourses of love have been informed and formed for centuries. This long tradition of representations brings inevitably a production and reproduction that defines and states what love should be like. However, what kind of love has been portrayed in western artistic depictions? Importantly, the most recurrent type is romantic love. In fact, it could be stated that

for too long now, love has been conflated with romantic love. Most people in the West, and many beyond, have grown up being continuously exposed to images in the media<sup>3</sup> and popular culture which present an idealized and essentialized version of romantic love. (Johnson, in Morrison et al. 2012, 517)

Furthermore —as it will be analyzed throughout this chapter—, it is crucial to acknowledge that romantic love has been heavily marked by a number of myths that construct it as a whole providing a static and monolithic definition.

This first chapter elaborates on the myth(s) of romantic love in an introductory way looking at what has been theorized and written about it. My goal will be to try to answer the following questions: What is romantic love? Which are the myths that shape it? How has it been understood and defined by feminist and non-feminist theorists? What kind of relationships are most frequently promoted through the romantic love discourse? Could (romantic) love be understood and ‘practiced’ differently? The chapter is articulated in three subcategories. Firstly, I will concentrate on the origin of particular myths tracing them to Ancient Greece, as well as considering debates and definitions of romantic love made by non-feminist scholars<sup>4</sup> —such as Freud, Sartre or Charles Lindholm. Secondly,

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<sup>3</sup> The potential influence that mass media has over its consumers will be tackled throughout this thesis, especially in chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> The focus on non-feminist scholars is meant to elaborate a background setting so as to observe how love has been articulated outside feminist theoretical approaches. Nevertheless, my aim in this thesis is not studying these views in depth. Quite on the contrary, the scope will be put on the feminist understandings of romantic love which will be helpful for the analysis in chapters 3 and 4.

I will engage with a feminist deconstructing approach from which it is claimed that what and how individuals feel is a result of the society in which they live (Jackson, 2006, 35). Therefore, love is also “socially ordered” and “the meanings of love are constructed and elaborated through discourses and representations” (35). In order to underpin these statements, contributions of theorists such as Eva Illouz (1997a, 1998b, 2012c) or Coral Herrera (2010) will be of crucial importance as both of them have devoted their research, almost exclusively, to romantic love.

Thirdly, departing from this poststructuralist feminist position along with an intersectional perspective will be helpful to zoom into the major problems and inequalities that emerge from this way of understanding love. To begin with the focus will be put on the asymmetrical gender power relationships that this myth promotes<sup>5</sup>. Then, attention will be given to the observation that, through its homogenous representations—in terms of race and sexuality—an overwhelming majority of mainstream discourses construct romantic love as white and heterosexual<sup>6</sup>. Interestingly enough, when there is a step outside these homogenizing characteristics the narrative tends to revolve precisely around the disruption of the normative representation<sup>7</sup>.

Ultimately, in the last part of this first chapter I will lay aside the myth of romantic love *per se* trying to provide different ways of understanding love that challenge its hegemonic construction. On the one hand, this section will be theoretically inspired by bell hook’s *All About Love* (2000) and her promotion of a new and divergent conceptualization of love that steps outside the patriarchal discourse. On the other, Coral Herrera’s work will be key on a more activist and tangible level. My aim is to underline the urgency of acknowledging the transformative potentiality of love not remaining exclusively on the deconstruction of romantic love. Certainly, the first step to take in order to change the way love is represented should be deconstructing the hegemonic discourse and the rhetoric. Nevertheless, I also consider pivotal to provide new ways of

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<sup>5</sup> These asymmetries will be analysed more deeply in chapter 3 by considering the films *West Side Story* (1961) and *Romeo + Juliet* (1996)

<sup>6</sup> See chapter 3 where these issues will be closely studied and exemplified by the films *West Side Story* (1961) and *Private Romeo* (2011).

<sup>7</sup> It is important to highlight that these statements are made in regard to mainstream western romantic love films. I am aware of the existence of stories that promote a different kind of love—for instance, LGTBQ+ cinema—not engaging with a “white or heterosexual” depiction. However, those cinematographic discourses are not, at least in general, part of the mainstream western cinema. Hence, contemplating those films in this project would mean stepping outside its major goal, which is precisely analyzing representations of the myth of romantic love in mainstream western cinema.

understanding love. After all, love should not be relegated automatically to the romantic discourse but rather opened to other ways of conceiving it. New ways of loving where we all have the power to define what love really means to us.

## 1.1 The Myth: What is romantic love?

As Charles Lindholm maintains in the article “Romantic love and Anthropology” (2006), “if there is anything that modern Westerners take for granted, is the importance - even the necessity - of falling in love” (5). At this point, a pertinent question is: what does falling in love mean? It has been repeatedly defined in hegemonic western discourses as “an agitation, a mixture of hope, anxiety, and excitement” (Person, 1988, 11). Falling in love has also been described as a disease, a state that triggers lack of appetite and sleeplessness (11). Importantly enough, these characteristics that define this process can be considered myths themselves, as their origins are difficult to trace and verify. According to Galician,

Myths are stories that influence a society's perspectives about the world, about themselves, about what behaviours and approaches have meaning or value. The focus of a myth, a sacred story that expresses moral values in human terms, is the powers in control of the human world and the relationship between those powers and human beings. These narratives are considered both true and sacred in the originating culture, but they are not verifiable because their source is usually impossible to document. (2004, 50)

In order to introduce some of the myths of romantic love in terms of their meaning, evolution and understanding outside the feminist framework a book that has to be mentioned is *Love in the Western World* (1939) by Denis de Rougemont. This work concentrates explicitly on the study of romantic love outside the feminist theories. In this book the philosopher analyzes the western idea of love arguing, “to love in the sense of passion-love is the contrary to live. It is an impoverishment of one’s being, an *askesis* without sequel, an inability to enjoy the present without imagining it as absent, a never-ending flight from possession” (285). Moreover, he categorically states that romance only takes place when it is linked with the fatal when it is “frowned upon and doomed by life itself” (15). Historically, aside from de Rougemont, few non-feminist western

intellectuals have focused their works on romantic love. However, at some point, some of them have elaborated on the way in which they understood love<sup>8</sup>. For instance, in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1961) Sigmund Freud suggests, “one of the techniques used in the pursuit of happiness and the avoidance of suffering is to make ‘love the centre of everything’” (Freud in Ahmed, 2004, 125). For Jacques Lacan, “loving is to give what one does not have... to someone who does not want it” (1965). Importantly, all these statements are easily relatable with the mythical construction of romantic love that link it, paradoxically, to happiness and frustration or suffering at the same time. As Charles Lindholm puts it, “according to the romantic clichés, love is blind, love overwhelms, a life without love is not worth living [...] Romantic love cannot be bought and sold, love cannot be calculated, it is mysterious, true and deep, spontaneous and compelling, it can strike anyone” (2006, 5). That is, all these authors perceive love as all you need to be happy but at the same time as something irrational, uncontrollable and, ultimately, as an emotion that people are not capable to manage.

Due to this understanding of love as an uncontrollable force, non-feminist scholars have recurrently associated it with madness. The philosopher Edgar Morin, for instance, claimed “but then what is love? It is the summit of the union between madness and wisdom”<sup>9</sup> (1998). As a consequence of this supposed irrational nature, love “has often been spoken in the metaphorical language of insanity. People in love are ‘love-sick’ lovers are ‘crazy for each other’ and are expected to be out of touch with ordinary reality” (Lindholm, 8). Even the expression “falling in love” can be linked, in a sense, to the idea of madness. The verb “to fall” depicts an action that is neither decided nor a rational choice. Quite on the contrary, the action of falling is something you cannot avoid, something that is hence nonthought that places love outside a person's rationality and sanity. According to Charles Lindholm, the origin of this relation between madness and

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<sup>8</sup> The main reason of choosing Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Jean-Paul Sartre among plenty of options is that even though none of these authors can be described as feminists —rather the opposite—, their contributions have been pivotal for many feminist theorists (for instance, Simone de Beauvoir or Julia Kristeva). Therefore, taking into account their conception of love will be useful for setting the ground for the following section where a further explanation of love from the feminist perspective will take place.

<sup>9</sup> This quote is my translation from the original one in French: “Qu'est-ce que l'amour ? C'est le comble de l'union de la folie et de la sagesse”

love can already be found in the classical Greeks (8) where not only this connection was made but also plenty of the contemporary ideas of love were created<sup>10</sup>.

For this particular thesis, two recurrent associations traceable to Ancient Greece<sup>11</sup> will be of major importance: the union between love and death<sup>12</sup> and the belief in the better half<sup>13</sup>. Love and death are, in theory, opposite forces though paradoxically the link between them has been depicted as unbreakable. This union was portrayed by the Greeks through the figures of Eros —the Greek God of love— and Thanatos —the Greek God of death; “Eros and Thanatos balance each other. They are complementary and oppositional but not hostile. They influence human relations” (Wiszniowska-Majchrzyk 2012, 108). Significantly, this mythical relation was essential in Freud’s psychoanalysis theory<sup>14</sup>. He “introduced the concept of the death drive as a negative concept in opposition to the drive for life” (Kahn, 2016, 33). That is, according to Freud “Eros is paired with the energy of ‘libido’” while “Thanatos has no such equivalent energy beyond a suggested name ‘mortido destrudo’” (33). This means that although the connection between love and death was already made in Ancient Greece this relation has been embraced, promoted and repeated in later cultural manifestations and theoretical contributions —for instance, Freud’s psychoanalysis.

The second pivotal idea for this thesis attached to love generated by classical Greeks finds its origin in Plato's theory of the soulmate. This concept has had a major influence on the contemporary understanding of love creating one of its most relevant myths: the idea of the other half. In one of the stories in *The Symposium* Plato proposes that humans were originally not only male and female but also hermaphrodites who had

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<sup>10</sup> Not only in relation to love, but also other crucial ideas on gender in western societies are found in Ancient Greece. In *The Man of Reason* (1984) Genevieve Lloyd analyzes how, for instance, ideas of sex/gender were already part and parcel of Greek philosophers thoughts. She explains how in Ancient Greece "the male was connected with the active and the female with the passive" (3). Furthermore, she poses how the idea of femininity was already "symbolically associated with the non-rational, the disorderly, the unknowable" (11) and with nature. As a consequence, according to Lloyd, all this representations "affected the philosophical imagination in later developments of the tradition" (17).

<sup>11</sup> The myths of romantic love do not only find their origin in Ancient Greece. Some other pillars in which the discourse of romantic love is based are, for instance, the concept of courtly love developed in European medieval literature and the Petrarchan love poetry in the renaissance —pivotal in Shakespeare’s work. Nonetheless, due to the limited space, I will not engage with these literary movements in this research project.

<sup>12</sup> This will be studied in detail in chapter 4 through the violent deadly endings of the protagonists in contemporary film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*

<sup>13</sup> This association will be observed in depth in chapter 3.

<sup>14</sup> I regard in more detail the psychoanalytic understanding of the myth of Eros and Thanatos in chapter 4.

“four legs, four arms, one head with two faces (looking in opposite directions) and two sets of genitals” (Galician, 2004, 36). Due to their strength, hermaphrodites

[re]presented a threat to the gods, who decided to divide their bodies in two, thereby both reducing their power and increasing their service to the gods [...]. Each newly two-legged two-armed, one-faced, single-genitaled creature now longed for its missing half, which it sought relentlessly to become whole again. (36)

What Plato argues is that love is indeed the searching of your other half in order to form a whole unity again (Person, 1988, xviii). It is extremely useful to relate Plato's theory of the soulmates with contemporary discourses of romantic love, as both engage with the ceaseless idea that there is only one person in the entire world who can make a perfect match with you. This individual is your better and unique half and he or she has to belong necessarily to the other sex so as to shape the original hermaphrodite<sup>15</sup>. In other words, love is hence an aspiration “not merely for a mate but rather for a perfect partner who is the one-and-only part of ourselves with whom we long to merge” (Galician, 36). Perhaps for this reason, "romantic love is most commonly 'thought of as a merging of selves'" (Jackson, in Morrison et al. 2012, 517) and, as a consequence, the idea of the soulmates transforms romantic love almost into a magical belief, a promise to paradise,

It is ‘a divine delirium’, a transport of the soul, a madness and supreme sanity both. A lover with his beloved becomes ‘as if in heaven’: for love is the way that ascends by degrees of ecstasy to the one source of all that exists, remote from bodies and matter, remote from what divides and distinguishes, and beyond the misfortune of being a self and even in love itself a pair. (De Rougemont, 1939, 61)

Leaving aside the enormous significance of Ancient Greece in the contemporary western understanding of romantic love, it should be noticed as well that western ideas of love have been unceasingly informed by canonical artistic representations, for instance, literary works. One of the cornerstones of western love stories is that of *Romeo and Juliet*, most famously in the version by William Shakespeare whose enormous influence is still tangible nowadays. This play is presented as one of the most beautiful and touching love stories ever written and for this reason in chapter 3 and 4 I will engage in depth with some

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<sup>15</sup> This fact can be also relatable with the imposed heterosexuality in romantic love narratives

contemporary film adaptations of it. Though, before that, there is a key question that should be addressed in this chapter: What kind of love is depicted in the play? *Romeo and Juliet*'s romance is considered to be the epitome of western romantic love, and thus is a perfect source to find the myths that have been attached to it. In broad terms, there are two clear myths that can be found in the play: love at first sight and the importance of destiny which, indeed, can be related to Plato's soulmates theory —both myths will be studied in detail in chapter 3. Regarding the first myth, it is interesting to notice that although Romeo “died for love of Juliet, only five days before meeting her he had been sick with love for Rosaline. Rosaline, however, did not return his love” (Person, 1988, 5). For this reason, “when Juliet returns his love, he is transformed into the truest of true lovers” (5). Hence, Romeo's love (at first sight) seems to be based only on physical attraction since when he meets Juliet he was, in theory, already in love with another girl and he switches to Juliet even before speaking a word with her<sup>16</sup>.

It is shocking to notice that even in the story of *Romeo and Juliet* —which is, as stated before, conceived to be the epitome of romantic love— the represented love is, in the end, sexual attraction. This could be related to what Sartre's stated, “people who say they are 'in love' are fooling themselves, disguising their simple human lust under a mask of idealization” (Lindholm, 2006, 10). Hence, as outlined not only by Sartre but also by many theorists (Lindholm, 6) it could be argued that what it is understood by “falling in love” in western culture is, indeed, nothing but mere sexual attraction. The depiction of falling in love at first sight in mainstream narratives —such as *Romeo and Juliet*— collides with reality. This provokes a shock when “the lover becomes horrified at the beloved's slightest deviation from his [her] template” (Person, 8-9) leading unavoidably to disappointment and frustration.

In sum, though love has been depicted in artistic manifestations over centuries the problematics that emerge from its mainstream conception, romantic love, have not been so recurrently addressed. That is, even though many non-feminist authors have written about love, they did not engage with the issues and asymmetrical power relations that arise from this archetypical idea of love. In my view, they simply remained on the surface of the romantic discourse. Perhaps this was the case because love has been considered “a

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<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, there is one character in the play, friar Laurence, who judges Romeo's attitude precisely for this reason claiming, “holy Saint Francis, what a change is here! Is Rosaline, whom thou didst love so dear, so soon forsaken? young men's love then lies not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes” (19).

transcendent experience, that, by its very nature, resists any rational analysis” (Lindholm, 2006, 8). Hence, it has been from the feminist approaches where love has been deconstructed and observed in detail in order to understand how it constructs and promotes asymmetrical power relationships that inevitably provoke inequalities.

## **1.2 Deconstructing romantic love from a feminist perspective: An asymmetrical, white and heterosexual myth**

Contrary to popular mythology, feminists argue, romantic love is not the source of transcendence, happiness, and self-realization. Rather, it is one of the main causes of the divide between men and women, as well as one of the cultural practices through which women are made to accept (and “love”) their submission to men. For, when in love, men and women continue to perform the deep divisions that characterize their respective identities: in Simone de Beauvoir’s famous words, even in love men retain their sovereignty, while women aim to abandon themselves. (Illouz, 2012, 4-5)

As previously explained in this chapter, romantic love is a patriarchal discourse that has been constructed over centuries through literature, music, paintings, sculptures etc. Interestingly enough, in this commodification of love women have been the most recurrent consumers but, generally, they have not been the producers. As bell hooks notices, “men theorize about love, but women are more often love's practitioners” (2000, xx). For many feminist theorists love has been considered a kind of distraction mechanism that entertained women while men gained power in society and took control, for instance, over cultural representations. This fact inspired Kate Millet to utter her famous quote “love has been the opium of women, as religion for masses. While we loved, men ruled” (in *Sexual Politics*, 1970) In other words, love has been used as a mechanism of control that provoked a lack of women creating culture (Firestone, 1970, 126). Furthermore, as hooks suggests it is also crucial to take into consideration that in the literature of love there are only few writers that have focused on the impact of the patriarchal system (xxiv). In my understanding, due to this recurrent lack of analysis it seems necessary and essential from a poststructuralist feminist approach, to deconstruct romantic love. Indeed, this should be a key issue for feminists as women have been historically “controlled by

the church and state and subject to the tyrannies of capitalism” (Lowe, 2010, 143) and love has been an undeniable tool of oppression deeply “embedded in institutional structures” (143). Therefore, for all these reasons, I consider love as an extremely important political tool. As Firestone highlights, “a book on radical feminism that did not deal with love would be a political failure. For love perhaps, even more than childbearing is the pivot of women's oppression” (126). This means that love has to be acknowledge and claimed by feminist scholars in order to fight back the patriarchal oppression

Though, how is romantic love understood from different feminist perspectives? In her book *La Construcción sociocultural del Amor romántico*<sup>17</sup> (2010) Coral Herrera articulates, “love is a condensation of myths that circulate around the collective space”<sup>18</sup> (7). Some of the most relevant myths that inform romantic love are, first of all, the belief of the other half involving the role of destiny. As already stated in this chapter, from the discourse of romantic love, it is categorically stated that there is only one person in the entire world who is your perfect match. Even though statistically the possibilities of meeting that person are almost null, romantic love asserts that destiny will make that encounter possible allowing the lovers to find each other. Secondly, the myth of jealousy and possessiveness<sup>19</sup> and, of course, the idea that love conquers all: economic, social barriers or even health problems. As Eva Illouz points out in *Consuming the Romantic Utopia* (1997) this characteristic attributed to romantic love presents it as a magical transformative power. Illouz explains how love is not only presented as able to overcome all kind of barriers but also with the power to “transform poverty into abundance, hunger into satiation, *lack* into surplus [...], ugliness into startling beauty, poor shepherds into kings, frogs into princes” (247). She maintains that romantic love has, therefore, the capacity of uniting people that on the contrary would not be together “separated by barriers of class, nationality, and birth” (247).

