Education By Film:

What American Movies Tell Teens About Sex, Love, and Relationships

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"For adults to hand over responsibility for educating young people about love and sex to popular culture is a dumbfounding, epic abdication of responsibility...
...What is more important in our lives than learning how to have mutual, caring romantic relationships?" (Weissbourd, 2014)

In most American high schools, teens are taught the Common Core of Math, English, History, and Science. But, for their emotional and interpersonal education, students are left to their own devices. There are no adequate measures in place to teach emerging adults how to start and sustain healthy intimate relationships. Unlike the Common Core, health and sex education classes are poorly regulated and implemented. Faced with either silence or misinformation from figures of authority, teens implicitly learn lessons from visual media, like films.

While teens are not blank slates, or empty vessels to be manipulated by moving pictures, they are susceptible to unquestioningly and inadvertently internalizing the harmful ideas presented in films. Many films normalize and reinforce toxic ideologies like heteronormativity and misogyny. These movies imply that relationships are a battle of wills, equate men's controlling behavior with love, and present sex scenes where women's pleasure is ignored or absent.

Of course, not all films fall into this problematic category. I will discuss films that present potentially dangerous ideals, but I will also discuss films that attempt to counter these harmful ideas. I will also point towards possible ways forward, namely developing counter

cinema, teaching media literacy, modifying high school curricula, and potentially adding relationship consultants to the filmmaking process.

What Are Teens Taught in High School?

The Common Core State Standards were developed in 2009 to standardize secondary school education in the United States. Today, high school curricula in 41 states conform to the Common Core, which includes requirements and regulations for what students should know at the end of each grade. The subjects included in the Common Core are English Language, History/Social Studies, Science, and Mathematics. Outside of these requirements, high schools provide their own electives. These might include art, physical education, psychology, computer skills, and health (Development, 2018).

According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative website, the Common Core was developed based on research and evidence concerning what would make students successful in college and their careers. The justification for the standards emphasized how the Common Core was "informed by other top-performing countries to prepare all students for success in our global economy and society" (Development, 2018). In this case, success is defined economically and globally in relation to other countries. Students are workers who represent America as a nation. But what about success in terms of fulfillment and quality of life? What if the definition of success placed students' wellbeing above the status of the nation as a whole?

The standards were developed with the input of teachers and no input was given by students (Development, 2018). Students in college or people who have graduated college could answer crucial questions: how has your education affected your college and career success? What does success in college and your career mean to you? Given what you know now that you

are in college or have a career, what do you think is essential for high school students to learn to be successful? What obstacles have caused you difficulties in college and in your career?

The Common Core was developed by state leaders who are of a different generation than current high school students. Students currently reaching emerging adulthood occupy an entirely different social environment than current legislators did at the same age. Now legislators make recommendations from their vantage point. And additionally, they think about America as it compares to other nations, not about individual students and their mental health and ability to make meaningful connections. A 2015 Atlantic article summarized this generational divide:

> "When asked what their primary concern was during their first job, about 64 percent of older Americans talked about making as much money as possible or learning new skills. When asked the same question, younger Americans were much more likely to say that their top priority was doing something that they found enjoyable or making a difference in society, with 57 percent choosing one of these options" (White, 2015).

The Common Core was created with the intention of strengthening America's power on the global scene. But the state leaders who developed it are out of touch with the world of today's emerging adults. High school students would be more successful learning media literacy, emotional and social intelligence, cognitive behavioral therapy, and sexual health. These are the modern necessities for people to have success in "college, career, and life" (Development, 2018). These skills must become more valued than monetary success. In fact, it could be argued that those who achieve material success in college, career, and life without learning these skills are dangerous to society.

