

Nora Ephron and the Romantic Comedy

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Introduction

In a scene near the end of *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), Sam Baldwin (Tom Hanks) hosts a dinner party for his sister and brother-in-law at his new home in Seattle. The group is discussing the film *An Affair To Remember* (1957). As Sam's sister Suzy (Rita Wilson) recalls why she loves the film, she becomes overwhelmed and begins sobbing her way through a recounting of that film's powerful final scene, while the men stare at her with concern. This scene in *Sleepless* highlights an important theme running through the film, that men and women experience and engage with art differently. While the suggestion that men and women have different points of view is not an uncommon or incisive idea, it is an integral subject within the film. In another earlier scene in *Sleepless*, Annie (Meg Ryan) and her friend Becky (Rosie O'Donnell) are watching *An Affair to Remember* on TV, when Becky cries "Men never get this movie!" One year prior to the release of *Sleepless*, author John Gray published his blockbuster self-help book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992), which deals with the discord of perception between the sexes. Judging from both the popularity¹ of this book and *Sleepless*, these differences were clearly resonant in the collective consciousness of the consumer public in the early 1990s. Going back to the 70s and 80s film scholars like Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane used psychoanalytic theory to explore how social frameworks are influenced and reinforced by the audience's fascination with the magic and spectacle of film.

Sleepless director Nora Ephron discussed the Rita Wilson scene in a September 30, 1993 seminar at the American Film Institute moderated by Lynn Roth, "You know the scene where Rita Wilson tells the story about *An Affair to Remember* and starts to cry? There's no reason for

¹ *Sleepless in Seattle* has grossed \$126,680,884 domestically and \$227,799,884 worldwide. According to publisher Harper Collins' website as of May 28 2020, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* has sold over 15 million copies since its first publication.

it. It doesn't move the plot along. But you just can't imagine the movie without it, because that's what the movie is. All the little themes of this movie come together in that scene—about women and men and how different they are” (162). In the introduction of the 1975 article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* Laura Mulvey begins her analysis with the idea that film “reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle” (837) Mulvey's aim is to attempt a theory that challenges the cinema of the past through an analysis of the unconscious way our patriarchal society has influenced film form. Mulvey makes the argument that female spectatorship moves back and forth between a passive feminine position and an active yet regressive masculine position. Where Mulvey reasoning stems from a psychoanalytic approach, Mary Ann Doane works to investigate the representation of female spectatorship in film genres specifically addressed to women. By referencing Hollywood romances of the 50s Ephron enters this debate about women's perspectives in film.

Interestingly, Ephron was initially hired as a fourth writer on *Sleepless*, which already had another director and leading lady attached. Regarding reading the initial script she said, “I looked at it and it was a very gloopy script. It was nothing like the movie you saw—nothing like it. It was not a comedy at all” (161). Ephron described how in the original script the father makes the phone call to the radio station, “He not only made one phone call, he made six phone calls, and they all went like this: ‘I'm so sad and droopy. My wife died and I don't know what to do.’[...] It was an unmakeable movie because no male actor would ever have played a wuss like this. Ever” (161). Within forty-eight hours of handing over her revised script for *Sleepless in Seattle*, Ephron says, “It was like a teeny weeny explosion.” Every agent and actor in Hollywood

wanted to be a part of *Sleepless* except for the female lead and director. “I think he knew it had become a comedy and I don’t think he thought it should be a comedy. So off he went, and when the dust settled they offered it to me to direct” (162).

In *Movies about the Movies: Hollywood Reflected*, Christopher Ames asserts that “all Hollywood movies are about Hollywood, in that they contribute to the larger story of film and celebrity that gives Hollywood its complex meaning. Film audiences read the literal plot of a movie simultaneously with that developing meta-narrative of Hollywood, to which each film contributes a piece” (2). The focus of Ames’ book is on Hollywood movies that both take place in Hollywood and make it their subject. The subject matter of *Sleepless* isn’t concerned with Hollywood, nor does it take place there, however it is preoccupied with existing Hollywood films like *An Affair to Remember*. *Sleepless in Seattle* fits into Ames’ argument that “Each film we view adds to the repertoire of impressions that we bring to bear in envisioning Hollywood itself” (2). *Sleepless*, and the Hollywood films like it, foreground their own mythology, because film is a twentieth-century medium, and the discourses of magic, illusion and wonder still influence how the movie going experience is depicted.

Ephron spoke about how she was obsessed with the word “timeless” while working on *Sleepless in Seattle*. She said, “I was determined to make a movie that if you looked at it in twenty years you wouldn’t necessarily know when it was made. You wouldn’t say, ‘Oh, god, look at her pants, this has to be 1993’” (165). Through the use of referential touchstones like the nods to *An Affair to Remember*, as well as music from other classic romantic films (“As Time Goes By” from *Casablanca* for one), Ephron draws on the repertoire of impressions that we bring to bear when envisioning Hollywood itself, as Ames describes. Ephron uses these

references like tent poles, supporting and holding her film's narrative with artifacts of Hollywood's past. Weaving these allusions to classic Hollywood romantic films within the narratives of her own work, Nora Ephron presents her own personal version of the romantic comedy, one that is fundamentally inseparable from her relationship with the romantic films of Hollywood's past.

This discussion of Hollywood's meta-narrative gives way to what Robert Stam terms "the genre of self-consciousness" (127). Stam makes the argument that these self-conscious works exhibit their own condition of artifice, by showing the fictional world as an authorial construct set up against a background of literary tradition and convention (127). The dismissal of self-conscious works relates to a general hostility to the comic mode, as if by playing with its own conventions, fictions become suspiciously self-gratifying. "Film criticism as well has tended to downplay both the tradition and the creative potentialities of reflexivity in the cinema. The mainstream of film criticism, both academic and journalistic, continues to be subtended by the assumption that truly serious films must be realistic representations concerning plausible characters set in a believable social context" (127-129). In Stam's view, critics and journalists writing about film have tended to focus on realistic and representational films, and in neglecting a discussion about the historic and artistic power of reflexive fictions, similar to the way romantic comedies are viewed by critics. Through the use of reflexive techniques in her work Ephron is calling attention to the film medium's condition of artifice. Having characters within her films watch and discuss actual existing films Ephron is able to create a dialogue with her audience that relies on said audiences' understanding of how cinema operates and not on a supposed realism presented in representational films.