This is precisely the core of *Romeo and Juliet*’s story which is, as explained in the previous section, considered to be one of the epitomes of romantic love. Indeed, in this play —like in many other mainstream stories—love is presented as “a kind of secular

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<sup>17</sup> All the quotes taken from this book are my own translation from the original text in Spanish.

<sup>18</sup> “El amor es una condensación de mitos que circulan por el espacio colectivo” (Herrera, 79)

<sup>19</sup> “Those who love you will make you suffer” or “you are mine” are recurrent ideas linked with how a romantic love relationship should be like. Despite their importance on defining the myth of romantic love, these myths will not be specifically analyzed in this project.

salvation ... that could redeem [the lovers'] entire existence, even though they might die of it' (Illouz, in Lindholm, 2006, 5). In *Romeo and Juliet*, the protagonists' redemption is obtained through suffering and by overcoming barriers. Interestingly enough, there is even a so-called "Romeo and Juliet effect or the attraction to frustration" (Herrera, 2010, 4)<sup>20</sup>. According to Herrera, conflicts such as the war between Romeo and Juliet's families intensifies the lovers' passion because when there is a difficulty in being with someone our interest on that person grows (84). This portrayal of love promotes the belief that when a love story finds barriers that love is automatically powerful and meant to be.

All these ideas have been sustained over time through the hegemonic cultural representations<sup>21</sup>. It shall be noticed at this point that western culture "is not universal, but rather sectarian, presenting only half the spectrum" (Firestone, 1970, 127). That is to say, representations are made by those who have access to them, in other words, those who are in control. A feminist analysis allows to see who is at the top of the pyramid of power in western societies: white, heterosexual, cis, able-bodied, wealthy men who create massively the narratives of romantic love. As a consequence, "love's power is constructed through discourse, language and representation" (Morrison et al. 2012, 506) affecting how we behave and even think in our daily lives (hooks, 2000, 96). Hence, it could be claimed that representations "are thus not mental or physical reflections of "natural" and "real" referents, but ideological constructs through which ideology misrepresents its own actuality as a signifying system that refers only to its own significations" (Ebert, 1988, 27).

Above all, mainstream representations present love as a synonym of happiness "the most desired state" that defines "both the meaning and the goal of existence" (Illouz, 2012, 211). Nevertheless, these depictions have been accused of misrepresenting reality as cinematic works "do not portray everyday relationships realistically, [...] they instill high expectations, [...] they tend to omit the portrayal of problems, [and they] offer narrative formulas in which love triumphs against all odds" (215). Due to this detachment from reality, mainstream representations may provoke dissatisfaction in the viewer, as Illouz argues they "may instill ideas that others achieve love when we do not, and that

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<sup>20</sup> "El efecto Romeo y Julieta o la atracción de la frustración" (Herrera 84)

<sup>21</sup> In further chapters the concept of representation and its importance will be more developed through the analysis of the case studies (films). For that purpose, Stuart Hall's *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997) will be a substantial theoretical input.

achieving love is normatively important for successful life” (2012, 220). Consequently, she explains, this may lead to “chronic disappointment” (220). However, even if “disappointment is always viewed as the result of ‘unrealistic expectations’ [...] the structure of the real that makes those expectations unrealizable is never questioned” (219). That is, the authority of romantic love is not contested even though it is where the unreachable goals are set and constructed provoking the consequent disillusionment. Quite on the contrary, the “blame” is located on an individual dimension as people are accused to be “too romantic” or “unrealistic”.

### **1.2.1 Gender asymmetrical romantic relationships**

Love is the cement with which the edifice of male domination has been built. Romantic love not only hides class and sex segregation, but in fact makes it possible. (Firestone in Illouz, 2012, 5)

Going deeper in the analysis of romantic love the real urgency of deconstructing these discourses lies in the fact that they “are crucial sites for the operation of patriarchal ideology” (Ebert, 1988, 21). They promote inequalities, among them, asymmetrical relationships based on gender difference in which women are always in a disadvantaged position<sup>22</sup>. Indeed, as several feminist scholars have pointed out romantic love discourses have been repeatedly associated with women though they have also been “used against them” (Toye, 2010 in Morrison et al. 2012, 506) to keep them entertained and obedient. For this reason, feminists have to acknowledge that the way and the person one loves is necessarily a political issue (506).

From a feminist analysis, romantic love is understood as a discourse that does not represent a salvation for women, but rather a condemnation. As bell hooks (2000) states paraphrasing Toni Morrison, romantic love is one “of the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought’ Its destructiveness resides in the notion that we come to love with no will and no capacity to choose” (170). This is precisely what has been repeatedly depicted in mass media representations of love driving people to assume that love is something that cannot be chosen. According to Coral Herrera (2010), the most worrying

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<sup>22</sup> The focus of this project will put specifically on heterosexual romantic love relationships as they are the most represented stories in mainstream films.

issue is that “love myths create over-high expectations imprisoning people in divisions and classifications that perpetuate an unequal hierarchical system based on the dependence among its members” (296)<sup>23</sup>. I agree with Herrera when she highlights that people suffer when they realize love is “not perfect or wonderful” (296) like it is represented, for instance, in mainstream films. In fact, there is an understandable disappointment when reality strikes. For this reason, as Herrera explains romantic love is a utopia that promises happiness though, in reality, it just carries suffering and disappointments. It is just a disillusion that provokes a “constant discomfort and a recurrent tension between desires and reality” (296)<sup>24</sup>.

At this point, it is crucial to remember that men and women have a different socialization, defined roles and expected behaviors in western cultures (Person, 1988, xxii). For instance, romantic love attaches clear stereotypical roles to men and women. On the one hand, the male role is marked by its agency and power as “patriarchal masculinity requires of boys and men not only that they see themselves as more powerful and superior to women but that they do whatever it takes to maintain their controlling position” (hooks, 2000, 40) This situation may find its explanation, as previously noted in this chapter, in the fact that men have had the “capacity to define the objects of love and to set up the rules that govern courtship and the expression of romantic sentiments” (Illouz, 2012, 5). On the other hand, women are assigned submissive roles always characterized by their helplessness and necessity of a male hero. For Firestone “the psychological dependence of women upon men is created by continuing real economic and social oppression” (1970, 146) provoking unhealthy relationships between them (138-139). As a consequence, sexual inequality has been historically a constant, being the corruption of romantic love a “characteristic of love between the sexes” (130). Firestone summarizes this whole problematic by paraphrasing Simone de Beauvoir “the word love has by no means the same sense for both sexes, and this is one cause of the serious misunderstandings which divide them” (135).

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<sup>23</sup> “Los mitos amorosos crean unas expectativas desmesuradas que aprisionan a la gente en divisiones y clasificaciones que perpetúan un sistema jerárquico, desigual y basado en la dependencia de sus miembros. Además, provocan dolor en la gente porque el amor no es eterno, ni perfecto, ni maravilloso, ni nos viene a salvar de nada” (Herrera, 296).

<sup>24</sup> “La insatisfacción permanente y la tensión continua entre el deseo y la realidad” (Herrera, 296).

### 1.2.2 Racial and sexual impositions

Romantic love does not only construct gender unequal relationships, but it also produces other significant oppressions in terms of race, sexuality, able-bodied and class<sup>25</sup>. Due to this reason, applying an intersectional approach<sup>26</sup> to deconstruct it seems mandatory. It is important to highlight that intersectionality does not represent a crossroads of identities but a structure of systems of oppression. As Kimberlé Crenshaw claims the importance of intersectionality lays on the fact that it "hear[s] the voices that have been silenced" (in Nash, 2011, 12). This approach is crucial to analyze how the homogenous narratives of mainstream romantic love —recurrently depicted as exclusively white and heterosexual—invisibilize many subjectivities who do not follow the norms. Interestingly enough, the characteristic whiteness and heterosexuality bring also hegemonic ideas of femininity and masculinity. In other words, the normative behavior and roles of men and women are also informed in terms of race and sexual orientation. Therefore, the tangible gender inequality in romantic love is also constructed by its whiteness and heterosexuality.

As previously noted, mainstream romantic love discourses have generally presented white lovers in their stories. Whenever a non-white protagonist is represented the racial aspect is normally depicted as the conflict *per se* in the narrative<sup>27</sup>. The message is therefore that an interracial relationship will bring the lovers disgrace and obstacles. This homogenous representation in terms of race carries inevitably consequences because as Sara Ahmed explains,

whiteness is an orientation that puts certain things within reach. By objects, we would include not just physical objects, but also styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits. Race becomes, in this model, a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do 'things' with. (2007, 154)

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<sup>25</sup> In this thesis I would focus exclusively on gender, sexuality and race.

<sup>26</sup> Intersectionality was a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Through this notion she wanted to highlight the importance of understanding how the different layers of oppressions present in society are indeed interconnected. The idea of intersectionality will be further developed in chapter 3.

<sup>27</sup> As previously exposed, this statement is exclusively made in regard to mainstream romantic love stories. An example of this *West Side Story* (1961) which will be studied in chapter 3.

According to Ahmed "if whiteness is inherited, then it is also reproduced" (154). Furthermore, in observing these exclusive representations of love a feeling of "walking into a sea of whiteness" (157) could easily invade the viewers, who unable to identify themselves with the narratives "disappear into the 'sea of whiteness" (159). That is, if some identities are misrepresented in mass media this absence is expected to provoke consequences on those silenced subjectivities.

Romantic love has not only been defined in terms of whiteness but also as a heterosexual myth. Interestingly, the first feminist theorists who tried to deconstruct romantic love were precisely accused of neglecting this fact, "the 'hetero- sexual nature of love was taken as given. These analyses of love did, of course, contain within them an implicit critique of heterosexuality, but this was not their explicit object" (Morrison et al. 2012, 507). Indeed, in western societies people "have grown up being continuously exposed to images in the media and popular culture which present an idealized and essentialized version of romantic love - a version that is heterosexual and monogamous" (517). By analyzing mainstream representations of love, one can easily observe how "heterosexuality is glorified"<sup>28</sup> and taken as ordinary and expected (Martin and Kazyak, 2009, 333). As a result, imagining other realities —that is, non-heterosexual relationships— outside this monolithic discourse is particularly difficult (333). Although more artistic representations —such as films— of queer non-white love are proliferating these days they are still an oddity. Consequently, heterosexuality is still a characteristic of the myth of romantic love.

To conclude, it is crucial to understand that "love is always political" (Morrison et al. 515) and a poststructuralist feminist approach to romantic love should not stay at the surface on its analysis but, on the contrary, it must dive into the problematics that emerge from this construction of love. It should engage with its static representation in discourses and the plurality of oppressions that it promotes. All these issues should be put into scope making a connection between them, though not homogenizing or transforming them into a singular problem. For this reason, I believe there is an urgent need of embracing intersectionality in the deconstruction of romantic love as "oppression [does not] come in separate, monolithic forms" (Trinh, 1989, 104). If the discourse of romantic love is not considered in its whole with all the repressions that emerged from it, then a complete and effective deconstruction of that discourse will never be achieved. In my

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<sup>28</sup> This glorification does not only happen in relation to love. Heteronormativity is indeed a dominant discourse in all kind of representations regarding plenty of topics.

view, romantic love should be thus understood always as a multilayered system of oppression and it has to be looked with a global vision so as to perceive all the problematics that this way of conceiving love promotes<sup>29</sup>.

### 1.3 Other ways of understanding (romantic) love

We fail at romantic love when we have not learned the art of loving.  
(hooks, 2000, 178).

As bell hooks argues in *All About Love* (2000), stepping outside the patriarchal romantic love discourse—which is deeply embedded in western societies—is a major feminist task since “our culture may make much of love as a compelling fantasy or myth, but it does not make much of the art of loving” (178). Taking as a starting point that culture constructs the meaning of romantic love through a number of myths, hooks highlights that real-life love fiascos are directly related to this way of understanding love. For her, the hegemonic idea of falling in love is crucial for the success of romantic love as it “reflects a peculiar attitude toward love and life itself—a mixture of fear, awe, fascination, and confusion” (Thomas Merton in hooks, 2000, 171). Interestingly enough, and according to my own experience as a viewer of mainstream romantic love films, one of the most recurrent cinematographic scenes is the moment when the protagonists of the story fall in love with each other<sup>30</sup>. This is represented as something that exceeds their own control promoting the idea of losing responsibility for their actions.

Furthermore, as previously stated—and here again *Romeo and Juliet* illustrate this perfectly—hooks claims that there is also a tendency in confusing “perfect passion with perfect love” (178). Perhaps due to this reason, many people lose their faith in love as they get frustrated when they fail to find the perfect love described in songs or films. Through this bitterness, toxic relationships appear as both lovers may feel disappointed because the conflicts that emerge in their relationship are rarely addressed, normalized or represented in romantic love stories. Mainstream films, for instance, normally focus on the beginning of a relationship, when the two protagonists met—usually a man and a

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<sup>29</sup> In chapter 3 all these problematics will be addressed in depth and exemplified by specific films.

<sup>30</sup> This is perceivable in all the selected films for this project: *West Side Story*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Private Romeo*...

woman following a “compulsory heterosexuality”<sup>31</sup>. As a consequence, consumers of these narratives may believe that when problems arise in their relationships those issues are more about them —or their lovers— than about the image they have about love, in other words, about the way in which love is represented in mass media. In reality, what should be considered is that the “happily ever after” narratives do not portray the problems that every relationship may encounter in real life. This entails that these stories do not show the whole picture and could be hence considered as misleading fictional constructions<sup>32</sup>. As a consequence, romantic love discourses promote unreachable ideals that simply do not take place in reality.

Hence, taking all these into consideration, why do mainstream representations promote such a static and unrealistic way of conceiving love? Since romantic love is a mere patriarchal depiction manufactured by those who are on privileged positions in western societies —that is white, cis, heterosexual men (hooks, 71)— the main reason would be “maintaining power and control” (97). Furthermore, mainstream love stories are heavily marked by implicit —and sometimes explicit—violence. According to hooks, mass media perpetuates “an ethic of domination and violence because our image makers have more intimate knowledge of these realities than they have with the realities of love” (95). She argues “anyone socialized to think this way would be more interested in and stimulated by scenes of domination and violence rather than by scenes of love and care” (97). From my point of view, a significant correlation can be raised from this observation since nowadays in western societies— regardless of emergent political actions and social awareness—violence against women is still an extremely worrying issue. Representations of love in mainstream films, for instance, may not validate directly these violent behaviors but they do it indirectly through the way in which love is represented<sup>33</sup>, for instance, in terms of possessiveness and domination.

It is therefore important to highlight that consumers have a responsibility in rejecting those mainstream stories that perpetuate violence and inequalities. As hooks states “we have power as consumers. We can exercise that power all the time by not

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<sup>31</sup> See Adrienne Rich (1980) “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”

<sup>32</sup> It is true that this affirmation can be made about all kind of representations in mainstream fiction —as the word fiction states, these are non-real depictions. Nonetheless, these portrayals are not, in general, as powerful as the ones about romantic love since the discourse of romantic love goes beyond fictional representations. Indeed, it is also perpetuated in other cultural products like songs or jokes as well as it is intrinsic in hegemonic conceptions of gender.

<sup>33</sup> The correlation between representations and reality will be further analyzed in chapter 2.

choosing to invest time, energy, or funds to support the production and dissemination of mass media images that do not reflect life-enhancing values, that undermine a love ethic” (97- 98). Indeed, in my view, this answering to the dominant discourse is becoming more perceivable nowadays through social media, new media<sup>34</sup> or independent films in which new stories that reply the normativity in mainstream films are proliferating. It could be then claimed that there is an emergent awakening of people who are fed up with the homogeneous and repressive representation of love; who want to find other kinds of love; who want a more inclusive idea of love not marked by a number of myths that have shown to be not only unrealistic but also harmful.

In the end, what hooks proposes is to take a step away from the patriarchal construction of love by providing a new and more inclusive definition of love. One of her major concerns is actually that dictionaries define love in a very monolithic way always in relation to romantic love. Indeed, love at first sight and sexual attraction are highlighted as the epitome of love (3). According to hooks, different definitions of love could for example, “let the reader know one may have such feelings within a context that is not sexual” (3). For instance, demisexual people do not feel sexual attraction at first sight but rather when they get to know a person in depth. Or asexual people, do not feel sexual attraction at all. For this reason, hook also argues that “many of us are more comfortable with the notion that love can mean anything to anybody precisely because when we define it with precision and clarity it brings us face to face with our lacks-with terrible alienation” (11). That is, if there is a unique definition of love the possible inability of feeling identified with it carries an unavoidable frustration. My own views match with this last statement. I do not believe that the answer is portraying a new but still fixed definition of what love is, but rather, providing a more flexible understanding of it. Defining love as a closed category is not understanding what love is in itself. In my interpretation, it is not something definable since every individual feels love in a different way. Therefore, it should not be measured, and it should not follow specific patterns and definitions.

For these reasons, the feminist theorist and activist Coral Herrera started her “Escuela del Amor”<sup>35</sup> (School of Love). Through this initiative, Herrera offers online

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<sup>34</sup> In contrast to the mass media, new media blur the lines between producers and consumers and allow users much more flexivity (Milestone and Meyer 2012, 5)

<sup>35</sup> To know more about this School of Love visit the website <http://otrasformasdequererse.com/biocoralherrera/>

courses in which individuals can have collective discussions about love in a creative space where they debate and share their experiences and understandings of love. In these courses Herrera supports three principles: “the romantic is political”, “no love is illegal” and “other ways of loving each other are possible”<sup>36</sup>. Her goal is promoting healthy relationships through the deconstruction of the myths of romantic love, in other words, by ending up with the patriarchal understanding of love “other ways of loving” can take place. In sum, Herrera and hooks advocate for the same goal: getting rid of the immediate and automatic correlation of love with romantic love as it has proved to be detrimental and alienating for women.

