

***CHANGING SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS ABOUT MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY IN MOTION PICTURES: MEET JOE BLACK – A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS***

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*Abstract: Over the course of Western history, three paradigms regarding masculinity and femininity have found expression in psychological life scripts, as well as in cultural products. After a series of recent papers where I have analyzed these paradigms in their logical succession, as well as their application to various fields such as couple construction and gender stereotypes, but also wedding customs and beliefs about love – in my present paper I aim to analyze the process of changing gender social representations by widespread media such as popular motion pictures, as well as to examine filmic methods of modelling stereotypes by questioning romance and gender social scenarios.*

*I have applied the method of discourse analysis to the motion picture Meet Joe Black (1998), where characters illustrate the passage from the first positively masculine paradigm (criticized for being too mechanical and lacking passion) to the second negatively masculine one (criticized for the uncontrollability of love’s violent tyranny, which commands and must be obeyed) and move on in a crescendo to the third negatively feminine Weltanschauung (discovering the responsibility and dignity of a partnership), attempting even to reach a fourth positively feminine one in the end.*

**Keywords:** *social representations, motion picture techniques, masculinity, femininity, paradigms*

### **Social scenarios and social representations**

Social representations are mental images of social events and practices, of persons and artifacts. As mental images, they are by default subjective, both culturally and socially – in the sense that they depend on the subjective experience of either the individuals or their community.

Social scenarios indicate acceptable manners of public, as well as private (!), behavior of human beings as social beings. Social scenarios are scripts meant to be carried out by individual social beings; education as socialization is based on social scenarios and social representations, which are in turn based on norms, customs and ideologies (Marica, 2008).

Among the dangers posed by social scenarios and social representations, Dewey (1986, pp. 125-126) shows that “the things more emphasized by our imagination, when it is remodeling the experience, are those things that were never real”, while Moscovici (1973, p. xi) emphasizes “the power of our capacity for representations to create objects and events” and maintains that “The peculiar power and clarity of [...] social representations is derived from the success with which they control the reality of today through that of yesterday” (*idem*, pp. 24-25).

Social representations influence social environment perception and are influenced by cultural tendencies. Therefore, one of the widespread media used for their rapid international modifications is mass-media, especially commercial motion pictures reaching every nation in a fast pace. “The current speech of the feminist-oriented press is in fact a strategy to confirm an *identity reconstruction* by promoting an image for femininity [...] in a cultural background in which women have become important social actors, whose voice has become quite distinct in fields which were once exclusively reserved to men” (Coman, 2012).

Women magazines aim to play an implicit educational role, as Mădălina Nicolaescu finds, as “they play an important role in the construction of the new subjectivities, and set out to teach, mobilize and to shape new values and new identities”, “projecting empowering modes of femininity” (Nicolaescu, 2001: 175). According to Ruxandra Coman (*idem*), magazines targeting women as audience offer portraits which they propose as archetypes in the current society, sketched in the coordinates of *the positive heroine’s myth*. These are press materials which implicitly propose the value of reading with a view to taking over role models, in the context of an interpretation grid regarding women’s capacity to fight against biological determinism, social constraints and prejudice. The assailed stereotypes pertain to women’s role and status in society.

The objective of this paper is to analyze the commercial motion picture *Meet Joe Black* (1999), which addresses and changes stereotypes regarding coupling and romance.

### **Paradigms regarding masculinity and femininity**

As I have argued in previous papers (Archip, 2012), over the course of Western civilization’s history two paradigm shifts have taken place regarding masculinity and femininity’s social scenarios and social representations, given that three paradigms have replaced one another in a rather natural succession. As we speak of masculine or feminine organizational cultures, we may speak of cultural historical stages emphasizing either femininity or masculinity, each of them putting its mark on the general perspective upon romance and the construction of a couple (Goran, 2012).

First I shall present an outline of these paradigms, and then I shall exemplify each of the stages as portrayed in the popular motion picture *Meet Joe Black* (1999), ending in a short discourse analysis sketch of four different aspects.