“Reflexive fictions call attention to their own artifice and operations, refusing a transparent, self-effacing language that opens quietly onto the world [...] by seeing themselves not as nature’s slaves but as fiction’s masters, the reflexive artists cast doubt on the central assumptions of mimetic art” (129). In this view, art that claims to portray real life is immediately rendered suspicious. *Sleepless* is a film that by its very existence calls attention to its place in the larger story of film and celebrity, all of which add to the story of mythic Hollywood. A work of fiction that claims to render an accurate portrait of human existence does so knowing it is a work of fiction, and certain films make their audiences aware of this knowledge. Films like *Sherlock Jr.* (Buster Keaton, 1924), *8 1/2* (Federico Fellini, 1963) or *Masculine, Feminine* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1966) foreground the process of film production; Stam writes “Cinema is a composite language by virtue of its diverse matters of expression[...] sequential photography, music, phonetic sound, noise—and thus ‘inherits’ all the art forms associated with these matters of expression” (131). A composite language wherein any medium or work of art actively makes use of all the elements that make film art: Images photographed on plastic tape strung together, viewed at twenty-four frames per second, using music and the spoken word. Photography, music and dialogue, acting, writing, makeup, lighting; each individual branch of the arts, all three of these mediums combine to make a film a film. In Stam’s view, reflexive artists like Cervantes or Godard use these elements, making use of the widest range of sources, taking high and low materials and shaping them into art, “seducing minor genres into brilliance” (131). In *Sleepless*, Ephron makes a variety of references to other films, to both illuminate the narrative of *Sleepless* but also to call attention to its own construction. In this way *Sleepless* is a reflexive work, and through this self awareness, has the ability to subvert the generic tendencies of the conventional

romantic comedy. Traditional romantic comedies are centered on main characters who meet daunting obstacles in their pursuit of the object of their desire. In *Sleepless* Ephron's male protagonist Sam only desires being left alone, a negative desire that challenges traditional gender norms of the romantic comedy, leaving the door open for Ephron to represent female subjectivity in a way that expands and evolves the romantic comedy genre.

In discussing *Sleepless In Seattle*, our aim is to look at how this film works as a genre piece belonging to the category of romantic comedies, and to look at how *Sleepless* both follows the generic tendencies and subverts them. We will be engaging with the work of Stanley Cavell, particularly his book *Pursuits of Happiness*, on the love story and what Cavell terms "comedies of remarriage"(1). In addition we will refer to the book *The Desire to Desire* by Mary Anne Doane, discussing her thoughts on female spectatorship and female desire and how it works within the construction of the love story and the romantic comedy. Lastly, on the topic of *Sleepless* and the romantic comedy, we will consider essays written by Deborah Knight and Flo Leibowitz discussing why critics tend to be hostile to sentimentality. Through an interrogation of these resources, the objective of this paper is to deliberate on the common traits within the love story, how *Sleepless in Seattle* adheres to these criteria, and how the film uses these established conventions to diverge from the norms of the genre.

Another objective of this paper is to look at *Sleepless* as a self-aware picture about how we see movies. It is important to this analysis to view *Sleepless* as a film uninterested in definitions and more concerned with the processual inter-animation of texts. Robert Stam, in his book *An Introduction to Film Theory*, asserts that intertextuality theory is best seen as an answer to the limitations both of textual analysis and of genre theory. With *Sleepless in Seattle*, Ephron

makes use of "intertextuality," defined by Stam as "dynamically orchestrating pre-existing texts and discourses" (203), allowing for dialogic relationships to meld between other arts and media.

In the final section of this paper I will compare *Sleepless* with Ephron's 1998 film *You've Got Mail*. Highlighting Ephron's authorship to demonstrate another way she creates within the genre of the romantic comedy. I will be discussing how Ephron uses aspects of the genre differently in each film, and highlighting her use of reflexive techniques in both. I will discuss Stam's theories on reflexivity as they relate to *You've Got Mail's* references to Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*. Through a reading Cavell and Doane, I will consider the ways in which Nora Ephron portrays male and female spectatorship *You've Got Mail*. Lastly I will discuss the importance of technology's influence on the relationships in *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You've Got Mail*.

More than making films about the different perspectives of men and women, or merely about interpersonal relationships in *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You've Got Mail* Nora Ephron is creating movies about the movies. They are movies about the magic of movies. Ephron's film's are works of art about how men and women perceive the images projected on the silver screen. *Sleepless* and *You've Got Mail* are films about both the author and the audience's relationship with film.

I. The Romantic Comedy

In *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell discusses his experiences with, and his readings of seven Hollywood films released between 1934 and 1949, films he labels "comedies of remarriage".

The comedy of remarriage is a successor to the concerns of Shakespearean romantic comedies, Cavell writes,

“The genre of remarriage is an inheritor of the preoccupations and discoveries of Shakespearean romantic comedy, especially as that work has been studied by, first among others, Northrop Frye... Frye follows a long tradition of critics in distinguishing between Old and New Comedy: while both, being forms of romantic comedy, show a young pair overcoming individual and social obstacles to their happiness, figured as a concluding marriage that achieves individual and social reconciliations” (1).

Frye writes that “The action of New Comedy tends to become probable rather than fantastic, and it moves toward realism and away from myth and romance” (451). New Comedy stresses the young man’s efforts to overcome obstacles posed by an older man to win the young woman of his choice, whereas Old Comedy emphasizes the role of the heroine, who may hold the key to the successful conclusion of the plot. In this way Cavell situates the comedy of remarriage as being more closely related to Old Comedy, because of the importance of the woman. Cavell points out that comedies of remarriage are significantly different from either New or Old Comedy by casting as its heroine a married woman, and the object of the plot is not to get the pair together, but to get them back together.

Sleepless differs slightly from Cavell’s comedy of remarriage in that the objective of the plot is not to get Annie and Sam *back* together, rather the object is to get them together in the first place. Even though Annie and Sam aren’t married, the weight of marriage is present in that Sam is a widower and Annie is engaged. It is interesting to note at this point that even though the characters Annie and Sam don’t get together until *Sleepless*’ conclusion, the actors Meg Ryan

and Tom Hanks are being reunited in terms of the fact that *Sleepless in Seattle* is the second time they've been paired as a lead romantic couple. *Joe Versus the Volcano* (John Patrick Shanley, 1990) is a romantic comedy about a man played by Hanks, who after recently learning he is dying of a rare disease, accepts a financial offer to travel to a South Pacific island and throw himself into a volcano in a ritualistic sacrifice. Ephron inserts a subtle nod to this immediately following the bi-coastal radio wave meet cute by highlighting a passing sailboat outside Sam and Jonah's home, a sailboat that subtly evokes the yacht Joe Banks and Patricia Graynamore board for their journey to Waponi Woo. Furthermore it is interesting to consider that Joe Banks encounters two other characters played by Meg Ryan, Joe's coworker DeDe and Patricia's sister Angelica. If we consider these previous matchings, *Sleepless in Seattle* does align with Cavell's comedy of remarriage.

Sleepless in Seattle relates to Old Comedy and to the comedy of remarriage in that the role of the film's heroine Annie is key to the successful conclusion of the plot. It isn't until Annie is able to dump her fiance Walter, and embark on her rendezvous with Sam at the top of the Empire State Building that the film can come to its conclusion. The plot of *Sleepless* is driven by Annie's pursuit of true love. *Sleepless* is about love and destiny, fate versus accident, and the magical being victorious over the mundane. In her book *A Fine Romance: Five Ages of Film Feminism*, Patricia Mellencamp addresses the power of Annie's agency: "Only when they behave 'like in the movies' can they find each other. Why? Because 'true love' becomes their only motivation" (92).

Sleepless in Seattle opens with an extreme long shot of Sam and his son Jonah (Ross Malinger) atop a grassy hill standing at the grave of their wife and mother, Maggie (Carey

Lowell). Sam explains to Jonah and to the audience how and why she died. “Mommy got sick and it happened just like that. There’s nothing anybody could do. It isn’t fair. There’s no reason, but if we start asking ‘why’ we go crazy.” It isn’t clear until the camera cranes upward, revealing the city of Chicago and the other mourners present, setting these characters in a world where they feel stranded and alone. Ephron uses this selective framing to illustrate Sam’s loneliness and suffering, but also gives the audience hope by contrasting this isolation with the vastness of the world and its possibilities. This opening scene followed by the opening credit sequence, set to the song “As Time Goes By” (Jimmy Durante), establishing the expectations of a Hollywood melodrama, with its narrative riding on the audience’s expectations of a happy ending.