Why Does This Matter?: Emerging Adulthood and Media Usage

> "The United States has the highest rates of teenage pregnancy and birth in the Western industrialized world, and research indicates that television and other mass media are important sources of sexual information for young people." (Pinkleton, 2008, 462)

Teenagers are taught biology, history, and literature, but they are never formally taught interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, or sexually healthy thoughts. They remember that the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell, that Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth, that Shakespeare wrote in iambic pentameter. But they are left to make their own judgments on why and when they should have sex, on who they should date and how they should treat them, and what behavior they should accept from their romantic partners. A lack of institutionalized education when it comes to love, sex, and romantic relationships in America largely leaves the task to media, which teenagers are consuming more of than ever before. Often left helpless without lessons from those in positions of authority—teachers, parents, older siblings—emerging adults take their own lessons from the films they watch.

According to studies, emerging adults consume media twelve hours a day (Coyne, 2013, p. 127). Emerging adulthood is the period in a person's life from their late teens to their mid to late twenties and the theory of emerging adulthood refers specifically to people in industrialized societies. Studies demonstrate that "by the time they leave adolescence, emerging adults have already experienced 18 years of media socialization, with evidence suggesting that this socialization continues well into emerging adulthood" (Coyne, 2013, p. 127). For example, one study found that some viewers of the reality television show, *The Bachelor*, "report that they use the program as a way to inform their own views of intimate relationships" (Coyne, 2013, p. 130).

However emerging adults are not passive consumers. Theories indicate that while media socializes people, people also have needs that they gratify by choosing certain media to consume (Coyne, 2013, p. 130). While in the former, the consumer is more of a victim, in the latter theory

the consumer has control over their media consumption. Researchers have found that people choose media that will help them explore their identity, but that "media's misrepresentation of reality (e.g., gender, ethnicity) is particularly influential for those who do not have additional exposure to related information about which they can think critically" (Coyne, 2013, p. 130). In other words, if people do not know any gay people personally, stereotypes about gay people portrayed in film may be perceived as realistic and accurate.

Additionally, "emerging adults often use favorite television characters as 'social surrogates' that enable them to feel connected to others, but also enhance self-discovery through identification" (Coyne, 2013, p. 131). Other studies found "fantasies of "possible selves"—future visions of hoped for or feared selves—are both informed and limited by the available models in the mass media" and that "media models for romantic relationships may prime stereotypes about men's predatory sex drive or women's objectification" (Greenwood, 2014, p. 628).

According to social cognitive theory, viewers imitate those in the media if they are portrayed as attractive and if they are rewarded or simply not punished for their behavior (Hust, 2008, p. 5). One study pointed to the idea of media "as a 'super peer' and sources of information about sex when or if adolescents are unable to learn from their peer group (Bleakley, 2008, p. 445). The media offers teens a "sexual script," and if unhealthy behavior is normalized, then teens will likely enact that behavior in real life (Hust, 2008, p. 5).

If the media that emerging adults consume directly impacts their beliefs about themselves and others, it becomes crucial to look at what they are watching and ask what messages exist in those pieces of media. But first, I would like to explore a different question: what is the culture in Hollywood that media makers are steeped in?

Hollywood Culture

In 2000, Rachel Abramowitz wrote "Discussing sexism, indeed sexual harassment, in Hollywood was a little like discussing the fact that the sea was blue" (Abramawitz, 2000, p. XIII). Then in October of 2017, Ronan Farrow reported the stories of dozens of women who accused producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape (Farrow, 2017). Farrow's piece began the Me Too Movement, which led to countless women coming forward to share their stories of sexual harassment and abuse in Hollywood. The movement shone a light on an uncomfortable truth: Hollywood is structured to protect male abusers and silence female survivors. In a USA Today article, Maria Puente and Cara Kelly found that 94% of women in Hollywood have experienced sexual misconduct (Puente, Kelly, 2018).

In 2015, April Reign started the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite to protest the lack of diversity in Hollywood, specifically in relation to the all white acting nominees (Schulman, 2018). While presenting as liberal, the industry is overwhelmingly white. One of the first Hollywood blockbusters was the extraordinarily racist 1915's *The Birth of a Nation,* in which the KKK is presented as the heroes, saving the virginal white damsel in distress from black rapist.

