

DID THEY LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER? A REPRESENTATION OF ROMANTIC MYTHS IN THE FIRST TWO DECADES OF THE 21ST-CENTURY EUROPEAN FILM INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT *Analyzing the representation of romantic myths in film can give us insight into the cultural understanding of desirable behaviors related to the areas of marriage, love, romance and sexuality. Whilst a number of authors have already warned about the effects these myths, which idealize the image of love, can have on the public, most research is based on samples which are heavily focused on Hollywood-produced films. However, it is important to include filmography from various parts of the globe in the analysis of romantic myths. Based on a sample of 13 films produced in Europe from 2001 to 2020, which are listed among the "100 Best Fresh Romance Movies" on the webpage Rotten Tomatoes, alongside acclaimed romantic Croatian films, a content analysis revealed that the sample depicted narratives which tended to award verbal expressions of romantic myths. On the other hand, verbal expressions voicing problems and challenges, although more common, were usually punished. Unlike Hollywood-produced films, the overarching themes of European films were more focused on challenges than on romantic myths.*

KEYWORDS

ROMANTIC MYTH, EUROPEAN FILM, LOVE, SEXUALITY

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INTRODUCTION

The mass media, together with other institutions of socialization, are involved in shaping the cultural and social norms of a particular time and society. Among such key patterns, there are those related to dating, marriage, love, romance and sexuality that occupy a unique space in visual media like film. Bachen and Illouz note that "(i)f in previous centuries romantic love was principally represented in dramatic, poetic narrative or mode, in contemporary culture it has become a highly visual affair" (Bachen & Illouz, 1996, p. 285). Many individuals rely on romantic myths as a kind of cultural script that tells them what is desirable in a romantic relationship (Bachen & Illouz, 1996; Metz, 2007).

Romantic film narratives are a combination of realism and fantasy, a space for the realization of our illusions that are not necessarily achievable in everyday life. In the context of the media, Sternberg reports that "although each relationship that we enter becomes its own experience with its own story, we often enter into relationships with idealized images and understandings of partnership depending on our cultural values" (quoted in Metz, 2007, p. 23). This is why many authors express concern that they believe that idealized narratives harm the formation of realistic romantic expectations, which can later lead to marital crises and dissatisfaction (Galician, 2002; Galloway et al., 2015; Johnson & Holmes, 2009; Metz, 2007; Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Many cite the media as a source of information about life and romantic relationships they learn about from a very early age (Bache & Illouz, 1996; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Metz, 2007; Pardun, 2002; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). It is these depictions of romantic love that are constructed, and not necessarily depictions of reality, that can influence young people who are still in the age of identity formation, who will interpret film images as cultural norms and stick to them as benchmarks in their own romantic relationships and expectations (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). The representatives of cultivation theory George Gerbner and Larry Gross argue that unlike everyday life, film narratives often depict a closed whole – there are no unresolved issues, rewards and punishments are shared according to merit, and the rules of the game are usually clear and familiar (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). This is one of the reasons why film viewers find some comfort, clarity and a lesson in how to live their lives. Therefore, film is a fertile ground for the implementation of cultural norms that reflect dominant ideologies, which can be seen in the sphere of romantic relationships where the film screen clearly states what are desirable and what undesirable patterns of romance. In point of fact, idealization has its significant place in the production of film stories, so if the perfection of relationships cannot be achieved in everyday life, it can always be resorted to by media romantic narratives as a way of compensation.

While most of the film industry is "occupied" by Hollywood-produced films, the study of romantic patterns needs to be extended to the film industries of other cultures in order to gain insight into the process of shaping romance from the perspective of directors of different film traditions. One of the ways of noticing desirable or undesirable behavior is the study of the representation of the so-called romantic myths, or beliefs and statements that express love as ideal and perfect. Such myths are fairly prevalent in

Hollywood romantic films, and there are numerous categorizations of perceived patterns that are perpetuated from film to film (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Europe's worldview is relatively close to North America's, yet Europe has a very different path of film tradition from Hollywood; European cinema is a logical continuation of the study of romantic myths and depictions of love and intimacy with the aim to see similarities and differences in cultural patterns and notions. Thus, newer data can predict cultural movements and potentially real preoccupations in the sphere of marriage, love and sexuality. On this track, this paper aims to problematize the relationship between the medium of film and the depiction of romance in it, to see more precisely whether popular European romantic films perpetuate romantic myths in the way Hollywood cinema does or whether there is a difference. For this purpose, 13 romantic blockbusters produced between 2001 and 2020 will be subjected to a content analysis with a view to identifying the trends in European cinema when it comes to romantic myths. We would like to emphasize that the selected film sample is not representative due to the small number of the analyzed films. Therefore, the results are not applicable to the European film industry in general.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND CLASSIFICATION OF ROMANTIC MYTHS

According to Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropological interpretation, myths are culturally specific and serve as a "means of explaining the workings of the world" (quoted in Hartley, 2002, p. 153). Roland Barthes, from his linguistic and semiotic perspective, believes that the myth is a mode of signification and that pure linguistic meanings can be radically altered by social and cultural practices (quoted in Laughey, 2007, p. 56). Thus, Barthes's emphasis on culture as one that determines the content of myth is a complement to the notion of romantic myth and its shaping in the 21st century.