After the opening sequence a title card tells the audience we are in Baltimore, eighteen months later. Ephron introduces us to Annie and Walter, taking separate cars to Annie’s parents’ home for Christmas Eve dinner to announce their engagement. From this introduction, putting Annie and Walter in separate vehicles, Ephron is signaling to the audience that this couple will not be together. We find more foreshadowing in the scene immediately following Annie and Walter’s engagement announcement, when Annie’s mother Barbara (Le Clanché du Rand) takes her to try on her old wedding dress. “The Historical Society wanted this, and I never would give it to them.” Barbara says, “I noticed these things were back in fashion.”

This long continuous shot begins framed in a long mirror, and as Barbara carefully removes the dress from its box the camera slowly pans around the attic-like room, decorated by old lamps draped with colorful scarves, fancy dresses from a bygone era, a tailor’s dress form wearing pearls, and twinkling white string lights, all of which imbue the scene with an ethereal and magical quality. Barbara asks Annie how she and Walter met as the camera settles on the

pair. "It's silly really," Annie says, "One day we both ordered sandwiches from the same place, and he got my lettuce and tomato on whole wheat, which of course he was allergic to, and I got his lettuce and tomato on white." "How amazing." her mother says. "It really is, isn't it." Annie replies, "You make a million decisions that mean nothing, then one day you order takeout and it changes your life." "Destiny takes a hand!" sighs Barbara. "Mom. Destiny is something we invented because we can't stand the fact that everything that happens is accidental. It wasn't a sign, it was a coincidence." As the music subtly begins to swell, the two move closer to the camera to see themselves in the mirror. Mom pulls the wedding gown over Annie's head and tells her the story of her first encounter with Annie's father in Atlantic City: "He held my hand. At one point I looked down and I couldn't tell which fingers were his and which were mine, and I knew." "What?" "You know, magic... it was magic." "Magic?" Annie says. The two come together for an embrace, when Annie accidentally rips the seam of the gown's sleeve. At this moment the long shot cuts for the first time in this scene, and we see Annie and her mother close-up in the mirror's reflection. Annie gasps "It's a sign!" her mother reminds her, "You don't believe in signs." It is in this scene where the ideas of magic and true love are introduced, for both the audience and the characters in the film.

In Cavell's theory of the comedy of remarriage, the heroine is a married woman (or engaged in Annie's case), whose goals and desires are central to the successful completion of the plot. Central to the plot of *Sleepless* is Annie's search for that mythical "true love." When we first meet Annie she shows no sign of this longing, but now that the seed of the idea of this intangible magical romance has been brought to her attention she will spend the remainder of the film pursuing it.

Mary Ann Doane writes that the “love story is, paradoxically, both central to and a marginal discourse within the classical Hollywood cinema” (96). It is central in that the couple is a constant figure of Hollywood’s rhetoric and some form of heterosexual pact constitutes its privileged mode of resolution. The love story is marginal in that it is associated with its status as a feminine discourse; it purportedly speaks to a female spectator. However, *Sleepless in Seattle* cannot be viewed purely as a woman’s film. As Mellencamp points out, *Sleepless* is about taking the melodrama of *An Affair to Remember* and manipulating its heartrending conclusion into a joyful one, turning melodrama into a romantic comedy as a comparison between real life and the movies (97). Ephron refutes the idea herself: “Well, *Sleepless* is not a women’s movie [...] *Sleepless* is a date movie, a married-couple movie, a ‘I want to be in love’ movie” (170).

For Doane, female desire is a necessary premise of the love story’s structure, presupposing a desiring subjectivity and emblemizing both absence and distance. Doane writes, “Like the maternal melodrama, the love story activates an entire apparatus of waiting, near misses, separations, and accidental meetings... but unlike the maternal melodrama, the distance between the subject and the object of desire is not always measured against an imaginary plenitude or originary unity” (112). In *Sleepless* the symbolic distance is both literally and metaphorically represented by the whole of the contiguous United States, and the absence that motivates the subject, Annie, is the absence of true love.

Doane writes “Technology makes it possible to represent the absent presence so essential to the construction of the love story” (113). By representing various technologies of communication as malevolent and threatening, telephones for example, can signify the very separation and distance conducive to desire, but as Doane asserts, they are also the ground for

numerous misunderstandings, representing the difficulties of communication. Technology in these films first seems to heighten the anguish but eventually becomes the cause of this anguish. This theory can be applied to *Sleepless in Seattle* if we look at how Ephron makes use of the radio in Annie's car. The car radio is a technology of communication that denotes the distance between Annie and the object of her desire. Through the radio Annie is given the possibility of desiring, but the ways in which that desire is narrativized suggests that it is an imaginary desire, mainly because it occurs outside the boundaries of her impending marriage to Walter. In this way Annie's desire is nourished by an overactive imagination, and threatens to put her engagement to Walter in jeopardy (113-114).

The emphasis on the threatening aspects of an untethered female imagination and on the woman's excessive relation to fiction is, in a way, an attempt to contain female desire and to magnify the distance between that desire and the real (115). For *Sleepless* it is Annie's desire for true love, and inability to resign herself to marrying Walter that brings upon the film's conclusion. "In a patriarchal society, the myth of romantic love is always there to act as an outlet for any excess energy the woman may possess, to, somewhat paradoxically, domesticate her," writes Doane (115). In this case the notion of romantic love is in conflict with the domestic work expected of women, and as Doane notes, this is a structuring contradiction, which generates others. Ephron subtly subverts this "domestication" by resolving the conflict of romantic love and domestic work, making it Annie Reed's job as a journalist to follow the story of the little boy who called the radio station.

After Jonah's Christmas wish phone call to Dr. Marsha Fieldstone's call-in radio show, Ephron takes us into the office of the Baltimore Sun where Annie works. Becky reads from the

news wire, “Listen to this: phone service in the greater Chicago area was tied up for two hours Christmas Eve when some kid calls a phone-in radio show and says that his dad needs a new wife. Two-thousand women called the station asking for the guy’s number.” The two male journalists mutter, “Jesus,” as Annie chimes in, “I heard it! This kid calls up and says, ‘My dad needs a wife.’ And the shrink-ette practically forces the guy onto the phone and says ‘Do you want to talk about it?’ Then he says, ‘No, as a matter of fact I don’t.’ And then suddenly for no reason at all he starts to talk about how much he loved his wife and how he just fell in love with her, like he was one of those cows in Michigan.” Annie goes on, “I was listening to him talk about how much he loved his wife, and suddenly I was crying.” Becky, noticing Annie’s interest in the story, tells her “You should write something about this.” “About what?” asks Annie. “Whatever it is.”

