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CHICK FLICK DISCOURSE AS A REFLECTION OF FEMININE STEREOTYPES

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Abstract

The article studies the cinematic discourse of “chick flicks” (from the English “chick flick” – a film about relationships, love, etc., which attracts mainly women) to identify gender stereotypes, as well as the general patterns of plotting “female films”. Of greatest interest for our study is the opposition sex – gender, where sex is the “innate binary sign” and gender is the “sign constructed by society.” The material was the cinematic discourse of the film “Sleepless in Seattle” (1993). The work shows that the plot of “Sleepless in Seattle”, as a prominent representative of the “chick flicks”, corresponds to the clichéd formula of “chick flicks”: 1. “Two people fall in love. 2. They get along fine. 3. There is some kind of misunderstanding. 4. They break up. 5. They get back together. 6. The end”. The article notes that the cinematic discourse of “chick flicks” is a reflection of gender stereotypes (especially feminine-colored). The study found the presence of both fair and distorted gender stereotypes in the discourse of “Sleepless in Seattle” as an example of “chick flicks”. The article concludes that the cinematic discourse of “Sleepless in Seattle”, which includes verbal, non-verbal components, intertext, the role of moviegoers, criticism, and the director has a dominant feminine trait.

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Keywords: Cinematic discourse, chick flick, distorted stereotypes, fair stereotypes, gender stereotypes, Sleepless in Seattle.



1. Introduction

Currently much attention is paid to the cultural space of the film industry, which is due to both the emergence of new iconic personalities in this area and genre diversity, the “widening” of the cultural range of this sphere. Works of art, filming, audiovisual effects and even moviegoers are being researched. Such interest, of course, attracts the attention of philologists-linguists to the linguistic, textual side of the film – film text and cinematic discourse.

Besides other aspects of research of cinematic discourse identifying the gender component in this type of discourse seems very up to date. Of greatest interest for our study is the opposition gender – sex, where sex is a congenital binary feature and gender is a feature constructed by society (Prosuntsova, 2010). Of particular interest is the study of the feminine stereotype and this is no coincidence. Starting from the end of the 19th century, when there was the so-called “first wave of feminism”, and continuing with the “third wave” that rose in the late 1990s, the attention to a woman as an individual does not wane.

2. Problem Statement

Like any other genre a “chick flick” has specific lines according to which the plot develops. For a “chick flick” such lines, or steps, are: 1. Two people fall in love. 2. They get along fine. 3. There is some kind of misunderstanding. 4. They break up. 5. They get back together. 6. The end. These steps may vary from film to film, but the essence remains the same. In our study we are going to trace the plot-lines of the film “Sleepless in Seattle” to see if it “fits” the general plot-pattern of “chick flicks”.

Besides we are going to examine the cinematic discourse of “Sleepless in Seattle” in order to identify gender stereotypes and classify them into “fair” and “distorted”.

The study of cinematic discourse as well as gender stereotypes in cinematic discourse is an urgent topic among modern researchers. Various aspects of this phenomenon are highlighted in the works of Dukhovnaya (2015), Zaretskaya (2012), Ignatov (2007), Katermina and Linnik (2018), Nazmutdinova (2008), Samkova (2011), Dokhova and Cheprakova (2013), Prosuntsova (2010), Schofield and Mehr (2016) and others.

Among the structural elements of cinematic discourse there are the following: “film text” (which includes the linguistic system of the film and narrow extra-linguistic factors), “film discourse” (the language component plus non-verbal communication tools), “film dialogue” / “cinema language” (the verbal component of the film is the nuclear position of the film discourse) and a particular form of writing in film – “subtitles” (Dukhovnaya, 2015). Some researchers equate the concepts of “movie” and “cinematic discourse,” defining the latter as the movie itself, combining verbal content and visual audio effects (Ignatov, 2007). The cinematic discourse among these terms stands somewhat apart, since it goes beyond the framework of a single film, affecting also intertextual connections, the role of a cinema viewer, criticism and the director (Zaretskaya, 2012; Nazmutdinova, 2008; Samkova, 2011).

3. Research Questions

According to the aims of the research, the authors pose the following questions:

1. Are there any gender stereotypes in the cinematic discourse of “Sleepless in Seattle”?

2. Are these stereotypes fair or distorted?
3. Does the plot of “Sleepless in Seattle” follow the clichéd formula of “chick flicks”?
4. What gender trait predominates in the cinematic discourse of “Sleepless in Seattle”?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the article is to analyze the cinematic discourse of “Sleepless in Seattle” as a prominent representative of “chick flicks” with a view to identifying gender stereotypes as well as plot building patterns.

