

Kornelia Hahn

Romances in movies

The following arguments are based on a research to a larger extend (Hahn 1999). Today, I like to point out one thesis and in presenting this thesis, I will try to find a good balance between theoretical and phenomenal considerations.

The sociologist Leopold von Wiese wrote in 1914: “You can not chat about feelings. They need to be symbolized through music and literature.“ If he would have foreseen the success of movies he surely would have mentioned the significance of film work to symbolize feelings. Films combine music and literature but exceed these forms of communication. The question is, if movies therefore are extraordinary appropriate to symbolize “love” or “falling in love”, “love pains” and “passion”.

Actually, massive attention is paid on the presentation of love affairs. Moreover – as Siegfried Kracauer, the famous film theorist, had once said - movies do not reflect individual ideas but the collective mind and, in this qualification, movies exceed all other forms of media representation. However, another expert, the director Jean-Luc Godard, argued: “The only film I like to realize very much, I will not be able to, because it is impossible. This would be a film on love or toward love or dealing with love.” Even other directors mentioned that they (nearly) failed with this topic. On the other side, the spectators are aware of seeing a film to be about “love”; they are not unsure to interpret a film as one of the varied melodrama. This ambivalence between the presentation of love relations and its cinematography code are very interesting in a sociological point of view.

Romantic love in modern societies are found upon the exclusiveness of the couple and the uniqueness of their love affair. Moreover, the love relation became the most important social relation and got high significant to create personal identity. The consequence is a permanent reflection upon the state of the love relation and the risk to overwhelm it by continual interpretations of the meaning of any kind of signs in the daily conversations.

In this situation, one get to know a “love code” how to interpret and to express one’s feelings could be helpful. Therefore, fictional stories may be regarded as a pattern or blueprint of love

affairs in the reality. But, the problem is that while watching a film, the spectator is managing at least with three levels of meanings: The presented “love relation”, its cinematography “translation” and his or her imaginations which result to individual experiences. Therefore, I like to raise the question, if love stories in movies can function as a model for intimate relations?

In this contribution, I like to refer firstly to the characteristics of performing love and then, I like to refer to the presentation of social reality in film. Finally, I will give a statement concerning the influence of the cinematography code on love affairs.

I. Characteristics of performing love

Although love relations often control the plot of a film, the presentation of love constitutes no film genre as such. Moreover, we observe different ways of performing love depending on the movie genre.

The movie type which is – in particular in the English spoken world – classical to perform “love” is the melodrama. As it is pointed out in a study the melodrama should expose the identity of emotions and morals in the bourgeois society so that its moral is regarded as universal (Seeßlen 1980:20). This intention is supported by a continual use of special forms. One interesting form is the “excess”. This form can be demonstrated in different qualities. For example: The villain is not only bad, but exclusively and exceptionally bad or the beauty has to be reflected enormously in the music, the architecture, the nature etc. Besides, the male hero is a virtuous man and the female hero loves the sincere boy of her own class by means of him. Then, there is need of other well-defined figures – for example a rigidly father or comedians – promoting the demonstration of the inner selves of the heroes. But, the film stories and their formal realization are changing with new artistic ideas. In the 1930s which are characterized both by an economical depression and the technical advancement of the sound in the USA, the melodrama developed new forms because the old ones now gave way for involuntary humor. I quote: “Audiences wanted, if not total realism, at least some kind of mirror (romanticized to a degree) of the society in which they lived” (Mercer 1975: 6).

However, films dealing with an humorous effect, have to follow strictly a certain form. One characteristic feature is that only comedies are explicitly operating with a communication