The love story, in Doane’s view, requires that the male character undergo a process of feminization by his mere presence in the film. According to Doane, male stars who tend to be cast as the lead in these love stories are not chosen for their “masculine” qualities. Doane writes, “Men in the love story frequently do ‘act like women’ insofar as they are attentive to detail, minute incidents, and the complexities of inter-subjective relations” (116). Tom Hanks is an actor famous for his “everyman” quality, rendering a personal and relatable quality in each character he plays. His role in *Sleepless* couldn’t exactly be described as feminine either. Critic Roger Ebert writes “Tom Hanks keeps a certain detached edge to his character, which keeps him from being simply a fall guy.” For Sam, the character in *Sleepless in Seattle*, there are examples of the characteristics Doane describes as feminine. Feminization of the male in the love story serves a different function from implicitly patronizing and ultimately repressive behavior, Doane

writes “What is fascinating about this process is the supposition that underlies it: that men in the love story are what women would want them to be, and what they want the to be is like themselves” (116).

We can see this in *Sleepless*, the stoic and depressed Sam Baldwin demonstrates cliché characteristics of masculinity in the opening scenes, scoffs at the mere suggestion of talk therapy or support groups, preferring to work through the pain rather than finding help. Interestingly when Sam opens up to the radio show host Dr. Marcia Fieldstone, he begins to show his attentiveness to detail, minute incidents, and the complexities of inter-subjective relations, the layers of femininity Doane asserts male characters in the love story embody. Sam begins to explain the little details that made him fall in love with his wife, “Well, it was a million tiny little things, that when you added them all up it meant that we were supposed to be together. And I knew it. I knew it from the very first time I touched her. It was like coming home, the only home I’d ever known. I was just taking her hand to help her out of a car, and I knew it. It was like magic.” Annie says the word magic at the same time as Sam. This is the precise moment where Annie and the audience too, falls in love with Sam/Hanks, when he becomes what they would want him to be. Doane writes, “The feminization of the male in the love story facilitates the female spectator’s divided identification with both the man and the woman—the man desiring the woman, the woman desired by the man” (117).

II. *An Affair To Remember*, Melodrama and Crimes of Sentimentality

An Affair to Remember (1957) is a film that looms large over *Sleepless*, casting its shadow over nearly every aspect of the film. From the plot point of having Sam and Annie meet atop the

Empire State Building as Deborah Kerr and Cary Grant were to have, to the characters in *Sleepless* actively talking about and making references to *Affair*. It may serve some use to discuss *Affair* in a bit more detail. In his essay *Film, Emotion, and Genre*, Noël Carroll establishes some generalizations about film and what he calls “garden-variety emotions” (218). Carroll states that these emotions, like fear, hatred and sorrow are central elements of the film experience as we know it. Carroll writes “Emotion supplies such a pervasive coloration to our movie experience that it may fly in under the radar screen. But a little apperceptive introspection quickly reveals that throughout our viewing of a film we are generally in some emotional state or other, typically one prompted and modulated by what is on screen” (218-219). Part of Carroll’s theory is that emotions organize perception, guiding the audience’s attention to the pertinent aspects of the story by selectively focusing our awareness to the features of the story that fall under the criteria of the reigning emotional state. Carroll writes, “in order to be an appropriate object of the emotion in question, the relevant object must meet certain necessary conditions” (221). In other words, for an audience to feel pity for a character, for example, the audience must believe that the character has suffered some misfortune. Carroll’s thinking here is that virtually every instance of our emotional engagement with film can be tracked as responses to many different elements of film articulation. Carroll states, “Perhaps empirical credibility for my theoretical proposals can be derived by illustrating what these hypotheses might facilitate with respect to the analysis of certain genres” (225). The argument here is that certain genres appear to have inherent preordained and specifiable emotional states they intend to elicit from audiences. Carroll writes “Sometimes these genres are named by the very emotion it is their purpose to arouse” (225). For the remainder of the chapter Carroll reviews some of the

applications for his theory in regards to the genres of suspense, horror, and melodrama. It is in Carroll's application of his theory to the melodrama where he specifically discusses *An Affair to Remember*. I believe that by reviewing Carroll's reading of *Affair* we can have a clearer view of the impact *Affair* makes on *Sleepless*, and importantly, a rubric by which to discuss *Sleepless* in terms of emotion and genre, and how *Sleepless* subverts the predictive criteria expected of a romantic comedy.

“In *An Affair to Remember* the female protagonist, Terry (Deborah Kerr), is struck down by a car on her way to a long awaited rendezvous with her lover Nicky (Cary Grant). Their meeting, atop the Empire State Building, is supposed to symbolize their commitment to each other. Terry fails to make the appointment because of her accident. Terry's old boyfriend (Richard Denning) wants to tell Nicky what happened, but Terry won't allow him. She feels that if Nick learns that she has become disabled, his reaction will be pity, not love. Her silence is, in other words principled. She does not want to take advantage of Nicky's sense of obligation. We may feel that Terry's course of action is ill advised. But we admire her for her principles at the same time we pity her. Meanwhile, Nicky is becoming more and more embittered.

Perhaps the most emotionally fraught scene in the film comes at the end. Nicky still does not realize that Terry is disabled. He visits her apartment to deliver a shawl that his grandmother has bequeathed to Terry. He is still very hurt and angry. But just as he is about to leave, he realizes that Terry is disabled, that that's the reason why she missed their rendezvous, and, we presume, he also realizes that she didn't inform him of a self-sacrificing desire to protect him.

None of this is said. The audience infers that this is going on in Nicky's mind. Compactly, in a few seconds of screen time, this device encourages the audience to review the whole saga of Terry's adversity and nobility, jerking tears from man and woman alike" (226-227).

Carroll begins this application by identifying the dominating emotions that the genre aims to instill in its audiences. Carroll states the difficulty in isolating a single package of emotions that apply to the melodrama. He writes, "there is a relatively clear class of melodramas, often called 'tearjerkers,' that take as their subject matter what are loosely called 'interpersonal relationships' and that appear to call forth certain massively recurring emotional resources" (225). For Carroll the fact that these melodramas are referred to as tearjerkers hints to the emotional criteria of these films, there should be something that warrants crying (226). Carroll allows for the fact that crying can be elicited by a variety of stimuli, but he highlights the related states of sorrow and pity, stating "It should come as no surprise to the informed viewer that pity is the relevant tear-producing state that comes into play in the vast majority of melodramas" (226.) The audience anticipates that such melodramas are composed of misfortunes suffered by the protagonists. Carroll notes an important recurring motif of the victim of misfortune accepting their suffering in order to benefit another, often at the expense of satisfying their own desires of interests. Carroll writes "Were melodrama only a matter of pity—of witnessing horrible things happen to people—it might strike us as a particularly sadistic genre. It does not, I think, because typically the misfortunes in melodramas also provide the occasion for characters to exhibit noble virtues amid adversity, encouraging the spectator to leaven pity with admiration" (226).

We have established that *Sleepless in Seattle* belongs to the genre of romantic comedy and decidedly not the woman's film, even by Nora Ehpron's accounts. If we look at the attributes of the woman's film and those of the romantic comedy we find some commonality in that these are stories about interpersonal relationships. Another corresponding trait between the woman's film and the romantic comedy, is that they are both commonly maligned for their reliance on sentimentality.

