

Ileana Nicoleta SĂLCUDEAN, Claudia NEGREA

Sexuality in Comedy. Controversy and Clichés

Abstract. The interaction between humor and gender provides a wide variety of possible directions of research.

In the context of antihermeneutics psychoanalysis, *materiality* and *meaning* in Foucault terms are becoming porous and plastic realities. Sexuality as an “enigmatic signifier” (Jean Laplanche) renders playful, romantic, or dirty, scatological traits to comedy. From the discursive sexuality (Foucault) to the sexuality and the lack of sense (Lacan), different codes of erotism and comic effects are juxtaposed to different comedy subgenres. The standard “boy meets girl narrative” (Mc Donald, 2007) invites the public into a love triangle that involves the lovers and the public itself as a participant to the sensuality and comedy all together. The viewer could experience the humor of the unconscious materialized in jokes (Freud) as well as the visual sensual experience of sex scenes and their emergence in the plot.

The objective of the paper is to observe what are the effects of this hetero-temporality for the assignments and explorations in/ of contemporary comedy.

This paper will analyze different codes of erotism and comic effects designated as clichés or as controversial aspects, analyzing two American comedies *Friends with Benefits* (2011) and *Don Jon* (2013) (and their consequential developments in the movie genre). Another objective of the analysis is to analyze and depict male and female character’s constructions and behavior.

Keywords: sexuality, comedy, antihermeneutics, clichés, controversy, sex taboos.

Sexuality and comedy

Sexuality in Foucault terms, is not referring to “history of representations” or “sexual behaviours” neither to the “scientific, religious and philosophical ideas” behind sexual behaviours, but rather the the “history of the experience of sexuality” (Foucault 1990, 3-4). Under various mechanisms of repression and strides of power, man becomes a “subject of desire” (Foucault 1990, 6). Jan Jagodzinsky would refer to the *reality* constituted at the intersection and tension of the three psychic orders of Lacanian psychoanalysis: the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. “In a

**Ileana Nicoleta SĂLCUDEAN,
Claudia NEGREA**

Cinema and Media Department, Babeş-
Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, România
E-mail: nicoleta.salcudean@gmail.com

EKPHRASIS, 2/2015
PROVOCATION AS ART
pp. 136-150

nutshell, the Symbolic register is at the level of conscious language. As a linguistic dimension, it refers to the Symbolic Order (system of signs) as defined by the Law, which regulates desire, *as well as all the possible transgressions to that Law*. This is the order of the *Signifier*... The Imaginary psychic register refers to connotations of illusion, fascination and seduction. It specifically addresses the relationship between the ego and its specular image. The Imaginary is neither illusory *nor simply reduced to the imagination*... Lastly, the Real (capitalized in this case to distinguish it from the more pedestrian understanding of `reality`) refers to an order that exists beyond both the Symbolic and Imaginary. The psychic Real can only be described as a void, a dimension which continually keeps a system from closing, a place of non-sense and impossibility. In this sense it has a traumatic quality about it for this is the site where objects of both Eros and Thanatos (anxiety), of love and rejection dwell that cannot be named nor imagined. It is the realm of meaningless nonsensical marks, colors, and sounds as informed by affective states of *sensuous being*; i.e. Kristeva's semiotic drives as opposed to the Symbolic Order. This realm of embodied Eros (Zoë)..." (Smith-Shank 2004, 140).

Sexual behaviour is difficult to approach for different reasons. The American society believes that there are at least three reasons: some opponents that consider that information about sex should not be public, sex in something private and that the data gathered about sexual behaviour can be inaccurate based on the statistics of subjects that are not honest about sex issues. (Laumann *et al.* 2000, xxviii).

Freud abandoned seduction theory because the reality of it was proved difficult to establish (Stockton 2011, 13).¹ Biological and psychological studies on sexuality refer to individuals, sociological studies attempt to bring in *scripting theories* (referring to the structure of events) and *network theories* (referring to the structure of relationships among people), and the interrelations among them. Thus, the approach is wider, including inquiring about the cultural context, the social network, age, single/marital status, significance of marriage, the influence of religious beliefs, views on premarital sex, divorce, social ties (Laumann *et al.* 2000, 5-34).

Stockton proposes psychoanalytic concepts of neurosis and repression for the study of comedy and sexuality (Stockton 2011, 21). "Furthermore, by developing Freud's ideas in light of Lacan's translation of Freud, I use the term comedy to circumscribe a `play of the signifier` that one finds even in a tragic text like Hamlet. As a frame for my own analyses, comedy is not dramatic form (the usual meaning of comedy in early modern studies) but a synonym for playfulness that cuts across the boundaries of genre" (Stockton 2011, 21).

