



THE SCHOOL OF GLOBAL STUDIES



Time to Love ❤️

Romantic comedies and narratives of LOVE – from a Swedish context

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Abstract

This study explores the relation between love and romantic comedies, (aka romcoms), among people living in Sweden. Romcoms, being one of the most popular film genres ever, has often been subject to critique of not being serious enough and to derange people's perceptions love. To investigate this, and to find out if there is any relation between romcoms and how its consumers think about love, I will focus on **why** we watch romcoms, **how** we embody the love displayed in the films, and **what** effects this might have on our perceptions of love. Four concepts will guide my analysis: Merleau-Ponty and Toren's definition of **embodiment**, Bourdieu's **masculine domination** and **doxa**, and Young's **restrained intentionality**. These analytical tools are employed together with **narrative interviews** and digital participant observations. The ethnographic data was retrieved through 10 interviews (6 women and 4 men) with a total of 22 hours. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducting via the digital tool ZOOM. The study points at three conclusions:

- Romcoms has a psychopharmacologic function in the sense of **escapism**.
- The participants embody romcoms in terms of **EPIC** love, disappointment, resignation, fear, non-realistic, demands, false happiness or joy.
- Romcoms has become a negatively loaded symbol for **traditionalism**, **monogamy**, **conformity**, **stereotypes** and **ideals**.

Placing these conclusions within a larger discourse, the study points at underlying social structures, indicating romcoms only to be part of larger societal dilemmas. This also indicates a need to move away from 'easy' solutions of Hollywood being the bad guy. The study emphasises a chronology in which love, and romance *precedes* the love presented by the film industry, implying our perceptions of love to be a combination of historical, social, and near-universal elements. Escapism indicates societal problems to which romcoms are portrayed as solution – not problem. Paradoxically, this solution is presented in a stigmatised, negative tone, causing feelings of shame, blame and belittleness, contextualising romcoms as a 'guilty pleasure' for the female consumer. A consequence of this paradox is a continuation of society re-writing culture, reproducing the outdated idea of *the Other*, as in dividing people into intellectual, serious, and pragmatic consumers and the rest: the naïve and stupid consumer of banal and superficial portrayals of love. This indicates a dislocation of discourse from near-universal love to pragmatic rationalism. However, despite findings of love being related to pragmatism, disappointment and love *always being for someone else*, the interviews also indicate near-universal takes on love represented by dreams, hopes and visions for a love reaching beyond social constructions. The fact that romcoms hold such complexity, opens new horizons for future studies, in which three aspects are of certain interest: 1) the capitalisation of culture consumption including film, literature, music as well as social media, 2) the continuation of re-writing culture and, 3) the anthropological lack of discussing love as possible near-universal phenomenon.

Key words: love, romcoms, masculine domination, doxa, embodiment, escapism

Preface

“For June, who loved this garden, from
Joseph, who always sat beside her.
Some people do spend their whole lives
together.”

(Notting Hill, Michell, 1999)

To You,

My Precious, Beautiful, Lovely, Wonderful LOVE

My heart is not one, but two...and I am never alone, because
you are always with me...living and breathing inside of me.

I love you more than all the stars
on the velvet blue summer sky
and I will never Ever leave you



Content

- 1 Introduction 5
 - 1.1 Romcoms – a brief history..... 6
- 2 Previous research 9
 - 2.1 My position 9
 - 2.2 Conceptual frameworks 10
- 3 Field data and methodology 12
 - 3.1 Operationalisation 14
 - 3.2 Etchical considerations and reflexivity 15
- 4 Ethnographic discussion 17
- 5 Conclusions..... 30
- References..... 34

List of figures

- Video 1 Love heroin scene5
- Video 2 Hollywood versus Britain..... 7
- Figure 3 Examples of film posters.....8
- Video 4'Just a girl'8
- Figure 5 The logic of my conceptual choice (My model) 11
- Figure 6 'Surreal, but nice' Source: NottingHill13
- Figure 7 Screenshots taken from Zoom.14
- Figure 8 From Top-down to equality.15
- Figure 9 Screenshots from my PowerPoints included in the interviews.....19

1 Introduction



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Video 1 Love heroin scene, [NottingHill](#) Love heroin. Retrieved 2022-04-03.

...it's as if I've taken love heroin, and I can't
ever have it again
From *Notting Hill* (Michell, 1999)

I LOVE to watch film 🥰...and although romantic comedies are not my first choice on a Saturday evening, I have thought a lot about this genre lately. What is it about these films that attracts so many viewers? Why do we love to watch love on film? The more I think about this, the more curious I get to find out, not only the **why**, but even more **what impact** this genre has on its viewers 🤔? Anthropologically, I find this interesting as it seems anthropology has left LOVE in the dark, or as Belgian anthropologist Maïte Maskens and Portuguese anthropologist Ruy Blanes writes: “Are we done with romanticism” (2013:248)? Have we been too absorbed by audit cultures, and therefore given way to a rationalized conception of humanity and society, leaving anthropology of love out in the cold? If so, I guess we have a problem as love and romance still appears to be an important aspect of people’s lives? (ibid.). My take on this is simply (or complex?) to reach out to people, asking them about love on film and love in real life. **Romcoms** (short for romantic comedies) are still holding a fast grip as one of the most popular film genres worldwide (Thomas, 2022; Bruncati, 2022), but still very ‘under-represented in anthropological research. Being aware of this lack, I feel very inspired to put the spotlight on this genre and explore love from a rather unexplored perspective 😊!

From a historical point of view, love is mentioned and highlighted already in the 1st Corinthians 13:13: “[a]nd now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love ❤️. As the British ‘boy band’ Wet Wet Wet sang in the soundtrack to one of the most famous romcoms *Four Wedding and a Funeral*: Love is all around (Newell, 1994), we seem to watch romcoms and talk about love – but we rarely *talk* about love! The existing research seems to focus more on aspects like culture consumption, self-identity and self-perceptions, in which love has almost become a *paria* 😬! This might originate from how society puts romcoms in the box called **chick-lit genre**, **women genre**, and something not to be taken seriously (Banks, 2022). Inspired by a recent American study focusing on the eternal

search for **Mr Right** (Kretz, 2019), three questions will be central in my attempt to bring love back to anthropology:

1. Why do people watch romcoms?
2. In what way do people embody love as portrayed in romcoms?
3. **How** can we relate people's perceptions of love to the romcom genre?

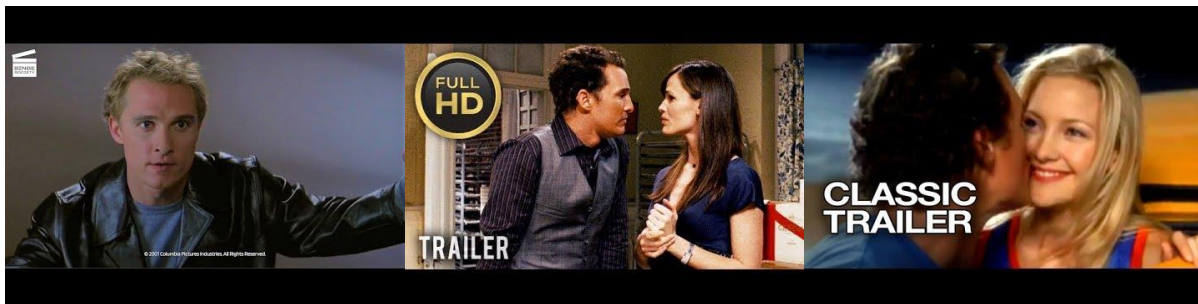
In this attempt I will delimit my study to only involve people living in Sweden. Furthermore, I won't emphasise cultural takes on love *per se*, but rather just a study genuinely curious of people's stories about LOVE ❤️ and to understand **why** we consume romcoms, **how** we **embody** love on film, and **how** this might affect our view on love in real life. By transforming the 'familiar' into something strange and turning love upside down, we can look at love with new eyes, creating knowledge for a phenomenon we might take for granted (Roberts, 2006). That is my contribution to the anthropology of love: to bridge people's stories of love ❤️ with the context of romcoms 📺 🎬 🎞️.