code to express “love” with its ritual-charged symbols how it is described in Sociology, e.g. in the study of Niklas Luhmann: “Love as Passion”. But, if we compare comedies dealing with “love” over a few decades, we even become aware of a change. For example, the comedies as they are known in the 1950s and 1960s with its favorite actress Doris Day compared with the comedies as they got developed by Woody Allan in the 1970s and 1980s show a significant shift: In the early comedies, it occurred a lot of misunderstandings and external circumstances in the course of everyday life to prevent the lovers from happy-end. In the later comedies, the presentation of “love” is connected to social alienation under the conditions of the urban neurosis (Gerhold 1995: 21). But 20 years after his famous film “Annie Hall” Woody Allan creates a different form. In his comedy, “Everyone says: I love you” (1996) love is not only the central topic of the film, but advances the action even formally. There is no concentration of one couple, but on one of the now so-called “patchwork-families”. This means that there is a never ending story in connection to the original love story of a now divorced couple, the discussion of the love-stories of their children and their love relations to present partners. Therefore, the film consists of a series of different types of love relations, but without putting the accent on their beginning or end as it is often showed in other romances. The improbability of love can only be presented in an undisputed *unreal* framework of action to become plausible: this is at least the explanation the narrator of the story gives. Therefore, the story is put in the form of a musical film. Here, “love” is symbolized by a basic theme which penetrates the whole film and, metaphorically, the whole life. This melody is more important to communicate emotions as the single actions of the figures.

In German movies – even when they are usually not known as the top of the world - there are some characteristic phenomenon. After 2nd World War, in the very popular so-called “Heimatfilm” - country-side films – emotions were produced by the metaphorical symbolization of nature (Fiedler 1995:15). This provided a new order by constructing an artificial magnificence of the landscape. The common and uniform perception of the landscape led to strong sensations of the lovers. They constituted unity in harmony with the nature. This formed the inevitable exclusiveness for the couple, but apparently it gave them the chance of being independent from society or a running social order. Moreover, the scenes presenting a picturesque nature and wildlife replaced scenes of sexual contacts which were only indicated metaphorically.

Later, in the 1960s, the film plots often showed a conflict between the lovers because of a powerful social order or social control. The lovers were hindered to come together because of

their different positions in society. In most of the times the end of the conflict results to an unexpected occurring way to adjust their social positions and not of their resistance against social structures. In fact, this scarcely *romantic* way of “falling in love” was completed by a restricted variety of signs to symbolize love: Women were laughing like children and men were demonstrating their passion by grasping quite violently (Schlupmann 1983: 12). On the contrary, in the 1970s and almost the 1980s, the couples were continually discussing their relation or their failing whereas in the 1990s, love relations are presented chiefly in form of Comedies again. According to its tradition the happy-end is again prevented by misunderstandings. But, these misunderstandings are now attributed to the inability to converse or to come to an understanding. This conflict is “home-made”. The plot of the story is humorous because the spectators may change between recalling these conflicting situations from their own experiences and the distance they are having because of the ironical exaggeration of these situations. This exaggeration *detects* the romantic love code as such and devalues it. Maybe for the moment, there is no both original and collective comprehensible expression of love. Due to this, it seems that the love code can no longer be regarded as being serious. But, in spite of the doubts if love can still be expressed authentically we are living in a “New Age of emotions”. For example, this was circumstantially discussed after the unfortunate death of the Princess of Wales in 1997. Another example is given by the absolutely most successful film “Titanic” in 1998. Without telling the love story of Rose and Jack, this film could be described nearly as a documentary film of a catastrophe. Such kind of films are one of the rare film genres which usually neglect the presentation of intimate relations. Now, it seems that the associated reconstruction of love and peril of one’s life makes the intensification of feelings possible.

Generally, it is very difficult to realize the inner self of the figures through motion pictures. Therefore, some external signs have to be developed as a replacement. The film theorist Siegfried Kracauer said that the inner self can be presented only in case the presentation it can be derived from images of the external world (Kracauer 1985: 344). In regard to “romances” this may be the presentation of mirror, water, fire, forest or erotic clothes (Donner/Menningen 1987) particularly in connection with a special kind of music or even with colours. Since Hollywood invented the star system and the actors stand for certain characters, this means that in most cases they stand for certain types of lovers.

The most important parts of the romances are directed elaborately: The camera angle, the distance of framing, cut-ins and close-ups are having an effect on generating an intimate situation.