Approach: hermeneutics vs. anti-hermeneutics; heterotemporality

The poststructuralist, post-humanist waves challenged the romantic hermeneutic interpretation on culture, starting with Michael Foucault, Bruno Latour, Friedrich Kittler, Lawrence Grossberg (having as forerunners Nietzsche, Saussure, Levi Strauss,

Althusser) (Fornas 2012, 490-500). A single and rigid interpretation of the meaning of each word, mostly as intended by the author is questioned. Fornas is proposing rather a “reworking of Paul Ricoeur’s critical hermeneutics offers a better basis for reconstructing cultural theory, by sharpening rather than abandoning the focus on interplays between meaning and materiality, instead of substituting the former with the latter” (Fornas 2012, 491). Furthermore, he would not rule out hermeneutics, but rather redefine the focus of hermeneutics: meaning, subject and context into a pluralization: meanings, subjects and contexts (Fornas 2012, 513-514). Thomas Austin, reintroduces the concept of “dispersible text” as defined by Barbara Klinger in 1989: “according to Klinger, marketing, merchandising and media *hype* operate to pluralise a mainstream film by *raiding* the text for *capitalizable* features that can be commodified ideas and interpretations of the film extends its presence in the social arena occupied by potential spectators” (Stokes and Maltby 1999, 148).

Stockton would see that pluralization in antihermeneutic psychoanalysis in the reiteration of the message.² The approach of anti-hermeneutic psychoanalysis require sexuality to be viewed as “a gap” between the event and its interpretation, between desire and identity (Stockton 2007, 15).

This gap implies a certain suspended duration of time, from the “original temporality” to “ecstatic temporality”. (Chowdhury 2013, 39-40). For Heidegger time is one, yet “the irreducible hetero temporality is disjunctive of the identity of Being of Dasein (*being there, presence* in Germ) and time. It is even refractory to ontology” (Chowdhury 2013, 39). Bal and Hernández-Navarro are talking about nowadays society at the intersection with technology as a “clash of temporality”, reality and fiction, “halfway between things, between past and future” (Bal and Hernández-Navarro 2009, 11). Heterotemporality is also used in the geopolitical discourse (Hutchings 2007, 2010; Hom 2010) as a response to the linear-progressive temporality of the classical International Relations theories. Hom argues that the meaning and character of time is actually the result of material, historical, and sociopolitical processes. Yet, there are unique unique moments constitute a “knowable trajectory” (Hom, 9).

In romantic comedies, the public is invited into a love triangle that involves the lovers and the public itself as a participant to the sensuality and comedy all together. The viewer could experience the humor of the unconscious materialized in jokes (Freud) as well as the visual sensual experience of sex scenes and their emergence in the plot.

Means of Achieving the Comic by Sexuality in American Romantic Comedies

In most romantic comedies, sexuality is often seen as a stress-releasing activity that doesn’t have much to do with the romanticism within the character’s relationships. Sexuality often becomes a means of creating comic situations within romantic or sex comedies which are not necessarily looking to explore the depths of romantic

relationships. Therefore, laughter caused by humorous situations or characters becomes a stress-releasing activity which only ensures the detached and somehow superficial character of the film. Sigmund Freud makes a reference to 19th century philosopher Herbert Spencer in his book, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*: “According to Spencer, laughter is a phenomenon of the discharge of mental excitation and a proof that the physical employment of this excitation has suddenly come up against an obstacle” (Freud 1960, 179). Philosopher Alexander Bain also debates on laughter and relief in his work, *The Emotions and the Will* that is mentioned in Michael Billig’s work, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humor*: “The release from constraint produces pleasure and an increase of nervous energy that can result in laughter” (Billig 2005, 97).

The way sex is presented in a (romantic) comedy depends on many factors such as the message of the film, its plot and theme. However, we can find that there is a general view towards this subject in the way comedies are being made nowadays and what kind of message/ideology they are trying to render.

Anti-hermeneutics theories debate on the meaninglessness of interpretation within cultural and artistic objects. “Antihermeneutic psychoanalysis allows the signifier to play, to freely associate, outside of what other texts or readers have already established as translative paths, and in doing so, it establishes new, rather than rediscovers old, syntheses between signifiers” (Stockton 2011, xiii). The examples of romantic sex comedies that are analyzed in this paper prove that the spectator’s interpretation of things and meanings can be as deceitful as the humor is often constructed on the basis of creating an expectation that will later be destructed. The paper does not intend to interpret the selected movies, but to analyze them by highlighting the means of achieving humor. Yet, another aspect of the paper refers to the expectations raised, fulfilled or destroyed by the narrative within the movies – for the spectator and for the characters as well – which can also reflect a way of creating humor – through contrasts.