In 1950, anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker conducted the first and only ethnographic study of Hollywood. She documented her studies in *Hollywood, The Dream Factory.* She found that Hollywood was a patriarchal society where film studios are run by "Men Who Play Gods" who are motivated by profit. She wrote, "For most persons in executive positions, it [picture making] is a business where. . . for a nickel you get a dollar. The goal is profits, large and quick

ones. . . . Any talk about the movies as an art is, for them, the height of absurdity and unreality" (Powdermaker, 1950, p. 25).

It is now no secret that Hollywood is a patriarchal industry that is rife with misogyny and racism and driven by profits above all else. This status quo is consistently being challenged by artists, activists, and journalists. But it is still the default for the industry. Just as emerging adults are deeply affected by the media they consume, the media created in Hollywood is greatly impacted by the culture in which the creators work. The question becomes how, not if, this toxic culture makes an appearance in Hollywood films.

What Do Hollywood Films Say About Sex?

In the documentary *This Film is Not Yet Rated,* director Kirby Dick examines Motion Picture Association of America's rating system. In the film, director Kimberly Pierce discusses her film *Boys Don't Cry,* starring Hilary Swank as Brandon Teena, a transgender man. In order for the MPAA to give the film an R rating (children under seventeen must be accompanied by an adult) and not an NC-17 rating (no children under seventeen may be admitted), Pierce had to change several scenes. One of the scenes was one in which Brandon performs oral sex on his girlfriend, Lana.

When interviewed, Pierce said the MPAA had no issues with the graphic scene during which Brandon is shot in the head and killed, but objected to the scene focused on Lana's orgasm. Of this decision, Pierce said, "This is totally about Lana's pleasure. So there's something about that that's scaring them, that's unnerving them… In a construct where most movies are written by men, directed by men, they're mostly the male experience. And even in sex scenes, it's from the male perspective. So I don't think the focus is female pleasure" (Schmidt & Dick,

2006). The MPAA also took issue with a similar scene from *Blue Valentine,* in which Dean,
played by Ryan Gosling, performs oral sex on Cindy. Of the scene, actor Ryan Gosling said "The
sex felt real – it wasn't sexy or 'a sex scene', and that's why we got into trouble" (Fisher, 2011).

In this way, the MPAA now serves the same function as the Motion Picture Production
Code of 1930. The code contained rules for what was and what was not allowed to be shown on
screen, and it was intended to "maintain social and community values" in the movie making
business *(The Motion Picture Production Code*, 1930). On sex, the code was meant to maintain
"the sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home" (*Motion, 1930).* No "scenes of passion"
were allowed to be shown (*Motion, 1930)*. Catholic in spirit, the Code claimed objectivity but
actually just enforced the ideals of a specific group of people, namely straight, white,
conservative men. The MPAA does the same. Who decides that teens can see the murder of a
transgender man but not the pleasure that he shares with his partner? Why is sexual passion
prohibited, especially when it centers on female pleasure produced by a trans man? This is
inherently a transphobic censorship decision.

Hollywood is a business and sex sells, and so does the sexualization and commodification
of women's bodies. This has created a tension between coexisting yet incompatible ideals; sex
and female pleasure is taboo, but sexualized women are not. As a result, teens are allowed to see
violence against women and highly sexualized and objectified women, but they cannot see
women's pleasure or healthy depictions of relationships. The MPAA's decisions concerning *Boys
Don't Cry* and *Blue Valentine* send some dangerous and despicable messages. Women can be
sexy, and they can be victims, but they cannot be sexy, powerful, and in control. Trans people
cannot give and receive pleasure, but they can be dead.

What Do Hollywood Romance Films Say About Love and Relationships?

In popular American romantic films, associating love with borderline abusive behavior is incredibly common. Emerging adults who worship these films may internalize the idea that, in the words of feminist theorist bell hooks, "it is a sign of commitment, an expression of love, to endure unkindness or cruelty, to forgive and forget" (hooks, 2001, p. 137). Additionally hooks asserts that "we may be more interested in finding a partner than in knowing love" (hooks, 2001, p. 173). This is reflected in many films that seem to push the idea that your life is worthless without a certain type of love and a certain type of relationship. But often that ends up being a far cry from hooks' definition of love as a "mix [of] various ingredients - care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication" (hooks, 2001, p. 5).