In my understanding, it is essential from a feminist perspective not only to deconstruct romantic love but also to consider it "as a productive force with [...] positive value" that needs to be “conceptualised and theorised also beyond the constraining power of a delusion called 'romantic love'” (Jónasdóttir, 2010, 22). As Coral Herrera argues “other ways of loving are possible” and I strongly agree with her. New feminist conceptualizations and articulations of how love —that powerful and strong feeling— is understood have to proliferate in order to share and take the enormous space that romantic love has been occupying for centuries monopolizing the concept of love. New ways that are not based on a number of myths but on the enrichment and happiness that we feel when we love someone. As Ilouz (1998) claims “love as a work” (169) where we have to take care of it every day.

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<sup>36</sup> “Lo romántico es político”, “ningún amor es ilegal” y “otras formas de quererse son posibles”.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE IMPORTANCE OF MASS MEDIA: CINEMATOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATIONS OF ROMANTIC LOVE AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON TEENAGERS

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We are daily bombarded with messages that tell us love is about mystery, about that which cannot be known. We see movies in which people are represented as being in love who never talk with one another, who fall into bed without ever discussing their bodies, their sexual needs, their likes and dislikes. Indeed, the message received from the mass media is that knowledge makes love less compelling; that it is ignorance that gives love its erotic and transgressive edge. (hooks, 2000, 94- 95)

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The goal of this second chapter is to analyze the dominant role that mass media and western mainstream representations<sup>37</sup> play in the perpetuation and creation of the myths of romantic love. To begin with, the work of the canonical theorist Stuart Hall (1997) will be pivotal as he developed the idea of representation working on Michel Foucault's notion of discourse. The chapter will engage with a particular mass media commodity, films, as these texts are a prominent space and place of representation in contemporary western societies. The focus will be put expressly on mainstream romantic love films which are "the privileged discourse of sexual and romantic desire" (Bachen and Illouz, 1996, 285). For this purpose, the work of feminist scholars will be crucial; among them Mary-Lou Galician (2004) and Eva Illouz (1997a, 1998b, 2012c) who maintains that "media shape our notions of love. Love stories have penetrated the fabric of our everyday life so deeply that we suspect they have altered, even transformed, our experience of love" (1997, 154). That is, mainstream love stories have promoted and perpetuated the myths that are typically attached to romantic love<sup>38</sup>.

The first part of this chapter works as a methodological framework based on film analysis and on an understanding of films as cultural texts. In line with previous feminist studies, where it has been stated "films [...] evoke strong mechanisms of identification"

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<sup>37</sup> Stuart Hall poses that "representation *is* an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture" (1997, 1)

<sup>38</sup> The most recurrent myths of romantic love were already explained in chapter 1.

(Bachen and Illouz, 1996, 285), I will observe how these films may exercise a potential influence on the viewers. Albeit, who is most likely to feel identified and influenced by these romantic narratives? Young adults are not only more exposed due to their age and their "lack [of] direct experiences" (Eggemort, 2010 249) of love; but also, since the vast majority of the protagonists of these stories are teenagers or people in their twenties, the "mechanisms of identification" are more probable for them.

It should be stressed that this chapter also works as a setting for the analysis that will take place in chapters 3 and 4 where I will consider five films: *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), *West Side Story* (1961), *Private Romeo* (2011) and *Warm Bodies* (2013). My criteria for choosing these films is multiple being the most important one that these are all contemporary adaptations of the Shakespearean play *Romeo and Juliet*, that the myths of romantic love are present as well as the correlation between love and death—which will be the pivotal topic in the last chapter. Moreover, since they are all mainstream films they are expected to reach a larger number of viewers<sup>39</sup> which makes their potential influence stronger. Last but not least, the protagonists of these stories are teenagers which is a necessary characteristic for my analysis of the mechanisms of identification. I would like to highlight that my aim is performing a cultural analysis and for this reason, I will contemplate films as cultural texts and not from a technical view.

In sum, what I want to address in this chapter is how mass media commodities—films in particular—have a potential relevance on how people conceive romantic love. As Bachen and Illouz noted, “the romantic imagination incorporates meanings that are socially produced and culturally patterned” (1996, 280) and these meanings are created in the mass media on a large scale<sup>40</sup>. Likewise, and what is perhaps more important, these representations of love “shape or reinforce unrealistic expectations that most of us can't dismiss completely” (Galician, 2004, 223) being teenagers especially affected by it.

## **2.1 Methodology: The importance of mass media**

My methodology comes from an understanding of the role of culture, defined by Stuart Hall, as decisive in the formation of individuals since humans are indeed “cultural subjects” (1997, 8). During childhood, individuals learn to interpret the codes of their

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<sup>39</sup> All these films were exhibited in theatres and they are all nowadays easy to download from the internet.

<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that not all theorists accept that representations on mass media have a straightforward influence and relation with cultural behaviours. This point of view will be further developed in the following section.

culture becoming “culturally competent subjects” (8). Importantly, this process of socialization points out at the non-relevance of biology as, in order to achieve a “successful interaction” with the rest of their community, a child has to become a “cultured person” (8). Through the cultural codes meanings are attached to concepts and, as a consequence, certain ideas—cultural codes—are inscribed on, for instance, the romantic love discourse. Indeed, as Illouz points out, “the mental images with which one forms ideas about love are clear and repetitive. This is because the images of love available in culture have an extraordinary cultural saliency” (2012, 211). Though which are the tools and artefacts employed to repeat these images and why are they so powerful? Mass media representations are for sure of key importance in the perpetuation of these images.

From a social cognitive perspective, it is argued that “individuals may actively observe media portrayals of behaviors in romantic relationships for insight into how they themselves could behave in their own relationships” (Johnson and Holmes 2009, 353). That is, people look at representations of love in order to learn how to act in real life. Nonetheless, and interestingly enough, there is a phenomenon called “the illusion of personal invulnerability” (Zimbardo, et al. in Galician, 2004, 81) which highlights that people tend to accept easily the fact that mass media imprints certain ideas on societies, but they also tend to believe that “it's only on rare occasions [that they are affected] and that *other* people are influenced much more” (81). This phenomenon draws attention to the paradox in mass media representations that people are normally aware of their influence on society, but they are blind to how these narratives affect their own lives. As one of the principal mass media commodities, films have been of crucial importance in the (re)creation of romantic love. They are “symbolic text[s] containing meanings” that generate “certain meaningful representations and messages and communicate them to an audience” (Milestone and Meyer, 2012, 8). In other words, films send a message to the viewers and a particular way of looking at specific topics. Actually, they are one of the sharpest tools in contemporary societies influencing “our fantasies and daydreams with their obsessive representation of [for instance] romance” (Illouz, 1997, 154).

A relevant question at this point is: who controls the mass media? According to Milestone and Meyer, those who “hold leading positions in government and big corporate businesses” (2012, 17). As a consequence of this monopolization a homogeneous discourse and the enclosure of “the dominant view of the world” (17) is perpetuated. Additionally, it has to be considered that above all “mass media are businesses” and the

ultimate goal of its producers is selling the products (Galician, 2004, 74). Though importantly, media is not only trading with commodities but also with hegemonic ideas that persuade the consumer “to adopt a viewpoint and take an action” (74). For this reason— and in line with what bell hooks promotes in her book *All about Love* (2000) (see last section in chapter 1)—, Mary-Lou Galician advocates for a stronger awareness of the mass media consumers. According to her, they need to “evaluate not only the credentials and content but also the viewpoints and assumptions of mass media creators” (3). This means not taking hegemonic discourses as representations of reality or as behavior patterns, but rather as creations that pursue a goal: selling a specific way of conceiving a topic such as, for instance, love.

### **2.1.1 Methodology: The representation of romantic love in mainstream films**

If culture induces love, it also falsifies it  
(Illouz, 1998, 162)

Films are [...] artifacts made by humans for human purposes.  
(Bordwell, 1997, 3)

My methodology continues by considering the power of films, that lies in their capacity to blur the line between reality and fiction through a vivid representation of real life. Precisely for this reason, it should never be neglected that “a film is produced by both machines and human labor” (Bordwell, 1997, 3) and, hence, is always artificial and fictional. Nevertheless, some theorists have argued that “*reality* is what the mass media *say* reality is” (Galician, 2004, 27). For instance, Eva Illouz (1997) maintains that “the boundary between fiction and reality has collapsed, and [...] ‘models take precedence over things’” (154). That is, how things are represented in fiction is transferred into how things are conceived and interpreted in real life. Hence, it could be claimed that “part of our emotional socialization is fictional” (Illouz, 2012, 212) as individuals are able to predict and anticipate feelings “through the repeated cultural scenarios and stories” (212).

In other words, consumers of romantic films have a potential tendency to copy what they watch in fiction perpetuating a monolithic way of behaving and understanding love<sup>41</sup>.

Due to the blurriness of the dichotomy between reality and fiction establishing whether what love is in real life comes before how love is represented—or *vice versa*—is an arduous task. Nonetheless, what can be claimed is that romantic love is simultaneously produced and reproduced in films and that it is a glorified topic transformed into “a supreme value” and a synonym for happiness (Illouz, 1997, 28). Interestingly enough, “many social critics [...] have accused the mass media of brainwashing consumers with portrayals of romanticized love that is unattainable as a goal and unhealthy as a model and, thereby, [they contribute] to the construction of [...] unrealistic expectations” (Galician, 2004, 13). Actually, in a sociological study Eva Illouz (1998) demonstrates that an overwhelming majority of the participants cited the mass media—particularly in films—as the answer to the question “where do you think your ideas about love come from?” (180). To give an illustration, the following are two examples of the replies to that inquiry: “I think a lot of them come from the movies and they are I think, I think the movies have fucked us up a great deal in terms of our images about love” (180). Another answer was “a large part I guess from media and from myths about love” (180). All this manifests that since the idea of romantic love, or at least a huge part of it, comes from fictional depictions and representations this way of understanding love “may engender unrealistic expectations in those who are exposed to them”. (Bachen & Illouz, 1996, 281).

But, why is the representation of romantic love in films so relevant? According to Milestone and Meyer (2012) “representation is so important because it is an active process of creating meanings”, and meanings are simultaneously “produced through representation across different cultural sites” (7). Notwithstanding, one could ask why are particular meanings promoted and activated? Stuart Hall argues,

If the relationship between a signifier and its signified is the result of a system of social conventions specific to each society and to specific historical moments, then all meanings are produced within history and culture. They can never be finally fixed but are always subject to change, both from one cultural context and from one period to another. There is

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<sup>41</sup> Not only consumers of romantic films but of any kind of film since love stories are present in almost every cinematographic genre being a recurrent subplot.

thus no single, unchanging, universal ‘true meaning’. [...] This opens up meaning and representation, in a radical way, to history and change. (1997, 17)

Following Hall’s explanation, if meanings are arbitrary and changeable in time and context they are, therefore, not necessarily true or/and universal. Nevertheless, the meanings created in romantic films are interpreted as universal truths by a large proportion of its consumers<sup>42</sup> as they are the only way—or at least the most common—in which love is represented. This means, viewers of these narratives may interpret the depicted stories as the unique and valid way of understanding love. As a consequence, they may think that just like it happens in films, “their own personal romantic relationships will be void of problems or that problems will magically resolve because love conquers all” (Galloway et al. 2015 693). This also happens because these films portray romantic love always in an extremely positive way under the premise “love is all you need”. This is also particularly important because “social cognitive theory posits that learning from media is most likely to occur when the models are rewarded, rather than punished, for their behavior” (Bandura, in Hefner and Wilson, 2013, 163). In the case of romantic love stories, especially in comedies, the protagonists are always rewarded with “true love”.

In order to understand the power of films another core concept to take into consideration is Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse. As Hall explains, for Foucault discourse

constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others. (1997, 29)

What Foucault argues is that discourse is equal to knowledge (Milestone and Meyer, 2012, 23) and knowledge is always connected to power (Hall, 33). Indeed, “knowledge linked to power not only assumes the authority of ‘the truth’ but has the power to *make itself true*. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has real effects and, in that sense at least, ‘becomes true’” (Hall, 33). Even though romantic love films are hegemonic

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<sup>42</sup> I am aware that this statement may sound too bold. For this reason, I am using the notion of potential to state a possible way in which viewers may engage with these narratives. There is no “universal truth” in how consumers of mass media films interiorize the given representations, but it can be claimed that these depictions have a potential influence on their own views of love.

discourses — that is, knowledge— created by a specific kind of individuals (as mentioned in the previous section) it is only when the consumers transfer the knowledge they acquire in those films into reality that the discourse of romantic love gains power. This also matches with Foucault's idea of power functioning as a chain as “it is never monopolized by one center. It ‘is deployed and exercised through a net-like organization’ (Foucault in Hall, 34). In my view, Foucault is absolutely right in arguing that power is not monopolized as everybody is involved in a certain way on the perpetuation of discourses. For this reason, viewers and consumers of mass media products should start realizing that, for instance, romantic love is a construction that has acquired a status of knowledge, of universal truth, precisely because they are imitating the given representation of love provided in fiction<sup>43</sup> in real life. Consumers must be aware of how media reinforce hegemonic cultural messages, perpetuating behavioral and ideological conformity to the established ‘norm’ (Galloway et al. 2015, 707). Ultimately, as Galician poses people “don't have to give up the mass media we enjoy, but we need to resist being seduced by them” (2004, 14). It would be really interesting if consumers understand that they can actually write their own “realistic love stories, which [...] can be far more wonderful than any offered by Hollywood” (Galician in Galloway et al., 707). In other words, consumers of romantic love films are paradoxically those who empower these discourses and those who are affected by the unrealistic portrayals. They are ultimately who have the ability to end up with the monopolization of the definition of love.

### **2.3 Adolescent mimicry: The influence of romantic films on teenagers**

As already mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, it is likely to expect that teenagers are potentially more affected by the provided monolithic representations of love in mass media. In order to support this statement, it is crucial to consider firstly that due to their youth and consequent lack of experience in intimate relationships, adolescents regularly look for models in mass media representations. This means that they are “particularly impressionable” in the process of making “sense of themselves and others around them,” (e.g., Bachen & Illouz, 1996; Brown, 2002; Signorielli, 1997) (in Johnson

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<sup>43</sup> This representation of love is also present in popular sayings, jokes, ads...that is, it is a constant in western cultures.

and Holmes 2009, 352). That is, as young adults are still positioning themselves in society, the inputs they receive in that process are more relevant than the ones an adult gets. For this reason, “adolescents’ romantic conceptions are expected to be shaped by several cultural influences” (Eggermont, 2010, 245). But why is this influence so determinant? Although it could be claimed that “adolescent romantic relationships are short-lived and superficial” they are also “central in adolescents’ lives” (Furman and Shaffer, 2003, 3). As already noted, during adolescence individuals are in the process of building their own identity and their social relationships being love experiences key in this socialization. As Furman and Shaffer argue,

adolescents develop distinct perceptions of themselves in the romantic arena. They do not simply have a concept of themselves with peers but have different self-schemas of themselves with the general peer group, with close friends, and in romantic relationships. (4)

Films are one the major sources where teenagers find models for their own love relationships. Indeed, “movies played an important role in helping adolescents to mentally visualize and anticipate future behavior through day-dreaming activities” (Blumer’s research in Bachen and Illouz, 1996, 282). Importantly, the danger of this lies in the fact that “younger viewers [...] may come to view these representations as cultural norms and form unrealistic relationship beliefs and expectations accordingly” (Johnson and Holmes, 2009, 352-353). That is, teenagers may use these films as a *mold* [sic]<sup>44</sup> for their acts. But how does this happen? In the previous section, I argued that romantic films activate a mechanism of identification in teenagers through their resemblances with the protagonists of these stories who are normally adolescents. This recognition plus their lack of experience in romantic affairs lead them to imitate what they watch in those narratives. At this point, it is important to mention that there has been a recurrent debate among theorists discussing if media works whether as a *mold* or rather as a cultural resource. According to Michael Schudson (1989) not every cultural symbol is equal,

some [...] carry more weight than others, and thus are more likely to mold or shape people’s understandings accordingly. Schudson offers five criteria by which one can evaluate the potency of cultural objects: retrievability (how accessible a symbol is), rhetorical force (its ability to

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<sup>44</sup> I use this concept by following Michale Shudson’s terminology (1989) (in Bachen and Illouz 1996).

connect with people in a powerful way) resonance (the extent to which it resonates with existing social relationships and the lived experience of people), institutional retention (the degree to which it is embodied in other social institutions), and resolution (its ability to influence action). These five criteria can help us better understand and predict which aspects of culture are more dominant in molding our thoughts, imagination, and behavior, and which serve more as resources. (in Bachen and Illouz, 1996, 281)

By applying these criteria in order to check if romantic love representations in films work as a *mold* or as a resource, it can be observed firstly that romantic love is easily accessible—through mass media commodities for instance—, that is it is retrievable, and that it does not only promote a connection with people—rhetorical force—but is indeed based *per se* on social relationships. Furthermore, it resonates with experiences of teenagers in real life as several studies have shown<sup>45</sup>. This means also that romantic love discourses have the ability to influence action in real life. Hence, by following these criteria it could be claimed that romantic love films work indeed as a *mold*. The problematic emerges when through that use of films as *molds* for their relationships, teenagers end up disappointed (Johnson and Holmes, 2009, 368) as reality and fiction are not equal. Therefore, one could ask, if they end up suffering why do teenagers find so desirable the stories depicted in romantic love films? According to the social cognitive theory "individuals are inclined to adopt attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that are modeled for them, particularly if the behaviors being modeled for the viewer are rewarded (e.g., Bandura, 1994) (in Galloway et al. 2015, 693). Romantic love films show stories that are always positive that "portray a "feel good" storyline" (Galloway et al. 693). As a consequent, teenagers find these love stories as role models for having a perfect and successful love relationship.

But are all adolescents equally affected by romantic love representations? The answer is clearly no, as the influence may depend on the degree of exposure to those narratives, as well as on the person's capacity for critical thinking. As Galloway et. al observe in a survey of teenagers "viewing preference for both romantic comedies and dramas was significantly and positively correlated with idealized notions of faith that love conquers all, greater expectations for intimacy, and endorsement of the eros love style"

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<sup>45</sup> See for example Bachen and Illouz (1996).