1.1 Romcoms – a brief history



The timeline above, shows a history going all the way back to 1598 when Shakespeare wrote what is considered as the world's first romcom ever: *The Merchant of Venice*. During the 1920s Hollywood began its era as *the* number one in film history, converting the silent films into what was called 'Screwball comedy' during the 1940s. However, the real boom came during the late 1980s with films like *Sleepless in Seattle* and *When Harry met Sally*, continuing into the Golden Era during the 1990s and 2000s with classics like *Bridget Jones Diary*, *Love Actually*, *Notting Hill* and *Pretty Woman* (Urena, 2019). In the late 2000s, an ideological shift appeared turning the audience's focus into matters like gender politics, diversity and critique against romcoms as being too 'white' (Johnson, 2018). The film-industry now had to re-consider *who* could fall in love, *who* they could fall in love with and *how* this was portrayed, resulting in LGBTQ characters increasingly being involved (although often as supporting actors portraying gay friends giving fashion advice). This 'new' romcom re-instated traditional romantic elements while also introducing an increased diversity to please both audience and critics, but – it was

also a compromise with how society looks today: 2022 looks very different from 1990. Stress, demands, rationality and multi-tasking society, calls for an increased need to breathe and pause. Solution: romcoms, combining fantasies with guilty pleasures of forgetting the world for a while 🍷💕 (Jones, 2020). To personify the difference between Hollywood and British take on the genre, two actors are often mentioned: Matthew McConaughey and Hugh Grant. Their characters oppose each other as McConaughey embodies the American **hustler**: confident, handsome, clever, arrogant, charming and the witty romantic guy-next-door, while Hugh Grant is the British **gentleman**: polite, timid, careful, shy, awkward and restrainfully charming:



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[Video 2](#) [The Wedding Planner](#); [Ghost of Girlfriend's past](#); [How to Lose a Guy in 10 days](#); [Notting Hill](#); [Love Actually](#) and [Music and Lyrics](#) Retrieved 2022-02-15.

McConaughey later distanced himself from romcoms as they lack the depth and meaning he wanted to portray (Gurley, 2021). Grant, however, is still ‘open for suggestions, although realising: “I’m too old [...] and too ugly to play the romantic lead,” 😊 (Libby, 2021). Although Hollywood’s firm grip on the genre, an increasing incorporation of cultures other than the white and straight middle-class has appeared. Countries like India and Nigeria, together with plots involving LGBTQ-communities make their way into the big block busters (Urena, 2019), together with growing themes like kinship, friendship and platonic love between colleagues. This celebrates a greater image of love, however still advocating non-complicated feelings of happiness, easy to follow and digest while illustrating everyday life without demands of being realistic. By combining *Hollywood magic* with reality, the genre is moving towards the Romcom 2.0. Building on nostalgia, optimism and hope, the audience accepts the unrealistic,

but always, Happy End 🥰💖 (Devi, 2022). This overarching theme permeates and imprints even non-western countries like India and Nigeria with *Hollywood magic* (Amos, 2015) – all the way down to film posters 🖼️:

unexpected love 😲 → trouble 😬 → a classic reunion scene 😊 → declaration of love 😍.



Figure 3 Examples of film posters. Source: [The Wedding Planner](#); [Isoken](#); [Four Weddings](#); [Namaste Wahala](#); [How To Lose A Guy In 10 Days](#); [I Hate Luv Storys](#) Retrieved 2022-02-14.

There is also a circularity in this *Hollywood magic*. Recently Swedish pop-singer Kiddo (*Just a girl*, Kiddo & Jæger, 2022) revived the classic line ‘I’m just a girl’-line from Notting Hill, while British music icons Ed Sheeran and Elton John re-used the cardboard scene from Love Actually (Curtis, 2003), in their promotion video for their new single in December 2021 (*Merry Christmas*, Sheeran, John & McCutcheon, 2021).



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Figure 4 ['Just a girl'](#); ['Merry Christmas'](#); [Love Actually](#) Retrieved 2022-02-07.

Even I have been inspired by Love Actually when making music videos to My Love ❤️!



¹ Anthropology about Bollywood and Nollywood have focused on cultural, social, and political significance (cf. McCall, 2007; Jones, 2010; Ganti, 2013; Miller, 2016; Borah *et al.*, 2019). Acknowledging this research, this thesis holds a different focus.

2 Previous research

Mapping the anthropological field of love shows an emphasis on various aspects of love. While some focus on gender (cf. Behar & Gordon, 1995; Kulick, 1998), others focus on sexuality (cf. deMunck, 1998; Strong, 2021), or marriage (cf. Constable, 2003; Freeman, 2020). Other themes are capitalization and love (cf. King Pierce, 2016; Lefkowitz, 2003), love and emotions (cf. Svašek, 2005; Overing & Passes, 2002; Favret-Saada, 2012), love from a philosophical take (cf. Biehl & Locke, 2010) and intimacy as in feelings of comfort (cf. Miller, 2008). Love and romance are discussed by Lindholm (1998; 2006) – both in terms of romance and a more ‘Weberian’ rationalistic take, while another discussion focuses on tourism and aspects like sex, marriage and romance (cf. Singh, 2019; Simoni, 2018; Junmo, Bum-Seung & Ador, 2014). A more quantitative take deals with cross-cultural perspectives on love (cf. Fischer & Jankowiak, 1992; Kanthor & Xie, 2014; Karandashev, 2021). Outside the anthropological field the discussions mainly focus on critiquing the Hollywood ideal: *Why is the term 'romcom' used so negatively?* (Khan, 2014); *Does Movie Viewing Cultivate Young People's Unrealistic Expectations About Love and Marriage?* (Galloway *et al.*, 2015); *Depressiv kärlek. En social patologi* [Depressive love. A social pathology. My translation] (Engdahl, 2016); *Romcoms kan framkalla skadliga idéer om kärlek* [Romcoms might provoke damaging ideas about love. My translation] (Askerfjord Sundeby, 2017); *Explained: Here's Why Romantic Comedies Are So Popular* (Banks, 2022).

Although being varied in themes, there is a shared imbalance on love being cultural conditioned. The only research that focuses on bringing forth alternative ideas are Lindholm's *Romantic Love and Anthropology* (2006) and *Cultural Diversity of Romantic Love Experience* (Karandashev, 2021), and to some extent *A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Romantic Love* (Fischer & Jankowiak, 1992) – all three discussing the possibilities of love being a universal (or near-universal) constant, instead of always being a cultural conditioned phenomenon.

2.1 My position

Previous research has approached love from an extensive point of view: intimacy, gender, sexuality, friendship, kinship, marriage etc. However, none of the anthropological studies emphasise the specific relation between romcoms and people's perceptions of love. This calls for concerns. However, the lack of relating romcoms to love is not the only flaw in previous research. Fischer and Jankowiak's (1992) study, for example, doesn't include Northern Europe and Scandinavia, which proves a significant gap in data, as well as Kanthor and Xie's (2014) outdated ideas that Asian/Eastern women don't experience love because of social structures

preventing passion and infatuation (almost touching upon orientalism)! Although I find myself closer to e.g., the idea of contextualising love as a near-universal phenomenon (Lindholm, 2006; Karandashev, 2021; Fischer & Jankowiak, 1992), the attempts to carve out ‘spaces’ connected with love still leave much to wish for.

To explain my critique, I will turn to Norwegian anthropologist Signe Howell, when doing research about adoption and kinship simply asked the question: “Why did you want to have children? To which the adoptive parents answered that they just wished to become a ‘normal family’ (Howell, 2003:469). This is a good representation of my take on love and romcoms: the need for reflecting on the *why* and *how* it might affect us. Bringing back romance to anthropology (cf. Maskens & Blanes, 2013), I emphasise the value in *listening* to people’s stories without the context of critiquing, shaming, condemning or politicizing. My desire to understand people’s relation to love on film and real life is also a heuristic contribution to bring back the individual’s autonomous *own* voice.