*The first historical paradigm regarding masculinity and femininity* conceived of manhood as mankind and of masculinity as being prototypical for humanity. Women were defined by reference to masculinity, as inferior in every possible respect, therefore not-as-human-beings as men – not as powerful, intelligent, competent and significant. Coupling was decided by third parties according to exterior criteria, such as wealth and competence for men or youth and beauty for women. Relationships between men and women were therefore aimed at solving everyday problems and at mechanically performing well defined masculine or feminine social roles (Archip, Sava, 2012).

Passionate love and all its romance drama was invented *in the second historical stage* as a “social sentiment. It was created at the beginning of the last millennium by troubadours. It is also when Europe’s great cathedrals construction began” (Popescu, C.T., 2011). This second stage is characterized by masculine weaknesses (or exaggerations of masculine strengths, culturally surfaced after the lengthy exploration of the latter in the first stage); for example, using sheer force and violent, totalitarian imposition in order to generalize predetermined social order (Manu, 2009: sexual violence). Women are defined by opposition to men, endowed with strengths lacking in men, such as inner purity and harmony exteriorly proven by fragile beauty.

In this stage, infatuation comes about as a magical, uncontrollable force that overwhelms one, incapacitating the choice of whom one falls in love with. Men felt as if a

predetermined natural order had decided reciprocal completeness (the Platonic myth of the Androgyne), even in unexpected *coup de foudre* (love at first sight). Rhapsodic and grandiose declarations of love are also to be found in this stage.

In the *present-day third stage*, couples are finally seen as difficult to hold and complex, while marriage seems to be a settlement for the less-than-perfect affair that is not predestined to bring together a man and a woman, but is gradually built by them in tandem, by free individual choice, in order to satisfy their emotional and physical needs. It is a stage characterized by social discord and revolutions, such as the feminist movement, which has redefined women *per se*, as independent and equal to men both socially and professionally. This turns marriage into a partnership or, sometimes, into a competition, given that generalized social competition now replaces second-stage dueling and first-stage hunting, while means of mass and global communication rise.

Lust is destroyed by detailed communication, thorough reciprocal knowledge and continuous collaboration, giving way to attachment, but also to cheating, thus satisfying lust without breaking the couple. “Initially, infidelity has been considered as the breakage of a sexual exclusivity contract between two individuals within an official marriage or in a consensual union. Recently, the definition extended, covering a large range of behaviours such as: cybersex (computer sex using words), porn movies watching, various degrees of physical intimacy (kissing, holding of hands, necking, caressing, flirting, and even intimacy, emotional connections with another person against the initial, primary relationship. All these have been described as acts of betrayal. [...] It is regrettable that most of the times sexual desire is regarded as natural and generally excluded from the social theory.” (Rada, 2012)

I have also logically “predicted” *a fourth future social stage* regarding masculinity and femininity in my previous papers, but it is not of interest for my present objective to discuss it as well. That is why I shall move forward to discussing Meet Joe Black.

Table 1. The four paradigms regarding relationship construction and functioning

<b>Definitions of femininity</b>	<b>Quantitative difference</b>	<b>Qualitative difference</b>	<b><i>Per se</i> definition</b>
<b>Perspective on women</b>	Inferior to men in many respects Maybe not even whole persons	Antithetic to men Different from, but (almost) equal to men	Qualities and defects of their own “Like men, only different”
<b>Attitude of men towards women</b>	Possessive Tolerant	Serving Needy	Confused
<b>Attitude of women towards men</b>	Obeying (or not) Dependent	Mysterious	Competitive
<b>Consequences for women</b>	Unable to develop their potential	Incompleteness	Taking upon themselves twice as much responsibility (wives, mothers and career women)

<b>Consequences for men</b>	Unable to have real partners	Impossibility of communication	In an obvious need to redefine masculinity as well
<b>General consequences</b>	Different levels of being	Different species	Unable to adequately define femininity and therefore half of the human being and therefore the whole of it, since the very act of defining is masculine

### Summary of the plot and discussion of the motion picture's discourse

Bill (William) Parish is a magnate posing as patriarch, managing his huge empire with an iron fist, as authoritarian as possible – he even tries to give orders to death – and yet who is well appreciated for his verve, excellence, ability to instruct and having lived a first-rate life.