(687). Nonetheless, the effects of these narratives should be considered since the number of adolescents that watch these films is large. According to Bachen and Illouz (1996) 90% of “people ranging in age from eight to 17 years [...] said they “often” or “sometimes” encountered love stories in movies” (in Hefner and Wilson, 2013,152). From a traditional cultivation theory, it is claimed that “viewers exposed to a high level of romance media will come to cultivate beliefs and expectations of relationships consistent with those particular presentations over heavy viewers of media in general” (Johnson and Holmes, 2009, 353). That is, “viewers exposed over a prolonged period of time to portrayals of reality as defined by the media may come to develop perceptions that are consistent with these portrayals” (353). To simplified it, heavy consumers of romantic love films are more likely to take these narratives as *molds* for their own relationships.

The concluding question would be: where does this romantic love consumption lead adolescents too? Firstly, as mentioned before, it can be expected that these films that “convey impractical, dysfunctional, and/or unrealistic expectations about romantic relationships” (Galloway et al., 2015, 693) guide them to unhappy relationships. As outlined in chapter 1, when the viewers compare their own experiences “to the exaggerated depictions in the media they may come to feel as though they are lacking a relationship

that others are enjoying” (Johnson and Holmes, 354) and this comparison is more typical of younger adults. Last but not least, the consequences of this exposure to hegemonic romantic love narratives is that teenagers may endure the represented unequal relationships—in terms of race, gender and sexuality—as it will be analysed in the following chapter.

## **2.4 Concluding remarks**

As it has been shown in this chapter, media representations, like every cultural product, are biased since they are produced by a particular group of people with a particular goal. As bell hooks (2000) claims “the vast majority of the images we see are created from a patriarchal standpoint” (96). Furthermore, as already mentioned these representations affect consumers even though they “might not be aware of the all-pervasive media culture, [they] subconsciously incorporate its messages and myths into our own lives” (Galician, 2004, 222). This happens through a mechanism of identification which is most likely to happen during adolescence. Romantic love films are a clear example of this mass

media influence; they provoke a mixture of fiction and emotions which are “lived as narrative life projects” (Illouz, 2012, 212). As a consequence, romantic films “shape or reinforce unrealistic expectations” (Galician, 223) becoming “a source of disappointment through the implicit mediation of what we think they say about others’ expectations of us and about their achievements compared to ours” (Illouz, 2012, 220).

For some theorist such Mary-Lou Galician the solution to end up with this discontent is advocating to an awareness of the consumers of mainstream romantic films. She states, “it's much healthier and smarter to make *yourself the* hero or heroine of your own real-life love story” (223). However, I disagree with this answer as I find it quite simplistic. Galician focuses exclusively on the viewers’ responsibility and not on addressing the problematic *per se*: how love is represented. In my view what we should aim is more in line with what bell hooks proposes —as explained in the previous chapter— that is advocating for a more inclusive, non-monolithic and realistic representation of love. A kind of love that does not lead teenagers to imitate patterns that drive them to unhappy and unequal relationships. As hooks maintains, “these images will not change until patriarchal thinking and perspectives change” (2000, 96) and we are all responsible for that modification. Indeed, following a Foucauldian view, we all have the power to withdraw the power from the hegemonic discourse of romantic love.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE MYTHS OF ROMANTIC LOVE IN CONTEMPORARY ADAPTATIONS OF *ROMEO AND JULIET*: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS

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A common conceptual thread runs through the metaphors of love as fire, as a magnetic force, and as magic: love is conceived as an autonomous agent, acting with a force of its own, independent of the will or control of the lover. (Illouz, 1997, 192)

*Romeo and Juliet* gained fame not so much because of the intensity of their love, as because they braved their family disapproval, thus affirming the supremacy and righteousness of an individual's passion against the abusive endogamic rules of the group. (Illouz, 1997, 318)

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The first section of this chapter will be focused on how specific myths of romantic love—the myths of the soulmate, "love at first sight" and "love conquers all"<sup>46</sup>—are (re)produced in two films: *Romeo+Juliet* (1996) and *West Side Story* (1961). The next part will be devoted to examining from an intersectional perspective the potential asymmetrical relationships and inequalities that contemporary adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* may promote. As already explained in the introduction, these asymmetries can be observed in relation to gender, race and sexuality.

To begin with, it has to be considered that in terms of gender, "popular culture"<sup>47</sup>, including the media, plays a crucial role in contributing to the maintenance of patriarchy by perpetuating gender ideologies" (Milestone and Meyer, 2012, 11). Actually, in films, oppressive gender roles are regularly shown through romantic relationships where "women's subordination is presented as desirable [...]. Males, by contrast, are portrayed as the leaders of their communities, heroic warriors, and brave rescuers of the female character from her miserable fate" (Reznik, 2014, 22). In order to study this gender

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<sup>46</sup> For further information about these myths consult chapter 1.

<sup>47</sup> "Much of popular culture is media culture; popular culture includes mass media such as radio, the press, film and television, as well as new media such as the internet or email" (Milestone and Meyer, 2012, 1)

imbalance, the analysis will be made on *Romeo+Juliet* as the faithfulness of this adaptation to the original play allows to focus more explicitly on the gender asymmetrical aspect. In this film the characters' words are unmodified, and the main change made in the plot is the setting, as it takes place in the time period in which the film was released, that is, 1996. The story tells us about two powerful and wealthy families the Capulets and the Montagues who are historical rivals. When the heirs of both empires —Juliet and Romeo— meet for the first time, they unavoidably fall in love with each other. This provokes a number of unfortunate events that leads them to commit suicide only a few days after starting their romance.

Moreover, as aforementioned, romantic love mainstream stories do not only tend to depict oppressive gender relationship, but they also generally promote a homogenizing discourse in terms of race and sexuality. In these films "characters [are] predominantly white [...] and heterosexual" (Johnson and Holmes, 2009, 369). Nonetheless, in this chapter the whiteness and heterosexuality will be observed in stories that—at least at first glance—, seem to break with the homogenizing discourse. I will analyze if that is the case in each one of the chosen films.

The racial issue will be studied in *West Side Story* (1961) and for this purpose, Sara Ahmed's "A phenomenology of whiteness" (2007) will be theoretically pivotal. The film narrates an interracial love story in which dancing, singing and acting are mixed with New York City as the scenario of the plot. In this film, the hostility that threatens the impossible love between its protagonists, Tony and Maria, is not the historical rivalry between their families but rather their race. On the one hand, Tony is a white man considered to be "a true American". He is a former member of the Jets, a street gang that controls the neighborhood in which the action takes place. On the other hand, Maria, her family and friends are immigrants from Puerto Rico. Moreover, her brother, Bernardo, is the leader of another street gang the Sharks. The conflict arises when both groups fight to gain control over the streets making Tony and Maria inevitably enemies. Like in the original play, when the protagonists meet they fall in love with each other and their love leads them again to tragic events. This time the film ends with Tony's death and a broken-hearted Maria<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> The racial analysis made in this chapter will be partially based on a paper entitled "The Whiteness and Heterosexuality of Romantic Love: An Intersectional Analysis of *West Side Story*" submitted for the course Advanced Introduction to Gender Studies as part of my Master at Utrecht University in November 2017.

Sexuality will be analyzed in *Private Romeo* (2011) as the story takes place in an all-male Military Academy where two cadets playing the roles of Romeo and Juliet fall in love with each other. The script is almost exclusively taken from the original play as the protagonists are indeed rehearsing the play in the film. This provokes an effect of mixing reality and fiction within the narrative. Furthermore, the most interesting aspect of this adaptation is not only that the protagonists are gay but also the ending, as none of the lovers dies.

In sum, what I want to address in this third chapter is how a canonical story like *Romeo and Juliet* is not only part and parcel of the myths of romantic love but also how in its contemporary adaptations those myths are similarly glorified. In other words, a story that was written more than 400 years ago is repeatedly used as a model for modern depictions of love. All this leads in the end—and in line with the previous chapter—to the responsibility that these myths may have in the "romantic illusions that lead to deep frustrations and disappointments when real relationships fail to match them" (Reznik, 2014, 22). Furthermore, I want to analyze if in the process of adapting *Romeo and Juliet* to different settings, with protagonists of different sexualities and races, these contemporary stories are subverting or rather legitimizing the hegemonic white and heterosexual narrative. In other words, and formulating it as a question: to what extent do these films by placing those non-white and non-heterosexual subjectivities as the source of the conflict in the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, promote the hegemonic discourse of race and sexuality? Or do they have the opposite effect? Before tackling these questions, it is crucial to highlight at this point that the concepts non-white and non-heterosexual will be recurrently repeated throughout this chapter. The reason why I choose this terminology is that, though I am aware that these terms place whiteness and heterosexuality in the center and, as a result, the rest of subjectivities are defined by the prefix "non"—along with the consequent homogenizing discourse—, I have decided to use these concepts since what I want to emphasize in my analysis is precisely how romantic love films place at the center of their stories white and heterosexual individuals.

### 3.1 Romantic love myths in contemporary adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*

As it has been explained in chapter 2, films have —like the rest of the mass media commodities— a leading role in the creation of cultural meaning. That is, they have an influence on how people understand human relationships. Romantic love is presented in western cinematic works in a static way that seems to allow the perpetuation of the myths that have been repeatedly attached to it. Interestingly enough —and following what has already been stated in chapters one and two—, in line with Foucault's concept of discourse, it is important to consider that "myths are always about power and control" (Galician, 2004, 34). In other words, as the myths of romantic love are represented in hegemonic discourses they exercise power and control over the viewers who are taught to understand love in a very specific way. But why are these myths unperceivable for a large proportion of the audience? It is crucial to consider that myths "usually, [...] contain just enough [truth] that at least [they] seem credible in their time and place to get them accepted" (34). That is to say, these myths are depicted in a way that seems to be possible in real life. Hence, visualizing them as myths seems to be more complex than first thought. The following analysis on the myths of romantic love will be made on two contemporary adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Romeo+ Juliet* (1996) and *West Side Story* (1961), focusing on three particular myths: love at first sight, the idea of the soulmate and the premise "love conquers all".

The first myth that is easy to identify in *Romeo and Juliet*'s story —and hence in these two adaptations— is "love at first sight". This idea has been repeatedly used and "codified in popular cinema" (Illouz 1998, 172) though, perhaps, the classic story of *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most representative. Remarkably, as it was mentioned in the first chapter, the idea of "love at first sight" has been interpreted by many as indeed "lust at first sight" (165). This observation can be made quite clearly on both films. On the one hand, when Romeo meets Juliet in Luhrmann's adaptation (1996)—and also in the original play—his first words are referred to Juliet's physical attributes, though he automatically links it with true love: "Did my heart love til' know? Forswear it, sight! For I never saw true beauty till this night" [29:03]. In *West Side Story* when Tony meets Maria he also highlights her beauty in their very first conversation: "so beautiful [...] It's so much to believe" [41:26]. The relevance of both moments lies in how the male characters openly state that they are feeling "love" due to the female characters' beauty.

This depiction of these first encounters collides with reality as like Mary-Lou Galician (2004) argues, in real life

there's attraction at first sight, but real love takes real time [...] Physical attraction can grow into lasting love, but realistic romance is based on the test of time not the emotion of the moment. Long-lasting love is indeed a "choice" — not something we "fall" into because of blind Cupid (131).

Furthermore, Galician also highlights how films use effective tools such as music to “reinforce the myth by setting the tone and convincing us of the tightness and majesty of such moments” (130). This happens in both adaptations when Romeo and Tony see respectively Juliet and Maria for the first time as “sight and sound devices are impressively combined” (130). Here it is also crucial to consider a detail already mentioned in chapter 1: in *Romeo+Juliet* — like in the original play —, Romeo was already in love with another girl before he meets Juliet. When “still sick of love for Rosaline, Romeo accidentally sees Juliet [he] instantly transfer[s] his flame” (Illouz, 1997, 153) falling in love with her. Interestingly enough, this detail is not incorporated in the other adaptation, thus the first encounter of Tony and María is also depicted as “love at first sight”,

-You're not thinking I'm someone else?

-I know you are not.

-Or that we've met before?

-I know we have not. [40:40]

By analyzing, the first encounter between the protagonist in both films it becomes clear that the so-called “love at first sight” in *Romeo and Juliet* is indeed, as many authors have argued, “lust at first sight”, as none of them had even exchanged a word to feel love for each other and their attraction seems to be exclusively based on their physical attributes—at least in the case of the male characters.

Destiny is also a crucial element in both adaptations. The love between the protagonists is meant to be, in other words, it is predestined. This is where the idea of the soulmate gains weight, as a magical force that puts the lovers together allowing them to find their soulmate. Therefore, destiny is a key device in *Romeo and Juliet*'s romance since it highlights the fact that “potential romantic partners might be meant for each other based on predestined factors” (Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002, Knee, et al., 2001 in

Johnson and Holmes, 2009, 3). In *West Side Story*, for instance, this is shown through Tony's epiphany at the beginning of the film as he has the feeling that "something great is coming" [28:17]. Moreover, Maria and Tony's first encounter is portrayed as if, indeed, they had been waiting for each other for so long. Tony even states, "I felt...I knew something never before was gonna happen...had to happen, but this is so much more" [40:57]. Galician (2004) argues that this kind of representation is a truly appealing idea for the audience as "waiting for 'destiny' and its magical signs is easier than taking responsibility for your own life and love by doing your own work and trusting your own judgments" (124).

Despite the huge relevance of the aforementioned myths, perhaps the strongest one is the idea that "love conquers all", being able to overcome all kind of barriers, problems or possible oppositions<sup>49</sup>. The story of *Romeo and Juliet* does not only support "the supremacy of love over reason and family considerations" (Illouz 1998, 164) but it also promotes that "one way of experiencing love is [...] on the model of 'rebellion'" (170). For instance, in *West Side Story* when problems arise albeit Maria states "any fight is not good for us" [1:29:36] Tony immediately replies her "everything is good for us. We got magic" [1:29:40]. Interestingly enough, according to Helen Fisher, the existence of barriers may promote the "mystery and madness essential to romantic love" (in Galician, 46). Indeed, this has been even described as "the Romeo and Juliet effect" (Fisher in Galician, 46). This means that the myth of love conquering all is one of the principal ideas that the mythical story of Romeo and Juliet has promoted.

Albeit *Romeo+ Juliet* and *West Side Story* are contemporary adaptations of the Shakespearean play, both of them have shown to be conservative in the love values that they promote. Regardless of the change in the setting and the innovations they do not show a modernization in the way love was already depicted in the original play. This shows that the romantic plot is timeless, and it does not open up the possibilities to modernize it. In other words, the story in its popular version does not allow a translation into the traditional schemes. As a result, these modern adaptations portray a kind of love based on mythical values that have been the prevailing norm for centuries. In my view, what all this means is that romantic love is stagnant in a hegemonic discourse that has not evolved over the years and, as a consequence, it is enclosed in pernicious, unreal and, of course, mythical representation.

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<sup>49</sup> This myth is one of the most recurrent ones being a trope in almost every romantic plot. Indeed, this is known as 'star-crossed lovers' a term that was actually coined by Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet*.

### 3.2 An intersectional analysis of *Romeo and Juliet*

As already mentioned in chapter 1, romantic love promotes asymmetrical relationships not only in terms of gender but also in terms of race and sexuality through a homogenous discourse and representation. This provokes inevitably silences in romantic narratives and, certainly, this could be considered a way of symbolic violence as it implies “the practice of othering” marginalizing “those who are distinctly different from the majority ‘us’<sup>50</sup>” (Rawls & David in Bunch, 2015, 12) and who are, as a consequence, unrepresented. Oppression should be thought from a feminist perspective as multiple and simultaneous rather than only regarding sexual differences. For this purpose, intersectionality allows looking at oppression as something bigger, as an interlocking system. Though it was Kimberlé Crenshaw who coined the concept of intersectionality<sup>51</sup> in 1989, she worked on previous works of other theorists such as Audre Lorde who claimed,

certainly, there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation. (1984, 115)

Incorporating an intersectional approach in the task of deconstructing *Romeo and Juliet*’s contemporary adaptations from a feminist perspective seems mandatory. In any other way, the focus would be exclusively put on the asymmetrical understanding of love in terms of gender, rather than on the homogenizing perverse discourse that tries to invisibilize anyone who is different from the western norm, that is: white and heterosexual.

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<sup>50</sup> This “us” refers to the hegemonic subject represented in mass media, that is, a white, abled-body, heterosexual, middle-class individual.

<sup>51</sup> Crenshaw maintains that “the term intersectionality (...) underscores the ‘multidimensionality’ of marginalized subjects’ lived experiences” (139).

### 3.2.1 Gender asymmetries

Simone de Beauvoir said it: “The word love has by no means the same sense for both sexes, and this is one cause of the serious misunderstandings which divide them”. (Firestone, 1970, 135)

As already exposed in chapter one, western societies are structured in a patriarchal system that "reproduce[s] gendered subjectivities through the consumption of commodities" (Ebert, 1988, 21). Significantly, one of the most powerful tools for perpetuating gender roles are “romance narratives, which are crucial sites for the operation of patriarchal ideology" (21). According to Eva Illouz, this happens because when men and women are in love they tend to perform hegemonic gender characteristics and like Simone de Beauvoir stated, “even in love men retain their sovereignty, while women aim to abandon themselves" (in Illouz, 2012, 5). Hence, understanding that gender identities are “produced, represented and consumed in popular culture" (Milestone and Meyer, 2012, 1) is of crucial importance as it allows to point out as a strategic place of perpetuation of hegemonic identities.