The two movies were selected based on their somehow realistic depiction of actual romantic relationships. Happy endings and socially constructed images of men, women and relationships are mostly based on utopic patterns created by the media. No matter how damaged a relationship or a character appears in the beginning, they are certainly heading towards a positive outcome. American romantic comedies present the most general and popular kind of situations that are based on this patterns. The first part of the paper will analyze the selected movies by referring to the means of achieving the comic which are found in the movies. The second part of the analysis is intended to discover, analyze and depict male and female character’s constructions and behavior.

The movie *Friends with benefits* (Will Gluck, 2011) presents the sexual interaction as a game in the beginning. The two characters (Jamie played by Mila Kunis and Dylan played by Justin Timberlake) are developing a healthy friendship based on

mutual trust, sincerity and a strong feeling of likeness. Both of them are currently lacking sexual interaction with a partner and, as it turns out from their discussions, they both have liberal opinions towards the idea of having a friend with benefits (someone you can be friends and have sexual intercourse with without any emotional and romantic involvement). Therefore their sexual relationship starts as some sort of agreement or as an unwritten holy promise that they would keep things strictly sexual. Michel Foucault refers to sexuality and its implications: "The use of the word was established in connection to other phenomena (...) (embracing the biological mechanism of reproduction as well as the individual or social variants of behavior); the establishment of a set of rules and norms – in part traditional, in part new – which found support in religious, judicial, pedagogical and medical institutions; and changes in the way individuals were led to assign meaning and value to their conduct, their duties, their pleasures, their feelings and sensations, their dreams. In short, it was a matter of seeing how an experience came to be constituted in modern Western societies, an experience that caused individuals to recognize themselves as subjects of a 'sexuality', which was accessible to very diverse fields of knowledge and linked to a system of rules and constraints" (Foucault, 1990, 3-4). Not only in *Friends with Benefits*, but in most 21st century romantic comedies, sexuality has been presented as a method of inducing pleasure more than anything else. The act of sex for its reproductive purpose has long ago been exterminated from movies' storyline or aesthetic ensemble, especially when it comes to nowadays' romantic comedies. *Friends with benefits* takes the idea to a higher level by courageously pushing sexuality for pleasure, labeling it as the theme of the film.

Unlike the usual act of sex, in this case, the partners feel free to express their opinions, compliments or complaints during the actual act. For example, they both warn each other about things they like or don't like in bed (Dylan doesn't like his chin getting touched, because it tickles him and he sneezes after an orgasm; she tells him that she's not fond of dirty talk, that she has extremely sensible nipples and warns him about her unshaved legs). Of course, the comic occurs because the two of them are not always careful about the other's sensibilities and therefore, are put in awkward, but funny situations. Moreover, they feel free to criticize each other's sexual habits without any remorse: she's not pleased about his way of performing oral sex and tells him immediately; he tells her to call out his name during sex and she ironically tells his whole name and forename as they appear in his identity card. Of course, this also creates an ironical image of the so-called sexual fetish of one getting excited when hearing his/her name called during sex. All this comic situations wouldn't have been possible if the sex partners hadn't agreed on a pure physical relationship. Therefore, their feelings shouldn't get hurt regardless the objections they have against each other. When brute sincerity intervenes within an act that is supposed to be romantic and somehow mystic, the created contrast between expectation and reality creates a humorous situation. "Crucially, anti-hermeneutic psychoanalysis is not synonymous

with an inattention to `depth`, or with a rejection of the unconscious, but rather with an attention to gaps, omissions and slippages that avoids the immediate identification of these as evidence of psychoanalytic dogmas" (Stockton, 2011, xiii). The gaps between expectations and reality are therefore created and describe the spectators' point of view. Instinctively wanting to interpret everything that happens before their eyes, the created gap between what is expected of them and what actually happens creates a humorous situation.

The comic situations are created also by including external factors such as the unexpected arrival of Jamie's mother in her apartment while she and Dylan are having sex. Humorous is not only this shocking 'image' of the mother becoming a spectator of a sexual scene that involves her daughter, but also the fact that the spectator can empathize in that moment with one, two or all three characters involved in the scene. All three perspectives (the mother's, Jamie's and Dylan's) are awkwardly put together and, depending on the spectator's gender or background experience, he or she can understand and empathize with one or more characters. During the plot, other comic sexual scenes are being presented through a fast film editing: Dylan doesn't like when Jamie is staying on top during sex, because he feels emasculated. When they turn to missionary position, Jamie asks him if he now feels man enough and tells him to 'put it in then', although they are already having intercourse.