One such film is *Twilight,* the film adaptation of the wildly popular young adult book of the same name, which romanticizes codependent and controlling behavior. The film revolves around the relationship between high school student Bella Swan and the mysterious Edward, who she eventually discovers is a vampire who is over 100 years old. When Bella first encounters Edward in a high school classroom, Edward is visibly repulsed, seemingly by how Bella smells. We later discover it's because Bella is Edward's "own personal brand of heroin" (Godfrey, Mooradian, Morgan & Hardwicke, 2008), and that the smell of her blood is almost too delectable to resist. The implication is that he wants to drink her blood and kill her, but that he loves to be near her so much that he chooses to refrain. This extreme and deadly desire—a desire so intense that your partner wants to consume you—is positioned as sexy and romantic. It is

telling that this framework directly inspired *Fifty Shades of Grey,* a book and a film adaptation with a protagonist that makes Edward look like a saint in comparison. While Edward may not be as clearly controlling and abusive as Christian Grey, Edward occupies a similar space, which is troubling considering the countless young adults who consume this story.

Edward saves Bella's life countless times in the film and she often serves as the damsel in distress. In *The Twilight Saga: New Moon,* the sequel to *Twilight*, Edward breaks up with Bella, sending her into a deep depression where all she thinks or cares about is Edward (Godfrey, Rosenfelt, & Weitz, 2009). Later on in the film series, she becomes a vampire to stay with Edward, leaving behind and losing everything that made up her identity. It is clear that Edward is the only thing Bella cares about and that she only exists in relation to him. For some reason, this is seen as romantic, when in reality it is codependent behavior. Losing oneself in a partner, and making one's identity completely dependent on a partner is extremely unhealthy and should be portrayed as such, instead of idealized and romanticized.

The classic romance film *The Notebook* romanticizes resentment and unnecessary strife in relationships. The story revolves around the tumultuous relationships between privileged Allie and working-class Noah. To secure a date with Allie, Noah climbs onto the ferris wheel Allie is riding, hangs off of it precariously, and threatens to let go if she refuses to agree to go on a date with him. Allie gives in and agrees to go out with him. The scene is supposed to be romantic, and it can be assumed to be perceived as such; the film put Ryan Gosling on the map as a teen heartthrob and he won best kiss at the MTV Movie Awards alongside Rachel McAdams for the film. But it is not romantic to coerce someone into agreeing to your request. Starting a relationship by threat should not be presented as cute and playful.

Later in the film, after Noah and Allie have spent a long time apart, Allie cheats on her fiance with Noah, but then wavers on whether or not to leave her fiancé. When Noah and Allie fight about it, Noah says, "If you leave here, I hate you," (Harris, Johnson, & Cassavetes, 2004) again using slightly manipulative and coercive tactics. Although at the end of the fight Noah ends up asking Allie, "What do you want?" (Harris, Johnson, & Cassavetes, 2004) rightly putting her needs first, there is another portion of the fight that is unproductive and less than healthy:

> "Well that's what we do! We fight! You tell me when I'm being an arrogant son of a bitch, and I tell you when you're being a pain in the ass! Which you are, 99% of the time. I'm not afraid to hurt your feelings. They have like a two-second rebound rate and your back doing the next pain in the ass thing" (Harris, Johnson, & Cassavetes, 2004).

This quote points to the normalization of fighting with and disliking your partner, not the open and honest communication bell hooks discussed. Noah and Allie *say* that they love each other, but they do not behave that way. Again, in the words of hooks, we must "begin by always thinking of love as an action never a feeling" (hooks, 2001, p. 13). *The Notebook's* popularity is predicated on the desirability of Noah and Allie's relationship. But that relationship is volatile, passionate, unpredictable, and dishonest. Studies have shown that this type of "love" and this type of relationship is often depicted in Hollywood films, and that this has a real impact on viewers.