Flo Leibowitz writes in *Apt Feelings, or Why "Women's Films" Aren't Trivial*, that "It is common for philosophers of art to be interested in the elevating powers of tragedy, but it is equally common to scorn melodrama[...] This is no wonder, since melodrama as a narrative form is typically associated with contrivance, drastic reversals and disasters, and narrow escapes, and perhaps as a corollary, the emotional responses to melodrama have been dismissed as trivially based" (219). Because these films evoke emotions related to pity, they are dismissively referred to as "weepies" and "tearjerkers." Leibowitz writes "The sorrow and the concern evoked depend on understanding the protagonist in the context of a life history which it is the business of the film to relate and illuminate" (220). Leibowitz is arguing that the audience's pity is not felt thoughtlessly and the tears elicited by these films are not trivial. Leibowitz writes "These scenes are sad scenes because they represent loss or near loss. But that is not all they do. In addition, in these scenes the audience's attention is drawn to the meaning of value of what is lost or nearly lost" 220.

Critic Deborah Knight writes that "The philosopher feels at a loss" explaining why the sentimentalist watches a film like *Sleepless in Seattle*, incapacitated by emotions, eating chocolates and weeping, and since *Sleepless* could hardly be called "high art." Knight states "the

philosopher also cannot explain why the sentimentalist is watching the film for the umpteenth time, let alone why she is weeping over it again, and why she is, in an odd way, happy while she weeps” (413). Knight’s article is concerned with the philosophical discourse between a standard view in philosophy that condemns sentimentality and the paradoxical impossibility of defending sentimentality. Knight states “the standard view of sentimentality is simplistic; its rhetoric is manipulative; its examples are hackneyed or quickly become so... these are the sorts of charges that are standardly brought *against* sentimentality” (412). Yet, Knight writes “the conclusion we must face is that sentimentality cannot be defended, at least not if one works within a particular philosophical perspective” (412). In Knight’s view, the philosopher’s impression of sentimental works and individuals who respond sentimentally to art, is that of condemnation. Sentimentality is viewed as an indication of obsolescence in moral or aesthetic sensibility.

The sentimental emotion is always connected to the real, as Torben Grodal writes in *Love and Desire in the Cinema*, “emotions such as love, fear, and empathy are broad, innate motivators for human action, shaped by culture and individual experiences and abilities” (27). Sentimentality puts reason at risk as soon as our judgments about objects or about ourselves are colored by the emotions that give rise to those judgments. Knight argues that the standard view of sentimentality—that it “functions as a metonym of the non-philosophical, or as an antimetonym of the philosophical”—is simplistic” (412). For Knight, the problem lies in our poor opinion of these emotions (love, fear, empathy etc.), and how these subjective sentiments are perceived as irrational. Knight asserts “in short, according to the standard view, sentimentality leads us away from active, cognitive engagement with the ambiguities and complexities of the real toward the over-simplified, the distorted, the falsified, the fantasized,

and the fictional” (417). Considering *Sleepless in Seattle* as an artlessly sentimental film, fit to be condemned because, in Knight's view, sentimentality ought not exist in philosophical discourses on art would be dismissive at best. The reason I highlight Knight's comments following this long discussion of Carroll's reading of *An Affair to Remember* is to give a context by which we can examine *Affair* and its relationship with *Sleepless*. The scene Knight describes as the sentimentalist incapacitated by emotions rewatching *Sleepless* over and over again is literally played out within *Sleepless*' narrative, with the characters in *Sleepless* watching and rewatching *Affair*, openly weeping over it again and again. If we read the above excerpt from Carroll, and remember Annie, Becky, Suzy and Jonah's friend Jessica's reactions as they watch *An Affair*, we understand that the film engages its audiences' emotions. Carroll refers to the audience feeling both pity and adoration for Terry's bravery, and when they infer Nicky's internal revelation they are moved to tears. These are moments of spectatorship playing out within the *Sleepless* narrative. *Sleepless* isn't relying on sentimentality to engage the audience as Knight would have it, rather it is partaking with active cognitive engagement with how audiences consume cinema.

For Leibowitz there is a paradox of women's films in that they represent suffering and audiences enjoy these films for the depiction of that suffering rather than despite it. “The paradox is this: these scenes can bring audiences to tears, yet these scenes contribute materially to the enjoyment of the films they're part of.” writes Leibowitz. The sad scenes in women's films are part of the characteristic form of these films, and it's the form of these films that captivates audiences and elicits emotions. *Sleepless in Seattle* falls within the model asserted by Leibowitz:

“On a cognitive model of film, identifying with film characters is a cognitive skill, just as identifying with real people is, and the paralleling of the audience's emotions and the

emotions of film characters is the result. This is worth observing, because there have been many intellectual traditions which regard the exercise of imagination with suspicion, and many more in which the imaginations of women are so regarded” (226).

In *Sleepless*, the emotions that the characters feel as they watch *An Affair* are the effect of their ability to identify with the characters in that film. The final scene of *An Affair* brings every woman in *Sleepless* to tears, and in so doing sparks their imagination, inspiring each of them to help bring about a successful conclusion for Annie as well as *Sleepless in Seattle* itself. After watching *An Affair* Becky secretly sends Annie’s letter to Sam, and Jessica not only encourages Jonah to get on a plane to New York, but books the plane ticket for him. In this way *Sleepless* is more than a film concerned with getting its protagonists together, it is a film concerned with the imaginative power of romance in cinema. By having the characters within the narrative actively engage with the fantasized, and the fictional, *Sleepless*’ women are called to action within their “reality,” to work toward the successful conclusion of the plot.

III. Reflexivity

Film theory has always been concerned with spectatorship. In the 1970s film theory psychoanalyzed the pleasures of the cinematic situation, and in the 1980s and 1990s analysts became more interested in socially differentiated forms of spectatorship. The emphasis in reception theory on filling the gaps of the text is best suited to cinema, where the spectator is necessarily active, obligated to compensate for certain lacks, at once constituting and constituted by the text. According to Stam, neither text nor spectator is a static, pre-constituted unit; spectators shape and are re-shaped by the cinematic experience within an infinite dialogical

process. For Stam, cinematic desire is not only intra-psychic, it is also social and ideological. In the essay *From the Imperial Family to the Transnational Imaginary: Media Spectatorship in the Age of Globalization* (written with Ella Shohat), Stam argues that any comprehensive study of spectatorship must distinguish multiple registers of spectatorship:

- (1) The spectator as fashioned by the text, through focalization, point-of-view conventions, narrative structuring, and mise-en-scene;
- (2) The spectator as fashioned by the diverse and evolving technical apparatuses;
- (3) The spectator as fashioned by the institutional contexts of spectatorship;
- (4) The spectator as constituted by ambient discourses and ideologies;
- (5) The actual spectator as embodied, raced, gendered and historically situated. (159)

It is part of the folk wisdom of responding to films (and literature) that audiences sometimes identify with characters, that the success or failure of a film partly depends on whether this identification occurs, and that the emotional responses depend on identification. The notion of the identification of the viewer with an invisible observer becomes central, an identification that constitutes the identity of the viewer as an illusorily unified, ideological subject. Berys Gaut outlines three fundamental uses of identification when applied to a character in a fiction:

- (1) One cares for the character.
- (2) One believes they are the character.
- (3) One responds as if they were the character. (261)

We talk about understanding someone by imagining ourselves in their situation, putting ourselves in their shoes. And we come to understand them by imaginatively projecting ourselves in their external situation, imaginarily altering those aspects of our personality that differs from

theirs, and relying on our dispositions to respond in various ways, so as to work out what other things they might be feeling.

