The first lies in the challenge to heteronormative gender roles. Jamie refuses normative femininity, telling Dylan, “Since we’re just friends, I don’t need to be..." This assertion of autonomy, in which Jamie refuses to be defined by conventional gender roles, is significant in helping to challenge the notion that women are inherently passive in sexual situations. By refusing to conform to the expectations of heteronormative gender roles, Jamie is able to assert her own desires and boundaries in the sexual encounter, leading to a more explicit and equal negotiation of needs and desires.

Heteronormativity is a term used to capture the ways in which heterosexuality is produced as normal, natural and normative (Warner), through the “straight” line, the supposed “life line,” with which everyone is expected to align (Ahmed 19-21). It is a truism to say that romantic comedies both display and reinforce heteronormativity, but as a result of their problematization of it, they can also model and give voice to the anxieties, uncertainties and renegotiations that are being staged with this supposedly timeless institution.

Both films, then, offer a critique not simply of heteronormativity itself, but also a critique of what Lauren Berlant names “cruel optimism.” The alignment with heteronormativity that Ahmed describes is shaped by the recognition of normative, romantic, marriage-like heterosexual relationships as “good objects,” essential to a properly “good” life. But as Berlant demonstrates, this recognition is an attachment, and one which is sincerely and overly hopeful, as this object is unable to fulfill all of these hopes. This is “cruel optimism.”

In other words, there are numerous aspects of life that we believe are “good,” and enhance our lives and happiness, promising futures that we consider promising. But this connection to, say, romantic fantasies about a “happy marriage” (which is supposed “life line,” with which everyone is expected to align (Ahmed 19-21)). It is a truism to say that romantic comedies both display and reinforce heteronormativity, but as a result of their problematization of it, they can also model and give voice to the anxieties, uncertainties and renegotiations that are being staged with this supposedly timeless institution.

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Let’s Be Friends: Friendship as the Recognition of Cruel Optimism

The protagonists in Friends with Kids and Friends with Benefits critique the optimism involved in being attached to relationship-like partnerships, namely, the hope that they will fulfill most or all of the needs for romance, sex, intimacy, and so on. As a result, they participate in the kind of creative relational formation that Foucault identified as the value of friendship. Thus, this critique is thorough-going, articulate and lived, especially in the dialogue-focussed Friends with Kids, and the friendship between the two people of different sexes is transgressive and significant. The turn towards optimism at the close of both films, then, brings with it a particular significance, especially for the relationship between cruel optimism and heteronormativity.

In an articulation of self-aware and self-reflectively critical cruel optimism, Jamie says “God, I wish my life was a movie sometimes. You know, I’d never have to worry about my hair, or having to go to the bathroom. And then when I’m at my lowest point, some guy would chase me down the street, pour his heart out and...” This is a critique of the way in which romantic comedies both display and reinforce heteronormativity, but as a result of their problematization of it, they can also model and give voice to the anxieties, uncertainties and renegotiations that are being staged with this supposedly timeless institution.

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appraisal and rejection of various sensations, body parts and behaviours (well beyond PIV sex) than they are permitted in the heteronormative sex they have with potential love-interests. This level of honesty and sexual agency, especially from Jamie but also from Dylan, counters heteronormative depictions of sex, and instead presents sex as an explicit negotiation. It also reveals the extent to which heteronormative dating rituals, depicted throughout the movie, frequently undermine rather than enhance freedom because sex is situated as “coming naturally,” resulting in sex which is inherently compromising for all those involved, whatever their investments in the encounter.

The critique of cruel optimism is well-developed and articulated in Friends with Kids, primarily because it is dialogue-heavy, and depicts some of the complex realities of parent-child relationships. The main characters, Jules and Jason, do not explicitly reject fantasies about heteronormative parenting, relationship and lifestyles, as Jamie and Dylan do. Indeed, such fantasies are implicitly recognised as unachievable, but their focus is on avoiding the compulsive drudgery that seems to be associated with heteronormative parenting styles. They recognise that conventional friendships and lives because their friends, the two couples of Missy and Ben, and Leslie and Alex, are already evidence (for them, at least) of an attachment that undermines their well-being, in Berlant’s terms. Missy and Ben are in a long-term relationship, but their relationship breaks down over the course of the film, supported by the pressures of “real life” (that is, life with kids). Leslie and Alex have two children, and are deeply in love, emotionally and physically exhausted, and argue very frequently.

