

# THERE IS NO WRONG ROMANCE CAN'T RIGHT: HETERONORMATIVITY IN OUR ROMANTIC COMEDIES

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#### Resumo

O autor usa a Análise Crítica do Discurso (ACD) para analisar mensagens heteronormativas sobre o romance como exibidas nas comédias românticas *Crossing Delancey* e *Trainwreck*. O ensaio oferece uma definição extensa de solterismo, bem como esta permeia o pensamento contemporâneo antes de analisar os filmes. As conclusões deste artigo indicam que os dois filmes em questão servem como argumentos que propagam mensagens "singlistas".

Palavras-chave: análise crítica do discurso, filmes, solteirismo.

## Abstract

The author uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze heteronormative messages about romance as displayed in the romantic comedies *Crossing Delancey* and *Trainwreck*. The essay offers an extended definition of singlism, as well as how it permeates contemporary thinking before analyzing the movies. The findings from this article indicate that the two films in question serve as arguments that propagate singlist messages.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, film, singlism.

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Romantic comedies have long been revered by the American public and have become iconic in our discourse. Films like When Harry Met Sally and Jerry Maguire are popular among critics and filmgoers alike. Ouotes like "I'll have what she's having" and "vou complete me", extracted from these films, are iconic in Romantic comedies present escapist our culture. fantasies to viewers with respect to how they might ideally like to experience romance. In many of these comedies, the characters lament being alone. This lamentation is fed by films that portray representations, and behaviors for the audience's situations, entertainment. The typical arguments posed by these films is that romance and finding one true love make the characters better people, essentially curing the character flaws held by the protagonists. For example, in the classic Bringing Up Baby, Katherine Hepburn's nutty heiress turns Cary Grant's workaholic, fuddyduddy protagonist into a more spontaneous, fun-loving creature. Moreover, in An Affair to Remember, also with Grant as the protagonist, his mother posits the idea that "there is nothing wrong with Nicolo that a good woman couldn't make right."

While there is a growing body of research that highlights negative perceptions of singles, stereotyping in the popular media still contributes to negative perceptions of singles. This essay will argue that singlehood is portrayed as a problem that needs to be solved by "coupling." Films about romance present couplehood as being a superior option to singlehood, even though a recent study conducted by Bella DePaulo stated for people who were self-sufficient, being single allowed for a higher degree of happiness. For example, a 2017 study sampled a group of 79,000 women between the ages of 50 and 79 who married, got divorced or separated, or remained single (DEPAULO, 2018). DePaulo found that the women who divorced had started eating healthier, exercised more, and had smaller waists than the women who married. Yet, Hollywood propagates what Elizabeth Brake deems as "amatonormativity" (2012, p. 81), which is the assumption that a "central, exclusive, amorous relationship" is essential to one's life. One might argue that while the general public holds a collective adoration of these films, such cinematic works may create cultural stereotypes and value

judgments about singles. In some films, stereotypes and judgements are interconnected with heteronormative ideologies related to traditional Moreover, the films present these gender roles. ideologies as alluring yet realistic fantasies to captivated, impressionable audiences in the form of popular entertainment. In hopes of understanding the explicit and implicit messages about romance being sent through these films, this essay will analyze the discourse used in Crossing Delancey (1988) and Trainwreck (2015).

# What Is Singlism?

The term singlism was coined by Bella DePaulo; it includes the stigmatizing and stereotyping of adults who are single. Such stereotypes can include having poor social skills, being less attractive, and being less mature. For example, DePaulo created a scenario in which a landlord had the option to lease an apartment to a white person or a black person. When the participants learned the landlord offered to lease to the white person, the majority of their responses indicated the landlord was prejudiced. She then presented a similar scenario in which the landlord could lease an apartment to a single person or a married person. Despite the single person's offer to pay more, the landlord chose to rent to the married person. The participants seemed to think the decision was fair and just because they felt that the single person might not be as inclined to stay nor would they care for the property as well as the married person would (DEPAULO, 2006).