2.2 Conceptual frameworks

To help me analyse the field data, I will use four concepts that both separately and combined correspond to love and romcoms in general and my study in particular:

- Body to embodiment
- Male domination
- Doxa
- Restrained intentionality

The logic behind this choice is that all four can be found within the context of love. To put love and romcoms as historical and spatial elements, I will employ French philosopher/phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty and British anthropologist Christina Toren’s definition of **body to embodiment**. We are always spatial and ‘bodily:’ always *in* and *part of* the world. The only way to gain knowledge of who we are is *through this world* – but besides being about *being in time*, embodiment is even more about to *embody* the *time we live in*. This prerequisite a rationality of intentions, and intersubjectivity,² which in connection to romcoms, might indicate that an increased consumption of films would lead to being ‘born’ into certain perceptions of love, embodied through reproduction of shared ideas (McDonald, 2018:189). One example of such embodiment is the idea of ‘Mr Right’ as in rescuing, shining

² A large group of individuals share a subjective perception and understanding of a certain phenomenon (McDonald, 2018).

knights. Interpreting French sociologist and social anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu concept **masculine domination**, I claim it to be implicitly significant in previous research when describing the relation between men and women. However, it's also a way to discuss the eventuality of women 'freely' allowing themselves to *be dominated* – which correspond to some of the critique brought forward in previous research. Bourdieu claims social production and reproduction to often work in favour of men, constituting a fundamental part of everyone's habitus³ and a matrix of perceptions, thoughts and actions. Closely connected is what Bourdieu calls **doxa** (unspoken, evident beliefs and rules, taken for granted and never question). As seen in previous research, romcoms generally seem to have a strong doxa, to which, especially women accept and subordinate. This 'doxic' consensus are often embodied by female viewers, involving how they themselves make them part of their own subordination (Bourdieu, 2001:33-4). American political theorist and socialist feminist Iris Marion Young extend this consensus by discussing **restrained intentionality**, which I will employ in the context of agency: how individuals express and embody their experiences and perceptions of love. In connection with romcoms, women are exposed to restrained intentionality being stigmatised as naïve, easy to deceive, enjoying this 'chick-lit' only resulting in low self-esteem. This falls in line with women being immanent⁴, only being able to act *within* their own sphere, while men, being transcendent, can act beyond their own sphere. To Yong, women, to a greater extent than men, experience objectification, only to please other people, resulting in a dislocation from *can* into *cannot*. Women don't allow themselves to live out their passionate love other than when consuming romcoms, embodying fictive emotions and being someone, they cannot be in real life. Holding back, awaiting Mr Right to come to their rescue, will provide the HAPPY END 🍷 they're always dreaming of (Khantor & Xie, 2014; King Pierce, 2016; Engdahl, 2009).

As shown in fig.3, all four concepts are interrelated enabling a communication between previous research, chosen concepts and method. As such, they contribute to the analysis of my field data by exploring to what extent my ethnography corresponds to these concepts.

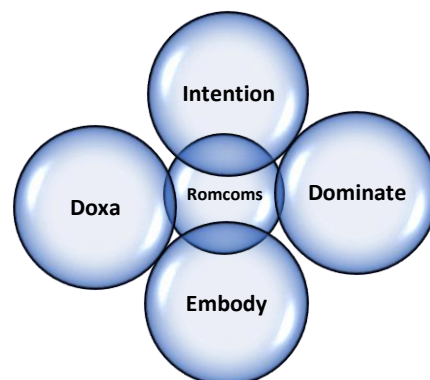


Figure 5 The logic of my conceptual choice (My model)

³A system of lasting, transposable dispositions, integrating past experiences, functioning as a matrix of perceptions and actions – as in socialisation and reproduction (McDonald, 2018:186).

⁴ Imprinted by French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir

3 Field data and method

Table 1 Description of the participant (Names, age and occupation are fictive to secure anonymity for the participants).

name & age	gender*	occupation	status	family	love ideal
Ami, 22	♀	student social science	single (1 year)	lives with her mother in a flat in a middle-class socio-economic area in a large city. Her father is absent. Mother a native Swede and father from a so called third-world country	prefers dating instead of stable relations as she prefers a sexual relation rather than to commit herself into romantic engagement.
Amanda, 25	♀	Employee clothing store large city.	relation (5 years)	lives with her boyfriend in a flat in a middle-class socio-economic area in a large city. Her father is absent. Born in Sweden of Swedish parents.	prefers stable long-terms relations, built on mutual desire to create unity and security, plans to have children and move to a house. Builds her relations on romance rather than plain sexual encounters.
Jolanda, 26	♀	student social science	relation (6 years)	lives with her boyfriend in a flat in a middle-class socio-economic area in a large city. Born in an eastern-European country but has lived her adult life in Sweden.	Her earlier relationships have been brief, often built on sex, but now she wants to build a family and stable future with her boyfriend.
Elias, 28	♂	employee transport sector large city.	relation (5 years)	lives with his girlfriend in a flat in a middle-class socio-economic area in a large city. Originating from a small town, born in Sweden of Swedish parents.	this is his first stable long-term relation- He prefers romance before sexual encounters and supports his girlfriend's plans of them having children and moving into a house.
Jovan, 33	♂	freelancer within the cultural sector in a large city.	complicated	on-and-off relation with a woman. Lives alone in a flat in a middle-class socio-economic area in a large city. Born in an eastern-European country but has lived over 20 years in Sweden.	prefers casual encounters built on sex as he is afraid of commitment and stability. The perfect relationship for him is being Friends with Benefits.
Jenny, 37	♀	employee health sector large city.	married (17 years)	lives with her husband and two children in a house in a middle-class socio-economic area outside a large city. Originating from a small town, born in Sweden of Swedish parents	believes in traditional romantic long-term relationship, raising her family.
Agnes, 44	♀	student social science	in love	lives alone in a flat in a middle-class socio-economic area in a large city but is in love with a man who does not love her. Born in Sweden of Swedish parents.	dreams of the amazingly romantic relationship with a man who loves her to pieces.
Lena, 55	♀	employee health sector large city.	recently separated	lives alone in a flat in a middle-class socio-economic area in a large city, both loving and hating her ex-boyfriend. Born in Sweden of Swedish parents.	disillusioned about love, but still dreams of finding someone who will love her without hurting her.
Dan, 56	♂	employee transport sector small town	married (19 years)	lives with his wife in a house in a small village. Has two children with his ex-wife, (both married with one respective two children). Born in Sweden of Swedish parents	Is satisfied with his recent wife. Has a traditional view on family roles. Used to cheat on his ex-wife, but now prefers to be faithful as it is difficult to find sexual partners in his age, and to 'hide' in a small community.
Erik, 65	♂	retired from health sector	relation (31 years)	lives with his girlfriend (also retired) in a house in a smaller town, and they have ' no children. Born in Sweden of Swedish parents.	Believes in love that builds on Trust, faith and commitment. Sees no point in getting married as that is just a contract without substance He and his girlfriend share the households' chores equally.

* All participants view themselves as either woman or man and considers themselves to be straight.

As seen above (table 1), my field data consists of 10 interviews (six women and four men), with a total of 22 hours conducted between January to April 2022. Being primary data, these interviews will communicate with my secondary data: previous research. Using *gatekeepers* and *snowball strategy* (Göransson, 2019:67-78), I found my participants⁵ by contacting people on my Messenger who I briefly have been acquainted to through various situations in life or through my occupation as yoga instructor. After presenting myself and my study, we agreed on a date, and I sent a ZOOM-link. (Due to Covid-19, all interviews were conducted via the digital tool ZOOM 🗺️). My first intention to find people from different cultural-, socio-economic background, and different ages, didn't worked out as intended. However, I still managed to gather people within an age-spread from 22 to 65, with a variety of status, occupation, background, and thoughts about love. Although the age factor might imply differences in terms of 'love trajectories' due to a generation context, in this specific study, it holds no influence on my analysis as all of the participants have been (or are) involved in relationships, as well as having (to various extent) watched romcoms.

Being in our own, private home (yet behind a laptop-screen), enhanced the relaxed atmosphere of hanging with a friend, with a cup of tea and snacks - to quote *Notting Hill* (Michell, 1999), it felt almost *surreal, but nice!*



Figure 6 'Surreal, but nice' Source: [NottingHill](#) Retrieved 2022-02-11.

The strategy was to conduct one round of interview sessions between 1-2 hrs, however during these sessions I felt a need to conduct a second round of shorter sessions (30 minutes to 1 hour) focusing on some themes I wanted to discuss further. ZOOM initially functioning as an 'emergency exit' because of Covid-19, in hindsight it turned out to be a very useful tool. Using my eyes as a lens, zooming in and out during the interviews (Göransson, 2019:108), I could see the surroundings while simultaneously focus on the participant's expressions and gestures.