Bill obviously lives in the second paradigm, expecting suitors to ask for his permission to pursue his daughter Susan, otherwise accusing “spooning, fooling around and God knows what”. He possesses a collection of rare books, he loves excess, knows “chapter and verse about everyone working with” him and will fire anybody who doesn’t give him a straight answer to a simple question.

So Bill is an authoritarian (of the second paradigm) posing as a patriarch (of the first paradigm), which we see in his motivation for rejecting a business offer: “I don’t want anybody buying up my *life’s work* [a lifetime of working based on believing in some value is a characteristic of the first paradigm], turning it into something it wasn’t *meant to be* [predestined events are expected in the second paradigm]. A man wants to *leave something behind* [a meaningful life that makes a change is to be found in the first paradigm], he wants it left behind the way *he* made it, he wants it to be run the way *he* ran it [the everlasting authority of the second paradigm], with a sense of honor, of dedication, of truth” [values of the first paradigm].

Approaching his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday, Bill is visited by “Death” embodied in his daughter’s suitor, Joe, who chose Bill for “all the sparks and energy he gives off”, for his “competence, wisdom and experience”, concluding: “you’re the one”, an exclusive choice typical for the second paradigm.

In order to give Bill a clue about his identity, Joe makes reference to “millenniums multiplied by eons, compounded by time without end [...] the most lasting and significant element in existence”. He also comes about from the second paradigm, being “the big shot, the biggest shot of all”, speaking of “the need for secrecy” and leaving much about him a mystery – his very name is chosen in order to also indicate this fact. Joe is appreciated by Bill’s daughter Susan as “attractive, well-spoken, diffident in the most seductive way, and yet powerful”, masculine traits of the second paradigm.

Joe presents himself to Susan as a one-girl guy – this heartfelt (not rule-obeying) exclusivity being a characteristic of the second paradigm. Although he (before being hit by a car and taken into possession by Death) attempts to conquer Susan as a second-paradigm man

(“Hitting on me in as nice a way as I’ve been hit on in a long time”), he still has a third paradigm view upon marriage: “taking care of each other the best you can”.

We can contrast two different film sequences, two paradigm shifts: the first we see in Susan, the second in Joe. As expected, Bill commands both.

At first, characters living in the first paradigm begin to realize that love is all mechanical there, like a “clockwork orange”: “There’s not an ounce of excitement, not a whisper of a thrill. This relationship has all the passion of a pair of *tick mice*. [...] I want you to get swept away out there. I want you to levitate. I want you to sing with rapture and dance like a dervish [...] be deliriously happy or at least leave yourself open to be.”

We find an answer to the question about life’s meaning and a first definition of love; a permission to lose one’s head and an emphatic invitation to step out of the first paradigm:

*“... love is passion, obsession, someone you can’t live without. If you don’t start with that what are you going to end up with? I say, fall head over heels, find someone you can love like crazy and who’ll love you the same way back. How do you find him? Well, you forget your head and you listen to your heart. The truth is, there’s no sense living your life without this. To make the journey and not fall deeply in love, well, you haven’t lived a life at all. But you have to try, because if you haven’t tried, you haven’t lived.”*

While the ever-repeated line “...Stay open. Who knows? Lightning could strike!” sends the message that life fulfillment cannot be controlled, as one cannot control whom one falls in love with; love is violent and tyrannical, it does not ask, but it commands.

Both Joe and Bill make second paradigm love declarations to Susan: “I’ll love you always”, says the former; “I want you to know how much I love you, that you’ve given a meaning to my life that I had no right to expect, that no one can ever take from me”, says the latter.

From the very beginning we see Bill’s oldest daughter “aiming for the stars” with a “too perfect”, “too exquisite” “party of the century” where the president may come, but also “the chairman of the F.C.C., the Secretary General of the U.N., many senators and congressmen “and at least 12 of the Fortune 500”. Bill feels like owning everyone at the party: “you’re mine for a night”.

