

Susanna Paasonen

Love, merinques, and performing seals – Four Weddings and a Funeral as a postmodern romance

Four Weddings and a Funeral, directed by Mike Newell and written by Richard Curtis in 1994 was one of the most popular British films ever. I discuss the film in relation to wedding ceremonies, the wedding industry, rituals of pairing, romantic comedy, romantic aesthetics, and "postmodern" strategies of parody and pastiche. I consider Four Weddings a neo-conservative romantic comedy that uses liberal gestures in order to attract as wide an audience as possible.

Norman Denzin, writing on Rob Reiner's *When Harry Met Sally*, has defined its characters as "mid-century people locked in the twilight years of the twentieth century. Unable to invent new solutions to the problems of love and sex, they fall back on the old clichés, and (...) meet the future by turning their heads (and their hearts) towards the past." "Reading the present through the myths (the songs, movies) of the past, they hunger for a love that lasts, a love that sweeps you off your feet, a love that weds sexuality with feeling, intimacy, and commitment." This is a good definition of *Four Weddings* as well. The film is packed with nostalgia and longing for this true love, unity, secure relationships. And yes, it does this in a most excessive manner, underlining all its clichés, drawing quotation marks around it all. Rather ambivalently it seems both wanting to have its cake and eat it – both to make visible and mock the clichés of romance and yet to do it all, once more, from the heart.

In *Four Weddings* we witness all together ten unions, and one burial. Even the funerals are a celebration of love – only this love is not a heterosexual one. As it is put in the film "Gareth used to prefer

funerals to weddings. He said it was easier to get enthusiastic about a ceremony one had an outside change of eventually being involved in." This joke actually gets to heart of the matter, as in this film gay funerals serve a function equivalent to hetero-weddings, expressing the depth of emotions felt for one another, sacralizing the love and making it public. This is done in a church, in the presence of a priest and a congregation. And, once again, homosexual love becomes linked with melancholy, death, loss, mourning – and longing. This intrinsically heterosexist film uses also its one gay couple as a liberal gesture.

In *Four Weddings* stiff wedding ceremonies, conventions, and especially meringue bridal gowns are ridiculed, but this very imagery still dominates the film's visual landscape, molding it into a themepark of heterosexual romance. The ideological core of romantic weddings – insitutionalization and celebration of a heterosexual couple and a family-to-be, the promises of eternal love and fidelity – are left intact. In fact, the whole film embraces and celebrates these very values.

Four Weddings is a most accustomed boy meets girl – boy loses girl – boy gets girl -narrative. It tries to convince us, that even in the age of premarital sex, the decline of marital ideology, with the influence of feminism, lesbian and gay rights activism it is still possible and jolly nice to do things the traditional way – and even to be dandy about it.

Maaretta Tukiainen

Nice or Rebellious? Romances Between Women in Girls' School Films *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931) and *Olivia* (1951)

Traditionally romance is regarded as a discursive narrative which aims at reinforcing the heterosexual model of relationships. In a romantic plot achieving the idealized love object is delayed by various obstacles and difficulties the conquering of which eventually implies the celebration of the ideal partners' mutual union and the reproduction of the heterosexual matrix. The essence of romance is perceiving the idealized other as the object of desire.

The dominance of the heterosexual model in western societies has largely contributed to the fact that also other kinds of relationships, friendship between women included, have been perceived in terms of the heterosexual matrix, i.e. prominently through possession and/or exclusion. On the other hand, psychoanalytic film theory has made a distinction between desire and identification in the analysis of pleasures of spectatorship. The assumption, to put it roughly, is that the bearer of the look either desires the object of the look or identifies with her/him.

Girls' school films *Mädchen in Uniform* (Leontine Sagan, 1931) and *Olivia* (Jacqueline Audry, 1951) challenge as well the traditional model of spectatorship as the schema of heterosexual romance. They concentrate on exclusively depicting relationships between women. The present paper discusses the various versions of romances constructed by these films.

