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Like a Horse and Carriage: (Non)Normativity in Hollywood Romance
Jessica Robyn Cadwallader

Abstract

Introduction

Two recent romantic comedies—Friends with Benefits and Friends with Kids—seek to re-situate the cultural logics of marriage by representing that supposed impossibility of the supposed impossibility between men and women. These friendships' choice to engage in a variety of intimate—sex, in one case, and parenting in another—through a rejection or disenchantment with the limitations of heteronormative approaches to relationships. This initial, but of course not final, rejection of the institution of marriage in romance is obviously not entirely unheard of in the genre of romantic comedies—indeed, ambivalence about or even rejection of romantic conventions in romcoms is fairly conventional. But the shift marked by these two films lies in the explicit and thorough problematisation of the optimistic investment in the marriage-like relationship (if not marriage itself), and in the couples in both films proposing that the problem lies in the marriage-like relationship to live up to the expectation that it will fulfil all of their needs.

Heteronormativity is a term used to capture the ways in which heterosexuality is produced as normal, natural and normative (Warner), the "straight" line, the supposed "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 critiques 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." 1

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 is a function of the idea that whatever the content of the attachment, the continuity of the supposed good life means that we lose, more and less consciously, the fact that they are frequently not giving, and perhaps not capable of giving, us happiness. We remain optimistic, but this optimism is cruel, because even when we arrange our lives around these "goods" and what they promise, they will almost disappoint us, wearing us out, threatening our well-being and undermining our relationships. But we remain committed to the idea that this "good" object remains capable of filling our lives with the sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. (21)

This decision is a form of resistance to heteronormative requirements of love-relationships, situating intimate, different-sex friendship as a site of potential resistance in a similar way to Foucault's interest in the potentiality of homosexuality: "Heterosexuality is a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities... because the "slantwise" position of the [homosexual], as it were, the diagonal lines he can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light" (205). That is, as a result of these apparent transgressions of the usual line between friendship and relationship, both films lay out, though also undermine, some of the most compelling critiques of heteronormative dating and married life.

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 marriage-like relationships, namely, the hope that they will fulfill most or all of the needs for romance, sex, intimacy, parenting and so on. As a result, they participate in the kind of creative relationship-formation that Foucault identified as the value of friendship. Thus, this critique is thorough-going, articulate and lived, especially in the dialogue-focused Friends with Kids, and the friendship-based and what they enable—are depicted as transgressive and significant. The turn back towards normativity at the close of both films, then, brings with it a peculiar significance, especially for the relationship between cruel optimism and heteronormativity.

Friends with Benefits and Friends with Kids are two recent movies that, at least to begin with, explore contemporary challenges to the heteronormative monogamous coupledom formula. In both movies, a man and a woman who are already very close friends make the (apparently, according to the films, very unusual) choice to share a part of their life they usually reserve for their (potential) love-relationships: in Friends with Benefits, Jamie and Dylan begin having sex together, and in Friends with Kids, Jules and Jason have a baby together. These decisions are both made because the arrangement enables the individuals to fulfill a desire that is conventionally associated with a love-relationship, while also pursuing their love-relationships separately, enabling the fulfillment of a range of needs.

This kind of self-reflexivity goes beyond generic self-referral, however, and demonstrates both an awareness of, and engagement with, entertainment-consumption as "public pedagogy" (Giroux). Their conversation following the film critiques the role that entertainment-consumption plays, first, in the construction of heteronormativity in its broadest sense—that is, including complementary and distinct gender roles, models for romance, models for proper heterosex, and the goal-defined temporality of dating leading to commitment—and second, in the cruel optimism involved in becoming attached to heteronormativity.

In an articulation of self-aware and self-reflexively 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 we'd kiss. Happily ever after." Dylan rolls his eyes over her sentimentality and suggests that women's problematic tendency to imagine their own lives and desires through these filmic fantasies is part of what complicates sex. He suggests, that is, that women's cruel optimism with regard to relationships unnecessarily connote the shared fulfillment of sexual needs, because they perpetually laden such encounters with impossible hopes. This is reasonably well-trod ground for romantic comedies, with He's Just Not That Into You, for example, both sustaining and critiquing women's cruel optimism surrounding relationships. But uncharacteristically, Jamie challenges the implication that only women are gullible enough to form their fantasies through film, arguing that the pedagogical significance of romantic comedies for women is matched by men's sexual education through watching porn, and their resultant inability and unwillingness to fulfill women's hopes, not only in terms of romance, but also in terms of fulfilling sex. She suggests that the disjunction in men's and women's investments in heteronormative sex is the result of different attachments to different objects—easy, fulfilling sex in which women's pleasure inevitably follows from men pursuing theirs, as apparently depicted in porn, and romantic, intimate, fulfilling and relationship-oriented sex, as depicted in romantic films.

This shared critique becomes the grounds on which Dylan and Jamie decide to reject these norms and add the "benefits" of sex to their friendship because they don't like [each other] like that, and so are able to perform the "physical act [of sex],... like a game of tennis." Instead of retaining their attachment to the "happy ending: the friendship between people of different sexes. These friendships are chosen as the site for particular kinds of intimacy—sex, in one case, and parenting in another—through a rejection or disenchantment with the limitations of heteronormative approaches to relationships. This initial, but of course not final, rejection of the institution of marriage in romance is obviously not entirely unheard of in the genre of romantic comedies—indeed, ambivalence about or even rejection of romantic conventions in romcoms is fairly conventional. But the shift marked by these two films lies in the explicit and thorough problematisation of the optimistic investment in the marriage-like relationship (if not marriage itself), and in the couples in both films proposing that the problem lies in the marriage-like relationship to live up to the expectation that it will fulfil all of their needs.