Joseph Gordon Levitt's debut, the 2013 comedy *Don Jon*, tells the story of young and handsome Jon (played by Levitt) who cares about only a few things in life: his body, his pad, his ride, his family, his church, his boys (buddies), his women and his porn. The movie opens with some intriguing, randomly selected images of women put in sexy positions, in order to raise the spectator's curiosity and to invite him towards a voyeuristic view towards the movie that is about to be presented. They also reflect the main character's view on the main subject which is his relationship to porn and women. No matter how developed modern society is on every level, pornography and explicit sexual scenes are still considered taboos for mainstream audiences and for people in general. The movie tries to cross over these barriers by integrating pornography in a man's everyday life, without camouflaging its importance and presence.

The comic is created mostly not by humoristic sexual scenes, but by the role of the voice-over. The character, also playing the role of the narrator, Jon, exposes in a very brutal and sincere way his relationship to pornographic movies by meticulously describing his ritual of enjoying this kind of material. The comic surveys mainly from the alteration of the elements that matter to him in life and from the juxtaposition of the almost holy-kind of ritual with the action of watching pornography. Moreover, he goes as far as comparing the act of watching porn and the sexual act, complaining about the sexual partner's performance. The pleasure of having sex with a woman does not fulfill his idealistic view towards the act as much as pornographic movies do it. This fantasizing about a `perfect` sexual partner as she is presented in pornographic

movies (intermediated by camera perspective, image composition and editing) and what he gets in real life creates a humorous situation because of the character's personality and immature perspective towards relationships and sexual interaction. The comic situations are therefore created because of Jon's false expectations and the reality he's going through. Because he hates the missionary position while having sex and also explicitly mentions this out loud through the narrator's voice-over, the spectator gets a funny perspective on sexual experiences and positions through the character's own experience which is, somehow, generally available for a certain group of people. In addition, the narrator doesn't abstain from mocking some pornographic movies as well, because he gets disappointed by them, just like a man gets disappointed by a woman from time to time. However, his relationship with this movies is a very special one, so he only finds insignificant elements to complain about, such as the camera focusing on the man and not on the woman, in the exact same time when he is masturbating, which turns him off. Hetero-temporality appears now under another form. While in most cases that are mentioned in the paper, it is a way of explaining the gap between spectator's expectations and what he actually 'receives' while watching the film, in this case, it's about the character's experience inside the film itself. Don Jon's expectations are sometimes unfulfilled, not only when he's watching pornography (which creates a meta-discourse), but also when he's trying to experience the same pleasure while having actual sexual intercourse.

The means of achieving the comic are therefore strictly linked to a gap that is created between the spectator's expectations of what a romantic comedy might 'look like' and what is offered by the film's narrative and characters. "Rather than worry over the historicity of sexuality, forever minding the gap between the event and its interpretation, and between desire and identity anti-hermeneutic psychoanalysis begins with the acknowledgement that sexuality is the gap" (Stockton 2007, 15). Therefore, sexuality creates an even greater ambiguous path in what interpretation and analysis are concerned, especially because of the pre-established values most people have about it. While some generations are still linked to traditional concepts in what sexuality and romance are concerned (the two going hand in hand in most cases), the new generations are somehow placed in between, expecting on one hand to develop those concepts and on the other hand to enjoy the moment in a hedonistic manner. The gap is therefore created because movies deliver these concepts of sexuality (both traditional and modern) and therefore, the comic is easily created.

Constructions of Male and Female Characters

Romantic comedies, such as any other movie genre or artistic product, have an ideological side which can very well be observed through the way women and men are constructed and portrayed. Throughout film history, they were represented in accordance to their actual role in society and by the way political and social currents were 'shaping' their image and ideas of how they should behave. "In a day where

one shunned sexual contact before marriage, the information that partners had about their sexual compatibility was probably far less at the time of the wedding than is the case in a day when most couples have sex with each other before they form marriage bonds" (Laumann 2000, 13). The subject of sexual context within a couples' relationship is also a 'problem' strongly related to how the society thinks of males' and females' behavior during their emotional and/or physical contact. It is well known that in some ages, the female figure was strongly associated to the mother-figure and her role in the society was mainly related to the household work, raising children and nothing more. However, modern times have 'revealed' a more emancipated woman who can freely choose her role/roles in the society and whose horizons are no longer broadened by the pre-established belief that their power can't be compared to men's power. The sexual intercourse is not an exception. While traditional believes don't sustain the idea of premarital sex, the modern society and the way sexuality is perceived nowadays, don't focus so much on the reproductive process as on the idea of pleasure and short-term fulfilment.