Such stereotyping is further exemplified by tropes like "spinster," a label that has been used since the 19th century to refer to an unmarried woman; this term generates images of a mousy, depressed plain woman who is not attractive or socially competent enough to find a husband (MUSTARD, 2000). Such a stereotype and tropes can be explained using system justification theory, which is defined as people's inclinations to accept the status quo as fair and just (DAY, KAY, HOLMES & NAPIER, 2011). In this case, the social status quo is that one must follow what is known as the Relationship Escalator, a term described by Amy Gahran as a series of stages in dating that progress



from meeting to casual dating to exclusivity to marriage and children, the holy grail of relationships (2017). Hollywood films often reinforce this idea by "coupling" a single female protagonist by the story's conclusion. This idea intersects with feminism in that women, in particular, are subjected to certain stigma that men are not. Women without partners or children are often bemoaned and pitied in scholarship and popular media for not having those things. Those who are successful in careers are castigated for prioritizing career over marriage and procreation, the latter of which is painted as a natural urge for a woman. In other cases, women are painted as "sluts," "prudes," or simply lacking in social skills or desirability.

## **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

I analyzed the romantic comedies selected for the study by using critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA focuses on analyzing written and spoken texts to reveal discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality, and bias and how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced, and transformed within specific socioeconomic, political, and historical contexts (HUCKIN, 1995). Its goal is to analyze the assumptions hidden in text and oral speech in order to refute various forms of power. CDA aims to systematically explore the relationship between discursive practices, texts, and events and wider social and cultural practices. In short, CDA tries to uncover the relationship between: a) the actual text; b) the discursive practices, and c) the larger societal structure. Huckin, Andrus, and Clary-Lemon describe it as concerning itself with language as relates to "...issues of social justice" (2012, p.123).

In this study, I use the words and actions the films' characters use in conjunction with actions associated with singlism. Trainwreck, was popular in terms of box office financial success, earning \$141 million (TRAINWRECK). Crossing Delancey, which was based on a 1985 play by Susan Sandler, was not as well-known, but it still received positive reviews from critics. Both films feature leading ladies who, at the beginning of the film, appear to enjoy their singlehood. The films were chosen due to their story arcs involving independent women who gradually realize they are

incomplete without male partners and they need to change their liberated ways in favor of traditional coupling, partially in thanks to interference from supporting characters. The dramatic arc of each story involves the protagonist coming to realize she has been incomplete without a significant other in her life; several scenes in each movie serve as implicit arguments in favor of such coupling. The scenes selected by the author exemplify such arguments.

## Analysis of the Films

Crossing Delancey

This film was chosen due to its explicit heteronormative depictions of coupling in comparison to many of the other films considered for this study. Throughout the plot, the female protagonist claims her independence, while her grandmother explicitly argues her life is incomplete without a male partner. The story concerns three characters: Izzy, a thirtysomething woman who prides herself on her independence; Bubbie, her busybody grandmother; and Sam, a mildmannered pickle vendor and what Jordan Hoffman of The Times of Israel referred to as a mensch<sup>2</sup>. All of the characters live in New York City, the Lower East Side, Izzy's place of origin. The Lower East Side represents the Old World she thinks she wants to leave behind, but cannot, as she feels obligated to take care of Bubbie. The Upper West Side represents a new life for Izzy, where she has fashioned a life of feminism, liberated ideologies, poetry readings, book signings, and singlehood, despite what the audience can discern as hopes of romance with the renowned poet Anton Moss. The former represents Izzy's Old World Jewish heritage and a place she is trying to leave behind, while the latter represents the "new world," a liberated life she is attempting to embody. Some of the terms are presented in Yiddish, which has the potential to position those in the audience who do not understand Yiddish as outsiders with only non-discursive practices (actions) and materalisations (objects) as clues as to what is happening in some scenes. However, many of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> A Yiddish word for an honorable gentleman.



the terms are explained to viewers who might not understand them<sup>3</sup>.

At first glance, Izzy seems to be happy with her life, outwardly resisting Bubbie's attempts to set her up with this "pickle man", who, according to Izzy, simply isn't "part of her world". She thinks she has evolved beyond it, but the film argues that she needs and wants true romance in her life, even if it is not necessarily congruent to the way she is meant to live.

The first instance of singlism occurs in a park on the Lower East Side during what the audience sees as the film's first interaction between Izzy and Bubbie. Here, Bubbie surprises Izzy with Hannah, a Shadkhnen<sup>4</sup>, who introduces her to Sam, a pickle vendor who has been in love with her for years. After this discovery, the action moves to Bubbie's apartment:

Izzy: Bubbie, I don't need that...I am a happy person. I have everything. I have a rent-controlled apartment people would kill for...

Bubbie: Pish, pish, pish...