Key to what drives the narrative of *Sleepless* is Annie Reed's dilemma in being able to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Annie's struggle to make this distinction is a crucial element that animates the plot. When Annie is driving alone in her car to spend Christmas with her fiancé Walter's family, she scans through the radio stations and lands on the call-in talk show, where Sam's son Jonah talks to the radio talk show host about how unhappy his father has been since his mother's death. At first Annie changes the channel and says, "Well, who could believe that?" and checks through the other stations, some playing irritating Christmas tunes like "Jingle Bells" backwards, or mind-numbing programs about "you and your spleen." Finding her options completely uninteresting, Annie resigns herself to listening to the unlikely story of the boy on the radio.

It is at this point in the film that the car radio becomes a metaphor for the cinematic experience. Annie is given insight into the lives of characters Sam and Jonah, as we the audience also become acquainted with them. Seated in the dim theater of her automobile listening, Annie slowly engages with these characters, to the point where she talks back to the radio. Annie continues listening to Sam talking about how he fell in love with his departed wife, and at the same moment both Sam in Seattle and Annie in her car say the word "magic." This scene demonstrates an important element of what *Sleepless* is about, reality versus fantasy. Gaut's theory of identification comes into play here; Annie is unsure how to relate to herself as a character in the film. The problem with this notion of identification, in Gaut's assessment of it, is that while Annie is engaged she is not relating, or identifying with Sam or Jonah; she is simply

entertained by their story. She is not locked in. When she pulls off the highway to get a cup of tea she is exercising her right as a spectator with free will.

This scene recalls Mia Farrow in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. In the course of *Cairo*, Mia Farrow's character repeatedly goes to the theater to watch and rewatch a film called *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. In her fifth or sixth viewing she actually catches the attention of the male romantic lead, who from the screen notices her, and drawn by her captivation, steps down off the screen to join her in the real world. He swiftly falls in love with her, fulfilling her spectatorial dreams. Doane writes:

“Toward the end of *Purple Rose* there is a long close-up on Mia Farrow in spectatorial ecstasy, enraptured by the image, her face glowing (both figuratively and literally through its reflection of light from the movie screen). What the shot signifies, in part, is the peculiar susceptibility to the image—to the cinematic spectacle in general—attributed to the woman in our culture. Her pleasure in viewing is somehow more intense” (1).

In a way, Farrow's character, like Annie, is incapable of falling into any of Gaut's three modes of identification. It's not that she cares for the character, or that she believes she is the character, or that she responds as if she were the character, it's that she is entranced with the fantasy occurring both on screen and within her mind. Farrow's character is transported from the vulgar surroundings of her Depression era, lower-class life by watching a 1930's comedy about the escapades of the upper-class. Doane writes that “if the female spectator is to invest energy in the love story, the films must also be able to count on her ability to distinguish between fiction and the real” (118). However this is precisely what the woman cannot do; in *Purple Rose*, Mia Farrow is too readily taken in by the image, her excessive sympathy does not allow her an

adequate distance. Unlike Annie in *Sleepless*, whose desire is embedded in the imaginary, she is conscious of the disparity between “real life” and the fantasy. It's not that Annie faces a choice between a fantasized prince over the real man, but that she has to choose between chasing after a mythic romantic love rather than resigning herself to marrying Walter.

So far we can see that *Sleepless in Seattle* is a film aware of its own generic precepts. *Sleepless'* world is one with access to our world of film history, the characters watch movies on T.V., talk about movies during dinner with friends, and even quote lines of dialogue and impersonate actors in movies. With each reference and quotation Nora Ephron is calling our attention to a possibility where *Sleepless* knows its a film and that we are watching it.

In the preface to “Reflexivity in Film and Literature” Robert Stam writes, “In artistic terms, reflexivity refers to the metaphorical capacity of cultural productions to “look at” themselves, as if they were capable of self regard” (xiii). Stam broadly defines reflexivity as “the process by which texts, both literary and filmic, foreground their own production, their authorship, their intertextual influences, their reception, or their enunciation. The French semiotician Christian Metz gives theorized analyses of a broad arsenal of reflexive devices such as direct visual address to the camera, verbal direct address, reflexive intertitles, the frame within the frame, the film within the film, subjective imagery, and the display of the apparatus. The aforementioned driving scene when Annie hears Sam and Jonah on the radio for the first time, works as a metaphorical display of the apparatus. In *Sleepless*, Ephron employs several of these reflexive devices. By showing us the television screen while Annie and Becky watch *An Affair to Remember*, Ephron is using the frame within the frame technique to foreground the intertextual influence of *An Affair*. Ephron also uses intertitles of dotted lines arching over a map of the

United States, visually representing her character's traveling across America. In the New York City of *Sleepless* there are scores of red paper hearts in the shop windows, like the dotted lines, leading Annie's way toward Sam and Jonah and the epic heart displayed in red lights on the Empire State Building. Finally, in both *Sleepless* and *You've Got Mail* Ephron implements the reflexive technique of subjective imagery in scenes of fantasy. In *Sleepless* Ephron inserts a scene where Sam imagines he is speaking to his deceased wife, and in *You've Got Mail* there is a scene where Kathleen Kelly sees a vision of herself as a child dancing with her departed mother.

So far the objective of this research and analysis has been to present a context to discuss how *Sleepless* is a romantic comedy that adheres to its generic conventions. It is also an objective to highlight the ways in which *Sleepless* subvert these conventions. Through the use of intertextual references and reflexive techniques in *Sleepless*, Ephron both submits to and subverts the generic conventions of the romantic comedy. Ephron's directorial intention was to create a timeless film, the idea was not to create a movie about love, but rather a movie about love in the movies. Stam makes the distinction that it is the task of illusionism to present characters as real people, and the images and representations as substantiated facts, whereas reflexivity points to its own mask, calling attention to its own artificial reality as a textual construct. *Sleepless in Seattle* playfully foregrounds its own constructed nature by demystifying our naive faith in fiction, and makes this demystification a source for new narrative.

In the title sequence for *Sleepless* we hear Jimmy Durante croon "As Time Goes By," a song made famous for its use in the 1942 film *Casablanca*. By beginning the film in this manner, Ephron goes straight to the point. Explicitly citing this song sets up a critical relationship not only between the text of this film and that of *Casablanca*, but also a relationship between

Sleepless in Seattle and the entire history of the Hollywood romance. Just as Ames has pointed out that each film we view adds to the repertoire of impressions that we bring to bear in envisioning Hollywood itself, the referential use of “As Time Goes By” imbues *Sleepless* with nostalgia and timelessness that was the central aspiration of the filmmakers. Through this evocative use of music from *Casablanca* Nora Ephron is commenting on the generic elements of the love story and on itself as a work within that genre. Ephron exploits this source material and merges it within her own film. The idea that a text is formed by an intersection of textual surfaces refers to Stam’s discussion of dialogism, the “necessary relation of any utterance to other utterances,” where an “utterance” refers to any “complex of signs” from a spoken phrase, to a poem, or song, or play or film” (201). In using the iconic song from *Casablanca*, Nora Ephron draws on the audience's awareness of the classic film, linking the past with the present.