As I recorded the interview sessions (after asking for consent), I could watch and re-watch as much as I felt necessary, giving me opportunities to focus on different aspects and

⁵ I consequently use the word participant instead of informant to avoid hierarchic relationships between myself and those I interview (Fluehr-Lobhan, 2008).

details. Having become more accustomed with digital conversations because of Covid-19, it facilitated providing a seamless and relaxed conversation, transforming the laptop into a digital extension of thoughts, bodies and voices. As such, the difference between talking through technology versus real life became increasingly blurred.

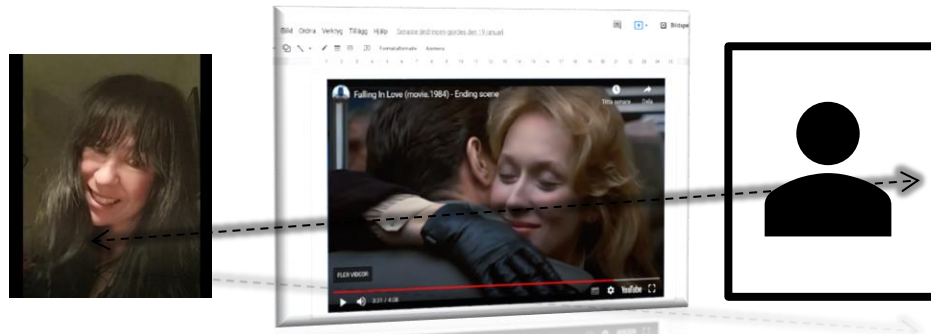


Figure 7 Screenshots taken from Zoom. Left: Myself. Middle: An excerpt of 'Falling in love' shared on ZOOM. Right: the participants (2022-01-28).

3.1 Operationalisation

My method when conducting the interviews was **narrative interview** (combined with participant observation) based on the idea of stories being the easiest way to be part of another person's experiences. When we tell stories, we also create possibilities of reaching a deeper knowledge *about ourselves* through experiencing deeper dimensions of the stories we tell. As such, stories are the most basic method of coming close to what it means to be human. We think and talk through stories making them a fundamental part of our communication, helping us to create meaning (Atkinson, 1998:2). This is one of the cornerstones to why I chose this method: it *deliberately* stimulates the **telling of stories** (Bryman, 2021:542) as keystone for the relation between lived experiences and meaning (Allen, 2017:1073). However, the most essential part is how the interviewer contributes to the storytelling by simply ask the question "Tell me what happened?" followed by "And then, what happened?" (Bryman, 2021: 542).

Narrative interviews also involve stepping away from strict schemes or guides, instead emphasising **conversations on equal terms**, instead of a top-down strategy (fig.6). Alike American anthropologist Paul Stoller, I want to observe *how the participants act* (Göransson, 2019:106), by becoming an *active listener* (de Walt & de Walt, 2002:125). Here ZOOM became useful, enabling me to identify whether there was harmony or conflict between the body and spoken words.

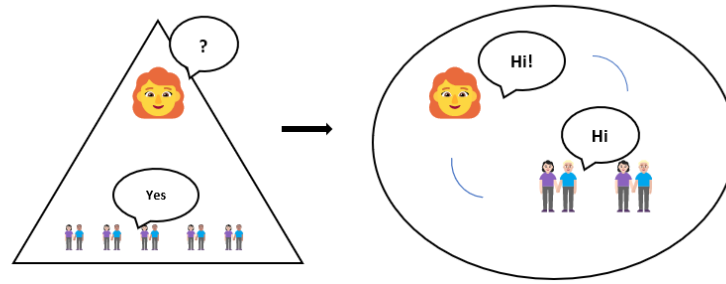


Figure 8 From Top-down to equality. (My model).

Stepping back and listening to the narratives from *the participant's* positions, thoughts and boundaries, created an emphasis on the *ethnography* – not *my* role, nor the participant's (Van Maanen, 2011:102). Despite not having any physical data, I still consider my study in terms of *thick descriptions* due to *both* spoken words *and* their embodiment (Geertz, 1973). Every gesture, tone, eye movement, voice, silence, pausing etc. give me an entry into the participant's **how** and **why** – but without going *native* as in *becoming* the participant. This strategy was helpful as I was floating between bodies and perspectives, between *emic* (inside) and *etic* (outside). By writing jottings of both verbal and non-verbal expressions I could structure the data into categories based upon an open coding involving single words or short phrases. Although being time consuming, it gave me a rich and useful data to work with 😊. When coding the data, I focused on **what was going on**, and **what can I learn from my notes**, **how do people talk about what's going on** – and **how do they characterise it?** And **what is the broader significance here?** (Emerson *et al.*, 2011:177).

3.2 Ethical considerations and reflexivity

When following the Swedish Research Council's (2017) ethical advice, I paid special attention to keeping the participants safe from harm. Although I cannot predict everyone's vulnerability, I'm still obliged to do my best to be careful of how I phrase my questions and be prepared for eventual emotional reactions (Iphofen, 2021:50). Being aware that LOVE ❤️ might stir up emotions, I was also prepared to accept if anyone didn't want to talk about love from a personal perspective. At the same time, by accepting to be interviewed, they also, accepted the terms of the situation (*ibid.*) Thus, I emphasised voluntariness, making sure the participants could stop talk whenever they felt like. I also assured every participant that they could contact me anytime they wanted, acknowledging the risk of someone might experiencing old traumas. However, I claim to have acted as professional as possible during the circumstances: I checked their emotional status before we said goodbye, assuring them I would be available whenever they

might need to talk, and because of their often ‘cheerful’ goodbye, I felt no immediate concern for any of them. Finally, as I never consider the participants as ‘tools’ for information, but instead saw them as storytellers, it helped me to avoid hierarchical situations. Together we learned something about ourselves and society by inspiring each another to reflect upon love, life and romcoms 😊!

4 Ethnographic discussion



Take 1 Scene 1 – the Escape

A central question in my interviews was to find out why people watch romcoms (or not), as I thought it to be a relevant question to start with. Less surprisingly, the majority quickly responded: **to escape**. To give examples of thoughts that came up in connection to that question, we can look at the cinema screens below:

Me: Why do you watch romcoms? 🤔

Jenny: there's SO much going on in life, so many virtual To-Do lists in our heads...we need to do something else...and watching romcoms makes us forget about this To-Do list for a while.

Erik: to cope with reality we need to numb our minds with pieces of false happiness...to imagine we *are* the protagonists, imagine it's *our* happiness.

Amanda: it's a way to relax...I don't have to think about anything else other than what's going on in the film...it helps me shut down life a bit.

Elias: It's like..in the films, everything is so soft and cute...that's not maybe what real life is about...it feels good for a while.

Agnes: I can pretend to be happily in love for a while.

Ami: love can create a lot of anxiety and watching films can make you feel a bit happier...it doesn't have to be bad in your relationship...it's just NICE to watch films.

Jolanda: I think we people never are satisfied with reality...with anything...there is no place where we can settle and feel, Ok, NOW it's good...NOW I'm happy.

Jovan: I watch them only if a girl I'm with wants to watch...I don't like to watch feelings on film...make's me feel...like pressure you know.

Lena: they are a bittersweet reminder of how much life and love sucks, sometimes at least I can be loved by Hugh Grant on screen...and then cry a bit when I'm back in reality again.

Dan: I watch them to accompany my wife...they give me a laugh for a while...I can relax and empty my brain.

From the quotes above I identify two common denominators: 1) escape reality and 2) feeling good. Beginning with the escape, my ethnography points at two directions: either we escape reality because of a necessity to **escape** 🌀 a reality that is too difficult to handle – meaning: we need a break. This is nicely framed by **Erik** who said: “the films create a window...a chance to breathe in order to survive out there”. **Ami** also touches upon that topic by saying: “reality is not flawless; it can be quite heavy”. This shows similarities with Lindholm’s (2006) ideas about ‘Weberian’ rationality – being rational (to survive maybe?), we consume romcoms as tools for helping us escape into **Elias**’ “soft and cute world”. Although previous research address this escaping reality, I find a gap in the important discussion, not so much about the *why*, but rather the *what* – as in *what are we escaping from?* The participants touch this topic in terms of relax, empty the mind, breathe, pretend to be happy, to be loved or to escape anxiety and strong emotions. But **what** are the underlying elements causing this escape. After my interviews, I’m still left with no good answer. However, I can conclude two things: 1) reality is difficult in the sense of making us feel stressed, causing constant demands and To-Do lists in our heads, causing anxiety and mental meltdown. From that perspective, *any* film would do, but we often still mention romcoms when it comes to feeling good and relaxed. To me, this is anthropology at its very core, and still anthropology seems to be ‘done’ with romance and love (Blanes & Maskens, 248), which is why I need to return to Howell (2003) in exploring love’s role in our search for normality.