5. Research Methods

The main methods for identifying and analyzing gender stereotypes in the discourse of “chick flicks” for us are: the method of contextual description, the method of linguocultural analysis and the descriptive method. The contextual method was applied in order to establish the features of actualization of stereotypes in the studied type of discourse; the method of linguistic and cultural analysis was to identify the dependence of the use of various stereotypes in the space of the English language on the elements of material and behavioral culture; the descriptive method was used to see the characteristic features of gender stereotypes in the discourse of “women's films”.

6. Findings

Nowadays, cinema is one of the most popular varieties of visual art: it contains catchy visual images, it is generally accessible, demonstrates a dynamic plot creating a special cinematic reality (Katermina & Linnik, 2018). An important role in the study of cinematic discourse is given to the consideration of gender stereotypes. The presence of gender stereotypes is noted not only in feature films for adults but also in the animation film space (Dokhova & Cheprakova, 2013). “Women's films” play a special role: such feminine-colored subgenres were identified as chick flicks (girlfriend flicks), rom-coms, fem-jeps, female buddy films, weepies, tearjerkers, soapers.

The most common and already generally accepted among the aforementioned notions of “female films” is the term “chick flick”. The Cambridge Dictionary defines the term “chick flick” as follows: “a film about relationships, love, etc. that attracts mainly women” (Cambridge Dictionary Online). In the Merriam Webster dictionary, the definition of “chick flick” (“a motion picture intended to appeal especially to women”) is preceded by the indication: “sometimes disparaging” (Merriam Webster Dictionary Online).

However, such a disparagement of “chick flicks” is not a regularity. Thus, Sonny Bunch (2019), a correspondent for The Washington Post, defends the term by saying that people use “chick flick” as a generally accepted cultural shortening because it is an amazingly useful phrase: “pithy and memorable”, simple rhyme gives a clear idea of what is meant by the person who pronounces it.

Alison Winch (2012), referring to “female films,” uses the term “girlfriend flicks” (p. 69). However, we tend to agree with The Washington Post journalist Sonny Bunch who notes the memorability and capacity of the rhymed phrase “chick flick”.

While the beginning of “chick lit” is coined with the appearance of the novel “Bridget Jones's Diary” (Remaeva, 2014), the beginning of “chick flicks” was the success of the film “Sleepless in Seattle” (1993). We propose to turn to the discourse of this film to identify specific features inherent in the “chick flicks”.

According to the Urban Dictionary, chick flicks have a certain clichéd structure: 1. “Two people fall in love. 2. They get along fine. 3. There is some kind of misunderstanding. 4. They break up. 5. They get back together. 6. The end” (Urban Dictionary Online). Let's try to arrange the film “Sleepless in Seattle” according to these “steps”.

The plot of the picture is built around two main characters – Annie Reed and Sam Baldwin. Annie dreams of something simple and at the same time beautiful: to meet a reliable man, “who wears a hat so he won't catch a cold, and I'm going to marry him and have three children and live happily ever after” (Arch et al., 1992). Her mother, Barbara, recalls the beginning of a relationship with her future husband, the “magic” she felt when they first joined hands (Arch et al., 1992).

Men in the movie express ideas about relationships somewhat differently, in a more mundane way. Thus, for example, Annie's colleague Tom claims that he got married because he was given the ultimatum: either they “break up” or “get married.” He believes that there is no “chemistry” between two people, but rather “your subconscious is attracted to their subconscious, subconsciously” (Arch et al., 1992).

Sam has practically the same idea about relationship, and it is proved in the episode, where he explains to his son the essence of his relationship with Victoria. He believes that bachelors “try people on” in order to understand which one “fits” them, but one way or another, no one fits perfectly (Arch et al., 1992).

Speaking about generally accepted ideas, a man and a woman are usually attributed with such binary characteristics as logic – intuitiveness, concreteness – abstractness, rudeness – tenderness, elevation – mundane, instrumentality – expressiveness, activity – passivity, etc., inherent in a man and woman, respectively. These characteristics included in the category of stereotypes can be called fair because they correspond to generally accepted ideas about men and women. Distorted stereotypes are the same fair stereotypes provided that typical characteristics, usually inherent in a particular gender, are attributed to the opposite sex. In cinematic discourse such “extreme polarization of gender roles” is also present (Busso & Vignozzi, 2017, p. 71).

In these two opposite relations to love of the characters of “Sleepless in Seattle” (female – in the person of Annie and Barbara, male – in the person of Sam and Tom) fair gender stereotypes can be traced. In the utterances of Annie and Barbara, the sentiment manifests itself, most often regarded as a feminine characteristic, and in the utterances of Tom and Sam, on the contrary, the calmness and pragmatism, inherent in the male sex, are traced. Thus, according to Pavco-Giaccia et al. (2019) “women are semantically associated with emotion and feeling and men are semantically associated with reason and thinking” (para. 3).