One study found that those who watch a lot of romantic movies had "faith that love conquers all, greater expectations for intimacy, and endorsement of the eros love style," with the eros love style being passionate, romantic love (Galloway, 2015, p. 687). Another study found that people who watched romantic comedies held more idealistic beliefs concerning romance than those who did not watch those films (Hefner, 2013, p. 150).

Another study found contradictions in the depiction of relationships in romantic films, which were shown to be simultaneously healthy and unhealthy. The study found that "characters in relationships placed importance on and prioritized partners, often made great efforts with romantic gestures, and were understanding and supportive when partners confided in them. Characters were also shown, however, to neglect their relationships, deceive their partners, fight and argue, and in some cases be unfaithful" (Johnson, 2009, p. 366).

Yet another study looked at myths perpetuated by wedding films, including:

- "The love of a good and faithful true woman can change a man from a 'beast' into a 'prince'" (Galloway, 2015, p. 361)
- "Bickering and fighting a lot mean that a man and a woman really love each other passionately" (Galloway, 2015, p. 361)
- "All you really need is love, so it doesn't matter if you and your love have very different values" (Galloway, 2015, p. 362)
- "The right mate 'completes you'—filling your needs and making your dreams come true" (Galloway, 2015, p. 363)

Normalizing and endorsing these incredibly unhealthy ideas means that viewers may be more likely to endure a toxic relationship because they believe they can fix their partner or that love conquers all. Additionally, believing these unhealthy ideas fosters extremely high expectations that will never be met, setting the viewer up for disappointment and frustration. People may be more likely to ignore problems, or downplay issues because they don't want to ruin a relationship that they believe should be perfect.

Since romantic films are largely consumed by women, this socialization by way of film may teach young women to put up with toxic and often abusive behavior. Relationships in film are often torn apart by toxic behavior, only to be mended by a grand romantic gesture that solves

everything. Female viewers are essentially trained to respond positively to this unhealthy cycle. In this media environment, the toxic becomes intoxicating and the abusive becomes desirable.

Furthermore, in a study of 40 of the top grossing romantic comedies from 1995-2005, it was found that the "characters were predominantly White, middle class, and heterosexual" (Johnson, 2009, p. 369). Only one movie featured a gay couple and they were not allowed to be sexual in the way that their straight counterparts were allowed (Johnson, 2009, p. 369). This affects who viewers see as a potential partner, and who they see as worthy of love. And if viewers are not white, middle class, and heterosexual, it affects how they view themselves. Viewers of these films are trained to view certain people as deserving of love and relationships, and others as undeserving. The real life implication is subtle visual discrimination which prevents someone from forming a connection with someone who doesn't "look" like a viable love interest.

Healthier Depictions of Relationships in Mainstream Movies

Despite the troubling ideologies present in many Hollywood films, there are many other movies that depict much healthier, truer to life ideas concerning love, sex, and relationships. One example is the animated film *Frozen,* a significant example because it was so widely viewed; *Frozen* is the fifteenth highest grossing film of all time. The movie is about two royal sisters, Elsa and Anna. Elsa has the power to control the weather and turn anything to ice, powers which change unpredictably with her shifting moods. As a result, she shuts herself and her sister in their castle, to the dismay of Anna, who wants so badly to know life outside of these constraints.

Bell hooks wrote that "to love well is the task in all meaningful relationships, not just romantic bonds," (2001, p. 138) and *Frozen* chooses to put the relationship between two sisters

before anything else. Anna is swept off her feet by Prince Hans, but when Elsa freezes the town and flees, Anna journeys to bring her back. Elsa's powers serve as a metaphor for her shutting her sister out of her life, and refusing to be vulnerable with her. But Anna's love for Elsa means she persists in trying to help her be bravely herself and open herself up to the joys of life, instead of fearing what might happen if she were to do so. And so when Prince Hans turns out to plotting against both of them, it is Elsa who saves Anna, and Elsa's love for her sister that ends up saving Anna's life.