Izzy: I have a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful job. Guess who I called the other day...Isaac singer. He won the Nobel Prize...I know lots of famous writers, editors, publishers. I organize the most prestigious reading series in New York. And I have plenty of friends, women who are doing tremendous things with their lives and don't need a man to make them feel complete. It's not like I'm gonna say no if someone walks into my life tomorrow...but I am not holding my breath.

Bubbie: A professor one said, no matter how much money you've got, if you're alone, you're sick. Listen to me: loneliness is a very lousy case.

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In a later scene, Izzy rejects Sam when they first meet:

Izzy: This isn't the way I live. This isn't the way I do things.

Sam: Well, how do you live?

Izzy: I don't live down here; I live uptown...a million miles from here.

Sam: This isn't your style.

Izzy: This isn't my style.

Sam: Sometimes you can change your style...I have this friend Harry Shipman, Shipman imports, lox, caviar, fancy stuff. For years, he used to wear this little brown cap, the brim pulled down, you wondered how he could see. One day, he's crossing Delancey, this big wind comes, poof, it's gone. He runs after it, but a truck gets there before he does. He comes into me crying, he feels so bad. Harry, I said, here, take five dollars, go across to Finkel and buy yourself a new one. But do me a favor, forget the brown cap. He goes, he comes back an hour later, he's a new man, a grey felt Stetson, a beauty. The next day, he makes an engagement. Between you and me, he must have given Finkel some Nova on the side. It was no five-dollar hat.

Izzy: Man trades some Lox for a Stetson, gets a bride in the bargain, very romantic.

Sam: Oh, he had his eye on her for a long time, but she couldn't see him. That little brown cap. She couldn't see his eyes.

Following this dialogue, he asks her on a date, to which she says no. He responds with, "you should try a new hat sometime, Isabel. It might look good on you." By ending on this note, the scene exemplifies the patriarchy of a man trying to tell a woman she needs to change her ways in order to accommodate romance to that man. Later in the film, we see Isabel being "wooed" by a package from Sam in which she receives a Stetson hat, the very same type of hat that Sam mentioned in his earlier story. A few moments after we see her open the package that contains the hat, she struts down a Manhattan sidewalk sporting a confident grin. She rejects Sam again, but this time, she hesitates; during her speech, she takes a series of awkward pauses, which may indicate her reluctance at rejecting Sam. While the viewer sees her ultimately trying to let Sam down gently, the story arc indicates that she may be starting to soften toward Sam. As worn by Izzy, the hat now functions as a dispositive object that foreshadows that Izzy may be working toward changing her "single," "independent" ways. These passages of dialogue reflect the film's argument that Izzy should do just that in order to accommodate her need for marriage, or more specifically, marriage to Sam.

Later in the movie, Izzy attempts to set Sam up with Marilyn, a close friend of hers who desires a spouse. Prior to their dialogue, she gazes at him from afar while wistful music fills the soundtrack, a further indication of her "softening." As for the ruse, she arranges to have them "accidentally" run into each other while the two are on a fake date set up by Izzy. During this scene, we see Izzy is falling for Sam, as made evident by close-ups of Izzy's longing eyes, punctuated by romantic music that highlights her facial expressions. When the deception is discovered, Marilyn says, "you seem like a nice guy" to Sam when giving him her phone number. In the following scene,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Some of the cited conversations to follow have been consolidated for the purposes of length.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Yiddish word for "marriage broker."



another one of Izzy's friends, Karen, converses with her while she breastfeeds her baby. The scene ends with a close-up of the baby. Wistful music fills the soundtrack while the viewer sees another close-up of Izzy's face, ripe with envy at her friend's relationship with her baby, which is meant to imply that she might want to form a family.

Howlett, Ramesh e Pearl destacam algumas The conflation between singlehood and lack appears in the film. Throughout the film, despite Izzy's claims of being a happy singleton, it is shown Izzy is smitten with Anton Maes, a renowned poet, played by Jeroen Krabbe. Toward the end of the film, Izzy thinks she will get physically intimate with Moss, and she discovers he was looking for an administrative assistant, as opposed to a girlfriend. After she leaves him, the music becomes upbeat, as she rushes toward her final destination: Sam. The obligatory happy ending occurs, where the lovers kiss. However, her tone of voice indicates that she may be entering this relationship out of obligation than out of true passion. Bubbie asks her if she is "with Sam," to which she replies in an annoyed tone, "yes, Bubbie." The resignation in her voice suggests that she is getting together with Sam in order to please Bubbie and because it completes the film's argument. In his review of Crossing Delancey, Washington Post critic Hal Hinson supports this contention by claiming their union at the end is not convincing because they have nothing in common except their "Jewishness." The coupled characters appear to be happy with their status, while the single ones ultimately seek to "ride the escalator" into couplehood. The movie's ending follows Field's advice that the protagonist undergoes "change" or "transformation" as part of her character arc (2005, p. 68). In 1984, Syd Field published Screenplay, which is a highly recommended book on writing screenplays. Here, he advises screenwriters to show the audience a "positive ending," making them "feel good," which encapsulates the conclusion (1984, p. 180). It also supports the heteronormative ideal that a female must be partnered with a man in order to be happy.