The feeling good aspect is also prominent, but from a different perspective: it’s more like a craving – the need to feel good, at least for 90 minutes. As we see in the quotes, feeling good is not only about having a laugh or feel a bit relaxed, but also about cheating oneself into “pretend to be loved” expressed by **Lena**, **Agnes** and **Erik**. To swap place with the protagonist, we can ‘live’ out emotions real life deprives us, which is quite depressing. Observing the body language of my participants, **Agnes** had an obvious language as she almost shrunk and physically belittled herself when she told me “I just want to be loved...but he doesn’t understand that.” With a cracked voice she sighed heavily, pulling her shoulders forward as to hide (or maybe protect) her chest...from what, I could not tell. **Lena** demonstrated with her body to have lost all belief in happiness: “I watch romcoms, not because I want to, but it’s cheaper than therapy sessions...and it’s like a comfort to be loved in fantasy...but also torture...F**k it...why do I watch this s**t anyway...Am I an idiot or what?” (with a dry, ‘empty’ and disappointed voice). **Jovan**, on the other hand, showed happiness through his reluctance to romcoms – the less he watches them, the happier he feels:

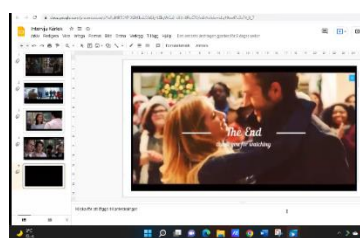
Jovan: They give me nothing, just reminding me on fantasy worlds girls try to force on me. I'm not their saviour, I'll never be the love of their life...I don't have such feelings...I like sex, but I won't ever allow myself to be trapped in the VVV [Swedish abbreviation for house, dog and Volvo. My annotation.] I'm an artist, I express myself freely without restraints...I'm a free spirit no one's gonna trap...why can't they just accept that?

Me: Are you not afraid to end up lonely in the end?

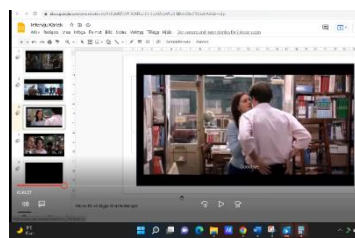
Jovan: No, I'm good looking...I'm a dancer...I'm fit...I can always find someone to sleep with in my business...women that understand what I prefer.

Interestingly though, when observing their bodies, I don't find any evident gestures or movements telling me they are happy, rather I observe a dichotomy as they say one thing with the mouth, and another thing with the body. Take **Dan**, for example, when he talked of having a laugh and look at films that are meaningless to him, just a 90-minute window on a weekend-evening to relax and have some time with his wife...his body did not show happiness. In fact, it was the opposite: his body, his face expressed only tiredness, resignation, and a sort of emptiness in his gaze. No joy there 😞. **Ami** and **Amanda** also had an interesting body language when talking about feeling good – it was not like they really appreciated the films, but rather used them as a tool to kill time, it's easy to just put on a film on Netflix or DVD or whatever...quick fix to not genuine happiness, but rather a moment to breath and forget the world. **Jenny** was the only one that really expressed happiness both with words and body, she *really* loves romcoms, and has watched every film on the market, genuinely happy about it. Her eyes sparkled, she laughed and moved her body in a 'happy' way which transformed to me as well, which ended up in us both laughed when talking about our favourite romcoms, making her the exception from the rest. Recapitulating previous research, this dichotomy is clear in terms of disappointment, false images of love, conflicts between reality and fantasy and unhealthy relationships (cf. Galloway *et al*, 2015; King Pierce, 2016; Askerfjord Sundeby, 2017).

The Holiday (2006)



Notting Hill (1999)



Falling in love (1984)

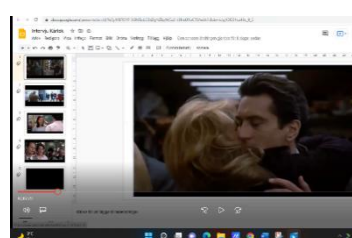
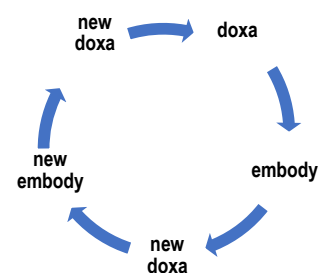


Figure 9 Screenshots from my PowerPoints included in the interviews.

To find some shared denominators in the quotes above, two concepts seem pervading: **doxa** and **embodiment** – however not necessarily in the sense advocated by Bourdieu, Merleau-Ponty and Toren. Rather the **doxa** was expressed as escapism (as in normality and acceptance of how society ‘treats’ people). Because of the intensity, tempo and increasingly rationality demanding multitasking and multi-decisions, watching films to relax rather than achieving new knowledge, meaning, and understanding of the world, appears to be a medicine the participants were keen on swallowing. From that perspective, **embodiment** touches upon **doxa**⁶ in terms of how *we need to relax* – embodying the time we live in (McDonald, 2018:189). At the same time, there is a huge difference between relax and escape 😊, which is quite telling in this context. By talking in terms of ‘relax’ and ‘escape’ I’d say we have accepted society as in both maintaining and reproducing this normalization: if life’s too much to handle, we can always put on a film and “numb our minds” as **Erik** was saying. From another perspective, the reluctant attitude towards romcoms is quite telling. All the male participants show a low interest in consuming this genre, only watching it to maintain the ‘domestic peace’ so to say 😊! But under this humoristic saying, lies a more complex attitude. **Jovan’s** claiming the necessity to avoid romcoms as they provoke feelings and pressure – which is a type of **embodiment**. **Elias**, being reluctant as well, explains that “I endure the films as a compromise, but don’t like the fluffiness and pink dreams displayed in the films” – as in embodying resignation and lack of hope, visions or beautiful images of the future. **Erik**, on the other hand was not equally resigned, but still did not believe romcoms “having any substantial substance that might help us cope with a complex and difficult life.” However, reluctance is not only a male phenomenon – **Jolanda**, for instance, said she rarely watches romcoms as “they are too shallow for me. I like to watch European, serious films that *gives* me something,” – as well as **Amanda**, who said “I used to watch romcoms when I was a teenager, now I prefer films like *Lord of the Rings* or similar.” Thinking of **doxa** and **Embodiment**, also makes me think of circularity – or what Nietzsche would have called *Circulus Vitiosus Deus* – the evil return (cf. Kaufmann, 2000). Through **doxa** we create **embodiment** and continues to do so forever and ever.

This is not *per se* a bad thing, but in the context of the participants it doesn’t appear as something they appreciate – on the contrary they get increasingly stuck in this circle. Ok, next scene.



⁶ **DOXA**: unquestioned truth leading to a ‘normalisation’ of ideas and behaviours (Bourdieu, 2001), which is here put in the dogma that the stressed modern individual needs to relax – as in escape reality.



Take 2 Scene 2 The Epic Love

Inspired by **Jolanda's** story, I call this take the **epic love**. She used the specific term **epic** to explain to me her once-in-a-lifetime LOVE 😍! The initial question to enter take 2 was if they felt comfortable with telling me their stories of their first experience of love:

Me: How would you describe LOVE ❤️?

Amanda: I was 14 [...] he wasn't very nice...but he SOO handsome and I was SOO crazy about him, couldn't stop thinking about him [...] but he was really MEAN to me actually.

Erik: I have been in love many times, especially in my younger years...but never experienced this BIG LOVE – I love my current girlfriend, but it's a more balanced love built on friendship rather than crazy passion...I'm too old for that [laughing].

Agnes: My first love is the one I experience now...it took me 35 years to find LOVE...I can't live without him, can't breathe, eat, sleep...I don't have a normal life.

Elias: I have never felt any BIG LOVE...I have been in love but I was so young...and my current girlfriend...I love her, but it's not any sensational about it.