Stam compares cinema with the novel, while the mode of expression in the novel is words and only words, cinema—by the very nature of its diverse matters of expression (photography, music, dialogue, noise, etc.)—is a composite language, inheriting all of the art forms associated with these mediums. Therefore, “cinema is open to all kinds of literary and pictorial symbolism, to all collective representations, to all ideologies, to all aesthetics, and to the infinite play of influences within cinema within other arts, and within culture generally” (Stam 131). *Sleepless in Seattle* not only includes music that suggests an association to traditional Hollywood love stories (Tammy Wynette, Nat King Cole, Gene Autry, and Joe Cocker), but its plot is structured around a re-imagining of the plot of the melodrama *An Affair to Remember*. Stam writes, “Such an orgy of citation, besides constituting self-parody, literarizes the narrative, empties it of its diegetic substance and forces us to contemplate the film as a crazy quilt of

literary and cinematic pastiches.” (132) Through the use of citation, Ephron is acknowledging the influences *Sleepless* is modeled on while also calling attention to the themes of the film.

IV. *You've Got Mail*

Ephron's 1998 film *You've Got Mail* is another romantic comedy starring Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan. It is fitting to consider this film as a comedy of remarriage, in that the objective of the film is to get Hanks and Ryan together again. The concept of legendary cinematic couples is nothing new, Kathrine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy made nine films together between 1942 and 1967, in 1998 the pairing of Hanks and Ryan together again five years after the success of *Sleepless* seemed to summon the romantic chemistry audiences desired.² In a review of *You've Got Mail* Lael Loewenstein wrote, “In this, their third outing as co-stars[...] they show why they are two of Hollywood's most bankable and, in many ways, most traditional stars.”

If *Sleepless* skewed toward Old Comedy, *You've Got Mail* leans hard in the direction of New Comedy. In “The Argument of Comedy” Frye writes “New Comedy unfolds from what may be described as a comic Oedipus situation. Its main theme is the successful effort of a young man to outwit an opponent and possess the girl of his choice” (450). In *You've Got Mail*, Joe Fox, owner of mega-chain Fox & Sons Books, falls for a quick-witted and endearing woman he anonymously meets in an AOL chat room. Both dating other people, they make a pact not to reveal their identities. When the two finally make plans to meet, Joe takes a stealthy look inside the cafe window and realizes his paramour is none other than his professional rival Kathleen Kelly. Kathleen is the owner of the Shop around the Corner, a treasured independent children's

² According to box office reporting in the *Los Angeles Times* on December 22, *You've Got Mail* earned \$18.4 million in its opening weekend.

bookstore that Fox & Sons is about to put out of business. In New Comedy the successful conclusion of the plot is brought to fruition by the maneuvering of the man toward the woman. In this way, the plot of *You've Got Mail* is guided by the desires of Joe Fox.

Like in *Sleepless*, the protagonists of *You've Got Mail* are not married. Both Kathleen Kelly (Ryan) and Joe Fox (Hanks) are in separate committed relationships. Where *Sleepless* had Annie's impending marriage to Walter as a fundamental function within the narrative, marriage is not a concern to *You've Got Mail's* plot. The object of both films remains the same: to get Ryan and Hanks together in the face of being paired with someone else at the beginning of the story. Absent in *You've Got Mail* is women's desire, therefore the distance to motivate the protagonist. In *Sleepless* this distance is presented as the map of the United States, the distance between the subject and the object of desire spans the miles between Seattle and Baltimore. In *You've Got Mail* distance can be measured out between city blocks and the blink of an eye. The Shop around the Corner is just around the corner from Fox & Sons, and the use of technology eliminates the distance between the subject and object of desire. From the beginning of the film Kathleen and Joe are in conversation under their screennames, ShopGirl and NY152 communicate and connect in an instant, where in *Sleepless*, the characters wait days for their letters to be delivered and read. In *Sleepless*, the radio in Annie's car presents her with the object of desire threatening her engagement to Walter. In *You've Got Mail*, the laptop is the threatening technology, by providing Kathleen a window to the object of her desire. Kathleen jumps toward her laptop to resume a conversation with Joe the moment her boyfriend Frank (Greg Kinnear) leaves the apartment. When Joe Fox realizes Kathleen is the woman behind the screen name, he is then motivated to win her affection. In the article "Longing To Connect: Cinema's Year of OS

Romance” Jeff Scheible writes, that *You’ve Got Mail*’s narrative illustrates “a romance made possible by the internet’s offering characters a safety net unburdened by physical bodies, with the ability to be more authentic and lovable than they are in their real-world encounters, where they are constrained by social expectations about the performance of self” (22). The anonymity of the internet provides Kathleen and Joe the opportunity to find romance where in the real-world the characters are reluctant to see each other as anything other than business rivals. The threatening aspect of Fox & Sons bulldozing Kathleen’s Shop around the Corner keeps the protagonists apart.

In *Sleepless* Annie’s desire for true love posed a threat to her marriage to Walter. In *You’ve Got Mail* the threat to the union of Kathleen and Joe at the end of the film is Fox & Sons ruining Kathleen’s business, which it does. In order for Joe Fox to win Kathleen Kelly’s affection by the end of this film, he must be focused on details of every minute incident, and observe the difficulty of the complex relationship he has with her. Joe Fox is not a feminized male by Doane’s standard, but rather a character that knows he must become what Kathleen wants in order to gain Kathleen’s love. In *Sleepless in Seattle* Sam Baldwin is already what the male character in a love story embodies, and he demonstrates this through expressing his grief to Dr. Marsha Fieldstone over the airwaves. This broadcast generates love letters from women all over the country, inspired by his display of sentimentality. Because Joe Fox learns ShopGirl’s true identity, he is presented with two options. One, abandon the entire online “will they or won’t they love story,” or two, or embrace sentimentality and pursue love. Connecting back to Jeff Scheible, the internet provides a sense of protection from the real-world, allowing the characters

to be more authentic and lovable than they are in real life. In order for Joe to connect with Kathleen he must be his authentic self.

You've Got Mail is a remake of the Ernst Lubitsch film *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940) starring Margaret Sullavan and James Stewart, however the work most often invoked by Kathleen Kelly is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Ephron uses Austen's novel as a throughline in *You've Got Mail*. Where *Sleepless* is a metatextual film about being in love like in the movies, *You've Got Mail* is a comedy that uses literature to bolster its romantic themes. The role *Pride and Prejudice* plays in *You've Got Mail* echoes the way *An Affair to Remember* is used in *Sleepless*. Austen's novel begins, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (1). For the characters in Ephron's cinematic universe, this truth is universally known, to the point that even children like Jonah in *Sleepless* know it. In *You've Got Mail*, the wealthy unmarried Joe Fox's journey towards the object of his affection is similar to that of Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*.

You've Got Mail is a film that requires a comprehensive interrogation to divine which emotional conditions its audience must succumb to; what emotions are central to experiencing *You've Got Mail*? To reiterate Noël Carroll's point, "in order to be an appropriate object of the emotion in question, the relevant object must meet certain necessary conditions" (221). In *You've Got Mail* it is not immediately clear what the preordained emotional states are, aside from humor, which is granted by the term *Romantic Comedy*. If we look at Ephron's writing about *Pride and Prejudice* we find some clarity. Her essay *A Few Words About Elizabeth Bennet* Ephron illustrates her experience with *Pride and Prejudice* and her relationship with the title's subject. "I fell in love with Elizabeth Bennet the first time I read *Pride and Prejudice*, and I have

read the book at least once a year ever since... Each time I cross into this world I bring to it the same intensity and sense of suspense I felt the first time throughout” (151). Ephron goes through an emotional whirlwind when she reads *Pride and Prejudice* feeling stunned, captivated, appalled, furious and “when Elizabeth unexpectedly meets Mr. Darcy while walking through Pemberley and realizes his feelings for her are unchanged—I cry” (151).