The influence of romantic myths on the everyday life of media audiences and their perception of romance has attracted the attention of numerous authors. By discovering and defining romantic myths, dominant cultural tendencies in relation to marriage, romantic relationships and family can be identified, as well as individuals' perceptions of what their relationships should look like and the consequences of such images and ideals. Jordana Metz claims that "the romantically engaged couple is the icon of our time" (Metz, 2007, p. 1), while Eva Illouz asserts that "romance replaced religion as the focus of daily life" (Illouz, 1997, p. 29). We can read about the theme of love in the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh, written 600 BC, where friendship, sex, love and romance were narrated on 12 clay tablets (Galician, 2002, p. 3). However, the notion of "romantic love" as we know it today – a phenomenon marked by passion, sentimentality, intimacy, and psychological and sexual compatibility - is more recent (Illouz, 2012). Although this paper will not address the sociological changes that have taken place in the spheres of marriage and romantic relationships, it should be noted that the break with the predominantly economic notion of marriage occurs at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. According to Kayser, the notion of romantic love began to develop during the Industrial Revolution when sexuality

began to be associated with love and marriage, more specifically when men and women began to earn personal income (quoted in Metz, 2007).

However, “romantic love is also the realm where we feel most private and creative, and pursue some of our most intimate moments with another human being” (Bachen & Illouz, 1996, p. 279). Illouz identifies the reason for our fascination with the topic of love in equating love and marriage with personal happiness (Illouz, 1997). Metz, on the other hand, warns that it is our will, which has been natural and present since the very beginnings of humanity, that in today’s culture has become almost shrouded in myths in a frantic search for a soul mate (Metz, 2007). In “The Halved Soul: Retelling the Myths of Romantic Love”, Judith Pinar argues that when our lives do not overlap with the idealized romantic images offered by romantic narratives for centuries, we would rather question the validity of our experiences than the value of myths fused in Western culture and with which we compare our romantic relationship. Pinar also notes that most people do not choose their intimate relationships based on personal growth and self-awareness, but on the emotions and sensory pleasure it brings (Pinar, 1992).

Using the term “cultural myths”, Metz explains that idealized romantic patterns that are perpetuated in literature, movies, commercials, and in our daily lives, are based on the ideals that culture tells us that we should appreciate or strive to achieve (Metz, 2007). Hefner and Wilson (2013) use precisely the term “romantic myths” which they denote in a double sense: they can refer to separate ideals related to each particular romantic relationship or to expectations that transcend separate partners (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). They deepen this last component, on which they base their research, by explaining that “it is a set of expectations for how a model relationship should form, develop, function, and be maintained” (Hefner & Wilson, 2013, p. 3). Furthermore, Metz uses the term “ideal love stories” in the context of this understanding of romantic myths, as stories that show a romantic relationship as “perfect, or better than in reality” (Metz, 2007, p. 2). In her extensive work on media education of the audience for the perception of idealized romantic constructions in the media, Galician introduces the aspect of fantasy, or illusion, and emphasizes the psychological components that are shaped by the acceptance and adoption of such myths. According to her, “unrealistic expectations regarding relationships comprise myth endorsement and fantastic beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors about a range of romance-related subjects from courtship rituals to sexual encounters” (quoted in Galloway et al., 2015, p. 88). Galician (2002) believes that the existence of ideals and fantasies can also have positive effects, and Hefner and Wilson point out that sticking to romantic ideals leads to stability, contentment, and fidelity (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). However, for Galician, the creation of illusions (as opposed to ideals and fantasies) can cause potential harm because it always goes hand in hand with false perceptions and beliefs that deceive and mislead a person (Galician, 2002). Thus, she points to the concern of a large number of scholars who deal with this topic, and who study the potentially devastating consequences of adopting such beliefs on the daily lives of individuals, often linking this phenomenon with growing dissatisfaction in relationships and marriage as a factor which contributed to a higher rate of divorce in last decades (Galician, 2002;

Galloway et al., 2015; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Johnson & Holmes, 2009; Metz, 2007; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). For example, Eidelson and Epstein (1982) have shown that romantic myths such as “he who loves me must be able to read my thoughts” and the myth of sexual perfectionism supposedly experienced with a soul mate correlate with the desire to end a marriage if the two conditions are not met. People who cling to unrealistic expectations in a love relationship can very quickly become intolerant of conflict, daily routine and lack of film romance, which in turn leads to frustration, verbal conflict and the opinion that it is better to change a partner than one’s expectations. As Ruvolo and Veroff conclude, “(t)he discrepancies between individuals’ perceptions of their partners in reality and the ideals they have for their partners can affect both the individuals’ own satisfaction with their relationship and their partners’ satisfaction” (cited in Metz, 2007, p. 24).

To analyze the unrealistic expectations of spouses, Eidelson and Epstein (1982) developed the so-called “Relationship Belief Inventory” (RBI) which consists of the question of whether respondents believe the following myths: “disagreement destroys the relationship”, “partners should read each other’s thoughts”, “partners cannot change themselves or their relationship”, “should be sexually perfect”, “there are dramatic differences between the needs of men and women” (James et al., 2002). Also, one of the widespread tools for measuring romantic beliefs is the Romantic Beliefs Scale (ROMBEL) by Sprecher and Metts, where the authors named four categories of romantic beliefs: “love finds a way”, “idealization”, “love at first sight” and “one and only soul mate” (Sprecher & Metts, 1989).

Barrón López de Roda et al., on the other hand, measured the propensity of the Spanish population for beliefs that are characteristic of contemporary love. They observed the existence of myths about passion which are manifested in “equivalence” (equating passion with love) and the myth of “eternal passion”. Furthermore, respondents highlighted the myth of a predestined “soul mate”, the myth of “exclusivity” that denies falling in love with more than one person, the myth of “love overcomes all”, the myth of “fidelity” that equates love and fidelity, and finally the belief that the only reason for marriage is passionate love and that romantic relationships are inherent in human nature and have existed throughout all historical periods (Barrón López de Roda et al., 1999). This research also showed that women gave more importance to romance in temporary and stable relationships and expressed greater belief than men in the myth of “soul mate”, “exclusivity”, the myth that “love can overcome all limitations and problems”. For the remaining myths, beliefs were equally represented in both sexes, and overall, 67% of respondents expressed a belief in one of the myths, with the largest percentage believing that a relationship is a natural human condition (95%), passionate or romantic love is key to marriage (85%), and fidelity is equated with love (80%) (Barrón López de Roda et al., 1999). Sprecher and Metts argue that people who are more prone to romantic behavior are those whose economic security does not depend on the other person and those who have control over the area of romantic choice, that is, most commonly – men. They also observed a positive correlation between the propensity for romantic behavior and pronounced femininity – that is, those individuals who have expressed care and trust in others (Sprecher & Metts, 1989).