In order to emphasize intimacy between the lovers, contrasting scenes can be placed in succession: non-intimate scenes or faked love but also an initially indifference or hostility of the lovers themselves. Additionally, the “look” or the “expressiveness of the face” are of fundamental importance for the symbolization of love affairs. The classical romance which seems to be grounded on something “unexplainable” and “unspeakable” between two persons can take advantage of the film technique. Contrasted with a novel, in film, there is a better chance, firstly, to reconstruct the “falling in love” as the mythical event as it is determined to a romantic love affair. Secondly, the “falling in love” can be put in a very short way, mostly without conversation and just as a point in time. The *evolution* of the love affair is seldomly described. So, the “look on the face” functions in accordance to a generalized medium of communication (as described of Talcott Parsons). However, the difference is that this medium should not only connect the actions of the figures but also make sure that the following action series is understandable for the spectators. This is, because as from the appeared confession of love, the status quo of the characters has fundamentally changed. The way the characters are looking on each other may also indicate that the figures are not yet aware of their love, but the spectators are able to interpret this as the beginning of a probably love affair, so that they can concentrate on the circumstances how this love affair will be realized. This means, in which way the potential lovers will come together. In general, a love affair in film has always be symbolized in advance or at least at present. This is contradictory to love affairs in the social reality where the turning point of a closer relation can only be indicated later on and often not by giving an exact time.

Now, the question is, if all these features of symbolizing love in film which are often defined by the film technique itself, can influence love affairs?

II. The presentation of social reality in film

The basic question of the cinematography fiction is: What is selected to be presented and in which way is it presented? Compared with a fictional presentation in novels and dramas, a film is grounded on a third form of presentation which combines elements from both, novel

and drama. But this connection creates something totally different (Hamburger 1987: 195ff.). Movies are directed by a certain action in front of the camera and by the movement and perspective of the camera work. This reconstruction can be compared with the action and the point of view of the narrator in a novel. However, it is not clear if we should talk about a “film language” because of this correspondence. But, movies are indeed whether a “picture-based narration” or a “narrative presentation of pictures”. On one side, they create a very artificial reality, but on the other side, this technology is exceptionally in pretending *reality*. Nevertheless, pictures have no classified structure as a language has got. Although pictures refer always on something concrete they equally permit individual interpretations in a large extent. This means, the film originates from the spirit and creativity of the spectators and can not be regarded as an object.

In observing the development of the 20th century, movies took advantage of all the used communication systems (language, writing, dance and music) and the film projects adapted elements and styles from photography and literature. But, the density of symbols in film exceeds the expressiveness of other arts. Film creates a special code – the cinematography code – which is characterized by different levels of meaning. Because of the decrease of temporal, spatial and causal restrictions, understanding the film and moreover: getting really involved and affected with the film is result of the *sequence* of the presented signs. They has to be revealed while watching the film. Researches show that movies can not be understood from persons who are not familiar with this medium. How to decode a film story can only be learnt by watching films. Understanding a film is therefore dependent of the ability of interpreting the cinematography code. As Georg Lucacs said: The “Weltanschauung”, this means: the philosophy of movies is: *Anything is possible*. The categories “reality” and “fiction” are equated. Moreover, the different levels namely “reconstruction” and “meaning” of the signs provide the spectators with a great variety of interpretations.

With these remarks I like to recall the old and famous debate about the indefinite relation of reality and artificial imitation, the mimetic, which may be particularly considered with regard to the cinematography code. Actually, there is a mutual penetration of social reality and cinematography code because of the *construction* of meaning while watching a film. Due to this, we have to realize that this construction itself is influenced from the experiences of watching motion pictures. However, the reception of a film is not just an identification, but a meaningful discovery of the reality. In this process of construction and re-construction of meaning not only intellectual reflection but also emotive reflection is stimulated.