It’s through the invocation of Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice* that we find a way to understand Kathleen Kennedy’s perspective. In the blind date scene, between ShopGirl and NY512, Kathleen Kelly waits for her date while reading *Pride and Prejudice* and holding a red rose. A nervous Joe Fox peeks through the cafe window and realizes ShopGirl is his business rival. He ultimately decides to go in, not as NY512, but as himself, and teases Kelly for her romanticism. Fox walks to her table “Kathleen Kelly! Hello, this is a coincidence. Would you mind if I sat down?” Kelly says “Yes! Yes I would actually. I’m expecting someone, thanks.” Fox leans over to see the book she’s holding, “*Pride and Prejudice*. I bet you read that book every year. I bet you just love that Mr. Darcy, and your sentimental heart just beats wildly and the thought that he and... well, whatever her name is are truly honestly going to end up together.” Despite Kelly’s protest, Fox sits down at her table knowing her date will not arrive. “The heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* is Elizabeth Bennet. She is one of the greatest and most complex characters ever written, not that you would know” Kelly quips. “As a matter of fact I’ve read it” Fox asserts, “You’d discover a lot of things if you really knew me.” Kelly shoots back “If I really knew you I know what I would find, instead of a brain a cash register, instead of a heart a bottom line.” This moment is a breakthrough for her, for the first time when confronted she knew exactly what she wanted to say and said it. Kathleen Kelly is finally able to express her inner

Elizabeth Bennet to roast Joe Fox. Ephron writes of Elizabeth Bennet, “Her flaw is that she is too quick to form opinions based on first impressions; in short that she is prejudiced. And that is her only flaw... In fact, I consider her flaw so minor that the first time I read *Pride and Prejudice* I assumed that both nouns in the title referred to Mr. Darcy” (152-153).

According to Doane, “telephones, like trains, signify the very separation and distance conducive to desire”(112-113). It is the use of technology in these films that represent the absent presence, for *Sleepless* this absence is symbolized by Annie’s car radio. The car radio gives Annie the ability to imagine herself in love with Sam, and this fantasy motivates her actions towards achieving this goal. In *You’ve Got Mail* the use of email and instant messenger is the technology that indicates the missing figure Doane considers essential to the construction of the love story. “There is, however, a more ‘old-fashioned’ means of articulating the effects of such a presence-in-absence: letters” (113). In *You’ve Got Mail* Ephron makes use of modern technology to signify the distance between Kathleen and Joe, a distance that is necessary to the narrative’s structure. Doane writes, “Technology makes it possible to represent the absent presence so essential to the construction of the love story” (113). In *You’ve Got Mail* the internet provides the distance needed to bring Kathleen and Joe together at the film’s conclusion. Jeff Scheible describes *You’ve Got Mail’s* use of AOL as a utopian version of new media, “*Mail* relies on a division of real and virtual worlds that, satisfying the expectations of the rom-com genre, eventually resolves into a union of incompatible worlds” (26).

Where *Sleepless* is a movie suffused with discussions of magic and fantasy, *You’ve Got Mail* interestingly only depicts one moment of fantasy shown through the eyes of the female protagonist. The Shop Around the Corner has finally closed for good and as Kathleen Kelly is

locking up she turns back for a last look to see an image of herself as a child dancing with her mother in the middle of the emptied store. The one moment of fantasy in *You've Got Mail* is through the eyes of the female protagonist. Doane writes "this immediacy of expression or feeling is usually manifested in the love story through the medium of vision" (114). For Doane female desire is linked to the imaginary, and this imagination is what gives the woman the possibility of desiring. This scene in Kathleen's empty store works as a metaphor for the absence necessary to the framework of the love story.

After Joe breaks up with his girlfriend Patricia (Parker Posey,) he has a conversation with his father about love and romantic relationships where the Oedipal elements of New Comedy are activated. After detailing the long list of failed affairs with Joe's nannies, Nelson Fox (Dabney Coleman) asks who Joe just broke up with, "Would I like her? Just kidding son... I just have to meet someone new, that's all. That's the easy part" Joe replies with some snark, "Oh yeah, right. A snap. To find the one single person in the world who fills your heart with joy." Nelson scoffs, "Well don't be ridiculous! Have I ever been with anybody who fit that description... have you!" After his father makes this remark Joe is finally inspired to chase after Kathleen, the one single person who fills his heart with joy.

Conclusion

The aim of discussing Nora Ephron's *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You've Got Mail* is to examine how these films simultaneously navigate and comment on classic characteristics found within the genre of the Romantic Comedy. In both examples of Ephron's work we can see how she employs established elements of the love story, women's films and melodramas, to express her

views on desire in the movies as well as her take on the genre of the romantic comedy as a whole. In both films Ephron touches on a theme of how women and men experience and relate to cinema in entirely different ways. In *Sleepless* we have Annie Reed's untethered imagination that directs her toward the object of her desire, and in *You've Got Mail* it is Joe Fox's desire that drives the narrative toward its successful conclusion. Through watching and re-watching these films, and engaging with the work of Mary Ann Doane and Noël Carroll we can understand that these films are not simple generic exercises, checking off boxes on a prescribed rom-com must-haves list, rather they are complex works interrogating the history of Hollywood cinema and what that represents to its viewers. In *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You've Got Mail*, Ephron is questioning what it is about a love story that draws the audience in, and how the audience constructs meaning based on traditional romantic cues?

Earlier we discussed the scene where Annie was behind the wheel, gazing out through the windshield, headlights from the cars on the highway behind her, functioning as a metaphor for the cinematic experience. We find that discussing this scene as a metaphor to be both suggestive and illuminating. Especially reading Carroll's framework for analyzing the relationship between film genres and emotions. Carroll's application of this framework on the genre of the melodrama endeavors to identify the governing emotion that genres aim to instill in audiences. However we find that isolating a single emotion that applies can be difficult, as melodramas like romantic comedies can elicit complex and compound emotions. These are the complex emotions Ephron constantly presents in *Sleepless* and *You've Got Mail* that resist dismissive readings typically reserved for sentimental romantic films. By making *Sleepless in Seattle* a movie about romance in the movies, Nora Ephron subverts the traditional pitfalls of the

love story, constructing a metatextual work in conversation with the genre of the romantic comedy and the Hollywood love stories that came before it.

In this paper we discuss how *Sleepless* is a reflexive work that calls attention to its own existence within film history through metatextual use of songs like *As Time Goes By*, direct references to other films like *An Affair to Remember*, and also through allusions to *An Affair* within the narrative. By making her audience aware of the fact that *Sleepless* is a work of fiction, Ephron is able to subvert the conventions of the romantic comedy, and resist the trappings of overly sentimental romances as decried by critics like Knight and Leibowitz. By using these metatextual techniques, Nora Ephron produces an interesting work concerned with the power of romance in the movies and how we the audience (Ephron included) experience the magical qualities of cinema.

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