A review of romance and romantic myths in the media

As part of media studies, film and other visual media, whose texts are rich in cultural indicators, provide fertile ground for research and analysis of possible myths related to romantic love (Asenas, 2007). When it comes to the theme of romance in film, as early as in 1910, a “formula” of films with romantic and sexual morals of the middle classes began to be created, which “drew upon the main characteristics of contemporary American culture: individualism, consumption, leisure, dating outside parental control, and exploration of the new sexual morality” (Illouz, 1997, p. 32). According to Edman, young people watched more romantic films than other films in the 1930s, and in Nash’s analysis, romantic comedies generated more than \$10 trillion in gross revenue between 1995 and 2010 (cited in Hefner & Wilson, 2013). The data from the Romance Writers of America website are also significant. According to this source, the share of love novels in paperback editions in the US market accounts for almost half of the market – 46% (Illouz, 2014). Likewise, according to a published study of the same site, more than 74 million people stated that they had read at least one love novel in 2008 (Illouz, 2014). This is significant because in the film industry, primarily Hollywood, film narratives often rely on already proven, successful formulas, and about 50% of feature films are adaptations of literary works (Mikić, 2001). The perpetuation of certain stories or myths is also related to the economic structure of the film industry in which, with a view to ensuring commercial success, production companies invest in those “formulas” that have already proven successful, so “(t)he movie industry capitalizes on this conception by depicting love as unproblematic and unwavering” (quoted in Hernandez, 2012, p. 46).

Johnson and Holmes analyzed the romantic content of 40 romantic comedies and found that in such films romantic relationships have the characteristics of new but also long-term relationships, no matter how much the loving couple have known each other (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). Such relationships are both exciting, but also emotionally deep and meaningful. Of the coded romantic items of content, by far the most common unit was “kissing” which accounted for 10% of the coded content, while nonsexual touches occurred almost twice as often as sexual activities (46 versus 21 units). Pardun (2002), in her research on the romantic agenda of Hollywood’s most successful films (regardless of genre), also concluded that sexual intercourse is rarely presented explicitly. According to Pardun, the dominant behaviors inherent in romantic relationships portrayed in the film were “kissing”, “touching” and “arguing”. This conclusion about the implication of sexual relations versus their explicit portrayal in Hollywood film is not unusual if we take into account the dominant ideology that was present in the implementation of the so-called Production Code in the early days of Hollywood (and it is present to a large extent even today), which set the moral standards of production, including how sexual relations would be portrayed on the movie screen (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2008). However, Johnson and Holmes (2009), and Pardun (2002) warn that such a “discontinuity” between sexual intercourse and the activities that precede it can be detrimental to the formation of romantic scripts for the young viewer, who turns to film to learn about sexual behavior and romantic relationships. Furthermore, Johnson and Holmes (2009) observed that out of the 61 coded units of analysis in the 40 films that referred to “openness in their feelings and intentions”, only four units were associated with trust in the other, with three

alluding to a lack of trust in your partner. The authors also coded 82 depictions of partner betrayal. Through content analysis, they found that signs of attention or romance in romantic comedies were significantly less portrayed among spouses: "Married couples were typically portrayed as either unhappy with their spouse (...) or were implied as happy but did little to reflect this" (Johnson & Holmes, 2009, p. 362). This was also established by Pardun with regard to films of other genres where marriage was portrayed as a "prison" or at least as unconvincing, whether the couple was at the center of the action or not (Pardun, 2002). However, Galloway et al. (2015), Reizer and Hetsroni (2014), and Segrin and Nabi (2002) found a correlation with viewing romantic content and desire for marriage.

Hefner and Wilson (2013) conducted an analysis of the content of the 52 highest-grossing romantic comedies of the last 10 years and identified the dominant themes and romantic ideals perpetuated in these films. Referring to Bandura's theory of social learning, which claims that individuals adopt behaviors by observing examples and the consequences that this behavior entails (reward or punishment), the authors analyzed the context in which characters relate to ideals and problem situations in films. They then examined the frequency of watching romantic comedies and beliefs about romance in a sample of 335 undergraduate students, where they found a positive correlation between frequent watching of this type of films, and learning certain behaviors and a tendency to adopt romantic ideals. As for the presence of romantic myths, the authors found that almost all films (98%) depict one of the following romantic myths: idealization of another, love at first sight, existence of one kindred soul, ideas that love overcomes everything. When it comes to separate units of analysis, of which 375 were coded, 40% referred to the myth of one soul mate. At the level of the theme of the entire film, the authors found that 39 out of 52 films have some of the romantic myths as the dominant theme. The myth of love overcoming all obstacles prevailed with 82%, while 18% of films had the myth of one soul mate as a general theme (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). The authors observed that problem situations dominated (on average there was one problem situation every eight minutes of film content). However, ideals were more often the dominant theme of the film. Problem situations and ideals were both portrayed in the films, yet ideals were more often rewarded than problem situations, while problem situations were more often punished. Furthermore, in 245 units of analysis, it was the man who expressed some of the ideals (versus 130 instances where it was expressed by women), whereas women were more likely to express a problem situation (415 units versus 324 units when expressed by men) (Hefner & Wilson, 2013).