#### Trainwreck

A similar argument is presented in Trainwreck. In this film, the viewer follows Amy through New York City and suburban Long Island as she happily indulges in alcohol, drugs, casual relationships, and random sexual encounters before settling down in a monogamous, escalator-style relationship with Aaron, a physician played by Bill Hader.

At the beginning of the film, a young Amy, along with her sister Kim, listens to their father rationalize his decision to divorce their mother, having them repeat the phrase "monogamy isn't realistic," which governs Amy's debauchery-adorned routine. She lives a "work hard, play hard" philosophy, serving as a journalist for a high-powered magazine publisher by day and engaging in excessive drinking, illicit drug use, and multiple sexual relationships by night. Her younger sister, Kim, has adopted a traditional relationship orientation, opting to marry and have a child. In the vein of Trainwreck's argument, much of Kim's dialogue, along with that of other supporting characters, is singlist and matrimaniacal.

For example, Amy breaks up with her casual dating partner, Steven, played by John Cena, who becomes upset that she is texting and sleeping with other men, and they have an argument that leads to a break-up:

Amy: We never said we were exclusive.

Steven: Fuck, Amy, exclusive, it's not high school. Do I have to worry about you with other guys?

*Amy: I hook up with other guys. I don't go to the movies with them. That's, like, our special thing.* 

Steven: That's so stupid. You know what the sad part is? I was gonna ask you to marry me.

Amy: Why are you making me feel bad about this? You can sleep with other girls. That's, like, every guy's dream.

Steven: It's not this guy's dream. This guy's got a dream. And it's us, making it, getting married, moving out to the countryside, having a family, three boys, and two, more boys. Enough for a basketball team! And I'll develop a Crossfit program and patent it, and I'll rule the Crossfit world, with you by my side. You'll be my Crossfit Queen. That's my dream.

Steven's dream can be said to be patriarchal in that it may illustrate a dynamic of man as breadwinner and woman as trophy wife. The movie illustrates its



support of this view during the following scene, when she vents to Kim about her breakup:

Kim: Maybe you should consider changing your ways.

Amy: My ways?

Kim: You would love having a family. Having a family is fun."

Later on, at her father's funeral, she argues with Kim:

Amy: You've been running away from this fucking family forever.

Kim: Amy, I am not a crazy person because I got married and got pregnant with a child. That's what people do!

Kim's dialogue here is heteronormative in that she enforces the societal norm that women must marry and procreate. After Amy's breakup with Steven, she enters a romance with Aaron. Their romance follows a traditional, "escalator-style" trajectory, in accordance with Bill Mernit's seven-beat structure for a romantic comedy: Setup, Catalyst, Turning Point, Midpoint, Second Turning Point, Crisis Climax, and Resolution (2000). They meet, have sex, and spend time together. Aaron meets Amy's family, who approves of him. Meanwhile, Amy looks for ways to sabotage the relationship. Step Six is the crisis climax, during which a fight and apparent breakup ensues. Thirty minutes from the end of the movie, Aaron expresses his dismay at Amy's heavy drinking and pot-smoking; he implies Amy's fear of failure, which leads Amy to break up with him.

During the breakup, Amy becomes a better person. She gives away her drug paraphernalia and alcohol. She starts being nicer to Kim and her sensitive stepchild Alastair, whom she had mocked previously. There is an obligatory reconciliation scene between the two sisters:

Kim: This isn't working for you anymore.

Amy: I know. I'm sorry.

Kim: I know you're sorry.

Amy: No, I'm really sorry. I want you to know that I act like everything you do in your life is so wrong and stupid but it's just because I don't think that I can have that. I'm not okay. I'm not okay, Kim. I know what I am. I know who I am, and I'm broken.