Most romantic comedies count on inverting the roles of men and women by transferring the power that is usually representative for men, to women. Even though this might seem a 'fair exchange' of power, we must keep in mind that it is only used as a mean of creating comic, because in the end, the power does not belong to the females. In the 50's, director's Jean Negulesco *How to marry a millionaire* explores the story of three young women whose goals in life are to attract and to marry rich men. Their expectations are sometimes fulfilled, but other times appearances can be deceitful and they end up thinking those males they considered to be rich and powerful are actually poor or the other way around. The idea is that the film encourages a somehow powerful 'image' of the female characters by presenting them as dominant, charismatic and able to obtain everything they want. However, it is actually the men's wealth and social or political power that triggers them to act in a certain way.

The recipe is not necessarily the same for nowadays romantic comedies or for the analyzed films, but we can surely identify a certain pattern of male and female characters' construction.

Friends with benefits

In Will Gluck's 2011 *Friends with benefits*, the view upon the male and the female characters seems to be more 'liberal' and unprejudiced. Dylan (Justin Timberlake) and Jamie (Mila Kunis) start their friendly relationship when he, an art director who works for a small internet company in Los Angeles, is trying to get a job in New York. Jamie, an executive recruiter for a company, manages to get Dylan the job and convinces him to move to New York. This is the first clue and moment that reveals the fact that the film doesn't (at least apparently tries not to) create a cliché-image of the dominant, empowering male figure and inverts the roles of the two main characters

by putting the female character in a dominant and decision-taker position. After a while they develop a platonic relationship which 'degenerates' in a sexual one, but both partners agree on keeping things simple, without getting emotional involved. However, in the end they discover that they have fallen in love which leads to them committing to each other on every level.

The film tries to place the male and the female characters on the same position by presenting them as equally open-minded about this subject. However, the one who proposes the sexual, unemotional relationship is Dylan, which shows that in this kind of matters, the best decision maker would be the male (for being able to have a more logical and pragmatic point of view).

No matter how 'different' Jamie seems to be compared to other women who get easily emotional, Dylan's gay friend, Tommy, explains very well the ideological view upon women that will obviously materialize in the film: "That never works, bro. She's a girl. Sex always means more to them, even if they don't admit it." What Tommy is trying to mark as a general truth about women also creates a contrast and a gap between men's and women's view on sexuality and its meaning. While women tend to be more affective and sensitive about their own body also because of their maternal instinct, men are perceived as more rational and pragmatic beings. "In positive terms every relationship must be based on the constituent elements of friendship: benefits and services rendered, efforts for the improvement of the boy one loves, mutual affection, a permanent bond established once and for all" (Xenophon, 1967). Dylan and Jamie both develop romantic feelings for each other, but none of them is prepared to reveal them. While Jamie expects deeper understanding from Dylan and him making the first step, Dylan is only trying to repress his feelings because of inner frustrations and strong insecurity when it comes to expressing emotions.

The image of the man and the image of the woman in *Friends with benefits* are, therefore, not as liberated of the clichés as they are presented at the beginning of the film. In the end, it is still the woman who acts in a passive-aggressive mode by revealing her feelings. While the man also shows in some way that he's beginning to fall in love with her, his way of protecting himself and covering up his feelings is much more subtle. Actually, the 'trick' of the film is that it has never presented us a different image of the male and female characters: we find out right from the start that Jamie wants a love story like the ones she sees in the movies and sometimes reminds the other characters that she's waiting for her prince-charming, because she believes in true love. "While most romantic comedies do not want to hint that the whole edifice of true romance might be as mystical as Santa, we as audience members, consumers and film scholars need to remember that big business relies on our urge to make ourselves loveable through the consumption of goods (make-up, shoes, underwear, grooming products, mood music, seductive dinners – and films)" (McDonald 2007, 15). This aspects are clearly integrated in almost every romantic comedy that relies on the boy meets girl narrative and *Friends with benefits* is no exception- on the contrary,

it probably creates one of the most representative image of how this structure works. As an effect of the continuous use of this structure and narrative, this kind of movies tend to become transparent and predictable in what the character's fate is concerned. Therefore, the spectator correctly presumes from the first plot point that the main characters will end up satisfying their need for sexual interaction and, ultimately, for creating a romantic bond that will 'last forever'.

On the other hand, the director tries to create a more complex female image by letting her accept the unconventional relationship with Dylan that is only based on sex and therefore, exactly the opposite of what she actually dreams of. In the end, she is disappointed in Dylan's lack of sensitivity without questioning his actual fear of commitment and revelation of feelings. The statement that he is 'just like every other guy' is somehow the cliché-climax not only in screenwriting, but also in character's construction and perception of the outside world.

Dylan's image is constructed in a quite conventional and cliché-like way: although he's the one in need for a job at the beginning, which makes us think that the dominant position will be assigned to Jamie, he afterwards takes the initiative by inviting her to have this kind of relationship. However, the director tries to create a multi-dimensional character by adding a background to him that explains most of his frustrations and fears.