The film breaks from tradition, in which the princess would end up with the prince, in favor of a more nuanced take on relationships. Anna ends up with Kristoff, and Elsa, instead of having a love interest, ends up loving a new part of herself, a part of herself she used to resent, feel shame about, and try to hide. The queer parallels are obvious, and Elsa's journey metaphorically sends the message to young viewers that one's power comes from being oneself regardless of what anyone else might think. Furthermore, Elsa and Anna model a relationship strengthened by constructive conflict. Their conflict stems from Elsa's tendency to self-sabotage and her aversion to being vulnerable. The two work through the discomfort of conflict to build a stronger relationship.

Another film that depict relationships more realistically than the idealized and unreal ones presented in *Twilight* and *The Notebook* is Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight*. The coming of age film follows protagonist Chiron as he grapples with his own sexuality as a black, gay man. Director Barry Jenkins explores the complexity of all kinds of relationships, and how they almost never fall into the clear cut categories of good or bad. Chiron has a troubled relationship with his mother, who becomes addicted to drugs, and he ends up seeking shelter with parental stand ins

Juan and Teresa. But despite the safety Chiron finds with them, Juan is the drug dealer who indirectly enabled Chiron's mom's addiction, a fact which eventually leads Chiron to abandon Juan.

But the central relationship of the movie is Chiron's relationship with himself. Most of the film is about the pain inflicted on Chiron and how tries to cope by avoiding vulnerability and becoming physically strong and financially successful. In the final scenes of the movie, Chiron, now a hardened drug dealer, reaches out to Kevin, his childhood lover. Chiron reveals that he hasn't been touched since their time together. The last shot of Chiron shows Kevin holding him while he cries, an image which illustrates Chiron's alienation and inability to initiate meaningful relationships as a result of the abuse and homophobia he faced throughout his life (Gardner, Kleiner, Romanski, & Jenkins, 2016). *Moonlight*, unlike *Twilight* and *The Notebook*, depicts relationships that are as complex as they are in real life. Rather than show an unhealthily idealized highlight real, *Moonlight* is able to depict the unpleasant and messy behind the scenes reality of actual relationships.

There are other films that I think model ideal relationships, or at least how one should ideally navigate relationships. The Coen brothers' *Fargo* forgoes the usual relationship drama, and chooses to show pregnant protagonist Marge and her husband Norm in the most ordinary moments. Marge is a police officer investigating homicides and a related kidnapping. In contrast to the high stakes of her occupation, each scene with Marge and her husband is so small and unremarkable. But that is what makes each moment so beautiful.

The film begins with Marge, who is a police officer, getting called into work very early in the morning. Norm makes her eggs, insisting "You gotta eat a breakfast," (Coen, & Coen, 1996)

even though she said he should go to back to sleep. In the kitchen they exchange I love yous before. Marge leaves and Norm pulls her plate closer to finish off her leftover eggs. Marge comes back to tell him she needs him to jump start the car.

In another scene, Norm brings Marge Arby's for lunch and she brings him worms for his fishing trip. Throughout the film, they talk about Norm's painting; he is hoping to get his featured on a stamp. In the last scene of the film, Norm reveals he got featured on the 3 cent stamp, but laments how it's not the first class stamp like his friend. But Marge doesn't care. She tells him how terrific it is, how proud of him she is, how "whenever they raise the postage people need the little stamps when they're stuck with a bunch of the old ones" (Coen, & Coen, 1996). Her genuine enthusiasm and interest in her partner, and their attentiveness to each other's needs is something rarely shown in film. In most movies the male protagonists wife is kidnapped and he has to save her; this is how he expresses his love. But not in *Fargo.* In *Fargo,* the last scene of the film is Marge, two months before her due date, and Norm cuddled up in bed, the last lines they speak (Coen, & Coen, 1996):

> Marge: Heck, Norm, you know we're doing pretty good
> Norm: I love you, Margie
> Marge: I love you, Norm
> Norm: Two more months
> Marge: Two more months