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This critique is extended into their initial sex scene, which explicitly challenges the Hollywood depiction of "normal" heterosexual penis-in-vagina sex which is supposed to come naturally to both parties, through the man's activity, while the woman generally remains passive. It also challenges the generic conventions of mainstream porn, which depict men as in control, and women as extremely easily orgasmic. This depiction, then, becomes a funny and self-aware pedagogical moment which draws attention to the space that can be found in giving up the object of heteronormativity.

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 romance. He's also refused the romanticization of women's sexuality as passing and romanticizing her looks, and dissident in the expectation that they will be respected: "My nipples are sensitive, I don't like dirty talk, and if I'd known this was going to happen, I would have shaved my legs this morning." Dylan echoes her rejection of normative gender roles, refusing hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt), especially in its claim to physical control, when he responds with "My chin is ticklish, I sneeze sometimes after I come, and if I'd have known this was going to happen, I wouldn't have shaved my legs this morning." Their friendship, then, allows them greater explicitness in their requests, refusals, demands and negotiations in the encounter, and in their
appreciation 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 undermines rather than enhances authenticity, 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 cruol optimism is well-developed and articulated in Friends with Kids, primarily because it is dialogue-heavy, and depicts some of the complex realities of parentiug and 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 compulsory drudgery that seems to be associated with such relationships. They reject the possibility of conventional family lives because their friends, the two couples of Missy and Ben, and Leslie and Alex, are already evidenge (for them, at least) of an attachment that undermines their well-being, in Berlin's terms. Missy and Ben display some of the characteristics of cruel optimism, as Berlant describes them. Leslie understands Jules's and Jason's plan, summarising "you want to have a kid, but without all the shit that comes with marriage," but Leslie is insulted. She argues that Jules's and Jason's plan is an "affront to us... to all normal people who understand that marriage is the goal, the goal of marriage is making relationships work, yes, it's insulting to you and me and us in general... You don't think it's insulting to our way of life?" This appeal to "a way of life," as a justification for struggling and making sacrifices reveals this way of life as a "continuity of the form of [attachment, which] provides something of the continuity of its sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world," as Berlant puts it. Alex responds that "We don't exactly have a way of life, babe... if it's our brave new world!" This exchange goes to the heart of the film's later resolution of the question of cruel optimism. It leaves open the question, resolved by Jules and Jason, about whether the heteronormative marriage and parenting style is, in fact, a normative "way of life," an object deemed "good," which one makes sacrifices to remain attached to or aligned with; or whether heteronormativity is the simple product of romantic feeling, a "reality" denied by Jules's and Jason's supposed reliance on reason and pragmatics, at least until the climax of the film.

Transgression to Normativity: Romantic Feeling as Reel, not Optimistic

In both films, despite these robust declarations of the awareness of the traps of "cruol optimism" as attached to heteronormative love relationships, the climax is true "rom-com," with the unusual friendships inevitably becoming 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 problematical 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, in other words, is 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 hopeless romance with the apparently perfect but actually manipulative and self-absorbed Parker, becomes synonymous with an optimistic misrecognition of lust for love: cruol optimism resituated as the result of personal error rather than the inadequacy of the "good object" of heteronormative marriage. The films make conventional familial and parenting lives seem less the problem. The challenge to the "happy object" of heteronormative family life is extremely explicit. When Jules and Jason announce their plan to Leslie and Alex, they refer to the fantasy of the romantic couple, of Missy and Ben to each other physically. In both films, the achievement of coupledom out of friendship is treated as a successful reconfiguration of heteronormative love-relationships, beyond normativity, and certainly beyond the dangers of a cruel optimism. Heteronormative love-relationships become no longer the problem. The problem is, instead, the protagonists' fantasies about them, their desires for more and other styles of relationships, and, most of all, the privileging of creative, pragmatic reason over the inevitable reality of their romantic feelings.

In Friends with Benefits, it is Jamie's unconventional mother, who has herself rejected normative relationship styles, who reminds Jamie of her attachment to the "happy object" of a conventional relationship, and warns her that her friendship with Dylan might prevent her from finding her fantasied love-relationship. This motherly advice, then, functions to remind Jamie of her original optimistic attachment, and situate her current friendship—for all of her enjoyment of it—as problematic. Dylan's sister is instead amused that Dylan's pragmatic commitment to his friends-with-benefits arrangement with Jamie blocks his recognition that he is already in a love-relationship, brought about by his feelings for Jamie. In Friends with Kids, it is Jules's jealousy, a hallmark of conventional monogamous couples, that sparks the catalyst for the film's resolution. In Jules's case, Alex responds that "We don't exactly have a way of life, babe... if it's our brave new world!" This exchange goes to the heart of the film's later resolution of the question of cruel optimism. It leaves open the question, resolved by Jules and Jason, about whether the heteronormative marriage and parenting style is, in fact, a normative "way of life," an object deemed "good," which one makes sacrifices to remain attached to or aligned with; or whether heteronormativity is the simple product of romantic feeling, a "reality" denied by Jules's and Jason's supposed reliance on reason and pragmatics, at least until the climax of the film.

Conclusion


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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 fulfill 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