Romantic narratives as forms of compensation for unsatisfactory romantic relationships have been specifically studied by cultural studies theorists Tania Modleski and Janice Radway, who have highlighted the importance of women's fantasies as a temporary escape from the harsh realities of everyday life because they feel oppressed and under pressure as mothers and wives (Modleski, 2008; Radway, 1983). Reizer and Hetsroni (2014) suggest that more frequent viewing of romantic content may be associated with dissatisfaction with one's own life where the media provides some kind of supplement to unfulfilled desires. Moreover, the authors point out that Baran found a correlation between watching television programs with lower levels of satisfaction in one's own

sex life (quoted in Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014). Reizer and Hetsroni surveyed 188 students involved in romantic relationships about the connection between media consumption and relationship satisfaction and concluded that higher television viewing predicted a lower level of commitment to the partner, and higher dominance of predominantly romantic television content predicted lower satisfaction with connection and a greater propensity to engage in conflict (Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014).

Galician (2002), following primarily media coverage of courtship and romantic relationships, adds that there are also myths about attractiveness - in order for a woman to keep her man she must look like a model, or the myth that a man must not be shorter, weaker, younger, poorer or less successful than a woman. The author also cites myths that the love of a faithful woman has the power to change a man, quarrels and quarrels are a sign of passion, and love transcends even fundamental differences in values. Metz interviewed partners who had been in a relationship for at least three years about their unrealistic expectations or other idealized images of romantic relationships that they observed in today's culture, and most respondents noticed myths related to "happy ending", "soul mate", "prince charming", "love that brings absolute satisfaction" and that "life is like a fairy tale with little interpersonal or external conflict" (Metz, 2007). The respondents also stated that the myth of "simply knowing" when a person is "the one" is the myth they most often experience in their personal lives, and all respondents cited the media as responsible for promoting these perceptions. They also stated that they feel uneasy and doubtful about their own relationship when compared to dominant romantic ideals (Metz, 2007).

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

This paper's research aims to open the discussion of what image of love and intimacy can be identified in the sample of 13 European films of the first two decades of the 21st century. It is supposed to contribute to the scientific community with recent data and conclusions specific to this geographical area, thus raising questions for further research in the field of romantic myths, problem situations and romantic intimacy in European films, given that research in this area mainly analyzes Hollywood and North American production. Although the sample of films is small and non-representative, the results can be indicators of cultural movements in terms of the notion of love and romance as romantic myths are a frequent reflection of cultural norms and desirable behaviors.

As mentioned earlier, a similar study was conducted by Hefner and Wilson (2013), who analyzed the dominant themes and romantic ideals perpetuated in Hollywood romantic films and showed that there is a difference in the way romantic myths and relationship situations are assessed within the film narrative, which according to social learning theory can affect how a particular behavior will be adopted. Given that such a cognitive assessment can also provide insight into what is considered desirable and undesirable – that is, what is rewarded and what is punished – this research will discuss whether such conclusions apply to some of popular European films of the last two decades. We will

extend the content analysis to the analysis of bodily expression of romantic intimacy, which, according to some previous research, has also proved to be a relevant factor in the visual perception of romantic schemes. Since the sample of analyzed films is small, we will mostly use the method of qualitative content analysis, trying to answer the following questions:

- Q1: Which romantic myths are present in the sample of the selected European films?
- Q2: How are problematic situations in a romantic relationship depicted in the sample of the selected European films?
- Q3: How are verbal expressions of problem situations and verbal expressions of romantic myths represented in the sample of the selected European films?
- Q4: Which are the consequences of verbal expressions of romantic myths in comparison with verbal expressions of problem situations in the sample of the selected European films?
- Q5: How is romantic intimacy expressed in the sample of the selected European films?

For the purpose of this research, the romantic myth is defined as an expression of the depiction of love as something ideal or very powerful, and depictions of four romantic myths are recorded (Hefner & Wilson, 2013):

- (1) The existence of a soul mate – an expression that suggests that there is only one perfect love for a character.
- (2) Idealization of the other – an expression that suggests that a character is perfect, flawless and wonderful in a romantic sense.
- (3) Love transcends all – a term that suggests that love is the only necessary solution to face relationship challenges.
- (4) Love at first sight – a term that suggests that love happened immediately after the first encounter.

The problem situation or “challenge to a romantic relationship” is a term that offers a more realistic picture of romance and relationships (Hefner & Wilson, 2013, p. 7). In this research, we will focus on statements that are generally opposed to the ideal and represent a conflict that a couple must resolve, and they will be defined as problem situations. The previously mentioned cognitive assessment is based on Bandura’s theory of social learning. Therefore, the positive or negative consequences of perceived romantic myths or problem situations may affect the potential adoption of such behaviors. A positive cognitive assessment or a positive consequence of a behavior includes reward, agreement, positive expression of emotions, and expression of physical or verbal closeness. A negative consequence or a cognitive assessment includes behaviors such as rejection, disagreement, physical departure, anger, sadness, or even physically aggressive behavior (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). A cognitive assessment of behavior is based on consequences that Hefner and Wilson define as behavior that is a direct response to the original expression. In terms of time, the response is given during the expression of the original expression (myth or problem situation) or immediately after, and four

consequences can be observed: rewarded (positive), punished (negative), neutral and mixed behavior (Hefner & Wilson, 2013).

In addition to the above, the research also analyzed the bodily expressions of romantic intimacy. Thus, in her analysis of 15 films most often watched by teenagers, Pardun (2002) encoded 309 romantic interactions between men and women, which she classified into nine categories of expressing romance or sexuality. As she claims, most encounters in predominantly Hollywood filmography have only been implied, and on the film screen itself, the most frequently coded interactions were kiss, touch and quarrel. Since two of the three most common expressions of romance and sexuality imply physical contact, coded encounters have been extracted from Pardun's matrix that imply physical contact between two people as an expression of romance or sexuality. For the purpose of this paper, this category will be called the "physical expression of romantic intimacy". It includes: (1) dancing, (2) kissing, (3) romantic touch, (4) sexual intercourse, (5) other (Pardun, 2002).