In the film *Romeo+Juliet* (1996) gender roles are supported in a clear way. Romeo is the first one that appears on the screen and he is indeed the one with agency through all the narrative: he is the one who talks to Juliet in their first encounter, he is the one who declares his love, he is the one who proposes getting married and, ultimately, when he thinks Juliet is dead, he is the first one to commit suicide. This kind of romantic narrative “perpetuates female dependency on men and serves as the rationale for over-investment of resources in search of the “one and only,” rather than in herself as an independent individual with agency and self-worth” (Reznik, 2014, 22). Furthermore, while Juliet has no friends Romeo has, on the contrary, a whole gang of male mates who support him and listen to him. This means that the female protagonist has no relevance in the story apart from her relationship with the male character. What is more, in the story the only aspect of her that is not related to Romeo is the arranged marriage that her father is preparing for her. Interestingly enough, this also depicts the patriarchal society in which both protagonists live in, where women have no agency to act freely being exclusively defined by their relationships with men<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> Notice that this analysis of the female character is made from my own position, that is, a feminist in the 21st century. It has to be stressed that Juliet in the original play shows indeed a degree of agency in her own context —renaissance

All this means that Romeo is defined and valued by his bravery, whereas Juliet is only characterized by her beauty, kindness and her relationship with Romeo. As already explained, this kind of representation enters on the imaginary of the consumers and consequently, “gender hierarchies and inequalities are maintained, among other factors, by meanings and belief system, and these are in turn generated through representation” (Milestone and Meyer, 2012, 8). To conclude, as mentioned in the previous chapter, I find important to highlight again that since the protagonists of the story are teenagers then the target audience is likely to be teenagers too. Love is a crucial matter for teenagers and it is “an issue that is gendered through and through” (Offen, 2010, 68) in mass media representations. The prevailing message that these films send to young adults is an authorization of who they are allowed to love, how they should love and how they have to perform<sup>53</sup> their assigned gender at birth.

### 3.2.2 Whiteness

If it is accepted, as feminists have argued, that cinematic forms connive in reproducing the ideology which underpins patriarchy, then it should also be recognized that cinema is complicit in the structuring and naturalizing of power relations between black and white people. (Young, 1996, 24)

There is no question that in most of western productions the protagonists are white people and the presence of characters outside that racial homogeneity are scarce. Whiteness is, therefore, a key defining element in mainstream western films. It could be claimed that “cinema constructs whiteness as the norm, by leaving it unmarked. The eerie property of whiteness to be nothing and everything at the same time is the source of its representational power” (Dyer in Smelik, 3). This implies that in films human experiences are represented as exclusively white (Young, 1996, 12). That is, whiteness “is the norm against which everything else is measured with no need of self- definition” (Dyer, 1988 in Young, 24) and, as a consequence, non-white experiences are marginalized.

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Italy— through her rebellious act of marrying Romeo and her decision of committing suicide. Nonetheless, *Romeo + Juliet* does not take place in that historical period but rather during the 1990s. Through my analysis, I show how the mentioned acts performed by Juliet are indeed part and parcel of the romantic rhetoric conditioned always by Romeo’s attitude as he is the one that leads the situation.

<sup>53</sup> Judith Butler defines performativity as “that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (1993, xii).

At first glance, it may seem that in *West Side Story* the whiteness of the myth of romantic love is slightly subverted as Maria is indeed a Latina. Nevertheless, it is extremely shocking that the actress cast for this role, Natalie Wood, is an American white woman of Russian ancestry. The reason behind this choice is not innocent at all and indeed it could be related to western ideas of hegemonic and heteronormative femininity and female beauty which are always related with whiteness. As Lola Young argues, “European history has constructed black female sexuality and femininity [...] as ‘lacking’ those ‘feminine’ qualities which have been attributed to white European women” (132). This puts into manifest a major problem: Even when a mainstream film wants to tell the story of a non-white woman, a white person who follows the norm is chosen for the role. Hence, in this selection of the main female protagonist, it becomes crystal clear that the producers of this film were not preoccupied with subverting the homogenizing whiteness. On the contrary, and interestingly, the rest of Puerto Rican characters are from Puerto Rico or at least they have a Latin American origin. However, it is also important to highlight the fact that Puerto Rican people are highly stereotyped in the movie. They are depicted with a strong accent, always dancing and partying, not really up to work and extremely religious. Furthermore, they are also described as violent criminals. Even the name of the band “the Sharks” animalizes them in contrast with “the Jets” that represent a westernized notion of civilization and technology.

Hence, though in this contemporary adaptation an interracial component is introduced, it is simply used to embody the impossibility of the love between the lovers and not in a way of contesting this homogenous representation in romantic films. Indeed, “interracial sexual relations have been perceived as problematic by black as well as white intellectuals and writers. Black people in mixed relationships are seen as participating in a form of racial suicide” (Young, 69-70). In line with this, in the film the interracial love is not embraced but seen as something problematic and, as a consequence, the mainstream idea of white love is preserved. The sent message is that a love like this one, non-normative in terms of race, could lead you to disgrace meaning that a “non-white” love will make you suffer. This problem is actually described in the song “Somewhere” performed by Tony and Maria. Through the lyrics, they manifest that there is no place in this world for their interracial love as all the people surrounding them are against their love [1:51:16]. Taking Sara Ahmed's point of departure in “A phenomenology of whiteness” (2007), race is as almost as a synonym of family. This idea can be found in the story when, Anita —Bernardo's girlfriend— asks Maria explicitly to end up with Tony

“forget that boy and find another. One of your own kind stick to your own kind” [2.06.55].  
As Ahmed claims,

Race in this model ‘extends’ the family form; Other members of the race are ‘like a family’, just as the family is defined in racial terms. The analogy works powerfully to produce a particular version of race and a particular version of family, predicated on ‘likeness’, where likeness becomes a matter of ‘shared attributes’ (154)

The major problem in the narrative is that racial difference is seen as something potentially dangerous because as Audre Lorde (1984) accurately describes, “we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear” (115). Undoubtedly, differences are seen with fear in *West Side Story* and they are perceived as “insurmountable barriers” (Lorde, 115). Interestingly enough, the title of the film was translated into Spanish as *Amor sin barreras* (“Love without barriers”) which is indeed a significant message about the content of the film.

To sum up, *West Side Story* is a good example of how a mainstream film in which a non-normative love is represented — in this case in terms of race— ends up centralizing the plot around the so-called problem of being non-normative. In other words, though this film seems to break with the prevailing whiteness in mainstream films, that is not the case; therefore, engaging with a “non-white” love does not imply a real subversion. This disruption become the burning issue in the narrative which, in the end, lead to the glorification of “white” relationships in mainstream romantic love stories.

### 3.2.3 Heterosexuality

Love can be understood as producing a heterosexual ideal that some bodies move towards and other bodies move away from. (Morrison et al. 2012. 515)

Heteronormativity is a term that points out how heterosexuality represents the sexual norm in western societies. It reflects on how “the view that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and prescriptive sociosexual arrangements” (Ingraham in Hand, 2013, 32). This concept can also be related to the theory of “compulsory heterosexuality” presented by Adrienne Rich’s (1980) who claimed that,

women have been conditioned to believe that they are incomplete and abnormal without a man and that this conditioning —which she termed "compulsory heterosexuality" and viewed as criminal —can lead to the acceptance of counterproductive and even abusive relationships to which women will cling in desperation to meet that cultural norm (in Galician, 2004, 39)

Taking into consideration the discourse of romantic love one can observe how this heteronormativity plays a dominant role in these narratives. According to Tammy Hand, romantic love does not only support but also reproduce the “dominant discourses of heterosexuality” (46). In the case of mainstream romantic films, this is easily perceivable as in the vast majority of the films the protagonists are heterosexual<sup>54</sup>. Through this representation “heterosexuality achieves a taken-for-granted status in these films not because it is ordinary, but because hetero-romance is depicted as powerful” (Martin and Kazyak, 2009, 333). As a consequence, any other sexuality that is out of the norm becomes an oddity, for instance, “homosexuality becomes the "other" against which heterosexuality defines itself (Johnson 2005; Rubin 1984 in Martin and Kazyak, 316).

In the adaptation *Private Romeo* (2011) the love story is between two gay men<sup>55</sup>. This seems to be a disruption with the hegemonic heterosexual representation, though is that the case? In mainstream films, gay and lesbian relationships are normally still defined by heterosexual patterns. As bell hooks states, “even in non- heterosexual relationships, the paradigms of leader and follower often prevail, with one person assuming the role deemed feminine and another the designated masculine role (2000, 171). In *Private Romeo* this is even more evident than in other films as one of the protagonists plays the role of the male, Romeo and the other the role of the female, Juliet<sup>56</sup>. Hence, though they have a homosexual relationship the words and the acts are marked by the heterosexuality of the characters in the original play.

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<sup>54</sup> Notice that with this affirmation my intention is not denying the existence of films in which non-heterosexual love is depicted. There are indeed stories about homosexual love, such as *Private Romeo* and it is also true that the tendency is changing, and more inclusive films are emerging. Nonetheless, in my view, there is not a large corpus of homosexual love films yet. Furthermore, as aforementioned, the problematic within this narrative tends to revolve precisely on the very fact that the lovers are not heterosexual

<sup>55</sup> This is an example of how mainstream films are more increasingly introducing gay characters, at least more than in the past.

<sup>56</sup> As they are indeed performing the original play.

Nonetheless, despite this reproduction of heteronormative roles, and despite the fact that the main issue in the narrative is indeed that both are gay, the director of the film provides a turning point at the end of the story that changes completely the final message: none of the protagonists dies. Therefore, the message is not the same as in *West Side Story*. Homosexuality is embraced as the expected ending would be that due to their love both characters die. Nevertheless, despite the recurrent emergence of LGBTIQ+ narratives, this embracement is still an exception in mainstream films as in general terms, it can be considered that there are two recurrent patterns for those mainstream films in which the heteronormativity is subverted. The first type is integrated by those narratives that deal with “the problematic of homosexuality”. In these stories, the homosexual protagonists find nothing but unhappiness in their love (see for example *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) or *Carol* (2015))<sup>57</sup>. The other recurrent prototype is shaped by those films in which the homosexuality of its protagonists is precisely the cornerstone of the story. That is to say, despite the characters are not unhappy because of their homosexuality, they are still portrayed as struggling with society — a good example of this is the film *Milk*, (2008) Consequently, it could be argued that queer love is only represented in mainstream films to symbolize an existing conflict in the narrative, and therefore it is never embraced<sup>58</sup>.

Importantly, some authors have highlighted their surprise as, according to them, love has been “undertheorized by queer theorists”, stating for instance that ‘love is a site which has not been queered enough’ and seeks more from love as an analytical concept than resistance to norms and conventions” (Berlant in Morrison et al. 2012, 515). The result of this heterosexual and homogenous representation of love in mainstream films is that it “(re)produces particular gendered expectations, practices and identities through various social institutions” (Hand, 2013, 32) and, as a result, “the invocation of ‘true love’ [is a] vehicle for considerations on heteronormativity among adolescent[s]” (Jackson, 2010, 65). One could ask then if homosexual love can indeed escape from the discourse of romantic love since one of its most powerful and recurrent myths is the impossibility of the lovers to be together due to a number of obstacles. The historical taboo about

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<sup>57</sup> It is also true that though these are contemporary films they are portraying the American society on the decades of the 60s and 80s. However, the fact that these are the non-heterosexual stories that are depicted in contemporary mainstream cinema should invite the viewer to reflect on why queer narratives tend to be set in problematic historical moments or environments.

<sup>58</sup> This last paragraph has been taken from my paper “The Whiteness and Heterosexuality of Romantic Love: An Intersectional Analysis of *West Side Story*”

homosexuality offers a great opportunity to reinforce this myth which serves as a potential reason to portray an impossible love. Moreover, films like *Private Romeo* —which are currently more frequent though still an oddity, especially in mainstream cinema—could lead to an openness of the spectrum of the represented realities. Despite this film still depicts some problematics regarding the mythical construction of romantic love —as it should not be forgotten that it is an adaptation of one of the cornerstone plays within this discourse— it still provides a change in the expected sexuality of the protagonists, breaking with a discourse that has proved to be exclusionary.

### 3.3 Concluding remarks<sup>59</sup>

Feminist analysis must aim to make the dykes that contain homogenous narratives, like films, visible. Through that exercise stories and other ways of addressing love that are not based on asymmetrical relationships or on any kind of established patterns, can be promoted. In that way, we will be able to make fissures in the dykes and perhaps even break them. Normalizing what is not normalized in the narratives is a powerful way of contesting oppression. Fortunately, there are more and more films in the last years in which this myth and its layers of oppression has been subverted like *Private Romeo* (2011).

In order to end up with inequalities, to denounce and to finally stop different kinds of oppressions, we as feminists have to deconstruct the patriarchal perception of the world and conceiving the feminist subject, as something plural is crucial to reach that goal. Following what Adrienne Rich (1984) states a change is required and “the movement for change is a changing movement, changing itself, demasculinizing itself, de-Westernizing itself, becoming a critical mass that is saying in so many different voices, languages, gestures, actions: It must change; we our-selves can change it” (225). To conclude, in my view it cannot be denied that films have a huge relevance within the western imaginary and the social conception of ideas such as love, and it should not be neglected either that they are effective tools that have been repeatedly used to preserve the hegemonic patriarchal discourse of race, gender and sexuality.

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<sup>59</sup> This conclusion has been taken from my paper “The Whiteness and Heterosexuality of Romantic Love: An Intersectional Analysis of *West Side Story*”.

## CHAPTER 4

### VIOLENCE IN ROMANTIC LOVE: AN ANALYSIS OF DEATH AND SUICIDE AS AN ACT OF LOVE IN ROMEO AND JULIET

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The Romantic vision of two lovers passionately longing for the fusion of their souls, in life or even, as was often the case, in death. (Illouz, 1997, 194)

Love is always envisioned as conquering every barrier, even death. [...] Lovers with conflicting values can easily overcome these differences, which fade in the face of love's power. (Galician, 2004, 39)

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This last chapter seeks firstly to introduce the historical relationship between love and death. This connection will be traced to Ancient Greece where they were, as already mentioned in chapter 1, closely related to each other through the figures of Eros — the Greek God of love— and Thanatos —the Greek God of death. Importantly enough, these mythological figures were pivotal in Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis theory<sup>60</sup>. As Wisniewska-Majchrzyk (2012) explains, for Freud “Eros and Thanatos balance each other. They are complementary and oppositional but not hostile” (108) shaping, as a result, human existence (107). Accordingly, the relation between love and death is part and parcel of one of the most well-known western theories: psychoanalysis.<sup>61</sup>

Secondly, in this chapter, I will consider a specific kind of death, suicide, as it has been repeatedly connected to the romantic love discourse through several western artistic representations<sup>62</sup>. To that end, I will analyse how death and suicides for love have been romanticized<sup>63</sup> in mass media depictions and how due to this glamorization, romantic love

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<sup>60</sup> I will focus exclusively on Freud’s understanding of Eros and Thanatos, which were useful figures in a particular part of his theory. Nonetheless, it is not my intention to engage with psychoanalysis in more detail.

<sup>61</sup> Albeit it is a controversial approach that has been strongly rejected by many, its influence is still considerable nowadays. Psychoanalysis is especially useful for analysing the symbolism in literature or films, being thus applicable to this particular study.

<sup>62</sup> See for example the literary stories of *Romeo and Juliet* or *Tristan and Iseult*.

<sup>63</sup> Interestingly enough, to romanticize is to “deal with or describe in an idealized or unrealistic fashion; make (something) seem better or more appealing than it really is” (Oxford dictionary definition) and, importantly, the etymology of this verb comes hand-in-hand with the very notion of romance. This relation is quite significant as one

is loosely tied to violence and how this relation leads to the construction of the myth of suicide for love. To illustrate this, I will observe the endings of four contemporary film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*'s narrative as it is considered to be the epitome of "suicide for love". Three of these versions have already been mentioned throughout this thesis: *Romeo+ Juliet* (1996), *West Side Story* (1960) and *Private Romeo* (2011). The fourth film, *Warm Bodies* (2013), provides an alternative scenario that breaks with the typical and expected ending in *Romeo and Juliet* narratives. The suicides and deaths represented in these films will be studied pointing at the potential material risks that may emerge from the glamorization of these violent actions and images connected to love in mass media. In line with chapter 2, I will briefly take into consideration how mass media depictions—in this case, representations of suicide and death in relation to love—can potentially affect the consumers' minds, especially teenagers (Johnson and Holmes 2009, 352).

My major aim in this chapter is to point out the paradoxical nature of romantic love. I agree with scholars such as bell hooks (2000), as in my view, love should be understood as a feeling connected to happiness, wellness and joy and not as one "of the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought" (Toni Morrison in bell hooks, 2000, 170) that drives lovers to tragic and violent endings.

## 4.1 Death, suicide and love

Contemplating death has always been a subject that leads me back to love.  
(hooks, 2000, xxii)

Though love and death seem to be opposite forces<sup>64</sup> they are paradoxically destined to be linked. But, why have they been recurrently connected and where does this relation come from? bell hooks claims "our collective fear of death is a disease of the heart. Love is the only cure" (2000, 198). This understanding places love as the antidote of death. Notwithstanding, it seems that they have a much more complex relationship. As

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could deduce that the idea of a romance is hence based on unrealistic expectations—this is indeed one of the core ideas of this thesis. In other words, that romantic love discourses are a romanticized version of love that are intrinsically unrealistic.

<sup>64</sup> I use this term in line with *On Love and Death* (2006) by Patrick Süskind in which the author defines love and death as "the two elemental forces of human existence."

mentioned above, love and death were already related to each other in the Greek mythology through the figures of Eros and Thanatos. As the Chilean psychiatrist Doerr-Zegers puts it in his article “Eros and Thanatos” (2017), Eros was understood as “as one of the great constitutive and constituent principles of the universe, [...] allowing the continuity of life in human beings” (189). But Eros was also a “god and his legend shows us some essential features of love” (189). Moreover, Doerr-Zegers also maintains that taking into consideration the etymology of the word Thanatos is highly useful to understand its nature. This term shares its root with *thalamon* which was “the most central room but also the darkest” (189) in Greek houses, where the wives spend their time. According to him, through its etymology, *Thanatos* is simultaneously related to “darkness and confinement” but also “to woman and love” (189). As a consequence, the antique relation between love and death can indeed be explained through the very word *Thanatos* as it “does not mean destruction and it is neither the source of our disgraces, on the contrary it is an essential part of life itself” (195). Hence, making an analogy between the word *thalamon* and *Thanatos* is extremely useful as both of them represent “the darkest place in a home [or in life], but also the most central” (195) as it is “where love is originated and consumed” (195). In other words, one could argue that “human life is the way from and towards that center”<sup>65</sup> (195) being that centre death.