This scene is indicative of the film's argument that a woman should forgo her independence in favor of "riding the escalator" and having a family. In the final scene, she arranges to have Aaron watch her perform a dance routine with the New York Knicks' cheerleaders while Billy Joel's "Uptown Girl" plays. This sequence as an antithesis to two earlier scenes: 1) where she denigrates the song as Billy Joel's worst; and 2) where she mocked cheerleaders during a basketball display, to Aaron's chagrin. The cheerleading outfit she wears is meant to signify that, like Izzy, she is willing to change her identity to a submissive female figure: doing so accommodates having Aaron in her life, which she verbalizes by saying, "I want to try with you." In this respect, the cheerleading outfit functions as a dispositive object in that it signifies Amy's willingness to give up her individuality so she can accommodate the relationship. Such an ending would follow the advice of Field, who advises screenwriters to have people "...walk away from the theater uplifted, fulfilled, spiritually aligned with their own humanity" (2005, p. 86). In accordance with these suggestions, having an audience feel good would mean allowing them to see the happy couple reconcile at the end of the story. By having Amy take these actions through her move into an escalator-style relationship, the movie takes the same position as Cena, supporting the film's argument that Amy "settle down;" moreover, it takes the position that a woman must be subservient to a man's needs. Such an ending is worthy of discussion, given that according to the latest U.S. Census report, 45.2% of the American population over the age of 18 are not married, which is higher than it has been in the past (FRIDAY, 2018).

#### **Future Directions for Research**

Both of these films, while released at different times, follow the same character arc: 1) woman is single and lives a liberated life; 2) woman is reluctant to couple up; and 3) coupling solves all of her problems and makes her a better person. In these films, the overreactions of the supporting characters around the protagonists' singlehood reflect their films' arguments. In Crossing Delancey, Izzy needs to go back to her family roots and live according to Old World Jewish philosophies, including being married. Amy from Trainwreck needs to stop partying and find a stable man with whom to have a committed relationship. Critical analysis of the discursive practices, actions, and objects in a small sample of typical comedy films about mid-life indicates that the film industry can, and does, influence singlist attitudes. Such attitudes are exemplified by a review from Janet Maslin of the New



York Times, who described the inevitable happy ending as "nicely affirming Miss Bozyk's efficacy as a grandmotherly Cupid"<sup>5</sup>. However, when one critically examines such charm through a cultural and linguistic lens, what is revealed? Are language and voice presented through a series of coded stereotypes, and if so, are the writers and producers disseminating messages of exclusion, marginalization, cultural/linguistic inferiority, and ultimately, singlism?

Like most art, films emerge from cultural and societal realities, and usually construct responses to such realities to inform, persuade, or dissuade particular beliefs among certain groups. Films are written, produced, and viewed/interpreted "...not in isolation but in some real-world context with all of its complexity" (HUCKIN, 1995, p. 95). As such, it is crucial to understand that films, animated or not, shadow certain ideologies that are represented in the producers' perspectives, which is bridged to societal beliefs.

Such beliefs are crucial to understand because it should make society realize that we cheer for coupling in films because they mostly portray the "new energy" that precedes relationship committed relationships, to which people subscribe as a form of escapism. Moreover, we accept it as an ideal of romance, which many people strive to achieve in order to feel "complete." In this particular case, these films could have the potential to influence perceptions of in relationships and cause unrealistic expectations, which could lead to problems. For example, in a study by Nancy Signorielli, adolescents who regularly viewed TV programs that promoted positive images of romance had a positive correlation with their desire "to get married, stay married to the same person for life, and to have children" (1991, p. 145). Additionally, Johnson and Holmes (2009) conducted a content analysis of Hollywood romance films in which they noted that the positive features in romance films, such as chivalry, physical affection, and the overall state of being happier with a partner, take place typically in the early stages in a relationship. They noted adolescent viewers might develop distorted perceptions of what

<sup>5</sup> Ms. Bozyk is the actress who plays the single protagonist's grandmother, who is forever trying to set her up with a boyfriend, as will be described in the film's synopsis.

meaningful relationships would look like as a result of viewing these films, and as a result, those films might have negative influences on the realities of their relationships. Moreover, viewers may discover their relationships are markedly different from what is portrayed in the films. These differences could even include dangerous relationship markers like alcoholism, drug addiction, and domestic violence. Even in an era where staying single has become more commonplace, such issues keep critical discussion of this topic essential.

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