The chosen research method is a content analysis because it enables qualitative and quantitative data processing. For the analysis of the image of love and romance, some of the most popular romantic European films of the first two decades of the 21st century, namely from 2001 to 2020, which, according to the web page Rotten Tomatoes, film critics and audience rated among the best 100 films with romantic themes (100 Best Fresh Romance Movies), were taken as the subject of analysis. It is worth noting that only films that had garnered a minimum of 20 reviews were included. According to these criteria, the following films were included in the analysis: *Amélie* (Jeunet, 2001); *La meglio gioventù* ("Better Youth") (Giordana, 2003); *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* ("Engagement lasted a long time") (Jeunet, 2004); *Atonement* (Wright, 2007); *Once* (Carney, 2007); *Amour* ("Love") (Haneke, 2012); *Only Lovers Left Alive* (Jarmusch, 2013); *La Vie d'Adèle* ("Adele's Life") (Kechiche, 2013); *Brooklyn* (Crowley, 2015) and *Chiamami col tuo nome* ("Hidden Love") (Giudagnino, 2018). In order to extend the research to Croatian filmography, the subject of analysis also includes three films of Croatian production that focus on love and were shot in the last ten years. These are *Sonja i bik* ("Sonja and the Bull") (Vorkapić, 2012); *Zvizdan* ("The High Sun") (Matanić, 2015) and *Ministarstvo ljubavi* ("Ministry of Love") (Marinković, 2016). In total, it is made up of 13 films of European production that were shown in cinemas in the period from 2001 to 2018.

The units of analysis were twofold. At the first level, verbal and nonverbal expressions of the characters within the film were analyzed. Verbal expressions were analyzed in the expression of romantic myths, problem situations and their cognitive assessment. This research is based on verbal utterances because such expressions are more noticeable to the average film viewer (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Non-verbal communication is analyzed in the case of expressing the myth "love at first sight" because at the very core of this mythical expression, there is a key element of non-verbal communication as well as in the cognitive assessment of statements. Nonverbal communication is also analyzed in the bodily expression of romantic intimacy. At the second level, the entire film narrative is

analyzed as a unit of analysis in which it is determined whether it is focused on a romantic myth, problem situation or other, and finally how the whole narrative is concluded – whether there is a happy ending where the characters are rewarded for their effort, whether they fulfill their dreams, whether they overcome difficulties, or end up punished, resentful and with unfulfilled desires.

RESULTS: FROM PARTNER IDEALIZATION TO LESS IDEAL REALITY

Out of the 13 films analyzed, 10 could be classified into the drama genre, while three had the characteristics of the comedy genre. A total of 1833 minutes of film content were analyzed. The films were produced in the UK, France, Italy and Ireland, and several co-productions were recorded: with Germany, Austria, Belgium, Spain, Brazil, Canada and the United States. Of the films of Croatian production, the film *Zvizdan* was made in co-production with Serbia and Slovenia, while *Ministarstvo ljubavi* with the Czech Republic.

The coding of verbal and nonverbal communication centered around romantic myths and problem situations, as well as bodily expressions of romantic intimacy between major and minor couples within the film. Several films, such as *La meglio gioventù* or *Zvizdan* follow several couples in their main plot, so 18 couples are coded, which are at the center of the film narrative, i.e., “the main couples”. According to the relationship status for most of the film’s narrative, seven couples were friends, i.e., acquaintances, four couples were in the dating phase, three were spouses and the rest of the couples analyzed were either cohabiting, or they were engaged, single or undefined. Of the 18 coded principal couples, two couples were homosexual, while 16 were heterosexual. Due to the presence of homosexual interactions, no emphasis was placed on the gender category emphasizing male-female differences because the data would have been uneven. There were more coded minor, i.e., secondary couples – 28. While the main couples were mostly acquaintances or in the dating phase for most of the duration of the film narrative, in the case of secondary couples most of them were married (eight coded pairs), in cohabitation (five coded pairs) or were acquaintances (five coded pairs). Of these, 24 couples were heterosexual and four were homosexual.

The answer to the first research question “Which romantic myths are present in the sample of the 13 selected European films?” is that there were 15 myths coded into four categories. The most present was the myth of “idealization of the other”, in which seven expressions were coded, while in this research the presence of the verbal expression of the myth of “one kindred soul” (“existence of a soul mate”) was not identified. An example of such an idealization of the other in a romantic sense appears, for example, in the film *Brooklyn*, where Eilis (Saoirse Ronan) writes in a letter to her mother in Ireland about her new boyfriend Tony (Emory Cohen), whom she calls “the only source of happiness in America” alluding to the fact that time spent with him is so ideal that she can experience complete happiness in a foreign country because of him. This is confirmed visually as well, through the adequate editing of the scenes with Eilis and Tony happily walking, hugging,

holding hands. The myth of “Love at first sight” can be identified in special moments of film narratives focused on depicting characters who notice their love interest for the first time, showing intrigue and attraction, such as in the case of Nicola (Luigi Lo Cascio) and Giulia (Sonia Bergamasco) in *La meglio gioventù*, or Tony and Ellis in *Brooklyn*. A certain idealization of one’s love is identifiable in *Amélie* where the titular character’s neighbor, Madelaine tells Amélie about a letter her husband wrote to her saying that she is his only reason to live, which brings her to (happy) tears. Due to the fact that 15 coded myths were identified in 1833 minutes of content, on average, one myth is expressed every 123 minutes of content – the average duration of one movie is 141 minutes. It should be noted that not every film had a coded expression of a romantic myth, but one or more myths were recorded in eight films out of 13. On the other hand, each film had at least one coded expression of a problem situation. In relation to the second question in our research framework: “How are problematic situations in a romantic relationship depicted in the sample of the selected European films?”, we first noted 49 separate expressions of problem situations, i.e., on average, a problem situation was expressed every 37 minutes of film content. Thus, the sample of the selected films shows more verbal expressions of problem situations than verbal expressions of romantic myths. The results are consistent with the results from research by Hefner and Wilson (2013), who observed that there had been more coded problem situations than romantic myths in popular romantic comedies of the past decade. However, in Hefner and Wilson’s research (2013) at the level of the overall message of film narratives, romantic myths were still dominant. In the case of this research, it was found that most of the analyzed films of European production in the last two decades were focused mainly on the problem situation (six films) or did not have as a message of the whole narrative a problem situation in a romantic relationship or a romantic myth (six films), while there was only one film that perpetuated the myth of “love that transcends all” at the level of the entire film narrative.