However, the third paradigm threatens the second one and comes into conflict with it, through the “three hysterical chefs”, through Bill’s refusal to be bought by the negative traits of the third paradigm (“Reporting the news is a privilege and a responsibility. And it is not exploitable”) and by the fear of “violating the laws of the universe [...] Any universe that exists or ever existed” (when Bill tries to circumvent Joe’s plan to take Susan with him as well). Joe’s response to the latter admonition is “What I know is what I want, and what I want is Susan. And I will have her, and she will have me. And that’s the way it’s going to be. And there’s nothing you can do.”

In the second sequence of the film, characters looking for the second paradigm’s romance begin to realize that passion and obsession have nothing to do with trust and respect, with responsibility and dignity – and then the third paradigm emerges: “How perfect for you to take whatever you want because it pleases you. That’s not love. It’s some *aimless*

*infatuation* which, for the moment, you feel like indulging. It's missing everything that matters. *Trust, responsibility, taking the weight for your choices and feelings and spending the rest of your life living up to them* and, above all, not hurting the object of your love.”

A second definition of love is offered here, again by Bill – this time, love is not passion, but partnership: having “the grace and compassion and fortitude to walk beside her as she makes her way through this beautiful thing called life”.

The most important requirement for love in the third paradigm is knowledge: “how can this be love? She doesn't know who you are. Why don't you tell her, try it out, see what happens? Reveal everything there is to know about yourself and let the chips fall where they may”. A similar idea is to be found in another character's discourse, where we find another complaint of the third paradigm to the second – being conquered and loved as an ideal means living in constant fear: “How do I know she loves me? Because she knows the worst thing about me and it's ok. That's not one thing. It's just an idea. It's like you know each other's secrets, your deepest darkest secrets and then you're free. You're free to love each other completely, totally, *no fear*. There's nothing you don't know about each other and it's okay.”

From the point of view of the third paradigm, the second one is immature: a dying old woman tells Joe that his and Susan's falling in love without knowing each other comes down to “Schoolboy things in your head. Badness for you. Badness for her.”

On the other hand, throughout the film, third paradigm treason is present in:

- the boyfriend of Joe's sister;
- Bill Parish's right hand Drew, who sets up the game plan for Bill's competition to buy up his company in order to break it up and sell it off for parts – and who had also evaded paying the taxes in the past;
- Bill Parish's board of the company, meeting in secret and then mandating him to retire;
- Susan's relationship(s) with Drew and Joe;
- Joe's intending to betray his oath / pact with Bill not to touch his family.

Throughout the film, permanent discontent is ensured by redefining the objective once reached, thus forcing the passage from one relationship to another (from the machine relationship to the passionate romance and then to the responsible partnership).

As a **final sketch of our discourse analysis**, we may synthesize four different aspects:

1. Presentation of the new way of conceiving romance fulfilled its purpose after presenting and attacking its competition. The motion picture's discourse had a well-defined structure: it began with the appearance of the first paradigm, continued with the second one and its criticism on the first, and ended with the triumph of the third. The insight on which the discourse was based, typical of the third paradigm, pertained to knowledge, namely the knowledge of others.
2. The message of the film is addressed to all categories of persons, of all colors, ages and social positions. This was evidenced by the various characters included in the action deployment, from the old Afro-American poor dying woman and the Asian cook helps in the kitchen to the wealthy and/or young main characters.
3. Like most commercial motion pictures, *Meet Joe Black* is a discourse about the two Freudian forces: the life instinct (*Eros*, the romance) and the death drive (*Thanatos*) –

including the aggressive character of business competition. The motion picture's discourse is about values and beliefs, providing examples of everyday life to argue for its message. Characters are easy to empathize with, and because of this they reach a more touching side.

4. The pace of the action and music are in line with the message conveyed at each stage of the discourse. The resulting atmosphere gave the film's discourse its power to convey the message: the discourse about morality, about vulnerability, about lofty goals and respect for the principles. The lavish house and the sumptuous natural setting, the physical beauty and expressive capacity of most actors, as well as the filmic method, contributed together to the motion picture's overall success.

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