Like a Horse and Carriage: (Non)Normativity in Hollywood Romance
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Two recent romantic comedies—\textit{Friends with Benefits} and \textit{Friends with Kids}—seek to re-situate the cultural logics of marriage by representing that supposed impossibility of friendship between people of different sexes. These friendships can be sexual in one case, and parenting in another—through a rejection or disenchantment with the limitations of heteronormative approaches to relationships. This initial, but of course not final, rejection of the invention in romance is obviously not entirely unheard of in the genre of romantic comedies—indeed, ambivalence about or even rejection of romantic notions of romance are common even in films that reinforce them sexually.

But the shift marked by these two films lies in the explicit and thorough problematisation of the optimistic investment in the marriage-like relationship (if not marriage itself), and in the couples in both films proposing that the problem lies in the expectation that it will fulfill all of their needs. This is “crue optimism.”

\textit{Friends with Benefits} marks a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility. What is cruel about these attachments... is that the subjects who invest in them do not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment, the continuity of its possibility remains. And the sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.

In other words, there are numerous aspects of life that we believe are “good,” and enhance our lives and happiness, promising futures that we consider promising. But this continuity—especially when it comes to believing that sex is to be key to the good life means that we, more and less consciously, the fact that they are frequently not giving, and perhaps not capable of giving, us happiness. We remain optimistic, but this optimism is cruel, because even when we arrange our lives around these “goods” and what they promise, they will almost disappoint us, wearing us out, threatening our well-being and undermining our relationships. But we remain committed to believing that sex has consequences that they can or should be capable of fulfilling the “promise” of the future-oriented.“

The protagonists in \textit{Friends with Benefits} and \textit{Friends with Kids} critique the optimism involved in being attached to marriage-like relationships, namely, the hope that they will fulfill most or all of the needs for romance, sex, intimacy, parenting and so on. As a result, they participate in the kind of creative relationship-formation that Foucault identified as the value of friendship. Thus, this critique is thorough-going, articulate and lived, especially in the dialogue-focussed \textit{Friends with Kids}, and the friendship between people of different sexes is transgressive and significant. The turn back towards normativity at the close of both films, then, brings with it a peculiar significance, especially for the relationship between cruel optimism and heteronormativity.

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

This decision is a resistance to heteronormative requirements of love-relationships, situating intimate, different-sex friendship as a site of potential resistance in a similar way to Foucault’s identification of the potentiality of homosexuality: “Homosexuality is a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities... because the "slantwise" position of the [homosexual], as it were, the diagonal lines he can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light” (206). That is, as a result of these apparent transgressions of the usual line between friendship and relationship, both films lay out, though also undermine, some of the most commonly cited critiques of heteronormative dating and married life.

Both films, then, offer a critique not simply of heteronormativity itself, but also a critique of what Lauren Berlant names “cruel optimism.” The alignment with heteronormativity that Ahmed describes is shaped by the recognition of normative, romantic, marriage-like heterosexual relationships as “good objects,” essential to a properly “good” life. But as Berlant demonstrates, this recognition is an attachment, and one which is sincerely and overly hopeful, as this object is unable to fulfill all of these hopes. This is “crue optimism.”

The idea of “good” life that we believe in is “good,” and enhance our lives and happiness, promising futures that we consider promising. But this continuity—especially when it comes to believing that sex is to be key to the good life means that we, more and less consciously, the fact that they are frequently not giving, and perhaps not capable of giving, us happiness. We remain optimistic, but this optimism is cruel, because even when we arrange our lives around these “goods” and what they promise, they will almost disappoint us, wearing us out, threatening our well-being and undermining our relationships. But we remain committed to believing that sex has consequences that they can or should be capable of fulfilling the “promise” of the future-oriented.