In spite of all the attempts of creating more unconventional characters, the construction of the storyline is still based on a conventional and transparent structure that the audience is so much used with since the romantic screwball comedies. On the other hand, the use of this structure will always sell: the audiences will always need to identify themselves with optimistic views towards a reality that is hardly tangible, but delivers hope.

Don Jon

Joseph Gordon Levitt's debut as a film director, *Don Jon*, doesn't necessarily highlight a certain contrast between the male and the female figure. However, a strong image is created by the character that also has the role of the film's narrator. Speaking in the first person, the narrator describes himself very well as what one would call a contemporary Don Juan, a macho man of the 21st century who's only interested in a few things in his life, like his car, his family and, of course, his women (the women he attracts in night clubs and, if fortunate, ends up having mindless sex with). The main character's everyday route is based on a cliché-like image of the superficial alpha-male who only cares about trivial aspects of life that merely involve his intellect or emotional affectivity. Clichés are not only used in order to shape Don Jon's characteristics, but also to announce the movies' specificities by bluntly presenting an assumed transparent route of the character's fate.

The idea of the movie is based on a typical coming-of-age kind of narrative, because Don Jon is an emotionally immature character who also confuses the idealistic act of sex presented by pornographic movies with the actual act that happens in real life.

Don Jon and his buddies are somehow portrayed as a collective character when they're going to night clubs to pick up women: they are the hunters and the women are the prey. Moreover, the women get to be 'graded' by their looks with grades from one to ten. The boys are therefore 'individualized' in accordance to how strict or how permissive they are when it comes to women's looks. This also creates a stereotype in their closed circle, because the most 'unattractive' man is the most permissive when it comes to grading: he's modest and knows how high he can afford to raise his standards and therefore doesn't aim for the most sexy women in the club.

The general image of Don Jon is quite a superficial one: the spectator finds out only a few things about him and his daily routine seems to gravitate around pornography, this being the most interesting and pleasurable part of his life. The subject brings into discussion a very debatable problem which relates to the sexual behavior of men and women. Strongly associated with taboos, pornography or masturbation are not discussed subjects in cinema or in real life, because they bring out the most intimate activity a person could get into. McDonald explains the evolution and exposure of taboos in romantic comedies by relating the subject to America's 1950's cinema and Playboy magazine. Otto Preminger was one of the directors who managed to get one of his denied films (*The Moon is Blue*, 1953) exhibited. "Due to the success of the film and audience members' evident willingness not to be protected in their viewing by the Production Code Administration, the power of this body began to be regularly challenged by filmmakers and thereafter rapidly declined" (McDonald 2007, 42). However, by 1956, every taboos except for nudity, sexual perversion and venereal disease were lifted. Needless to say, representations of sexuality in romantic comedies have had their ups and downs during film history because of audience's needs and attractions. "Although such films are called sex comedies, their date of production and targeted general audience ensures there is going to be very little actual sex in them" (McDonald 2007, 43). This statement can and cannot be applied for contemporary cinema. For example, *Don Jon* actually presents short and inexplicit sex scenes, focusing mostly on fragments of the pornographic material which arouses the character. On the other hand, there are sex comedies (like David Mackenzie's *Spread*, 2009) which present full nudity and explicit sex scenes. The freedom of expression on this level has brought the directors in a situation from where they can choose the way they want to create the image of sex comedies without creating a single pattern for all of them.

Don Jon's spiritual life begins and ends in the church, where he weekly confesses his sins that are mostly related to masturbation and out of wedlock sexual intercourse. His shallowness towards every aspect of his life affects his ability to develop a romantic relationship (an aspect that doesn't concern him in the beginning). The only woman he's interested in going out with is the one who wouldn't give in from the first night: Barbara, the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

Don Jon is the type of character who doesn't necessarily care about his girlfriend's personality. Her exceptional looks are good enough for him. That is why he wouldn't

get into serious arguments with her and is willing to change most of his habits for her. The only thing he can't give up on is his pornography – which at some level represents his right to freedom, a freedom that is gradually suppressed by Barbara's principles and selfish, arrogant attitude. The problem of sexual repression is also an important matter in which Don Jon's sexual life is concerned. Firstly, he is not pleased with whatever sexual treatment he gets from other women he sleeps with and this causes a kind of frustration similar to the one Freud theorizes about. "Freud taught that sexual repression was the chief psychological problem of mankind. He surmised that repression and constriction of sexual behavior in youth would become manifest during adulthood (Wilf Hey, 2015).

Jon's character reaches full development inside the film's narrative when he begins his relationship with an older woman from his class, Esther (Julianne Moore). Obviously, the single woman suffering after the loss of her husband and child reveals Jon's sensitive side and he begins to understand the depths of life of which he was unaware before. While he is becoming more emotionally mature, he is also starting to discover that the act of sex involves much more than just the visual fantasy he was craving for and waiting to be materialized.