Relationships in movies do not have to be needlessly dramatic in order to be watchable. But this isn't to say that relationships must be free from drama or conflict. It matters what the conflict is, and how it is handled and portrayed. In independent film *Short Term 12,* the protagonist Grace works at a short term housing facility for homeless youth. Grace was sexually abused by her father, who she just found out is being released from prison. She also just

discovered that she's pregnant. She tells her boyfriend Mason about the baby, but she hasn't

opened up to him about her history with her father, something which always keeps them at a

distance. After one of the kids in her care attempts suicide, Grace has a breakdown but refuses to

talk to Mason about it. The scene is heartbreaking. He tries to help, but she defensively tells him

he has no idea what she's going through. He replies:

> "Then tell me. That's how this works. You talk to me about it so that I can take your hand
> and fucking walk through this shit with you. That is what I signed up for, ok? I cannot do
> that if you won't let me in" (Astrachan, Goldstein, Najor, Olson, & Cretton, 2013).

Grace ends up rejecting his bid for greater intimacy and breaks up with him. In this case,

it's Grace's inability to communicate, to be honest with Mason, and to work through her trauma

that pulls them apart. A relationship does not have to be free from conflict to be a positive

representation. Mason communicates what he wants, and leaves once it is clear that the

relationship is not working, and that Grace is not ready to make it work.

Fruitvale Station also successfully depicts conflict in a loving relationship. The film is

about the real life story of Oscar Grant, a young black man who was killed in 2009 by a police

officer in Oakland, California. The film charts Grant's last day alive. In an interview with the

New York Times, director Ryan Coogler said, "I wanted the audience to get to know this guy, to

get attached, so that when the situation that happens to him happens, it's not just like you read it

in the paper, you know what I mean? When you know somebody as a human being, you know

that life means something" (Rhodes, 2013). The primary way Coogler accomplishes this is by

showing how Grant relates to his girlfriend, daughter, mother, and even strangers in the grocery

store. In other words, Coogler crafts genuine relationships in order to humanize a man who could

easily become a statistic. By exploring Grant's relationships in this way, Coogler forces the audience to truly contemplate the gravity and implications of Grant's murder.

In the film, when Grant's girlfriend Sophina confronts him about his infidelity and he does not gaslight her, play the victim, get defensive or leave. Instead he confronts what he's done and is honest and present. He is unafraid to be vulnerable with her and to sit with his mistake. Oscar recognizes what he's done and works to be better for Sophina and for himself for the rest of the film. Short on money, Oscar contemplates dealing drugs again, but ends up abandoning that plan because in the past his jail time strained his relationship with his girlfriend and his daughter. Some of the lightest moments in the film are slow motion scenes of Grant playing with his daughter. These intimate moments exemplify the "care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust" that bell hooks wrote about (hooks, 2001, p. 5).

However, the strongest relationship on display in the film is the relationship Grant has with his mother, Wanda, who loves him unconditionally. She constantly shows this through her actions. Flashbacks show her visiting him in prison, and present-day scenes show her cooking for Grant and his friends. She consistently provides him with a safe, loving environment that stands in stark contrast to his time in prison and the last moments before he was shot and killed on the Fruitvale Station platform by a Bay Area Rapid Transit system police officer.

Unlike the other examples, *Fruitvale Station* features a couple of color. Within the limited pool of films that accurately depict love, sex, and relationships, it is even more difficult to find examples that feature anyone other than a heterosexual, able-bodied, white couple. This media landscape upholds the idea that only certain types of people are worthy of having fulfilling

sexual and romantic relationships, and the potential outcome is that viewers only view certain people as valid or desirable partners.

Alexander Freeman's documentary *The Last Taboo* explores this unfortunate reality by asking people with physical disabilities about how sex and relationships function in their lives. Erin Pfeiffer, a subject in the documentary, discussed normative beauty standards, saying that, "People will look at something and they think it's beautiful if it falls under certain guidelines and they've really strictly defined that and I think that is definitely what puts so much stigma on the idea of someone with a disability being a sexual person" (Freeman, Christenson, Iarrobino, Scotina, & Freeman, 2013). Another subject, performance artist Mazique Bianco, expressed a similar sentiment:

> "One of my first opinions of myself as a person with a disability who was sexual or hoped to be sexual one day was that no one was going to find me sexually attractive… So holding myself to this really specific almost like scary standard, like needing to be like as groomed and as femme-y and as like you know presentable as possible because for me it was less forgiveable to not look good, you know, because my disability and you know whatever else I thought was weird about my body" (Freeman, Christenson, Iarrobino, Scotina, & Freeman, 2013).