In an articulation of self-aware and self-reflexively critical cruel optimism, Jamie says “God, I wish my life was a movie sometimes. You know, I’d never have to worry about my hair, or having to go to the bathroom. And then when I’m at my lowest point, some guy would chase me down the street, pour his heart out and worry about my hair, or having to go to the bathroom. And then when I’m at my lowest point, some guy would chase me down the street, pour his heart out and

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This kind of self-reflexivity goes beyond generic self-referralitvity, however, and demonstrates both an awareness of, and engagement with, entertainment-consumption as “public pedagogy” (Giroux). Their conversation following the film critiques the role that entertainment-consumption plays, first, in the constitution of the heterosexual consumption as “public pedagogy” (Giroux). Their conversation following the film critiques the role that entertainment-consumption plays, first, in the constitution of

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appraisal and rejection of various sensations, body parts and behaviours (well beyond PIV sex) than they are permitted in the heteronormative sex they have with potential love-interests. This level of honesty and sexual agency, especially from Jamie but also from Dylan, counters heteronormative depictions of sex, and instead presents sex as an explicit negotiation. It also reveals the extent to which heteronormative dating rituals, depicted throughout the movie, frequently undermine rather than enhance the autonomy, because sex is situated as “coming naturally,” resulting in sex which is inherently compromising for all those involved, whatever their investments in the encounter.

The critique of cruel optimism is well-developed and articulate in *Friends with Kids*, primarily because it is dialogue-heavy, and depicts some of the complex realities of parenting and relationships. The main characters, Jules and Jason, do not explicitly reject fantasies about heteronormative parenting, relationship and lifestyles, as Jamie and Dylan do. Indeed, such fantasies are implicitly recognised as unachievable, but their focus is on avoiding the compulsory drudgery that seems to be associated with them. They recognize that they have experienced failure in their own conventional family lives because their friends, the two couples of Missy and Ben, and Leslie and Alex, are already living evidence (for them, at least) of an attachment that undermines their well-being, in Berlant’s terms. Missy and Ben have a passionate history, but their relationship breaks down over the course of the film, supposedly under the pressures of “real life” (that is, life with kids). Leslie and Alex have two children, and are deeply in love, emotionally and physically exhausted, and argue very frequently.

It is the difficult lives these couples live that shapes the protagonists’ decision to have a child together without being in a relationship with one another:

Jason: Why don’t we just do it?... We love each other, we trust each other, we’re responsible, gainfully employed and totally not attracted to each other physically.

Jules: Yeah, that’d be perfect. Beat the system.

Jason: Right. We have the kid, share all the responsibility and just skip over the whole marriage and divorce nightmare.

The challenge to the “happy object” of heteronormative family life is extremely explicit. When Jules and Jason announce their plan to Leslie and Alex, they refer to their friends’ “stupid attachments—[a], [b], and [c]—the [a] non-marriage. [b] in, [c] the [b] romance. A friend for at least a large portion of the movie, this pragmatic assessment and their solution to it does seem to provide them both with happiness: they both have romance with other people, while raising a child together.

Leslie and Alex, however, provide a counterpoint to the challenge to cruel optimism that Jules and Jason embody. They are sympathetic depicted, with real warmth and honesty towards each other, even in the presence of their flaws, and this, as I will shortly show, becomes a way that the film holds open the possibility of the emotionally insensitive man, hurts her repeatedly until he, too, waiting at a red traffic light that turns green, realises that he is in love with Jules and does a U-turn.

In *Friends with Benefits*, it is Jamie’s unconventional mother, who has herself rejected normative relationship styles, who reminds Jamie of her attachment to the “happy object” of a conventional relationship, and warns her that her friendship with Dylan might prevent her from finding her fantasied love-relationship. This motherly advice, then, functions to remind Jamie of her original optimistic attachment, and situate her current friendship—for all of her enjoyment of it—as problematic. Dylan’s sister is instead amused that Dylan’s pragmatic commitment to his friends-with-benefits arrangement with Jamie blocks his recognition that he

In both films, despite these robust declarations of the awareness of the traps of “cruel optimism” as attached to heteronormative love relationships, the climax is true “rom-com,” with the unusual friendships inevitably becoming love-relationships. The apparent impossibility of arranging one’s life around what Foucault identifies as a “multiplicity of relationships” (204) beyond conventional institutions becomes clear in a number of key scenes. This impossibility arises because of the recalcitrance of romantic feeling, which is situated as challenging the “sensible” and apparently overly pragmatic solutions developed by the protagonists in response to their particular situations.