The relationship with a more mature woman, whose life experience taught her to be more open minded and selfless, helps him evolve emotionally and psychologically. Therefore, the act of sex, that he grows to be so obsessed with, becomes exactly what he needs, without correlating it with the visual fantasy offered by porn.

Being strictly based on the main character's evolution, the woman's image in Don Jon seems to be unidimensional. However, she has a strong personality which actually helps Jon's evolution by highlighting most of the problems he has as a human being.

Barbara accepts the relationship with him, but postpones the act of sex until they know each other better. Although she seems to be appreciable for not letting Jon have sex with her right from the start, this 'principle' ends up looking like an immature trifle. Moreover, she has a strict list of principles, habits and interdictions when it comes to herself and to her relationships. We only know Barbara in the context of her relationship with Jon, but we can presume by the way she interacts with him that she is trying to expose an emancipated figure of the modern woman by imposing her rules and points of view, but in an immature and aggressive way.

She is enthusiastic about romantic comedies with a happy ending and believes that men should do anything for their partners in order to show their love. While Jon's idea of a good relationship is a reflection of pornographic movies, her idea of the perfect man comes from the constructed image of the male characters portrayed in romantic movies. She cannot understand why some guys would watch pornographic movies and her extremely aggressive repulsion towards this comes from an actual lack of confidence in her own attractiveness and personality. Put together, some of her character traits can denote a rather conservative personality, but actually, Barbara is just the kind of woman who expects that a man should do anything for her to prove his love and devotion.

As a conclusion, the images of men and women in movies are in one way simple social constructs of the media (publications, movies, magazines, advertising and so on). In another way, movie directors and screenwriters are mostly trying to create their characters as vivid as possible, in a realistic way. The debate remains, therefore open and valid by asking ourselves whether characters should stop being stereotyped or whether we, as human beings, should stop stereotyping ourselves.

Conclusions

Biological and psychological studies on sexuality refer to individuals, sociological studies attempt to bring in *scripting theories* (referring to the structure of events) and *network theories* (referring to the structure of relationships among people), and the interrelations among them. Thus, the approach is wider, including inquirerise about the cultural context, the social network, age, single/ martial status, significance of marriage, the influence of religious beliefs, views on premerital sex, divorce, social ties (Laumann *et al.* 2000, 5-34).

Stockton proposes psychoanalytic concepts of neurosis and repression for the study of comedy and sexuality (Stockton 2011, 21). Sexual behaviour is difficult to approach for different reasons. The American society believes that there are at least three reasons: some opponents that consider that information about sex should not be public, sex in something private and that the data gathered about sexual behaviour can be inaccurate based on the statistics of subjects that are not honest about sex issues. (Laumann *et al.* 2000, xxviii). Not only in *Friends with Benefits*, but in most 21st century romantic comedies, sexuality has been presented as a method of inducing pleasure more than anything else. The act of sex for its reproductive purpose has long ago been exterminated from movies' storyline or aesthetic ensemble, especially when it comes to nowadays' romantic comedies. *Friends with benefits* takes the idea to a higher level by courageously pushing sexuality for pleasure, labeling it as the theme of the film.

The approach of anti-hermeneutic psychoanalysis require sexuality to be viewed as "a gap" between the event and its interpretation, between desire and identity (Stockton 2007, 15). This gap implies a certain suspended duration of time, from the "original temporality" to "ecstatic temporality". (Chowdhury 2013, 39-40). The examples of romantic sex comedies that were analyzed in this paper proved that the spectator's interpretation of things and meanings can be as deceitful as the humor is often constructed on the basis of creating an expectation that will later be destructed.

"Rather than worry over the historicity of sexuality, forever minding the gap between the event and its interpretation, and between desire and identity anti-hermeneutic psychoanalysis begins with the acknowledgement that sexuality is the gap" (Stockton 2007, 15). Therefore, sexuality creates an even greater ambiguous path in what interpretation and analysis are concerned, especially because of the pre-established values most people have about it. While some generations are still linked to traditional concepts in what sexuality and romance are concerned (the two going

hand in hand in most cases), the new generations are somehow placed in between, expecting on one hand to develop those concepts and on the other hand to enjoy the moment in a hedonistic manner. The gap is therefore created because movies deliver these concepts of sexuality (both traditional and modern) and therefore, the comic is easily created.