This "scary standard" is reinforced by our most popular media representations, which overwhelmingly champion white, able-bodies, heterosexual couples. Freeman created Outcast Productions to combat this issue and "to give a voice to minorities that mainstream media ignores" (Freeman, Outcast Productions). The Outcast Productions website states, "we believe that no story is worth telling without taking action to make a change in the community and the world" (Freeman, About Us). Combatting marginalization in movies requires conscious and continuous effort. The influence of media on emerging adults requires creators to follow in Freeman's footsteps, and to recognize the power they hold and to wield it responsibly.

The Way Forward

A crucial first step towards changing what teens are learning about sex, love, and relationships in general and from the media, is changing what they're taught in school. Curricula should include emotional and social intelligence, cognitive behavioral therapy techniques, and media literacy.

Programs like Second Step and RULER have begun to be implemented in schools across the nation. RULER stands for "Recognizing emotions in oneself and others; Understanding the causes and consequences of emotions; Labeling emotions accurately; Expressing emotions in ways that are appropriate for the time, place, and culture; and Regulating emotions" (Tominey, 2017).

Studies have linked emotional intelligence skills to increased attentiveness engagement in school, more positive relationships, higher levels of empathy, better emotional regulation, higher grades, and less stress (Tominey, 2017). Other studies have shown that emotional intelligence can reduce aggression and violent behavior, and increase impulse control (Kahn, 2013).

The Common Core also fails to take into account the mental health of students. One in five teenagers experience a mental disorder and "more than 90% of people who die by suicide show symptoms of a mental health condition" (James, 2005). Mental illness costs America $193.2 billion in lost earnings yearly (James, 2005). Studies have shown that anxiety can be successfully treated by teaching students Cognitive Behavioral Therapy strategies in school.

Teaching students media literacy, or how to think critically about media, has been shown to make students "less likely to overestimate sexual activity among teens… and more aware of myths about sex" (Pinkleton, 2008, p. 462).

These are the steps that must be taken if we're assuming that films will continue to reinforce the dominant ideologies. But that doesn't have to be the case.

There is a space for a new position within the film production process. There is the potential for a relationship consultant to be involved in the pre-production of a film. They could consult with writers and directors of movies to discuss the potential impact of their films on audiences, especially if the intended audience is young people. Of course, no artist wants to be told what to write or how, but the intention of this suggestion is not to police artists, but to simply provoke thoughtfulness and intention. Media makers must at least consider and be aware of how their film might affect their audience.

Additionally, in order to truly enact change, there must be diversity in who is creating media. One cannot ask the Lena Dunhams of the industry to add diversity to their shows. The industry must be flooded with the Lena Waithes, with unfamiliar that will help young people see themselves empowered on screen, especially those who are often belittled and othered in media instead.

Why This Matters & One to Watch

Media and our everyday lives are inextricably linked. To brush movies off as "just entertainment" is to fail to recognize the power of media as well to ignore real world systems of power. Those who are stereotyped or ignored in media face much deadlier consequences off screen. On November 27th *Queen and Slim* will be released theatrically. Directed by Melina Matsoukas and written by Lena Waithe, the film is about a black couple who get pulled over after their first date, and end up killing a white police officer in self-defense. Of the film, Waithe said, "I wanted to give voice to all the nameless faceless men and women of color whose lives

were taken unjustly and who didn't make it home. I actually refer to them as fallen soldiers but unfortunately, they were fighting a war they didn't know they were in" (N'Duka, 2019). Matsoukas said, "It sounds naive but I always say I make films to change the world. I can do that by giving a voice to the unheard and telling their stories" (N'Duka, 2019). But it's not naive. It's necessary.

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