It is the difficult lives these couples live that shapes the protagonists’ decision to have a child together without being in a relationship with one another.

**Conclusion**

In both films, despite these robust declarations of the awareness of the traps of “cruel optimism” as attached to heteronormative love relationships, the climax is true “rom-com,” with the unusual friendships inevitably leading to love-relationships. The apparent impossibility of arranging one’s life around what Foucault identifies as a “multiplicity of relationships” (204) beyond conventional institutions becomes clear in a number of key scenes. This impossibility arises because of the recalcitrance of romantic feeling, which is situated as challenging the “sensible” and apparently overly pragmatic solutions developed by the protagonists in response to their particular situations.

Despite romantic feeling being situated as problematically encouraging people to attach to normative relationship forms that continually disappoint and require compromise, both films return to romantic feeling to suggest that if you love someone else enough, that feeling will ensure that the relationship never becomes a threat to well-being; it is, in other words, the sufficient grounds for an optimism that is not cruel. Disappointment, as manifested in the worn-down Missy and Ben in **Friends with Kids**, and in Jamie’s hapless romance with the apparently perfect but actually manipulative and self-absorbed Parker, becomes synonymous with an optimistic misrecognition of lust for love: cruel optimism resituated as the result of personal error rather than the inadequacy of the “good object” of romantic feeling, which is situated as challenging the “sensible” and apparently overly pragmatic solutions developed by the protagonists in response to their particular situations.

**Transgression to Normativity: Romantic Feeling as Real, not Optimistic**

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This exploration of the recent films *Friends with Kids* and *Friends with Benefits* has elaborated the recent turn towards depicting "unconventional" relationship and friendship styles in romantic comedies. Both films provide a critique of the cruel optimism associated with heteronormative love relationships, especially in their institutionalised form. They go beyond earlier more cynical romantic comedies such as *Annie Hall*, however, in that the protagonists do not merely recognise the inadequacies, compromises, sacrifices and dissatisfaction produced by going along with the fantasised "good object" of conventional marriage. Instead, as if following Foucault, they get creative with their relationship styles, reallocating certain forms of relating and sharing conventionally associated solely with the romantic relationship—sex and parenting—to their friendships. In both cases, however, the creative mode of relating becomes a temporary matter.

Whilst this could have been an *Annie Hall*-style challenge to the ideal of stability in relationships of all kinds, and a rethinking of the problematic equation which sees relationship worth in its longevity, it instead becomes an occasion to recuperate the cruel optimism associated with heteronormativity. The rejection of "cruel optimism" is finally depicted in both films as an overly pragmatic denial of feeling, and the "threats to well-being" which have been recognised in the critique of heteronormativity are re-situated as erroneous fantasy-nightmares: apparently the marriage-like relationship is not necessarily a threat to well-being, if you choose the right partner; and on the other hand, if you are too busy creatively fulfilling your needs, you might miss the right partner—a cruel cynicism of attachment to non-normativity, perhaps. In this way, the attachment to the critique becomes situated, in the denouement of both films—namely each man recognising that they do love the woman—as the site of "cruel optimism." For both couples, it turns out that the transgressive deployment of friendship becomes inadequate for the fulfilment of their needs apparently because of their feelings for each other, though it is never entirely clear how this stands in the way. This reproduction of the "happy object" of a marriage-style relationship, then, is primarily situated as allowing the romantic attachment to simply be whatever it "really" is.

Echoing throughout these films is a recurrent theme: the claim is that participating in conventional heteronormative arrangement of love-relationships and friendships because it is dominant could, indeed, be problematic in the way that Berlant’s notion of cruel optimism clarifies. As a pedagogical form, explicitly and self-reflexively noted by Jamie and Dylan, then, this storyline "test-drives" non-normativity only to discover heteronormativity at the heart of romantic feeling. Monogamy, heteronormativity, and profoundly normative modes of relating, here, are situated not as conformity, but as both the natural outcome of a man and a woman falling in love and a choice made from a place of knowing non-normativity and its apparent inability to fulfil desires. It thus becomes possible to choose heteronormativity because it works as an expression of the truth of romantic feeling; indeed, the implication becomes that heteronormativity is not the "good object" we are, in more and less forcible ways, aligned with and required to be attached to, but the coincidentally frequent outcome of choosing romantic feeling over other needs. The critique of cruel optimism and the depiction of non-normative styles of relating thus becomes an occasion for the reconstitution of a supposed "true" optimism, guaranteed by, in rom-com terms, finding "the one."

References