Despite romantic feeling being situated as problematically encouraging people to attach to normative relationship forms that continually disappoint and require compromise, both films return to romantic feeling to suggest that if you love someone else enough, that feeling will ensure that the relationship never becomes a threat to well-being; it, in other words, is the sufficient grounds for an optimism that is not cruel. Disappointment, as manifested in the worn-down Missy and Ben in *Friends with Kids*, and in Jamie’s hopeless romance with the apparently perfect but actually manipulative and self-absorbed Parker, becomes synonymous with an optimistic misrecognition of lust for love: cruel optimism resituated as the result of personal error rather than the inadequacy of the “good object” of heteronormative relationship styles. In *Friends with Benefits*, the films renounce conventional familial and parenting lives because their friends, the two couples of Missy and Ben, and Leslie and Alex, are already living evidence (for them, at least) of an attachment that undermines their well-being, in Berlant’s terms.

In *Friends with Kids*, it is Jules’s jealousy, a hallmark of conventional monogamous relationships, that challenges the persistent cruel optimism. For Jules, the problem is, instead, the protagonists’ fantasies about them, their desires for more and other styles of relationships, and, most of all, the privileging of creative, pragmatic reason over the inevitable reality of their romantic feelings.

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This exploration of the recent films *Friends with Kids* and *Friends with Benefits* has elaborated the recent turn towards depicting "unconventional" relationship and friendship styles in romantic comedies. Both films provide a critique of the cruel optimism associated with heteronormative love relationships, especially in their institutionalised form. They go beyond earlier more cynical romantic comedies such as *Annie Hall,* however, in that the protagonists do not merely recognise the inadequacies, compromises, sacrifices and dissatisfaction produced by going along with the fantasised "good object" of conventional marriage. Instead, as if following Foucault, they get creative with their relationship styles, reallocating certain forms of relating and sharing conventionally associated solely with the romantic relationship—sex and parenting—to their friendships. In both cases, however, the creative mode of relating becomes a temporary matter.

Whilst this could have been an *Annie Hall*-style challenge to the ideal of stability in relationships of all kinds, and a rethinking of the problematic equation which sees relationship worth in its longevity, it instead becomes an occasion to recuperate the cruel optimism associated with heteronormativity. The rejection of "cruel optimism" is finally depicted in both films as an overly pragmatic denial of feeling, and the "threats to well-being" which have been recognised in the critique of heteronormativity are re-situated as erroneous fantasy-nightmares: apparently the marriage-like relationship is not necessarily a threat to well-being, if you choose the right partner; and on the other hand, if you are too busy creatively fulfilling your needs, you might miss the right partner—a cruel cynicism of attachment to non-normativity, perhaps. In this way, the attachment to the critique becomes situated, in the denouement of both films—namely each man recognising that they do love the woman—as the site of "cruel optimism." For both couples, it turns out that the transgressive deployment of friendship becomes inadequate for the fulfilment of their needs apparently because of their feelings for each other, though it is never entirely clear how this stands in the way. This reproduction of the "happy object" of a marriage-style relationship, then, is primarily situated as allowing the romantic attachment to simply be whatever it "really" is. 

Echoing throughout these films is a recurrent theme: the claim is that participating in conventional heteronormative arrangement of love-relationships and friendships because it is dominant could, indeed, be problematic in the way that Berlant’s notion of cruel optimism clarifies. As a pedagogical form, explicitly and self-reflexively noted by Jamie and Dylan, then, this storyline "test-drives" non-normativity only to discover heteronormativity at the heart of romantic feeling. Monogamy, heteronormativity, and profoundly normative modes of relating, here, are situated not as conformity, but as both the natural outcome of a man and a woman falling in love and a choice made from a place of knowing non-normativity and its apparent inability to fulfill desires. It thus becomes possible to choose heteronormativity because it works as an expression of the truth of romantic feeling; indeed, the implication becomes that heteronormativity is not the "good object" we are, in more and less forcible ways, aligned with and required to be attached to, but the coincidentally frequent outcome of choosing romantic feeling over other needs. The critique of cruel optimism and the depiction of non-normative styles of relating thus becomes an occasion for the reconstitution of a supposed "true" optimism, guaranteed by, in rom-com terms, finding "the one."

References