Elaborating on the Greek mythology, Freud uses the figures of Eros and Thanatos to highlight the crucial importance of love and death as two forces that shape our existence. He points out that people accept love and death “in various stages of their lives” (Wisniowska-Majchrzyk, 2012, 107), actually, “Eros comes comparatively early in human lives [but] people begin to think about death much later” (107). Moreover, according to him, the human activity that belongs to Eros is the search for “new experiences, for doing things, meeting people, entering into various relations, building relationships, advancing in our profession, occupation, etc” (108). On the contrary, Thanatos is responsible for “situations in which man has to act aggressively, to defend his interest, or do something hazardous” (108). In sum, for Freud, a person “feels best

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<sup>65</sup> This quote is my translation as it was originally in Spanish: “En suma, t́́anatos no significa destrucci3n ni tampoco es la fuente de todas nuestras desgracias, sino que es parte esencial de la vida misma. Pues, como vimos que nos enseńaba la etimoloǵ́a, la palabra *thanatos* tiene el mismo origen que *thalamon*, el lugar de la casa donde habita la madre y esposa, el lugar donde se consume el amor y surge una nueva vida. Quizás el más oscuro del hogar, pero también el más central. La vida humana es el camino desde y hacia ese centro” (Doerr-Zegers, 2017, 195)

when he/she has these two drives<sup>66</sup> satisfactorily balanced” (108). Nonetheless, there are cases in which despite the expected behaviour “human beings would act against their best interests and undertake actions leading to self-destruction” (108). For this reason, using the Freudian theory seems to be useful in order to explain self-destructive actions such as suicide (108) as these acts are, at least apparently, fully motivated by the death instincts (Thanatos) going against the life instincts (Eros).

This means that by following a Freudian understanding of Eros and Thanatos, suicide can be interpreted as an imbalance between love and death. Albeit, how has suicide been specifically defined? Firstly, it should be noted that before the word suicide was used the act was described as “self- destruction, self-killing, self-murder, and self-slaughter” (Leenaars 2003, 131). Determining when the term suicide was coined is a truly challenging task and, indeed, there is no agreement in who was the first one to start using it. For some scholars, it was Walter Charleton in 1651, for others Sir Thomas Browne in 1642 or Edward Philips in the 1662 (Leenaars, 131). Nonetheless, one of the first and most well-known definitions of suicide was provided by Durkheim (1897), who states, “suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows”<sup>67</sup> (in González, 2016 45).

At this point, it is important to bring back into the picture the link between suicide and love that has been repeatedly illustrated in artistic representations over centuries. According to González, there are two ways of committing suicide for love: when a person is not loved in return and when the lovers cannot be together “hence they decide to end up with their life hoping to find their union through death”<sup>68</sup> (45). Focusing on the second, González provides an interesting reflection as it is through suicide that the lovers are able to “save” their love from external threats and impossibilities. In other words, the life instinct—that is, love— can only be preserved paradoxically by following the death instinct. This way of interpreting love creates a point of resemblance to religious beliefs:

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<sup>66</sup> Freud claims that human existence is balanced between two drives: death instincts (Thanatos) going against the life instincts (Eros).

<sup>67</sup> All the quotes taken from this article are my own translation from the original one in Spanish: “Se llama suicidio a toda muerte que resulta, mediata o inmediata, de un acto, positivo o negativo, realizado por la víctima misma, sabiendo ella que debía producirse ese resultado” (in González, 46).

<sup>68</sup> “Una de las formas más comunes de morir de amor es el suicidio en dos vertientes: por no ser correspondido de manera emocional y [...] cuando por circunstancias diversas es imposible estar juntos y se opta por quitarse la vida, con la esperanza de una unión a través de la muerte” (González, 45).

if lovers commit suicide it is actually because they presuppose there is something else beyond death—as it happens with different religions—and it is in that "beyond" that they find the way to be together. As a result, this mystifying discourse places romantic love as a salvation that will always keep lovers together even beyond death.

Furthermore, it should be noted that love is repeatedly depicted in romantic love narratives as a flame always linked to warmth and passion. Accordingly, the portrayed relationships are always explicitly marked by the rapidness of the romance and, therefore, drawing an analogy with a flame is extremely appropriate. Like a flame romantic love is held in time, it is not everlasting. Precisely for this reason, romantic stories do not depict long-lasting relationships, but rather dramatic and short ones and those characteristics are what ignite the intensity of the flame. If on the contrary, these stories showed how the lovers spend their life together that kind of representation marked by the intensity of a flame would not be as magical and powerful as the one that is regularly portrayed. That is, eventually, the flame will be extinguished.

Though the following point steps outside the major goal of this chapter, it is important to take into consideration how suicide for love has also been repeatedly related to women, especially in the romantic literature of the 19th century<sup>69</sup> where “their self-destruction is most often perceived as motivated by love, understood not only as loss of self but as surrender to an illness: *le mal d'amour*” (Higonnet. 1985 106). Despite this existing historical literary relation of women and suicide, in this thesis, the focus will not be put exclusively on women. Even though the discourse of romantic love affects men and women in a different way—as outlined in chapter 1 and 3 the patriarchal origin of these narratives places women always in a detrimental position —, my goal is observing how through contemporary adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*’s narrative suicide and death in relation to love is a topic that concerns both men and women. The potential effect that romantic love discourses in connection to death and happiness can have on the viewers can only be completely perceived if the whole picture is taken, analysed and deconstructed. In my understanding this task can only be accomplished if consumers of these discourses are considered regardless of the sex or gender.

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<sup>69</sup> For instance, *Anna Karenina* (1877) by Leo Tolstoy, *Edna Pontellier in The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin or *Emma Bovary in Madame Bovary* (1856) by Gustave Flaubert. There are of course previous depictions of female suicide in literature such as Ophelia in *Hamlet*, Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*.

## **4. 2 The romantization of violence in mass media: Death and suicides for love**

Why is that some romantic love representations lead lovers to death or to commit suicide as a demonstration of their love? Why does mass media promote “the Romantic vision of two lovers passionately longing for the fusion of their souls, in life or even [...] in death? (Illouz, 1997, 194)

Considering superficially how love and death are usually represented in mass media, one could think that indeed they “go [in] separate ways in modern culture” (Wisniowska-Majchrzyk, 2012, 107). This separate path can be found, for instance, in two mainstream film genres; on the one hand, romantic love comedies and, on the other, thrillers as they revolve around love and death respectively. Then, how and where do love and death come together in mass media representations? The convergence of these two topics can be observed in several tragic romantic narratives in which the love story is marked by the death of at least one of the lovers that can take place in terms of murder or of suicide. As already mentioned in the previous section, there is a whole historical tendency in idealizing these deaths being even more evident in the cases of suicides. This happens because the so-called great and magical power of true love is promoted by the idea that “some lovers would prefer even to die together than survive apart” (Person, 1988, 52). Hence, a pertinent question at this point would be: to what extent are deaths and suicides romanticized in mass media tragic representations of romantic love?

To begin with, it should be taken into consideration the relation between death and violence since it is pivotal to notice that there are significant differences between them,

First of all, violence defines a social relationship, while death describes an event. Secondly, violence is much more complex than death. There are degrees of injury and suffering, but not degrees of death. With death, it is an all or-nothing affair. (Bufacchi, 2004, 171)

Furthermore, according to John Keane, violence is “the unwanted physical interference by groups and/or individuals with the bodies of others” (in Bufacchi, 169). But, can violence be self-destructive being suicides an example of this? And, are suicides always necessarily violent? In order to answer these questions, one should consider the context of specific cases as not all suicides are self-destructive or violent. That is, ending with

one's own life is not always a violent destruction. For instance, people who suffer from diseases may seek relief from their pain in suicide. Nonetheless, the suicides and deaths represented in romantic narratives tend to be as already mentioned glamorized and depicted in a tragic atmosphere that is also characterized by violence. Despite the earlier mentioned distinction between violence and death both of them tend to come-hand-in-hand in the majority of the tragic romantic love stories not only because of the intrinsic violence of the suicides but also because the suicidal protagonists are living in an external violent atmosphere<sup>70</sup>. Actually, "the fact that some victims of violence seek refuge in the act of suicide suggests that death is not the worst thing that can happen to a person" (Bufacchi, 2012, 177). For these lovers, the impossibility of being together is a worse ending than death itself. That is, "the wish of lovers to be together may take precedence over anything we normally call happiness and, if need be, over survival itself" (Person, 1988, 52). Furthermore, these representations of suicides portray these acts as empowering and liberating for the protagonists<sup>71</sup> and it could be claimed that this may represent a potential material risk for the viewers of these narratives.

But, why are these representations of death connected to love potentially dangerous for the viewers? On the one hand, as explained in chapter 2, mass media representations may leak in the imaginary of the viewers who may feel empathy for the protagonists as well as identified with them. This may drive them to adopt "the goals of the protagonist" (Illouz, 2012, 212) or their way of behaving. In real life, for instance, when people are in a relationship some of them may start believing that "the defining question is not "Do you love me?" but [rather] "Would you choose to die with me or to survive?" (Person, 52). On the other, and although the direct connection between images of violence and real-life violence is not accepted by all the theorists, I agree with bell hooks (2000), who among other scholars, states that it is "the common-sense truth [that] we are all affected by the images we consume and by the state of mind we are in when watching them" (96). If consumers are entertained with violent images "it makes sense that these acts become more acceptable in our daily lives and that we become less likely to respond to them with moral outrage or concern" (96). That is, if mass media representations are violent then violence can be potentially normalized in real life. In my

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<sup>70</sup> See for example the story of Romeo and Juliet, as due to the rivalry between their families both lovers were involved in an extremely violent atmosphere before committing suicide.

<sup>71</sup> I will analyse this in detail in the last section, that is, the feminist intervention.

view, it would be rather naive to believe that this represented violence and glamorization of suicide in fiction lead people directly to kill themselves. Nonetheless, I consider that since these narratives present romantic love surrounded by a violent atmosphere, that representation may lead viewers to interpret that violence is valid and expected when someone loves a person. As hooks argues, these images “affirm the notion that violence is an acceptable means of social control, that it is fine for one individual or group to dominate another individual or group” (99). This violence may validate for instance, asymmetrical relationships—in terms of gender, race and sexuality—or even that “there are such things as ‘crimes of passion’ i.e., he killed her because he loved her so much” (14). In sum, if the representations of love regularly linked to violence, deaths and even suicides are not rejected—or taken as a mere fictional representation that do not portray what love is—that would mean that Denis de Rougemont was right when he claimed that love is indeed “the handmaiden to death, not [to] pleasure” (Person, 1988, 52). In other words, it would mean that love is doomed to the myths of romantic love and to the embracement of violence as a valid way of expressing love, even if that violence is self-inflicted.

### **4.3 'Til death do us part: “The End” in contemporary film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet***

“Thus with a kiss I die” (*Romeo and Juliet*: ACT V, 43)

*Romeo and Juliet* is perhaps the story that has been more recurrently associated in the west with the myth of suicide for love. This has been the case precisely because the most iconic part of the play is the tragic end with the suicide of both lovers. Due to its huge relevance, several films have adapted this play among them the ones chosen for this analysis. These contemporary adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* narratives show different versions of the iconic ending as not all of them are faithful to the original script. In this section I will engage with four particular films—*Romeo+ Juliet* (1996), *West Side Story* (1960), *Private Romeo* (2011) and *Warm Bodies* (2013). Each of them provides a different ending for their protagonists. Nonetheless, all the closures share the perpetuation of the myths of romantic love by depicting a so-called “true love story” defined by tragedy and/or suffering. As hooks accurately explains,

despite its glories, romantic love is notorious for its brevity, and—often because of that brevity—for the pain and suffering that may accompany it. [...] Though the lover may be redeemed in love, it is also true that he may be destroyed by it. (2000, xxv)

The first film that I have considered in my analysis is *Romeo + Juliet* (1996). This version is, as previously mentioned, the most faithful adaptation contemplated in this thesis. Indeed, the end is an exact rendering of the original script. The differences with the Shakespearean play can be observed not in the words but in other elements such as the setting. For instance, though in the film Romeo kills himself with poison just like in the original play, in the cinematographic adaptation Juliet uses a gun instead of a dagger. Even though the film script is directly taken from the play there are several aspects that deserve to be observed in the analysis of the lovers' suicide. To begin with, Romeo is the first one to commit suicide, when he thinks Juliet is already dead. He even delivers a long and dramatic monologue while he contemplates the still body of his lover. On the contrary, when Juliet follows Romeo after he kills himself, she does not even state a word, she just holds the gun and pulls the trigger. This puts into manifest the evident difference between the male character and the female character in terms of agency<sup>72</sup>. Moreover, Romeo's final words "thus with a kiss, I die" are indeed the final lines of the love story itself placing him as the centre of the romance. This sentence portrays perfectly the very essence of the myth of suicide for love, that is, the impossibility of my love forces me to kill myself since I am not able to be in this world if the beloved person is not alive or with me. In that way, even if the lovers die, love still "wins".

The musical version *West Side story* (1960), provides a different ending for its protagonists Tony and María. After a huge battle — that Tony tries to stop— between the Jets and the Sharks, Bernardo (María's brother) kills Riff (Tony's best friend). After witnessing this scene Tony is "unable" to control his anger and he murders Bernardo. These deaths lead to a number of misfortunes. Tony is misinformed and, as a result, he believes that María has been killed by a boy called Chino —one of the members of the Sharks who is also in love with her— when he discovered their romance. As Tony thinks that Maria is not part of this world anymore he goes through the streets looking for Chino asking him to end up with his life too. "Chino! Come on Chino! Get me too!" [2:20:58].

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<sup>72</sup> The difference in agency was already explained in chapter 3 in the section of gender asymmetries.

At this point, the viewers know that the tragedy is about to happen since Maria is indeed alive. While Tony is calling out for Chino in the streets, María appears in the distance. In that very moment, Chino finds Tony as well and, when the two lovers are running to hug each other, Chino shoots at Tony, who dies in Maria's arms. The final words of the lovers are,

TONY- I didn't believe hard enough

MARIA -Loving is enough

TONY -Not here. They won't let us be

MARIA -Then we'll get a way

TONY -Yeah. We can.

MARIA -Yes

TONY -We will

MARIA -Hold my hand and we're halfway there. Hold my hand and I'll take you there. Somehow. Someday. Some... [2:22:29]

Interestingly enough, in this version, the female character is indeed the last one to speak. Another relevant modification is that the logic of the original play is not followed by Maria since the next expected step in the narrative is that she commits suicide; surprisingly this does not happen in *West Side Story*. Even though these final subversions of the plot provide more agency to the female character stepping outside the idea of suicide for love, the essence of death connected to true love, is still preserved in the story.

As already mentioned in chapter 3, in *Private Romeo* (2011) none of the protagonists die. This comes as a surprising fact not only because the film is an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* —and a suicidal or at least dramatic end is likely to happen— but also because since the represented love in this version breaks with the heteronormativity imposed in mainstream narratives, some “consequences” derived from that love could be expected. Though, to what extent are these subversions of the story and eradication of the traumatic ending positive? Heike Bauer explains that “the discursive absence of homosexuality in mainstream discussions of suicide reinforces how easily heteronormative assumptions work themselves into the fabric of social research” (2017, 46). Nonetheless, and interestingly enough, Bauer also argues,

queer suicide and violent deaths are part of a traumatic collective experience, markers of the potentially lethal force of heteronormative

ideals and expectations but also complex sites of shared identification and resistance. (37)

For this reason, there are two possible ways of understanding the eradication of a suicidal or lethal ending in this queer adaptation. On the one hand, as a lack of representation of queer suicides or, on the other, as a subversion that avoids a final “punishment” against the homosexual romance. I agree with this last view as I believe that breaking with the suicidal end is a good way to rewrite and adapt this tragic story to contemporary and more inclusive realities. Indeed, the way I see it, this unexpected twist in the plot is a powerful way of breaking with the historical tendency of killing at least one of the lovers in non-heterosexual romances. However, since the film is based on the story of *Romeo and Juliet* and the lines are the same ones as in the original play the film is still inevitably perpetuating heteronormative roles. Despite this, and above all, this kind of adaptation leads to a possible world where, as Judith Butler states, “those who understand their gender and their desire to be nonnormative can live and thrive not only without the threat of violence from the outside but without the pervasive sense of their own unreality, which can lead to suicide or a suicidal life” (in Bauer 2017, 56).

*Warm Bodies* (2013) depicts a completely different scenario and the script has huge differences with the original play. The story is set in a post-apocalyptic world in which half of humanity are zombies. In this dystopian reality, a teenager called Julie — incarnating Juliet— meets R —Romeo—a zombie. Even though he is dead, and zombies are unable to have feelings, he falls in love with her as soon as he sees her for the first time. The story between them starts when he saves her<sup>73</sup> from a zombie attack. In order to protect her from the rest of the zombies, R keeps Julie locked in a crashed aeroplane. In the beginning, she is completely terrified, and she even tries to escape but as the days go by he starts progressively to behave as a human. Julie develops a kind of Stockholm syndrome and starts to have feelings for R too. In the end, R “allows” Julie to return home and she decides to take him with her. The problem appears when the rest of the humans do not look at R with the same eyes as Julie. They see him as a non-living creature, in other words, as a threat. All this situation leads to a final dramatic scene in which Julie’s father shoots R “to protect her daughter”<sup>74</sup> from a monster. Importantly, that is the very

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<sup>73</sup> Here the gender asymmetrical relationship is clear; that is, the male character depicted as the one who is strong and with agency.

<sup>74</sup> The film presents a patriarchal society in which male characters “protect” women.

moment when R touched by the magic of true love in the form of a kiss comes back to life while he starts bleeding from his bullet wound. When Julie witness this she starts shouting, “he’s different. He’s bleeding! Corpses don’t bleed” You are alive! He’s alive!” [1:26:00]. Hence, it can be observed that in this case the power of romantic love is even able to bring one of the lovers back to life. This means that the rhetoric of love connected to death is still present though in a contrary direction. That is, they lovers are able to be together in the same “space” not by dying but by coming back to life.

#### 4.4 Concluding remarks

The perfection of love is dying for love. (Denis de Rougemont in González, 2016, 46)

Love and death are two terms that have been historically related to each other. This association already existed in the Greek mythology and was pivotal for theorists such as Freud. Taking this historical connection as a starting point, the major aim of this chapter was indeed to highlight how romantic love discourses are one of the principal promoters of the paradoxical relation between love and death. The narrative of *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most well-known tragic stories in which death is a recurrent central topic.