Ami: My first love...hmmm...I don't think I ever have felt like this passionate love or so...I'm quite pragmatic about love.

Jolanda: I think I was 17 then...when it happened...and he is just one of those persons...EPIC you know...I will never forget what happened, both the good and the really really stupid things I did to him.

Jenny: I'm not shure I've felt the love you're after, but I love my husband very much...but LOVE...I don't know.

Jovan: I met a girl in my late teens, and I really liked her, I guess I was in love, but she left me because I never said I loved her...I still think of her...thinking that she might be why I am so f***ed up about love. I don't ever want to be left again.

Lena: I had a man in my late 40s... I was totally crazy about. We met at a course in Umeå of all places...he lived in Stockholm, so I had to commute for almost five years. He turned everything up-side-down you know...I could have died for him...and actually I am dead...has been ever since he left...he 'killed' me...

Dan: My first love...hmmm must have been in high school I guess...and I made her pregnant. Couldn't tell my mother [laughing] so I told the girl to do an abortion. I don't know if I would call it love...I just wanted to have sex with her as much as possible. I added her to my FB a couple years ago, but we have no contact.

What stroke me was how the majority had such a negatively-oriented experiences of love, as well as lacking the belief in love being something special – it’s just something they connect with a naïve youth. However, some stories were quite dramatic: **Jolanda**, **Agnes** and **Lena** had all experienced love that hasn’t treated them kindly, rather the opposite. **Jolanda’s** first encounter with the love of her life was extremely painful, and yet she loved this man SO MUCH - to the extent that she calls this romance **EPIC**. Although the sad context, **Jolanda** uses ‘happy’ codes involving smiles, laughs and warmth while talking. I too laughed and these laughs made a bond between us. During the second interview I asked if she had seen him again (she had been back to her hometown recently), curious about the continuation of this **Epic** story 😊! She told me that Yes! she *had* seen him and everything went back to crazy again:

Jolanda: I was convinced he was the love of my life [...] of all my ex’s he is the only one I have on Facebook and I’m surprised he hasn’t removed me [...] it’s almost 10 years ago but my feelings are still so strong, if I see him again...my heart pumps...it won’t just go away...despite how many years...it’s just that kind of love.

Me: Would you everything to be with him again if he’d ask you?

Jolanda: YES! Without doubt [...] I enjoy my current boyfriend and the life we’ve built, but I don’t love him. I’m not in love.

Me: But how can we avoid getting hurt?

Jolanda: I love with my brain, not with my heart...I guess I’m a bot cold-hearted [laughing out loud]. I just disconnect my emotions...to protect my heart...or else I will get hurt [smiling].

Here we see EPIC LOVE ❤️ coexisting with the pragmatic need to avoid break completely. The word **Epic** really captures the essence of some of the stories I was told (in which I can recognise myself and my own love story, although being less pragmatic and more emotional).

Me: What did you feel when you met him?

Agnes: He just entered my life like a hurricane...a volcano outburst...and completely invaded me...captured me...took power over my heart...but he is constantly disappearing from me...like he’s going in and out of me...as if I was a door or something...I write to him...phone him...but he always only replies when *he* feels for it...*Everything* is always on *his* terms...and to not lose him for ever...I have to play along...not being needy...wearying him to pieces...I just LOVE him SO much...but I don’t have a normal life.

This is also a story about **Epic** love, but with other words and other **body language**, far from being pragmatic. **Agnes** was SO sad 😞. She only wanted him to LOVE her back! To me, this resembled a LOT with romcoms and how the couple always end up passionate head-over-heels in love ❤️! But **Agnes** story was also very far from the ‘meetcute’ articulated in romcoms:

Me: Why do you stay with him? He’s clearly breaking your heart!

Agnes: Because...we’re destined for each other. He is my night and I’m his day...and I’ll wait for him. I know he has other women beside me...and that hurts like...a f**king meltdown. But I can’t live without him, so I grasp every bedding straw. He’d driving me mad. [...] I’d like to protect me, but I CAN’T...I let him in you know...and know he’s stuck like glue on the walls to my soul.

Lena’s story is like **Agnes**, although expressed differently, with a body showing less signs of sadness, but instead resignation, disappointment and the loss of faith in love 😞:

Me: Would it be possible for you to love again? I mean...after what happened?

Lena: You know...I don’t think so. I became empty when he broke my heart. Before him I had never loved and then he came and just played my heart into pieces. He knew my feelings, but still he f**ked around with other women as if I was ok with that – but I wasn’t! **I** wanted to be **THE ONE**... finally...for once in my f**king LIFE!!

Another take on **EPIC** love is addressed by **Jovan**, but from a completely different point: to him **EPIC** love is dangerous and something he *never* wants to experience as that would destroy the lifestyle, he has built during all his adult life:

Me: Is it ok for you to tell me a bit about why you don’t want this, like, overwhelming love that really blows your mind?

Jovan: Yeah, it’s just like women are sooo needy you know, life is short, why should I commit my life to just one girl? I like sex, I like to f**k and it’s better to be free and able to do that than to be stuck in a relationship with some needy person who wants kids and everything...she would kill my artistry.

All this about **Epic** love is something previous research does not address, but which could easily be related to both **masculine domination** and **restrained intentionality**. Interesting enough,

this domination is not only a *male* activity, rather my ethnography shows how women *themselves* subordinate to a destructive behaviour, involving both parties – what I call **doxa**. Looking at the other male participants, they are not as blunt as **Jovan**, but still talk about love in quite ‘cold’ manners: either they just want to have sex or just do not pay much attention to love other than having a girlfriend is nice. To me that is not evidence for **masculine domination** but instead how the difference between men and women concerning love has been so normalised and institutionalised that it lies in our DNA. Romcoms *per se* do not support this normalisation, they just go with the flow to earn some more dollars \$ 🇸🇮. Without entirely drawing back the responsibility from the film industry, we need to acknowledge that this behaviour holds deeper structures. *Notting Hill* (Michell, 1999), for example, turns the men-women role up-side-down as it is the *male* actor that feels this **Epic** love, it’s *his* heart that is broken, it’s he who is desperate to win back the female actress’ heart (which of course happens at the End 😊).

From that perspective, the participant’s stories of love point at a mixture of domination and restraint. Adapting to normalisation, whether it’s domination, pragmatism or restrained intentionality is also to adapt and sanction what Bourdieu (2001), Young (Engdahl, 2009), Merleau-Ponty and Toren (McDonald, 2018) discuss. It’s not only the male participants who are stiff, avoiding eye contact, seeming genuinely not giving love any seriously thought. Not only the men talked with monotonous voices while having a sort of questioning attitude to why I even bother to investigate this topic as it’s so NOT interesting! Ok, look at **Dan**: he made a girl pregnant – solution? Tell her to get rid of it, end of story 🤔. **Erik** and **Elias** lacked big gestures, except for a little laugh now and then, they just sat there quite still, with bodies telling me that love is not their first thought – but nor did some of the women. **Ami** was quite ‘still’ and pragmatic, both in words, voice and gestures: “I prefer to break up a date if I don’t like him [voice restrained and careful]. I don’t believe in butterflies in the stomach [neutral voice as in stating a fact].”

In opposition, **Amanda** and **Jenny** were extremely vivid in their gestures and voices: lots of laughing, giggling and smiles, but also a sort of deep and calm ‘he is my forever-and-ever-love:’

Jenny: When you are freshly in love...and this person becomes the centre around everything is evolving and he takes up all your thoughts and waking hours [a steady, calm voice and eyes expressing a warm feeling of (what I interpret) certainty].

However, despite her ‘happy’ expressions, **Amanda** also showed a different side:

Me: I remember being sad when the love never happened... I was waiting but nothing happened.

Amanda: yeah...there and then you get sad and think maybe well, I guess I wasn’t worth it then! [rolling her eyes, chaining the voice into a belittling tone, pulling down the corners of her mouth and shrugging the shoulders, and then laughing a laugh that never reached the eyes, but instead enhanced the feelings of shame and belittleness].