On the level of the overall message, we can see examples where the romantic relationship storyline is in service of a larger message that is trying to be conveyed, as is the case of *Only Lovers Left Alive*, which follows the long, “eternal” relationship of Adam (Tom Hiddleston) and Eve (Tilda Swinton), two immortal vampires, who in the wake of the modern era are searching for a way to survive without feeding on human blood, out of fear that it is contaminated by the 21st century environment, relying on local suppliers in blood banks. In the end, after running out of their guarded stash of supplies because of Eve’s reckless sister Ava, who does not care for the quality or ethics of the food supplies, Adam and Eve resort to their primal instincts, and return to feeding on humans, claiming they have no other choice. While the overall narrative is not a comment on romantic relationships, or interpersonal relationships for that matter, we can see that the pressures the protagonists face in a change of landscape inevitably have repercussions on their relationship, which is at times strained, at times supportive. It is also evident that, while not the primary motivator in this particular overall storyline, the romantic interest between Adam and Eve is a way to push forward the narrative, and it is often through their romantic and partner interactions that the characters reveal crucial elements and feelings, such as Adam’s despair and despondency, which reaches a pivotal point when Eve calls him out.

“Love transcends all”, is a myth played out in the overall narrative of *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*. Although coupled with tragedy and undoubtable problem situations – not only is Mathilde’s (Audrey Tatou) fiancée Manech (Gaspard Ulliel) missing, but after finally reuniting, Manech is crippled by trauma and hardly remembers his beloved. The overarching theme is Mathilde’s faithful, determined love for her betrothed and her determination to find him, unaware of whether he was killed on the battlefield of World War I or is still alive. Therefore, viewers follow Mathilde in a series of quests to gain information, going as far as being considered mentally unstable by her family members due to her obsession with retrieving Manech. In her search, although we see other characters helping her on this journey, it is foremost underlined that Mathilde’s love is what is moving the story. She is driven, reminded of the words her betrothed carved onto a church bell: MMM, which stands for *Manech aime Mathilde* (Manech loves Mathilde, a French play on the pronunciation of the word “aime”).

This idea of “Love transcends all”, therefore, is not flawless, nor does it imply the force of Mathilde’s love as otherworldly, but it does elevate her intentions, motivated by love, to a mythic, story-like level. When Mathilde reunites with Manech, she is overcome by emotion, with tears in her eyes and a smile on her lips, despite the obvious challenge that had been imposed before the two of them got engaged. Cognitive assessment of the expression of romantic myths differs from the problem situations within a film narrative. Of the 15 coded expressions of romantic myths, seven were awarded in the narrative, six were neutrally rated, and two expressions had mixed reactions from the characters. For example, a positive reaction to the myth of “love transcends all” is shown in the film *Atonement*, in which Cecilia (Keira Knightley) tells Robbie (James McAvoy) that she will visit him every day in prison after he has been unjustly convicted and that she still cared for him. However, Robbie believes that such a connection between them would not work because he is marked in society as a rapist. However, his love for her goes beyond such a label, and immediately after leaving the room, he returns to her and begins a romantic relationship. On the other hand, mixed reactions to the romantic myth are visible in the film *La vie d’Adèle* where the main character Adèle (Adele Exarchopoulos) meets Emma (Lea Seydoux) on the street for the first time. She immediately felt attraction, fascination (the myth of “love at first sight”) and curiosity, but soon became frightened because she had not been attracted to a person of the same sex until then.

It is interesting to note the nuance in the relationship of Georges (Jean-Louis Trintignant) and Anne (Emmanuelle Riva) of *Amour*, which is visible to us as viewers, but to the characters within the narrative, such as their daughter Eva, who is facing her own marital challenges, is somewhat less evident. She is coming to the realization that love is not as ideal as she held it to be, holding in high, idealistic regard the love of her parents, stating that, because of them, she believed that everything would always turn out alright in the end. She admits this to her father, Georges, as she talks about her failing marriage with Geoff, who is cheating on her. His infidelity is common knowledge between coworkers. Still, this idealization of love that Eva had of her parents’ relationship, led her to cultivate a certain hope and strength for a positive outcome. Thus, whilst expressing such a myth, she also notes the “positive” effect it had on her. Another positive consequence

to the myth which connotes a forceful hope to face challenges is that of Robbie in the aforementioned *Atonement*, who, by believing that his beloved is waiting for him, gives him the will to survive on the battlefield of World War II. These ideals also reflect the idea of an overpowering love, which transcends human weakness and external dangers. Negative expressions such as quarrelling, sadness, or aggressive behavior were not the result of expressing romantic myths.

However, out of 49 pronounced problem situations, the consequences were mostly negative – 33 such situations were coded. Such situations included sadness, resentment, shouting and physically leaving the room or breaking up. Therefore, one might say aggressive communication patterns are noticeable, for example, in *La meglio gioventù* in the turbulent romance of Nicola (Luigi Lo Cascio) and Giulia (Sonia Bergamasco), who constantly fall into problematic situations with roots in deep worldview differences, and their chosen way to solve conflicts (such as leaving the room or resignation) eventually leads to the final breakup of the relationship.