However, male and female ideas about love in this film are not always so unambiguous and correspond to fair gender stereotypes.

Annie, for example, sometimes appears as an unromantic nature. She is often rather dry and straightforward in her judgments showing an example of a distorted gender stereotype. Thus, for example,

she believes that fate is “something we’ve invented”, because no one can admit that “everything that happens is accidental” (Arch et al., 1992).

Sam is also ambiguous. In the aforementioned remark, the character was explaining the essence of his relationship with Victoria to his little son, so it can be assumed that he was somewhat simplifying his position. In addition, Sam recently lost his beloved wife and because of this fact he simply could not allow thoughts of a new relationship describing them so coldly. The character spoke very differently about his dead wife on the radio. Sam recalls that when he met his wife, he understood everything at once, he was “home”, felt “magic” (Arch et al., 1992).

Perhaps the most common gender-emotional stereotypes in most cultures are judgments that women are more emotional than men, express and experience a wider range of emotions and therefore we expect this from them. Women tend to express “more vulnerable emotions, such as sadness, fear, and shame, rather than anger” (Sharman et al., 2019). Men are expected to be mostly emotionally neutral in behavior which means the need for restrictions in the expression of emotions (Simonova, 2015). Speaking about his feelings, giving vent to emotions, Sam shows an example of a distorted gender stereotype. Sam also changes his confident, rational position when he sees Annie at the airport: he stops half a word “in exasperation”, stunned by her beauty (Arch et al., 1992).

It is here, in our opinion, that one can note the complication according to the formula of “chick flicks” – “two people fall in love”. And although Annie does not notice Sam in this episode, in fact, she was attracted to him much earlier – when she heard Sam’s story about his dead wife on the radio: “I don’t even know him. But I’m having all these fantasies about a man I’ve never met, who lives in Seattle” (Arch et al., 1992).

Sam sees Annie for the first time and, obviously, is captivated by her beauty, strange look.

According to the second “step” of “chick flicks” the characters “get along fine”. In “Sleepless in Seattle” Sam and Annie do not communicate directly with each other – Annie writes a letter to Sam. Sam’s son really liked the letter. Having discovered some similarities in the preferences of Annie and Sam, he thinks that this is a “sign” (Arch et al., 1992). Although communication takes place remotely, there is a connection between Sam and Annie.

The third and fourth “steps” of the formula are “misunderstanding” and “parting”. In “Sleepless in Seattle”, the moment of “misunderstanding” and “parting” can be the episode when Annie and Sam were to meet on the roof of the Empire State Building. Initially, Sam did not approve of the idea of meeting a stranger in New York, he got there by chance, thanks to his son Jonah. Jonah flies to New York alone, and Sam has to go after him. However, on the observation deck of the Empire State Building, the characters didn’t meet each other. Still, a few moments later, Sam and Jonah appear and Sam cannot believe: this is the same “mystery woman” (Arch et al., 1992). This is the moment of the reunion of the characters – the fifth “step”.

This was followed by the romantic and corresponding to the “chick flick” ending: the characters joined hands (it seemed “natural” to them), the camera moves away to the Empire State Building illuminated by lights, and then a large illuminated Valentine appears on the building (Arch et al., 1992).

We have mentioned that “cinematic discourse” is a capacious concept that goes beyond the scope of a single film, as it also affects intertextual connections, the role of the film viewer, criticism and director

(Samkova, 2011; Zaretskaya, 2012). Using the example of “Sleepless in Seattle”, one can trace the dominant feminine component of the “chick flick” cinematic discourse in all of these components. Thus, the feminine-colored intertextual connection of this film is obvious: “Sleepless in Seattle” contain a lot of references to the cult American film “An Affair to Remember” (1957). In addition to explicit and stipulated in the movie allusions to the famous drama (such as a meeting on the roof of the Empire State Building, repeated watching of this film by different characters), there are also hidden allusions. For example, Sam and Annie from “Sleepless in Seattle”, like Nikki and Terry from “An Affair to Remember” at the time of their meeting, were engaged (or, as in the case of Sam, were going to announce their engagement) with other people, which was one of the obstacles to the reunion of the main characters. In addition, both couples had a difficulty meeting on the roof of the Empire State Building.