This actually made me a bit uncomfortable. Why does she automatically feel it is *her* fault the love never happened? Why did she feel to excuse herself? According to earlier research (Banks, 2022; Kretz, 2019), romcoms are good example of this ‘shaming’ as they contribute to make women look like naïve idiots – which I can to a certain extent agree with, if putting it in the context of *immanence* (Engdahl, 2009). Turning to Fischer & Jankowiak (1992) or Kanthor and Xie (2014) and love being dangerous, maybe romcoms are necessary to feel ‘safe’ love in a ‘safe’ environment – like when daydreaming, and then returning to reality. About **masculine domination**, I think it is a little too complex than just put the four male participants into that conceptual box. I mean, look at **Dan**, when telling me about his first serious relationship:

Me: Why did she break up with you?

Dan: We we’re engaged to be married, but then I did this really stupid thing...I had an affair with a girl at work...just a brief one, but you know...living in small-town words come around fast...so she found out [his fiancée, my annotation]. I didn’t want to hurt her, I was just young and stupid...and I really liked her...but I understand why she left [lower his eyes and voice, pauses, and takes a deep breath].

Dan genuinely seemed to regret his behaviour, and to me he didn’t present the same idea of relationship, compared to for example **Jovan**. **Jovan** never expressed any strong feelings for any of the women he is involved with. To him, the primary thing was to enjoy life without commitment or being trapped. In that sense, **Dan**, **Erik**, and **Elias** are similar as they had never cheated (as far as I know) on any of their girlfriends, quite the opposite, they always tried to make them feel good, putting them first. To **Erik**, a relationship built on lies and deceit is not a good one: “I have always been open about my feelings, as everything else would have been disrespectful to my girlfriends. Love must be built on mutual respect.” This is repeated in **Elias** as “respect is built on deep friendship, which is necessary in a relationship.” Respect is also

visible in what **Jenny** calls ‘love language:’ how people articulate love differently. This stuck with me throughout the whole study, how we often condemn men for being executing **masculine domination**, while it sometimes just comes down to how we express love. **Jenny’s** husband doesn’t buy flowers but instead he cooks dinner, washes up the dishes, or helps with the children if he notices **Jenny** being tired. **Elias** tries to *really* listen to his girlfriend and supporting her. In this context, **Lena**, however expressed a different take on love language:

Me: Did your partner do anything nice for you?

Lena:...I guess not, he wasn’t a very good talker...or listener. I mean, he rarely bought me things or helped in the household. He often said women are so needy. I don’t know it was because he was from the Mediterranean...he just expected me to provide him with full-service...which I did because I loved him...but he killed everything inside me...we never talked...I guess one gets used to be a lesser being when you love someone as much as I love him...how can I ever love another man? [looking me in my eyes, with her eyes wide open. Her voice cracked a little, then a long silent pause].



Take 3 Scene 3 – the Not Happy End

Me: What impact on Love do romcoms have 🤔?

Agnes: I think they set the agenda, but not in a bad way. When I met my love of my life, it was actually as in films. We were in a crowded café, and he’s tall...so I saw only him everyone else became like a blurred mass of people...and he saw me and I just made my way through this mass...and he smiled at me [low voice, pausing and a ‘quiet’ little smile].

Jovan: They just f**k up women’s minds, I mean..what is love anyway! These films just make women even more needy and insecure...and wanting to share their feelings with me. Makes me uncomfortable.

Ami: The films.., everything goes so fast...it’s like, now we’re getting married [big laugh] I haven’t experienced this love at first sight. The norm is marriage between man and woman, white and rich. We never see what happens after the marriage.

Elias: I don’t know if it affects you if you’re already in a relationship, but if you’re single it might evoke larger expectations, no...demands is better.

Dan: I think they show what we all dream of – to find someone to share your life with. To me, although I like action films better, romcoms are still...nice...makes you feel good...and I like the moments just sitting next to my wife, eating snacks, cuddling together and watch her happy smile.

Lena: They have changed everything, I grew up with these 90s romcoms, and I've always wanted it to be like that...but obviously life is not about kissing on a train or random meetings in a bookstore...it just isn't [sighs slowly, eyes looking down].

Jenny: For sure they shape stereotypes and maintain a traditional way love. Marriage and heteronorms are central...and I guess might influence the audience...but I would have married my husband anyway [laughing].

Jolanda: I don't watch romcoms generally, but I guess that what we see on films are also what we reproduce in our head and search for. If I was single and watched romcoms, I would go out on Tinder and like guys that are like...big and strong.

Erik: I haven't consumed romcoms at all, but when looking around in society and on TV I see a clear connection between media in general and our view on love and relations. We are taught to search for the impossible...and tends to forget the nice and beautiful things and relations we have close by. We are taught to not value such things as kindness and friendship, only to chase a utopic fantasy that is never going to happen.

Amanda: Sadly enough these films display stereotypes...white beautiful wealthy... happiness...you know... dream – I don't know why we'd see it like that [laughing].

So, what impact *does* romcoms have on the participant's perception of love? That's both easy and complex to answer. One common denominator is stereotypes, but in the sense of being *aware* of the stereotypes, not *being* one of those. All participants were united in the idea that what happens on film has got nothing to do with reality, while at the same time many of them said that romcoms *do* shape our views on love. Confusing 🤔...Still, **Agnes** and **Lena**, to some **extent** seems to agree with the films, although for them the End wasn't very happy 😞. In connection to **doxa**, we might locate romcoms in the box labelled stereotype and non-realistic. As such, romcoms are just the outcome for a social structure *telling* us what love is and is not.

On one hand, romcoms function as conforming us into a monogamous life (something **Jovan** can't subordinate to), manifesting a historical take on love. On the other hand, romcoms function as the antithesis to reality. In connection to this, **Amanda** brings up the idea of another take on love that doesn't show in romcoms; the 'begging-for-sex.' Younger men often use this phenomenon to force them on women, without violating them: "They beg until you just can't resist...it's so tiring." Looking at previous research, this is likely to be found in contexts like intimacy and sexuality, and evidence of how romcoms don't influence men's attitude to love. It's also proof of both **masculine domination** and **restrained intentionality**. But we don't find this in romcoms, nor the ideal articulated in Hollywood-productions.

Another common denominator is the realistic take on romcoms – they just don't correspond to real life! Almost every participant agreed on that the End in romcoms is not the real End. Mr Right in real life is less shiny, less stereotyped and less overwhelming. Although **Agnes, Lena** and **Jolanda** did experience **EPIC** love from different perspectives, it didn't end well.

Me: How does it feel...this love?

Agnes: He's invaded my soul. I'm obsessed. I collect everything I find about him in my diary, the only place I can tell about my misfortune, my disappointment...how he disappears...how we sit next to each other...and yet he never lets me in...we can talk about everything...except love...at least not *our* love...I don't think he loves me.

This *really* affects me, as I can recall myself in this, and how angry I become when finding how this restrained intentionality sometimes grow so strong, but whether this originates from romcoms is not easy to conclude, although **Lena** makes a short connection to romcoms:

Me: How was your love compared to the films?

Lena: At first..he just blew my mind, I saw only HIM...and commuting to Stockholm was never an issue...but the way he cheated on me...would never had happened in romcoms...no-one cheats on film...if so, it's only by mistake...but he, he broke me on purpose [restrained but angry voice, breathing heavily, grimacing and flickering eyes]. He really hurt me...and never said sorry. How can you ever rise again? [steady eyes on me, neutral face].

What about the men then? None of them told me about the End, at least not explicitly. They used more pragmatic expressions like **Dan**: “it’s better to leave if the love has gone”, **Erik**: “we both felt it was time to go separate ways,” or **Elias**: “when I was younger I might have felt a bit sad, but I guess you always do that when you’re a teenager.” **Jovan**’s pragmatism however never reached the End as he has decided never to commit himself to a relationship. To him, being friends with benefits doesn’t cause him any problems: if they sex has become boring, he just stops calling the woman and disappear. That behaviour is not very prominent in romcoms.

Jenny was the only one who couldn’t recall any bad endings, and she is still very much in love with her husband – and I believed her as her whole body was a big smile when talking of him 😊. **Ami** had never felt any **EPIC** love and she seemed quite content with only dating different men, never taking their relations any further than that, which implies neither good nor bad End. It seemed as none of the participants never connected romcoms with Endings, rather just as a tool for escaping and feeling good...

Dan: If she’s happy [His wife. My annotation], I’m happy. You don’t need to complicate things.

...except for **Agnes**, whose whole narrative was about Ending – in fact a very bad one:

Me: Has it really ended?