As it has been observed in the analysis, *Romeo+Juliet* (1996) and *West Side Story* (1961) are the two more faithful versions to the original play and, consequently, where depictions of suicide and/or death are present. *Private Romeo* (2011) is a special adaptation as it uses the script directly from the play, albeit by subverting the end it provides a completely new and different perspective. In the case of *Warm Bodies* (2013) there is an unexpected turn in the script as the proof of true love is not depicted with the end of the lovers’ lives but with the resurrection of the male character. What all these films confirm is that the relation between love and death is of huge importance for romantic love stories representations and similarly that murder and suicide are romanticized and glamorized. Furthermore, since these mass media representations have a potential influence on the viewers, as outlined in chapter 2, it is hence relevant to consider that if love is constantly related to violence and death the way people interpret love in their lives will be heavily marked by that violence.

**A FEMINIST INTERVENTION:**  
**OTHER WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING LOVE AND SUICIDE THROUGH VULNERABILITY**

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Love [...] is a situation of total emotional vulnerability.

(Firestone, 1970, 128)

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Through all my life I have heard how being vulnerable is a synonym of being weak and how ‘falling in love’ is a process that catalyzes your vulnerability. These hegemonic ideas promote the belief that to love<sup>75</sup> someone makes people vulnerable: love leads to a defenseless position placing individuals at mercy of another person’s will and, as a consequence, at risk of losing their own agency. I use the concept of agency in here as the capacity to act and choose freely. According to Bronwyn Davies (1991) “in the humanist or individualistic model of the person, agency is, by definition, a feature of each sane, adult human being” (42). Nonetheless, it is important to highlight how this capacity has been historically attached to able-bodied, white men. Indeed, Davies states “those who are generally not constituted as agentic, such as women, children, natives (to borrow a term from Trinh, Minh-ha) and the insane are, by definition within that model, not fully human. Agency, for them, is the exception, rather than the rule” (42). Being vulnerable is from a patriarchal perspective exclusively connected to the emotional, and therefore, it is interpreted as a potential cause for losing rationality. Consequently, it is internalized as something negative as people are “taught to believe that the mind, not the heart, is the seat of learning” and “that to speak of love with any emotional intensity means we will be perceived as weak and irrational” (hooks, 2000, xxvii)<sup>76</sup>. Interestingly enough, in a way this fear of being vulnerable through love crashes with mainstream representations

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<sup>75</sup> Here I understand love exclusively in its romantic context excluding other types of love such as friendship, paternal, maternal etc.

<sup>76</sup> This idea of the mind and the heart in relation to rationality and weakness can indeed be linked with the dichotomy mind-body that has been a crucial division in western philosophy. In *The Man of Reason* (1984) Genevieve Lloyd tackles this dichotomy analysing how canonical male philosophers understood it —among them Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Spinoza. Descartes’ contribution is one of the most notable ones as he defended that the mind and the body were radically separated (42). He stated that the reason belongs to the mind and also how “reason was already symbolized as male in opposition to its ‘female’ opposites” (XV). As a consequence, the Cartesian dualism “served to polarize existing contrasts” (XV) between the sexes: the mind (reason) was male, while the body (non-reason) was female.

of romantic love. As it has been previously explained in this thesis<sup>77</sup>, in these narratives love —regardless of its inherent vulnerability— is constructed and presented as a promising magical force that provides almost a secular salvation for the lovers. Hence, one can find herself or himself in a conundrum between the fear of being vulnerable and the desire of finding a real-life love story like the ones depicted in romantic films. In a similar vein, there is another crucial topic analyzed in this thesis<sup>78</sup> which is also strongly related to the idea of vulnerability: suicide. Actually, self-killing is recurrently defined as an act of vulnerability *per se* by which ‘weak individuals’ find an end to their own struggles in life.

Departing from this patriarchal rejection of vulnerability many feminist scholars —such as Judith Butler (2016) or Margrit Shildrick (2009) — have provided other ways of understanding vulnerability so as to break with its monolithic definition. Through the intervention I make at the end of this section my aim is to embrace a different feminist reading of vulnerability, not only by understanding love outside romantic love discourses but also by observing suicide from a non-paternalistic perspective. This will be achieved by considering the importance of the collective —and idea developed by hooks (2000) and Herrera (2010)— as well as taking vulnerability, not as an opposite of resistance but rather “as a deliberate exposure to power, [which] is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment” (Butler, 2016, 22). For this purpose, the concept of “resistencias emocionales” —emotional resistances—coined by Rosa Medina and María Rosón (2017) will be pivotal as it allows to look at vulnerability from another angle and thus, understanding love and suicide in a different way.

## **Hegemonic understandings of vulnerability**

To begin with, it is important to consider how vulnerability has been defined and understood from a non-feminist perspective. For instance, The Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS) states that,

vulnerable persons are those who are relatively (or absolutely) incapable of protecting their own interests. More formally, they may have insufficient power, intelligence, education, resources, strength, or other

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<sup>77</sup> See chapter 1 and 3.

<sup>78</sup> See chapter 4.

needed attributes to protect their own interests (CIOMS 2002). (in Macklin 2012, 64)

Aside from its tremendous patronizing and paternalistic tone, this definition leads to the affirmation that there are groups of people who are intrinsically vulnerable —such as for instance, women, children, or people with disabilities. The problem is, as Butler (2016) points out, that “once groups are marked as ‘vulnerable’ within human rights discourse or legal regimes, those groups become reified as definitionally ‘vulnerable,’ fixed in a political position of powerlessness and lack of agency” (25). In order to ‘protect’ them the state and the institutions exercise their control and power over the so-called vulnerable individuals (25). The concept of paternalism —used by Butler in her analysis of vulnerability— is extremely useful in order to understand how vulnerability has been defined. The idea of protecting “vulnerable” bodies is indeed easily relatable with the hierarchal figure of the father controlling and exercising power over their children. This interpretation of vulnerability is not only fully patriarchal, but it also reinforces models of hegemonic masculinity as contrary to vulnerability. Interestingly enough, in the introduction of *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016) Butler et al. explain that there are two general assumptions made regarding vulnerability the first one

holds that vulnerability is the opposite of resistance and cannot be conceived as part of that practice; the second supposes that vulnerability requires and implies the need for protection and the strengthening of paternalistic forms of power at the expense of collective forms of resistance and social transformation. (1)

The second point is actually what the CIOMS defend in the given definition, arguing that vulnerable people are intrinsically in need of protection. This way of ‘taking care’ of vulnerable bodies does not only “underestimate, or actively efface, modes of political agency and resistance that emerge within so-called vulnerable populations” (Butler, 25), but also assumes that specific groups of people are vulnerable precisely because they do not match in the category of able-bodied, white, male individuals. Moreover, what this understanding promotes is a protection rather than an empowerment of those subjectivities to take responsibility for their own lives.

According to Sara Ahmed (2004) “vulnerability involves a particular kind of bodily relation to the world, in which openness itself is read as a site of potential danger” (69). This interpretation of vulnerability is stigmatized by the fear of “future pain or

injury” (69), that is, individuals are taught that opening themselves is something potentially dangerous as they will be automatically vulnerable to others who can make them suffer. This hegemonic understanding of vulnerability neglects, as Butler maintains, the potential resistance and agency that vulnerable individuals may have, and that denial is portrayed in a patronizing way that allows the perpetuation of the control over those bodies. It is hence crucial to conceptualize vulnerability differently in order to open up this notion getting rid of the fear of being vulnerable.

### **The misconception of vulnerability in love and suicide**

Taking the previous hegemonic understanding of vulnerability as a starting point and considering that to love someone involves opening yourself to the beloved person, it is then easy to see why love is contemplated as something that makes people intrinsically vulnerable. As Ahmed argues, “love extends our vulnerability beyond our own skin” (2010, 250). But how and why is vulnerability in connection to love regarded as something negative? The asymmetrical relationships<sup>79</sup> promoted in hegemonic discourses project the idea that in a romantic relationship one person is always more vulnerable than the other, being women normally the ones who are in a disadvantaged position<sup>80</sup>. Interestingly enough, and also paradoxically, it is precisely because romantic love is based on power relationships that individuals “become aware of [their own] vulnerability” (Bufacchi, 2012, 176). Notwithstanding, what these asymmetrical relationships provoke is a ‘misconception’ of vulnerability that is problematic in a social dimension. That is, the matter is not being vulnerable or powerless “but being powerless in relation to someone else who has power over us” (175). If love relationships were symmetrical then vulnerability could be understood in a different way and, consequently, it will not be a concept that shapes power relations but rather a characteristic intrinsic in all human relations and not in a single direction. As Firestone (1970) poses, “love requires a mutual vulnerability that is impossible to achieve in an unequal power situation” (132). For this reason, she points out at something of vital importance: if men and women are

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<sup>79</sup> This asymmetrical conception of love has already been analysed in chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>80</sup> Indeed, vulnerability has been regarded as something negative in men but, on the contrary as the ideal state for women in order to receive the male protection.

not equally, vulnerable love “turns destructive” and “the destructive effects of love occur only in a context of inequality” (130).

At this point, it is also quite relevant to consider how suicides are described as vulnerable acts. Knowing how vulnerability is generally understood it can be stated that the relation between suicides and vulnerability is based on a paternalistic view as it neglects the potential resistance in suicide. It is important to highlight that romanticizing these acts is not my intention, though I firmly believe that a degree of agency is necessary to end with your own life. Conceiving suicide through a patriarchal conception of vulnerability could lead to regarding this act from a paternalistic perspective. Undoubtedly, “death exposes the vulnerability of what exists” (Kamm in Bufacchi, 2012 174) but the problem is again how that vulnerability is understood.

### **Vulnerability in representations: the viewers and the protagonists**

The idea that ‘representations matter’ has been recurrently claimed throughout this thesis<sup>81</sup>. Indeed, according to this statement, it could be argued that “we are, quite in spite of ourselves, vulnerable to, and affected by, discourses that we never chose” (Butler, 2016, 24). To give an illustration, viewers of hegemonic discourses —such as mass media products— are potentially vulnerable to the provided representations. As outlined in chapter 2, this affects especially teenagers since “media is a key agent from which children learn what love is through processes of identification and adoption of figures of speech, beliefs and behaviours” (Reznik, 2014, 25). Nonetheless, once it is stated that viewers are potentially vulnerable to representations —which I consider to be true— it is extremely important to analyse how this vulnerability is understood.

If consumers of mass media are potentially vulnerable to how things are represented, is it a solution to protect them from those narratives? From my perspective, this is not a proper answer as it would mean promoting again “a paternalistic set of powers that must safeguard the vulnerable, those presumed to be weak and in need of protection” (Butler, 22). In my view, it is not a matter of protecting vulnerable individuals or censoring these narratives —for instance, romantic love films— but rather of inviting to a further analysis and a different understanding, that is, taking them as fictional portrayals and not as realistic representations of what, for example, love or suicide is. The goal in promoting the critical view among mass media consumers is to find resistance precisely

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<sup>81</sup> See chapter 2.

through their vulnerability (Butler, 2016). And that ability to resist the mainstream discourses of love can only be activated if individuals are exposed to the implications underlying the construction of those narratives and the given tools to perceive them. Additionally, I consider that establishing who is (more) vulnerable and who is not, is a complex project biased by a paternalistic tone; who is able to qualify a person as vulnerable and how and what is measured when the term is used?

Furthermore, analysing the behaviour of fictional characters and their vulnerability from a non-paternalistic perspective may also help the viewers not only to interpret the acts of the protagonists but also their own vulnerability in a different way. For instance, in the films considered in this thesis —*Romeo + Juliet* (1996), *West Side Story* (1961), *Private Romeo* (2011) and *Warm Bodies* (2013) —though it is true that they all promote a mythical construction of love and they glamorize suicide and death, all the protagonists (especially the male ones) present a considerable degree of agency. For instance, when Romeo and Juliet kill themselves in the Baz Luhrmann's film these acts can be read as empowering, that is, as a manifestation of their capacity to act freely, as a protest or even as an intervention in their own oppressive environment. Romeo and Juliet's deaths can also be read as a rebellion, even as a political act, a protest against their parents and friends. But in order to interpret their deaths in this way, suicide cannot be understood in its traditional conception that defines suicidal individuals as weak. Another good example can be found in *West Side Story* when Maria chooses to live after Tony's death. Indeed, through this act, she regains the agency that she did not show during the rest of the film<sup>82</sup>. All this means that even representations of suicides and deaths in films can be read as —using Butler's words— a form of resistance in vulnerability<sup>83</sup>. For this reason, the analysis made in this thesis is based on an observation of the potential way in which they can be understood from the outside and not by focusing on the acts within the narrative itself. I will expand on this in the next section through an intervention in which I provide a number of steps to take in order to achieve a different and feminist way of understanding love, suicide and vulnerability.

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<sup>82</sup> See chapter 3.

<sup>83</sup> Though to achieve this those suicides have to be perceived as political statements. For instance, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the protagonists commit an act of rebellion against their families as they did not allow them to be together.

## **A feminist Intervention: Towards new ways of understanding love, suicide and vulnerability**

As mentioned above, love, suicide and vulnerability are recurrently defined from a patriarchal perspective that has proved to promote asymmetries and power relations. Love discourses are quite useful in the pivotal feminist task of breaking with the patriarchal status quo as they reproduced hegemonic ideas of both love and vulnerability. They are “a key site and source of knowledge, an authentic repository of imaginative ideas that are also useful for the present to challenge patriarchal norms” (Medina, 2013, 1). The present feminist intervention aims to develop, on the one hand, new ways of understanding love in a more symmetrical way outside the myths of romantic love. For this purpose, I will engage with bell hooks (2000) and Coral Herrera’s (2010) notions of the collective. On the other —by considering Butler’s definition (2016)— to promote and understanding of vulnerability as a potential source of resistance and empowerment for individuals. In order to rethink and readapt love, suicide and vulnerability with a feminist approach, I am going to provide five steps and a feminist tool useful to achieve this aim. This intervention is thought as a way out from hegemonic definitions of love, vulnerability and suicide promoting an engagement with mass media representations in a different way. In other words, an advocacy for a counter reading of these narratives. The intervention will be especially useful for the so-called potential vulnerable individuals —for instance, teenagers, women...—as they would be able not only to undertake differently their own vulnerability by embracing it but also the vulnerability of others.

### **Step 1. Find resistance in vulnerability**

In “Rethinking vulnerability and resistance” (2016) Judith Butler highlights the importance of understanding how these two concepts are not opposite but rather intrinsically related. She claims that “by thinking about resistance, we are already under way, dismantling the resistance to vulnerability in order precisely to resist” (27). That is, regardless of what has been repeatedly stated “vulnerability can emerge within resistance” (26) and I would add that this happens also *vice versa*: from resistance vulnerability can arise. This can be observed, for instance, in the potential vulnerability of mass media consumers towards representations, since their vulnerability is indeed a threshold towards the resistance they can put up against those narratives. In other words, viewers of romantic love narratives who are potentially vulnerable can develop precisely

from their own vulnerability a resistance towards the romantic love discourse being empowered in that process. In the end, as Butler explains, it is not a matter of overcoming vulnerability but rather of embracing it, as it is “a potentially effective mobilizing force” (14).

### **Step 2. ‘If you are vulnerable you are weak, and you have no agency’**

The relation between vulnerability and the ideas of weakness and lack of agency are also recurrent. Precisely for this reason, many theorists think that an association between vulnerability and feminism leads women to be “portrayed in ways that rob them of their agency” (Butler, 22). As a consequence, the opposition of considering vulnerability as a political term “is usually because we would like to see ourselves as agentic” (23). But, as Butler intelligently asks, “if we oppose vulnerability in the name of agency, does that imply that we prefer to see ourselves as those who are only acting, but not acted on?” (23). For this reason, like Butler argues, deconstructing the binary opposition between agency and vulnerability is a fundamental feminist task. Indeed, if the concept of vulnerability is reconsidered outside a patronizing view, where it is deprived of agency, then “our understanding of both terms can change, and the binary opposition between them can become undone” (25). When someone is vulnerable that does not necessarily mean that that individual has no agency. Indeed, vulnerability can be regarded as something that activates your agency, as something that provokes you and moves you to resist — as explained in the previous step. It is only a matter of how your own vulnerability and the vulnerability of others are understood, where it is no longer conceived as a mark of weakness but as a catalyst for resistance and action.

### **Step 3. Embrace the vulnerability of love**

The embracement of the vulnerability of love is a vital step to take in order to deconstruct the patriarchal conception of romantic love and to achieve new ways of understanding love. Historically, love has been conceived as a battle of power: in relationships, one individual is vulnerable while the other holds control. This idea is promoted by the asymmetrical representations of romantic love also provided in mass media. Nonetheless, as bell hooks argues, “we cannot claim to love if we are hurtful and abusive. Love and abuse cannot coexist.” (2000, 6). Power relationships in which vulnerability is understood in a unilateral way can only lead to abusive relationships. For this reason, hooks

maintains that “we cannot know love if we remain unable to surrender our attachment to power if any feeling of vulnerability strikes terror in our hearts” (221). It is only by understanding that being vulnerable in love is something that opens us, that allows us to share our emotions and feelings with the beloved person, that new ways of understanding love can be conceived.

#### **Step 4. Get rid of paternalism!**

As Butler asserts a paternalistic model disables to see “how resistance and vulnerability work together” (2016, 25). Furthermore, vulnerability is regarded as a characteristic attached to specific individuals who are considered to be defenseless with a diminished or even null capacity to resist. This leads to the problematic that once people are marked as “vulnerable [they are] fixed in a political position of powerlessness and lack of agency” (25). Notwithstanding, “such moves tend to underestimate, or actively efface, modes of political agency and resistance that emerge within so-called vulnerable populations” (25).