We can also follow the erosion of the relationship between Krešo (Stjepan Perić) and his wife Sandra (Olga Pakalović) in *Ministarstvo ljubavi*, a disillusioned couple. Viewers gain one of their first insights into the marital tensions between the characters when Krešo finds out at a family gathering that his wife is to go on a business trip, unknown to him. This leads to a shouting match between the couple, in which eventually Krešo becomes unresponsive. Sandra does not listen, and resents her husband, claiming that he considers any sort of job “stupid”. A noticeable negative reaction to a problem situation is when Krešo calls his wife late on the phone, which triggers her. She does not allow him to speak to their son.

Six problem situations had a neutral or mixed cognitive assessment. There were four positive cases of problem situations, such as an expression of love or reconciliation. For example, in *Chiamami col tuo nome*, Elio's (Timothee Chalamet) ex-girlfriend Marzia (Esther Garell) comes to seek reconciliation after the relationship between the two fails and they both decide to remain friends.

The mixed and neutral responses seem particularly dissonant when it comes to infidelity. Again, in *Ministarstvo ljubavi*, there is such an example. After Sandra admits to Krešo that her business trips were indeed linked to a love affair, Krešo responds by howling with laughter, calling out her own father for infidelity in the process and admitting it to himself. He is sarcastic, leaving satisfied with the scene he has caused. On the other hand, Sandra's mother is shown to be visibly disturbed by her own husband's infidelity.

A neutral recount of a failed marriage is seen in *Once*, where Girl (Markéta Irglová) tells Guy (Glen Hansard) quite matter-of-factly about her past, saying that she got married after finding out she was pregnant. She is now separated from the father of the child, seeming at peace with the way things ended between them, saying that it did not work out. Nevertheless, she claims that she does not want her daughter Ivonka to be fatherless.

Thus, to answer the fourth question: "Which are the consequences of verbal expressions of romantic myths in comparison with verbal expressions of problem situations in the sample of the selected European films?" we state that verbal expressions of romantic myths have prevalently positive consequences, which we identify in the form of giving the characters a sense of hope, as well as intrigue, strength and infatuation. They are at times followed with physical touch or expressions of affection, whereas problematic situations tend to have negative consequences, depicted in a number of ways, such as breaking up of the relationship, quarrelling, shouting, leaving the room etc.

At the level of the entire film narrative, four film narratives are concluded in a positive tone, i.e., they have a "happy ending", four films are concluded in a negative tone, and five of them have a mixed, often ambiguous conclusion. For example, in the film *Zvizdan*, despite the many difficulties that are a consequence of the war waged between Croatia and Serbia in the past, the love story between two young people in recent times leaves the door open for a brighter future. Thus, Marija (Tihana Lazović) opened the door to Luka (Goran Marković) to return to her life and the life of their child, yet it is not indicated whether they managed to overcome the differences and past wounds. On the other hand, Tony and Eilis experience a "happy ending" in *Brooklyn*. Although Eilis's feelings for the man she secretly married are sometimes conflicted and vague, especially when she spends time away from Tony in Ireland, she eventually returns to him in America. The film does not portray Tony and Eilis' relationship as "soul mates", because Eilis, on her return to Ireland, sees what kind of life she could have had with other men and even allows herself to fantasize about unfulfilled desires. Still, her return to her husband Tony is portrayed in light of the fact that their love still overcomes such an obstacle and by choosing loyalty and keeping their marriage vows, Eilis can still live a fulfilled and happy life with Tony. "The unhappy ending" on the other hand, awaits Georges and Anne in *Amour*. Unlike the relationship of young Tony and Eilis, Anne and Georges, who are both at an advanced age, have already had many years of marital union and the film highlights their excellent knowledge of each other, and care for the person they love. However, the problematic situation on which *Amour* focuses is the frustration of spouses when faced with impending death. After her stroke, Anne's health is drastically impaired, and we gradually see her deteriorating cognitively and motorically. Georges takes complete care of her and becomes increasingly frustrated as he loses the woman he knew and married. In the end, Georges suffocates Anne with a pillow, but the film remains open to the interpretation of the motive for which Georges succumbed to the attack of his wife's murder – is it extreme despair, selfishness, the belief that the act of euthanasia will deprive the wife of suffering? In any case, the "unhappy ending" refers to the loss of a loved one (not only by death, but also cognitively, spiritually and mentally) and the sudden termination of the relationship after which life is irreversibly changed.

As for the bodily expressions of romantic intimacy, 416 units were coded. Most coded expressions were categorized as "romantic touch" which included holding hands, caressing and hugging and it was present in 47.6% of coded situations of this type, followed by "kiss" with 35.4% of coded situations and sexual intercourse that was recorded in 9.9% of cases. Dance as an expression of romantic intimacy was observed in 5% of cases.

Coded expressions were also analyzed according to the type of depiction and out of 416 coded situations there were 14 implicit representations (3.3%) of some physical expression of romantic intimacy, while in the analyzed sample of European films 402 cases (96.7%) were explicitly shown. If we look only at situations in which sexual intercourse occurred, out of 41 coded cases, 9 were implied, while 32 representations were explicit. Thus, our analysis concluded that romantic intimacy in the sample of 13 European films is physically expressed prevalently through touch while there is a tendency to portray sexual intercourse explicitly. Some authors express concern about the explicit portrayal of sex, believing that it can provoke a picture of discontinuity between it and other sexual activities and thus harm the romantic scripts of young people (Johnson & Holmes, 2009; Pardun, 2002). However, in the case of European film, Forbes and Street consider its propensity to explicitly portray sexual relations to be a comparative advantage in the market compared to Hollywood films (Forbes & Street, 2000).