Agnes: You know, everything is about HIM...and what scares me is that I don’t think he’s understood that...EVERYTHING is on HIS terms...he disappears and then comes back...like a f**king yo-yo...and I’m always there...patiently waiting for him to stay this time...but if I say I love him, he will never come back [looking down, lowering her voice and then becomes silent].

...or **Lena**’s simple question:

Lena: Why can’t I find someone who wants to stay with me?

~

Ten love stories from people living in Sweden, but who watch (voluntarily or non-voluntarily) romcoms mainly produced in Hollywood. Still, these stories really don’t have any geographic context...or do they? Have we all been Hollywoodized 🤔🤔?

5 Conclusions

Recapitulating the research questions, I focused on **why** we consume romcoms, **how** we embody them, and **what** effects they have on our perceptions of love. In connection to this, I will emphasise three conclusions:

- Romcoms has a psychopharmacologic function in the sense of **escapism**.
- The participants embody romcoms in terms of **EPIC** love, disappointment, resignation, fear, non-realistic, demands, false happiness or joy.
- Romcoms has become a negatively loaded symbol for **traditionalism, monogamy, conformity, stereotypes, and ideals**.

However, to properly discuss these conclusions, we need to put them in a larger, societal context, moving away from Hollywood being the ‘bad guy’ and instead look at deeper social structures. From a chronological perspective, love and romance *precedes* love presented on film, indicating that *we* shaped *Hollywood*– not the other way around. Although anthropological attempts to discuss love, they lack a deeper discussion involving the chronology of first ❤️, *then* 🧠 - as well as discussing *what role romcoms play* in relation to intimacy, sexuality, kinship, or rationality.

One essential finding is how the interviews show the almost unison idea of relating romcoms with escapism, to which my response is: escape from *what*, and *why*? As a main function of consuming romcoms is therapeutical, being a cheaper and simpler substitute to psychopharmacological treatment (without negative side-effects), indicates a larger social problem, which cannot be solved by escaping reality for 90 minutes – and then what? Go back to NDSS (New Day Same Shit)? This points at a paradox as the solution also becomes the problem. We need prozac⁷ and numb ourselves with 90 minutes of escape and eating snacks 🍿 but never change. In connection to **doxa**, romcoms being consumed as medicine, might in fact function to, not only maintain an on-going **doxa**, but also to fortify it by *re-producing* it. Expressed for **Jovan**, all participants, independently of each other, expressed implicitly genuine feelings of wanting to be loved, to be special for someone, to be respected, acknowledged, to be close, to find friendship, and to be someone worth staying for. All these facts indicate a problematic situation to which romcoms become the emergency exit 🚪! If taking a Weberian perspective, *we* are society. Everything that happens in society, boils down to *us* and the principles guiding *our* actions. Society is nothing else but the sum of all single

⁷ Influenced by Lucía Etxebarria. *Amor, Curiosidad, Prozac y Dudas*. Barcelona: Debolsillo, 2002.

individuals and their actions (Gilje & Grimen, 2007:222) – and if society is FUBAR⁸ then it's no-one else's fault by *ours*. However, evident in the field data is not actually the participants blaming anyone, except for some of the women implicitly blaming themselves for having fallen in love. A clear illustration of **restrained intentionality**, showing romcoms to be a valve for hopes and dreams of a situation that is *always* for *someone else*, but not for my participants – also an illustration of eventually upholding **doxa** as well as **masculine domination**, in the sense of dislocating *can* into *cannot* (without making any distinctions between the female and male participants). If returning to Lindholm's (1998) take on Weber and rationality, the interviews to some extent correspond to another **doxa**: the emphasis on pragmatic love in favour of the passionate **EPIC** head-over-heels love! In line with rationality and utility maximisation it's better to love with the brain, not the heart. This pragmatic takes on love however illustrates another aspect as well: the embodiment of disappointment, sadness, resignation, and fear, as in being afraid of getting involved in unwanted situations...better safe than sorry.

As having an interest in self-deception, I would like to contextualise this pragmatism and paradoxical take on solutions simultaneously being problems, within life-lies⁹. Although we can see indications of love *might* being a near-universal phenomenon (Lindholm, 2006; Fischer & Jankowiak, 1992), this is rarely discussed or appreciated, it seems like such love doesn't fit the modern society, so we lie (Khan, 2014). Despite the 88,5 % perceiving romantic love (Fischer & Jankowiak, 1992), we lie – or rather restrain ourselves, despite being female or male, as I believe love doesn't have a gender. Love is just...LOVE ❤️! Also, from this life-life approach, we can consider the blaming of West and *Hollywood magic* as a paradox: we blame the West for a deranged love ideal, while simultaneously keeping consuming these same ideals. We criticise Hollywood for being outdated, a critique in line with the *Woke* and *cancel culture*¹⁰, while simultaneously allowing it (in hegemonic forms) to profit on our dreams of being loved and to find someone who wants to stay 😞. Even more strange, in this critique, we seem to flush love somewhere down the drain, ridiculing it as a women-genre, shaming half the globe's population. However, the same goes for action being a 'men-genre' – ridiculing and stereotyping the same way, but still, in my opinion, more 'accepted' and less shaming than romcoms. Why is that? Maybe because of the paradox in blaming an industry we keep supporting. Back to the idea of *us* being society, and the problematic in *us* originally allowing

⁸ F**ked Up Beyond All Recognition, taken from the Steven Spielberg film *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).

⁹ Inspired from the drama *the Wild Duck* (1884) by Norwegian play writer Henrik Ibsen.

¹⁰ The practice or tendency of engaging in mass cancelling as a way of expressing disapproval and exerting social pressure (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cancel%20culture> Retrieved 2022-05-17).

Hollywood's imperialism to profit on love. *If* love might be a near-universal phenomenon and a fundamental element in our life, and we simultaneously belittle this force to the extent as shaming half to globe's population by ridicule their dreams of love – solution? we must turn to lying. Allow me to quote dear old Shakespeare¹¹, to contextualise the strategy used in relation to romcoms: we cause so '*much ado about nothing*.' Love is so strong that we need either to ridicule it, fear it – or just avoid talking about it scientifically and anthropologically. To me, this is in a way a reversed writing of culture: ridiculing romcoms, shaming the West (while simultaneously being part of it), orientalising and maintaining outdated ideas of Asians not being able to feel love etc. – when doing all of that, we re-write culture (cf. Clifford & Marcus, 1986) to fit the modern society, encouraging the pragmatic embodiment expressed by **Jovan**, **Jolanda** and **Ami**'s pragmatic approach to love.

To enhance this eventual re-writing culture practice, I will borrow what French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1981) calls **hyperreality** and **simulacra**, meaning artificial signs of reality functioning as simulating a *world within a world*. This holds a large anthropological relevance as we strive for pending between *emic* and *etic*. Obviously, there is still a LARGE audience appreciating romcoms, but from society – and to some extent anthropology – they are considered as the *Other*. Old colonial ideas are still present, if yet dressed differently. This indicates a dislocation of discourse:

Near-universal LOVE → **pragmatic rationalism**

Still, despite this dislocation, this study also indicates another aspect to reconsider: the still vivid near-universal love represented and embodied by dreams, hopes and visions about love. Although these dreams are being overshadowed by four essential words, representing the 'new' love, the one that is better and more authentic than what is portrayed in romcoms:

Colonialism Hegemony Life-lies Re-writing culture

This might be why **Amanda** belittles herself of not being worthy of her **EPIC** love's love, or why **Agnes** patiently awaits a love that won't come, or why men like **Jovan** still attracts women, or why **Dan** doesn't want to complicate things.

THE  **END**

¹¹ Play from 1599.

The fact that romcoms hold such complexity, opens new horizons for future studies, in which three aspects are of certain interest: 1) the capitalisation of culture consumption including film, literature, music as well as social media, 2) the continuation of re-writing culture and, 3) the anthropological lack of discussing love as possible near-universal phenomenon. My contribution to the field anthropology of love, is not only to involve a Swedish context, but also to discuss love as primarily a non-gender phenomenon. To illustrate the near-universal power of love, allow me to end with yet another quote from *Notting Hill* 🍷🍷 (Michell, 1999):

Journalist: “Anna, how long are you intending to stay here in Britain?”

Anna: “Indefinitely.”

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