In romantic comedies, the public is invited into a love triangle that involves the lovers and the public itself as a participant to the sensuality and comedy all together. The viewer could experience the humor of the unconscious materialized in jokes (Freud) as well as the visual sensual experience of sex scenes and their emergence in the plot. Hetero-temporality appears now under another form. While in most cases that are mentioned in the paper, it is a way of explaining the gap between spectator's expectations and what he actually 'receives' while watching the film, in *Don Jon* is about the character's experience inside the film itself. Don Jon's expectations are sometimes unfulfilled, not only when he's watching pornography (which creates a meta-discourse), but also when he's trying to experience the same pleasure while having actual sexual intercourse.

Most romantic comedies count on inverting the roles of men and women by transferring the power that is usually representative for men, to women. Even though this might seem a 'fair exchange' of power, it proves to be a means of creating comic, because in the end, the power does not belong to the females.

Endnotes

- 1 "Yet Laplanche redefines seduction as a child's reception of 'enigmatic signifiers': not just real physical abuse, but, more 'innocently', verbal and nonverbal messages freighted with untranslatable content. According to Laplanche, a child represses what does not make sense about these messages into his or her unconscious. This understanding of the unconscious as an individual reservoir of nonsense chafes against Freud's later understanding of the unconscious as a reservoir of universally shared desires. The latter constitutes psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic of suspicion, but through the former Laplanche revitalizes Freud's original practice of psychoanalysis as a method of detranslation – a way of making sense of ciphered messages, or symptoms, through the technique of free association, and without immediate recourse to *preestablished codes*" (Stockton 2011, 13).
- 2 "Antihermeneutic psychoanalysis attends simultaneously to the construction and derogation of historical narratives by focusing on messages that signify in excess of both their historicity and received psychoanalytic notions. History arranges itself through the translation of these messages and rearranges itself as these elements are subject to retranslation and detranslation" (Stockton 2011, 14).

Works Cited

Books

1. Bal, Mieke and Hernández-Navarro, Miguel Á. *Two move: video, art, migration*. CENDEAC, 2009.
2. Billig, Michael. *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humor*. London: Sage Publications, 2005.

3. Chowdhury, Aniruddha. *Post-deconstructive Subjectivity and History: Phenomenology, Critical Theory, and Postcolonial Thought*. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
4. Driscoll, Catherine. *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford/ New York: Berg, 2011.
5. Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality*, vol. II, *The Use of Pleasure*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
6. Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1960.
7. McDonald, Tamar Jeffers. *Romantic Comedy - Boy meets girl meets genre*. London: Wallflower Press, 2007.
8. Laumann, O. Edward and Gagnon, H. John, Michael, T. Robert, Michaels, Stuart. *The Social Organization of Sexuality. Sexual Practices in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
9. Smith-Shank, Deborah L. (ed.). *Semiotics and Visual Culture: Sights, Signs, and Significance*, Reston: National Art Education Association, 2004.
10. Stokes, Melvyn and Maltby, Richard (eds.). *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences. Cultural identity and the Movies*. London: British Film Institute, 1999.
11. Stockton, William. *Playing Dirty: Sexuality and Waste in Early Modern Comedy*. Minneapolis/ London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
12. Stockton, William. *Sex, Sense and Nonsense, the Anal Erotics of the Early Modern Comedy*, Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2007.
13. Stockton, William, *Playing Dirty: Sexuality and Waste in Early Modern Comedy*. Minneapolis/ London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
14. Xenophon. *Symposium*. English ed. and trans. C. L. Brownson and O. J. Todd. Loeb Classical Library. French trans. P. Chambry. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1967.

Articles

15. Fornas, Johan. "Post-Anti-Hermeneutics: Reclaiming Culture, Meaning and Interpretation". Scandinavian Academic Press, 2012, pp. 490-518.
16. Hom, Andrew, R., "Time and International Relations Theory", unpublished, p. 9, available online - http://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/4194/umi-ku-2567_1.pdf?sequence=1, retrieved in June 2015.
17. Klinger, Barbara, "Disgressions at the cinema: reception and mass culture", *Cinema Journal*, vol. 28 no. 4, Summer 1989, pp. 3-19.

Other Sources

18. Leydon, Joe, "The Girl Next Door", *Variety*, 394, 2, 2329-Feb, 2004: 34.
19. Monk, Katherine, "Revamping the teen sex comedy", *The Vancouver Sun*, 09 Apr 2004.
20. Portman, Jamie, "Sexy comedy puts Reitman back in director's chair; No Strings Attached an 'honest comedy about sexuality and relationships'", *Times - Colonist*, Jan 19, 2011, C.3.
21. Reid, Michael D, "Not Necessarily A Girl Next Door: Comedy goes a step beyond the typical Hollywood teen fare", *Times - Colonist*, 08 Apr 2004, D7.
22. Wilf Hey, "Sigmund Freud - Psychoanalysis and Sexual Repression, Insights and New Horizons", 2015, available online - <http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-sigmund-freud/597.aspx>, retrieved in May 2015.