#### **Step 5. The importance of the collective**

Love, suicide and vulnerability are recurrently contemplated from an individualized perspective. Importantly enough, a key step in order to deconstruct their patriarchal conception is precisely to interpret them from a collective dimension something that has been claimed by feminist authors such as Coral Herrera (2010) or bell hooks (2000) who even defines love as a “collective support” (215). hooks explains how, for instance, humans have no problem in trusting the collective when they are sick and they go to the hospital. In this case, we trust in that collective even though it is formed by unknown people (161). On the contrary, “we often fear placing our emotional trust in caring individuals who may have been faithful friends all our lives” (161). This happens precisely because love is understood on an individual level. According to Herrera, this has been the case because

the power fragments into an issue of two to avoid facing a collective love and solidarity between the inhabitants of the nations which would

dismantle the power hierarchies, the irresponsible consumerism and the idea of ‘you and me’ as the maximum ideal of love<sup>84</sup>. (391)

She claims that if love was conceived from a collective dimension “people would learn to relate with empathy and altruism and all social inequalities and hierarchies could be removed, so that the system could be changed on a radical way”<sup>85</sup> (390).

Furthermore, understanding vulnerability outside the individual dimension would also carry a significant change in how it is perceived. As Butler rightfully claims,

not only are we then vulnerable to one another—an invariable feature of social relations—but, in addition, this very vulnerability indicates a broader condition of dependency and interdependency that challenges the dominant ontological understanding of the embodied subject. (2016, 21)

Statements such as “if you show your vulnerability when you love someone you will be exposed to be hurt” are a clear way of conceiving love and vulnerability exclusively from an individualized dimension. It embodies an automatic neglect of the vulnerability of others since the focus is put on the individual rather than in the fact that we are all potentially vulnerable. Moreover, by rejecting our own vulnerability we are also implicitly dismissing the vulnerability of others. Indeed, it is in the intersection of individuals’ vulnerabilities where love can be conceived beyond asymmetries, where it can get rid of its mythical construction and also where suicides can be observed from a collective perspective: as political acts that do not invalidate a person’s agency.

Following these five steps will lead to a collective demand for different portrayals in mass media where love, suicide and consequently vulnerability are presented differently. As hooks states, “this change would radically alter our culture” (95) and the result would be “collectively regain our faith in the transformative power of love by

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<sup>84</sup> “El poder fragmenta en cuestiones de dos a dos para no tener que enfrentarse a un amor colectivo y a una solidaridad entre los habitantes de las naciones que desbaratarían las jerarquías de poder, el consumismo irresponsable el concepto de “tú y yo” como el ideal amoroso por excelencia” (Herrera, 391).

<sup>85</sup> “Si el amor alcanzase una dimensión colectiva, las personas aprenderían a relacionarse con empatía y altruismo y podrían eliminarse las desigualdades sociales y las jerarquías, de modo que el sistema podría transformarse de un modo radical” (Herrera, 390)

cultivating courage, the strength to stand up for what we believe in” (hooks, 92). In the end, it would mean as Coral Herrera argues “abandoning the individualism not for a dual selfishness but for the whole community”<sup>86</sup> (392).

### **A Feminist tool for a counteractive reading: “Emotional resistances”**

In order to make a feminist intervention certain feminist tools are needed. Here I propose “resistencias emocionales” —emotional resistances— as a primary and useful device to redefine love, suicide and vulnerability. The concept of “resistencias emocionales” was coined by Rosón and Medina (2017)<sup>87</sup> and allows to highlight the convergence between the idea of vulnerability and resistance as well as to deconstruct and readapt the archives of these concepts facilitating new ways of understanding them. According to Rosón and Medina the so-called archives are informed and formed by hegemonic discourses and they are understood as mental structures (419). They are the pieces that form the “official” history of a nation, for instance. What these authors ask for is an incorporation of subaltern materials — photographs for example (421)— in order to question precisely the hegemony of the archive itself. For instance, romantic love myths are (re)created in mass media representations providing a monolithic description of love. The tool “resistencias emocionales” offers an alternative outside the hegemony of the archives. As Rosón and Medina explain, they are

delicate procedures elaborated by people such as behaviors, ideas, acts, gestures, rumors, materials, photos, songs, smells, performances or words that potentially defy provided by affectivity the different shapes of structural or normative power and the emotional regimes that hold it<sup>88</sup>. (40)

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<sup>86</sup> “Abandonar el individualismo no por el egoísmo a dúo, sino por la comunidad entera” (Herrera, 392)

<sup>87</sup> All the quotes taken from this text are my own translation from the original one in Spanish.

<sup>88</sup> “Con resistencias emocionales nos referimos a procedimientos delicados que elabora la gente tales como comportamientos, ideas, acciones, gestos, rumores, materiales, fotografías, canciones, olores, performances o palabras y que, provistas de afectividad, desafían potencialmente las diferentes formas de poder, estructural o normativo, y los regímenes emocionales que los sustentan” (Rosón and Medina, 420)

That is, this tool allows to resist the hegemonic representations through affect and to deconstruct the archive generating alternatives (Medina, 2013, 407). Medina points out that it is essential to understand that “what we do with an archive or what the archive allows us to do is essential for the archive” (419) being hence crucial to orient ourselves towards that archives in a different way (419); a way that is critical and breaks with the imposed homogenizing interpretation. All this means that, for instance, consumers of mass media romantic love films can orient and interpret those narratives in a different way by embracing and using a tool such as “resistencias emocionales”. Interestingly enough, this is precisely what has been claimed by several media scholars who argue that mass media representations can be understood differently from the intended meaning. In *Practices of Looking: An introduction to visual culture* (2001) Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright maintain that “meanings are the product of a complex social interaction among image, viewers, and context” (47). They argue that “meanings are created in part when, where, and by whom images are consumed, and not only when, where, and by whom they are produced” (46). This entails that viewers can make a counteractive reading of the normative discourses, that is, they have the capacity to read against the grain. Romantic love films, for instance, can be understood differently because “although images have what we call dominant or shared meanings, they can also be interpreted and used in ways that do not conform to these meanings” (45). And it is in those alternative readings where audiences are empowered. Medina explains

culture is a space of negotiation, where people have the agency to select, transform, resignify, reappropriate the emotional regimes in their own benefit, discovering and forging their needs creatively, as well as construct, narrate and innovate. (434)

The feminist tool ‘resistencias emocionales’ allows making what Stuart Hall named ‘oppositional reading’ from which viewers “can take an oppositional position, either by completely disagreeing with the ideological position embodied in an image or rejecting it altogether” (Sturken and Cartwright, 57). This media intervention entails questioning the *status quo* not by rejecting the hegemonic narratives but rather by examining the cultural products. This is called “the art of making do” (59), that is, “while viewers may not be able to change the cultural products they observe, they can “make do” by interpreting, rejecting, or reconfiguring the cultural texts they see” (59). Indeed, this is

what the tool 'resistenciais emocionales' facilitates: to remind the viewers that they have the power of resignify the meaning of the mainstream representations of love, suicide and vulnerability by activating a critical way of approaching those representations.

## **Concluding remarks**

The representation of love, suicide and vulnerability in mass media reinforces their normative conceptualization and, as a consequence, the power of hegemonic discourses should not be disregarded. For this reason, from a feminist perspective, a media intervention is conceived as a trigger to change how these concepts are understood. As Sturken and Cartwright (2001) pose viewers “can appropriate images and texts (films, television shows, news images, and advertisements), [and] strategically altering their meaning to suit out purposes” (63). This is actually the aim of the proposed steps in this intervention: a way of reappropriating and giving different meanings to hegemonic representations.

After all, a feminist analysis should not just stay at the primary level of deconstructing romantic love and its myths but rather it should at least highlight that other ways of understanding love can be achieved. For this purpose, a good starting point is embracing vulnerability in itself. Shildrick (2009) states, “difference and vulnerability are, to a greater or lesser degree, qualities of all of us” (34). Therefore, understanding vulnerability as something shared by all that is collective is also primordial. That is, “all the vulnerability [...] that has been thrown on to the others must be owned as a condition of becoming shared by all” (174). Similarly, vulnerability should not be understood as a “negative attribute but simply an expression of the contingency and incompleteness that characterises all life” (174). Vulnerability can indeed be defined as a weapon that empowers individuals allowing them to observe the hegemonic narratives in an alternative way. However, to achieve that goal tools such as ‘resistenciais emocionales’ are needed. Certainly, more work is still to be done, more tools are still to be given and more awareness has to be raised among the consumers of mass media. Nonetheless, the path has already been marked towards new ways of understanding love, suicide and vulnerability.

## CONCLUSION

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My goals in this thesis were multiple. First, to analyse how the idea of romantic love has been understood by non-feminist scholars as well as by feminist theorists. Second, to stress the potential influence that the monolithic representations of love in mass media exercise over its viewers. For this reason, I tackled how romantic love has been constructed and perpetuated in a particular commodity: mainstream films. With this aim, I chose four contemporary adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* since I read this story as a perfect example of the way in which love has been constructed and understood within the western imaginary. The selected films were: *Romeo+ Juliet* (1996), *West Side Story* (1961), *Private Romeo* (2011) and *Warm Bodies* (2013). The major reasons behind these choices were that all these films reproduce recurrent myths of romantic love, that all the protagonists are teenagers and most importantly, that they all engage with the relation between love, death and suicide which was also a crucial topic of study in this project. This leads to the third goal of the thesis: to observe how love and death have been repeatedly associated since Ancient Greece. Furthermore, the study also addressed the repercussions of the aforementioned connection pointing at the way in which these ideas have been intertwined in the chosen films. To conclude, I presented a personal proposition in terms of a feminist intervention in which I provide a number of steps that facilitate new ways of understanding love, suicide and death through a reconceptualization of vulnerability.

Chapter 1 was an introduction to the research project where I started by examining how love has been historically understood by canonical authors — such as Sigmund Freud and Jean-Paul Sartre— stressing how they elaborated on its mythical romantic construction. Then, in order to show where this mythical understanding of love comes from I traced the origin of some of the romantic love myths to Ancient Greece. In this chapter, my aim was also to introduce the importance of the canonical story of *Romeo and Juliet* as a narrative that is pivotal in the promotion of the mythical construction of love in the west and thus setting the basis for the analysis in chapters 3 and 4. Next, I answered the question of the significant repercussions that this conception of love has by engaging with the work of feminist scholars —for instance Coral Herrera (2011) or Eva Illouz (1997a, 1998b, 2012c). Through their contribution I exposed how romantic love has been primarily conceived from a patriarchal standpoint being therefore especially

damaging for women as it has been actually constructed on gender power relationships. For this reason, several feminist theorists have interrogated the problematics that the discourse of romantic love embodies with the target of deconstructing it. Nonetheless, I elaborated further on their argument advocating for an intersectional reading of the discourse as, in my view, romantic love promotes a multi-layered system of oppression (Creenshaw 1989) that does not only affect women, or not all women equally. As I have pointed out, non-normative subjectivities —that is, non-white and non-heterosexual individuals— are invisibilized in mainstream romantic love narratives. That is, in mainstream films, for instance, the protagonists are normally white and heterosexual, and when those norms are subverted then the story tends to revolve precisely around that fact. To conclude with this first chapter and inspired by the work of bell hooks (2000) and Coral Herrera (2010), I challenged the hegemonic understanding of romantic love stating that other ways of conceiving love are possible. I suggested that a first step to take is offering new narratives where power relationships and their intrinsic violence are not present. For this reason, and in line with what bell hooks (2000) claims, I believe it is key to conceive love in a more flexible way and not in such a unique and closed manner. Here then, I concluded by opening up an alternative that I developed in the final part of the thesis, that is, in my personal feminist intervention.

In chapter 2, I answered the question of the importance of media representations of romantic love tackling whether they are determinant in the perpetuation of certain myths and if they have a potential influence on the viewers. The analysis was focused on films that I read through the work of Stuart Hall and by following a Foucauldian understanding of films as discourses. In line with authors such as Eva Illouz (1997a, 1998b, 2012c) and Mary-Lou Galician (2004), I outlined how representations of love in mainstream films perpetuate the mythical construction of romantic love and how this fact has potential repercussions on the consumers of these narratives. In line with this, the other pivotal idea that I introduced in this chapter was how adolescents are potentially more likely to be affected by these representations mainly for two reasons: the mechanism of identification with the characters and their lack of experience. Following Michael Schudson's (1989) distinction between culture-as-*mold* and culture-as-resource (in Bachen and Illouz, 1996, 281) I argued that the aforementioned reasons entail that teenagers can indeed take media representations as culture *molds*. Furthermore, I showed—through the Foucauldian notion of discourse— how the knowledge that viewers obtained in films (discourses) only reaches a level of truth when they apply in reality what

they learned in fiction. Moreover, I stated that this also exemplifies the Foucauldian understanding of power functioning as a chain; this analogy points at the fact that power is not exclusively in hands of specific individuals who are on a privileged position, but rather that we are all part and parcel of the power relations. In romantic love narratives, for instance, power is not unilateral and held only by the creators of these stories but rather shared with the viewers. These films can only gain force when the audience apply what they have seen in them in their own real-life relationships. Finally, I ended this chapter arguing that since mass media representations are culturally loaded and biased—as historically they have been exclusively produced from a patriarchal standpoint (hooks, 2000, 96)—in my view, a proper solution is advocating for more inclusive, feminist and varied representations.

In Chapter 3, my study proved firstly how certain romantic love myths are perpetuated in the films *Romeo+Juliet* (1996) and *West Side Story* (1961) namely the ideas of the soulmate, ‘love at first sight’ and ‘love conquers all’. Secondly, by applying an intersectional perspective I observed how love is portrayed in terms of gender in *Romeo+Juliet* (1996), in terms of race in *West Side Story* (1961) and in terms of sexuality in *Private Romeo* (2011). Through my analysis I demonstrated that the first two aforementioned films perpetuate a monolithic depiction of love whereas the third one provides a less hegemonic discourse. To begin with, I tackled how *Romeo+Juliet* presents an asymmetrical gender relationship based on hegemonic roles for male and female. Secondly, how in *West Side Story*—despite what could be thought at first glance since the story is about an interracial couple—the film does not subvert the imposed whiteness in mainstream romantic love films. As I propose, the plot places the “non-white” love as the central issue in the narrative and, for this reason, the protagonists are punished with the death of Tony. Last but not least, I focused on *Private Romeo* where heteronormativity is subverted. This is the case not only because the film tells the story of two gay men but also, and most importantly because in this case none of the protagonists dies. Nonetheless, I stressed the fact that the characters still represent a hegemonic play in terms of gender as the original script is maintained in this film and the love story happens between a man and a woman. Consequently, a complete subversion of the romantic love discourse is not achieved. In sum, what I showed in this chapter is how *Romeo and Juliet* an old story is still used to depict modern representations of love. In my view, these film adaptations generally present a lack of evolution in the narratives of love, that is, they are stuck in a tradition that is clearly homogeneous and problematic on different levels. Nonetheless, it

is also true that a canonical story such as *Romeo and Juliet* can also be used in more innovative way as in the case of *Private and Romeo*.

In chapter 4, I focused first on the historical relationship of love and death tracing it to the Greek mythology through figures of Eros —the god of Love— and Thanatos —the god of Death. I also took into consideration the importance of these figures in Freud's psychoanalysis for whom these were the two forces that shape human existence. Then, I introduced the idea of suicide and how in a Freudian understanding this act is regarded as an unbalance of these two forces. Secondly, I stressed how in dramatic love stories violence in terms of suicide and death has been glamorized, romanticized and repeatedly associated to love creating the myth of suicide for love. To show this I analysed the endings of the selected films with the aim of showing if there is any significant subversion in the narratives. In the case of *Romeo + Juliet* and *West Side Story*, I argued that there is a clear perpetuation of the idea that 'without you I do not want to be in this world'. In the first example both protagonists commit suicide and in the second one only the male lover dies, in this case killed by another character. This means that there is a small subversion as the female protagonist does not kill herself after the death of her partner. *Private Romeo* is, in my view, particularly interesting as it tells the story of a homosexual love and non-heterosexual relationships are normally punished in mainstream films. For this reason, it is truly surprising that in this film none of the protagonists die and also because since story is an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* a tragic ending is expected. Hence, in my opinion, this is an empowering ending and a way of embracing non-heterosexual relationships. The last film *Warm Bodies* is also truly interesting as there is also a direct relation between love and death but conceived on the opposite direction. It is through love that the male protagonist, who is a zombie, comes back to life. All this led me to conclude that death and love are indeed repeatedly connected in mainstream love stories and, as I stressed, the consequences of these depictions are not straightforward. That is to say, the problem is not that the viewers of these narratives are going to commit suicide for love, but rather that through this association of suicide and death with love, violence is conceived as something intrinsic to love.

In the last section, I discussed how love, suicide and death can be understood differently. To achieve this goal, I proposed a feminist intervention with five steps. First, I pointed out at the necessity of embracing the notion of vulnerability —see Judith Butler (2016) and Margrit Shildrick (2009)— not as a synonym of weakness but as a potential place of resistance and agency. Then, I suggested that another important step to take is to

embrace the collective dimension of love and vulnerability, that is, stop understanding these concepts from an individual dimension. In this intervention I also wanted to provide a feminist tool “emotional resistances” so as to facilitate a reinterpretation of mainstream romantic love films. In other words, my goal with this intervention —and also in the thesis as a whole— was not censoring these films but rather giving tools to the viewers, so they can make a counter reading of these narratives whenever they find them problematic. In that way, they can read against the grain being able to provide different meanings to love, suicide and vulnerability through a critical lens.

In sum, this research project has interrogated the mythical construction of romantic love where inequalities in relation to gender, race and sexuality are promoted exemplifying this through an analysis of four films. I have also shown how love has been recurrently associated with violence through ideas of death and suicide stressing the necessity of elaborating new ways of understanding these concepts through vulnerability. With all this, my target was double: opening up the spectrum of how love is represented and also advocating for a critical analysis of the mainstream depictions of love. That is, not asking for a censure of these stories but rather promoting a more critical interpretation of them and a more diverse representation.

In order to achieve this goal, it is extremely important, in my view, to understand love in a collective dimension getting rid of individualisms. Because as bell hooks states “we can collectively regain our faith in the transformative power of love by cultivating courage, the strength to stand up for what we believe in, to be accountable both in word and deed” (2000, 92). From my perspective, vulnerability can be turned into a tool needed for this change. As the Singer Anni di Franco rightfully claims in her song “My IQ”, “every tool is a weapon if you hold it right” and vulnerability is for sure a weapon that feminism should hold firmly to fight back the patriarchy. It is the weapon that allows to resignify love from a feminist ontology and epistemology providing a more equal conception of love, one that is not harmful or violent. A love that is finally liberated from individualism and from the myths of romantic love.

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