The film “An Affair to Remember” has been repeatedly characterized by the various characters of “Sleepless in Seattle” as “female” (“Men never get this movie” (Arch et al., 1992)). This drama is beloved by the exclusively female characters of “Sleepless in Seattle” – Annie, her friend Becky, a friend of the Sam's family Susie, the girlfriend of Jonah Jessica and also the wife of a security of the Empire State Building. This fact suggests the true popularity of “An Affair to Remember” among women of the United States of America. It is also one of the twenty most popular melodramas according to The Guardian (Graham, 2010) which confirms the popularity of the movie among American moviegoers.

When reading reviews from viewers, one also encounters an indication of the “femininity” of “Sleepless in Seattle”:

“Sleepless in Seattle” may be the ultimate ‘chick flick’, not necessarily because of its content (which is certainly female-centric), but due to the fact that it's not ashamed to acknowledge exactly what it is (Long, n.d.);

...Perhaps the best examples for this point will be two “classic” chick flicks starring Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan: “Sleepless in Seattle” and “You’ve Got Mail” (Scott, 2012);

In chick flicks, chance encounters can turn into life-altering opportunities. Consider this tagline for “Sleepless in Seattle”: “What if someone you never met, someone you never saw, someone you never knew was the only someone for you?” (Myers, 2018).

And, finally, the role of the director is also important in identifying the feminine features of the film in question. The director of “Sleepless in Seattle” is Nora Efron, an American screenwriter, producer and director. In addition to “Sleepless in Seattle”, she has featured films such as “Jealousy” (1986), “When Harry Met Sally” (1989), “You've got mail” (1998), “The Witch” (2005) – all of them are romantic comedies.

7. Conclusion

Thus, we can conclude that the cinematic discourse of “Sleepless in Seattle” which includes the verbal component, intertext, the role of the film viewer, criticism, and the director has a dominant feminine trait for several reasons. Firstly, it corresponds to the clichéd structure of “chick flicks”:

“Two people fall in love” – Annie (when she hears Sam on the radio), Sam (later, when he sees her at the airport);

The characters “get along fine” – they don’t communicate directly: Annie writes a letter to Sam, Sam sees Annie at the airport, but they are attracted to each other;

The moment of “misunderstanding” is when Annie suggests seeing Sam on the roof of the Empire State Building, but Sam doesn’t approve of the idea;

“Breaking up” is the episode when Annie and Sam were to meet on the roof of the Empire State Building, but it didn’t happen at first;

The characters “get back together” – on the observation deck of the Empire State Building where Annie is Sam and Jonah appear;

“The end” – the characters join hands on the roof of the Empire State Building.

Besides, the film contains numerous explicit and hidden allusions to the romantic drama “An Affair to Remember”, characterized by viewers and critics as a “female film”. Furthermore, it is filmed by a female director, on whose account there are many famous romantic comedies. Moreover, when reading reviews from the film viewers, one also encounters an indication of the “femininity” of “Sleepless in Seattle”. The viewers claim “Sleepless in Seattle” to be a “classic chick flick”.

Concerning gender stereotypes, the study found the presence of both fair and distorted ones in the discourse of “Sleepless in Seattle”. As fair gender stereotypes the authors consider male and female ideas about love in this film (in the females’ perception of love the sentiment manifests itself, and in the males’ one the calmness and pragmatism are traced).

To distorted gender stereotypes the authors, refer the fact that the heroine of the film sometimes appears as an unromantic nature: she is often rather dry and straightforward in her judgments. The main character, on the contrary, speaks freely about his feelings to his dead wife, gives vent to emotions, which is unusual for men.

The identified gender stereotypes are presented in Table 01:

Table 01. Gender stereotypes in “Sleepless in Seattle”

Ideas about love		
Stereotype kind	Female	Male
Fair	Annie, Barbara	Sam, Tom
Distorted	Annie	Sam
Expression of emotions		
Stereotype kind	Female	Male
Distorted	Annie	Sam

Thus, the identified fair and distorted gender stereotypes in “Sleepless in Seattle” can be represented in a ratio of 4:4, respectively. Talking about the sex of the characters who bear this or that stereotype, we can conclude that male and female heroes show examples of fair gender stereotypes in a ratio of 2:2 and distorted gender stereotypes in a ratio of 2:2, respectively. This enables us to conclude that the percentage ratio of fair and distorted gender stereotypes represented by male and female characters in the observed film is 50%: 50%.

The fact that the same male and female characters show examples of both fair and distorted gender stereotypes corresponds to the idea that gender is the “sign constructed by society”, for neither emotions nor reason-thinking cannot be strictly attributed to men or women. In fact, many of canonical ideas have

been partially rejected in scientific field and framed as stereo-typical norms around femininity and masculinity, which do not leave space for diversity (Bednarek, 2015).

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