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the content of thirteen European films of the first two decades of the 21st century has shown the presence of romantic myths, but not to the extent that it is present in Hollywood romantic comedies where, according to Hefner and Wilson (2013), romantic myths are perpetuated in 98 % of films and there is a tendency toward narratives that focus on problem situations among romantic couples, and the plot ends ambiguously, that is, with an "open end" or unhappily. Also, different myths dominate - in the research of Hefner and Wilson (2013) at the level of statements, the most dominant expression was the myth of the existence of a "soul mate", while in our research such a statement is not present at all. In the sample of the 13 analyzed European films, the most common expression of the myth was "idealization of the other". The frequency of this myth can also be considered as a relation to the fact that most of the main couples in the studied European films are in the dating phase, and the idealization of the other is characteristic of the beginning of a relationship.

Although there are verbal expressions of romantic myths, they are not present in all films and there are almost twice as many verbal expressions of problem situations, so we cannot speak of the studied sample as a group of films depicting an "idealized" overall picture of love and romance. A frequent problem situation in the narratives we analyzed was the deception of partners, that is, unfaithfulness between the main and supporting characters. In some situations, the deception is expressed as information with a neutral reaction of the characters, but there are also situations in which the characters remain heartbroken as a result.

The tendency of the European film tradition towards realism and naturalism suggests that the consequences, i.e., cognitive assessment of romantic myths are in any case mostly positive or at least neutral in everyday life, while most expressions of problematic situations are punished by shouting, anger, sadness, or physical abandonment. Thus, according to the studied sample, the expression of romantic myths, though rare, nevertheless remains

a desirable behavior. On the other hand, expressing problem situations is undesirable because it results in punishment in more than half of the represented cases. This can lead to the conclusion that what is sought in romantic relationships is ideal love in its mythical forms, although reality is still something else: it leads to disappointment because there is a clash between desires and reality. According to Bandura's theory of social learning, a positive assessment of romantic myths would mean that the population will be more inclined to adopt positive reactions to such expressions, and negative in case of problem situations, i.e., that expressing romantic myths is desirable behavior, while expressing problem situations is not.

Allen, Neale, and Krutnik argue that romantic comedies leave the impression of an idealized world precisely because of the happy ending of the entire narrative (cited in Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Nevertheless, if we take into account the fact that in the sample of studied films with European background, the whole narrative is more focused on problematic relationship situations than on romantic myths, the question arises as to whether they can be considered idealized? Abandonment is shown in *Ministarstvo ljubavi*, when Krešo leaves his wife and child; the fatal fate of Robbie and Cecilia is shown in *Atonement*, where lovers can never achieve their love in real life due to a child's mistake and unjust condemnation and even a relatively "happy ending". In *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*, in which Manech and Mathilde finally find each other, but Manech remains without memory, leaving no impression of the association of love with ideally perceived "true happiness". If we take the already mentioned example from *Brooklyn*, in which the characters Eilis and Tony end up happy and fulfilled, their love in the narrative is shown as strong, but not idealized. First of all, it should be emphasized that there is a diversity of genres in this research as well as in Hefner and Wilson's research (2013), and that dramas and comedies treat actions in a different way, and thus romance is used as the initiator of the action. In addition, although today's European films are classified into genres, which often places them on the boundaries between these pre-determined "frames", as art-cinema and other films under the influence of this tradition do not rely as much on genre patterns as Hollywood productions. However, from this research, it can be concluded that, whether it is about dramas or comedies, the ending in the studied films is more often ambiguous or unhappy, better to say bitter-sweet, rather than having a happy ending.

Furthermore, there is a feature of the European films covered by our research sample that differs from the tendencies of the Hollywood film industry: the expression of romantic intimacy tends to be visible in the way it is expressed physically. While in the case of this research, the category of "touch" as a way of expressing romantic intimacy dominated, when it comes to depicting sexual intercourse, Hollywood is wary of explicit depictions, whereas 13 studied European films from the last two decades confirm Forbes and Street's thesis of explicit and naturalistic approach (Forbes & Street, 2000).

The data from the content analysis open the possibility for some further research; given the dominance of problem situations, in this case infidelity as a frequent expression of relationship problems, future research should qualitatively and quantitatively specify

the type of problem situations in the relationships of characters of contemporary European films in order to gain insight into potential preoccupations of the European romantic couple.

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JESU LI ŽIVJELI SRETNO DO KRAJA ŽIVOTA? REPRESENTACIJA ROMANTIČNIH MITOVA U EUROPSKOJ FILMSKOJ INDUSTRIJI U PRVA DVA DESETLJEĆA 21. STOLJEĆA

Irena Sever Globan :: Paula Marija Stier

SAŽETAK *Analiza prikaza romantičnih mitova u filmu može nam pružiti uvid u kulturno razumijevanje poželjnih ponašanja vezanih uz područje braka, ljubavi, romantike i seksualnosti. Iako je veći broj autora već upozorio na učinke mitova koji idealiziraju sliku ljubavi na javnost, većina istraživanja temelji se na uzorcima koji su bave filmovima proizvedenima u Hollywoodu. Međutim, u analizi romantičnih mitova važno je uključiti filmografiju iz različitih dijelova svijeta. Na temelju uzorka od 13 filmova proizvedenih u Europi od 2001. do 2020. godine, koji se nalaze među „100 najboljih romantičnih filmova” na mrežnoj stranici Rotten Tomatoes, zajedno s hvaljenim hrvatskim romantičnim filmovima, analiza sadržaja otkrila je da uzorak prikazuje narative koji su skloni nagrađivanju verbalnih izraza romantičnih mitova. S druge strane, verbalni izrazi problema i izazova, iako češći, obično se kažnjavaju. Za razliku od filmova proizvedenih u Hollywoodu, prevladavajuće teme europskih filmova usmjerene su više na izazove nego na romantične mitove.*

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

ROMANTIČNI MIT, EUROPSKI FILM, LJUBAV, SEKSUALNOST

*Bilješka o autoricama*_____

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