This phenomenon is supported by the special situation of the reception in cinema. “Cinema is the location where film happens” says the director Edgar Reitz (1984: 7). The dark environment with the illuminated screen still intensifies the power of imagination and therefore, the emotional experience. Cinema even deals with the fascination of watching. The special selection and perspective of action and the camera angle realize an erotic concentration. According to Seeßlen and Weil (1978:8) every film can be regarded as an erotic film because every picture and every sign is motivated erotically. But, the degree of produced emotions is also dependent of what is visible or invisible in daily life. Of course, following the presentation of intimate relations on the screen is more interesting in a culture where it is normally hidden. Nevertheless, it is the development of the cinematography code itself which decides if the pictures presented are still able to evoke a sensation. Along with this, there is a permanent change in what can still be estimated as a presentation of something “intimately” and obviously of a “taboo”. For example, showing sexual contacts was illegal and intolerable at the beginning of the movie production. In 1896, the short film “The Kiss” showed nothing else than a long kiss between two actors who were playing this very scene normally during the Broadway piece “The Widow Jones”. This film became a scandal due to its unconventional view (Lenne 1983). What was really shocking was not the action itself which was known from the stage version but its enlargement on the screen. Up to now, we can observe that the production of emotions is caused by the *way* of presentation. The romantic novelist August Schlegel already found that it was a good strategy of William Shakespeare when he modified the well-known and popular story of “Romeo and Juliet” for the stage. I quote Schlegel: Therefore, the spectators do not expect that their curiosity will be stimulated and they appreciate the concentration *on the style* of the presentation (1988: 110). On account of the fact that the cinematography experience is more dependent on the *form* than on the *plot*, Wilhelm Salber described (1977) what he called – in German – “das Mehr”, the “surplus” of the film. This means the phenomenon that the reception of the film is able to unfold wishes and fears, an extended sensation and ecstasy among the spectators. The “narration” of the camera work leads to a shift of realities which do not only affect the emotional stability but can stimulate the rational understanding. Philosophers in the Middle Ages emphasized that the mind supports the sensual perception because of its classifying and evaluating function (Küstners 1994: 273). Moreover, the analyse of the middle-age literature about courtship shows that the crucial moment in the romantic intercourse is characterized by the process of “noticing”. “Noticing love” demands a mixture between mind and emotion,

between discovery and confession, between doubt and security. In the later novels, the beginning of “falling in love” is often reflected by the point of view of one of the critical observers belonging to the royal court.

I like to raise the question, if this role of the “noticing person” is now played by the spectator of the film? The spectators often perceive the development in love relations which is still unconscious to the figures. So, the idea of love grounds on the imagination which is stimulated along with the presented action and signs to symbolize love” on the one hand and the the camera work on the other hand. This process of arousing emotions or – more exactly – of pretending that emotions can be transferred from the presentation on the screen to “the heart” of the spectators is not just a one-step flow. To give an example, I like to refer once more to the “kissing”. The question is, how can an internal sensation be translated in the cinematography code so that the spectators can sympathize with? Often, a kiss is the climax of the film narration, just the same as the show-down in a Western. On the same time, this scene should be the climax of the sensitivity of the spectators. When Auguste Rodin created his famous sculpture “The Kiss” he had already the idea that the most important thing is not the presentation of the kissing lips itself but to stimulate a dizziness while moving around the sculpture contrary to its two twisted bodies (Mechel 1993: 90). Alfred Hitchcock used a similar technique in his film “North by Northwest”: The actors Cary Grant and Eve Marie Saints are leaning against a wall and they are kissing, their bodies are turning around each other while they are gliding down. The camera is taking this scene using a counter-movement to the movement of the actors. This double turn causes the feeling of dizziness which can be compared with the dizziness during a real kiss. Nevertheless, the similarity can only be felt if the original feeling is already known. As we have said before, understanding the film is not at least a consequence of the cultural patterns and the rational capacity. But, even the capacity resulting of mental experiences has to be considered.

Of course, we can not assume that romantic conversation is based on imitating certain film scenes. I rather expect that the stimulus of a mentally and rationally noticed love through the presentation in film is able to encourage the perception of erotic signs in the social reality. Nevertheless, this would be a much stronger preparation for “falling in love” than every recalled film story could be.

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Dr. Kornelia Hahn

University of Lüneburg

Institute for Social Sciences

21332 Lüneburg – Germany

e-mail: Kornelia.Hahn@uni-lueneburg.de