In both films the main character is a teenage girl who after arriving at a boarding school falls in love with her female teacher. In the course of the narrative the women's mutual romance gradually turns out to be quite different from the traditional heterosexual model. On the one hand, these films em-

phasize emotions instead of plain genital sexuality. On the other hand, they simultaneously connect the emotional expressions to conspicuously corporeal transactions: food, clothes and paying attention to each other's health display here the concrete spheres of caring.

Thus, the romances constructed in these films combine desire and nursing. They position the woman both as nursing and idealized figure and, at the same time, as the object and the bearer of desire. Consequently they process the traditional concept of womanhood, i.e. the division between madonna and whore, good mother and bad mother. They conceptualize also the idea of new woman as different from the one of Victorian girls' school literature and screwball comedy: in these films the new woman is not dressed in the masquerade of the antiromantic "tomboy". On the contrary, in them the confession which most bluntly challenges the dominant conceptions is articulated by the least obvious candidate – namely the emphatically "feminine" and emotional nice girl.

Mari Pajala

Vanity Fair?

Little Women and the Pleasures of the Costume Film

The success of the 1996 Jane Austen films indicates the continuous appeal of the costume film. In the 1990s this genre, previously sneered at by critics and reviewers, has gained growing positive critical attention. *Little Women* (USA 1994), based on L.M. Alcott's girls' novel classic, is a relatively "traditional" film, and is not usually regarded as belonging to the group of "progressive" costume films of the 1990s. As such it is a tempting target for the study of the pleasures of the costume film.

Historical films tend to be called nostalgic, with a negative flavour in the definition. Nostalgia is perceived to glorify the past, to represent it in accordance with today's expectations. Accurate historical realism is not, however, even the goal of the costume film. No doubt, *Little Women* with its depiction of

idyllic domesticity and country sceneries might be called nostalgic, but this definition does not say much of the film. In this paper my attempt is to read the nostalgic features of the film through the concept of utopia.

Little Women can be read as a utopia of matriarchy. This trend is present in the novel itself, but in the film matriarchal features emerge even more prominently. I therefore juxtapose the film with the feminist revisions of Alcott's novel. In film studies utopia is often attributed to so called non-representative signs in a given film. With reference to Caryl Flinn I discuss the importance of music in *Little Women* in defining the relations between family community and gaining independence, the central themes of the film. The visual pleasures of the film I approach by connecting them with the depiction of women's appearance and dresses. The typical incoherence in the costume film between historical authenticity and costumes tailored to please the expectations of the audience is displayed also in *Little Women*. I discuss the spectator's relation to the female characters of the film with respect to Jackie Stacey's thinking of differences between women as distances which provoke fascination.

Camp attitude is obviously one possibility to consider such "old-fashioned" film as *Little Women*, to derive pleasure from it and, at the same time, to retain distance to the values displayed in it. Cultural products cherished by camp are often marginalized in some sense. Also girls' culture can be regarded as a sort of "a room of one's own", a hiding place from the field of the preferred values of society.

Markku Soikkeli

Through Eros to Sameness The Generation-X Film and the Structure of Romance

Harmony in postmodern society is based on our readiness to empathically recognize types and role models. The smallest social reference unit, available for an individual to

imitate a certain "type", is the couple relation formed by romance. Romances in literature and films advise us to extend the emotions of solidarity and altruism from the family to a larger social field. The seeking of type normalcy is best exemplified by the so called Generation-X films, which are narratives of life of ritual consuming. Generation-X films, with basis on romance, include e.g. *Before Sunrise*, *Singles* and *Bodies*, *Rest & Motion*.

Generation-X is a conceptual effort to define the definition-challenging group of people aged 20-40, who rather share their consuming habits than their attitudes. In 1992 "twenty something" boom emerged in the USA, which more perceptively than before acknowledged the consuming potential of the generation in their twenties. The production of tv series and films dealing with young adults' everyday was commenced in the similar spirit as "thirty something" products earlier. X-generation entertainment circulates around problems of making work into hobby and retaining love as eternal dating. Characters in generation-X films belong to high middle class, if not to upper class, but seem to float in a state of imaginary classlessness and freedom in which successful living equals naturally easy and safe heterosexual life. Romance, to them, guarantees sameness, an us-spirit, which is self-generated and which distinguishes "us" from the rest of people.

Translations: Veijo Hietala