Revisit but not Revise: Friendship and the Romantic Imperative

Friederike Danebrock, University of Cologne, Germany

Abstract:

Popular culture apparently feels the need to return, yet again, to Harry's and Sally's statement that "men and women can't be friends" (*When Harry met Sally*) in another of Hollywood's romantic comedies. *Friends with Benefits*, as a close relative of the iconic *When Harry met Sally...* in terms of theme and plot, is not only revealing with regard to concepts of friendship and/as opposed to romance. The romantic imperative it constructs and represents is certainly a gendered imperative, as well: The crucial issue is the avoidance of romance in a specific constellation, namely cross-sex friendship between two heterosexual individuals – attempts at which, the films suggest, are doomed to failure. In this sense the narratives are driven by (the question of) a "romantic imperative", that is by debating and depicting the unavoidability of falling in love. *When Harry met Sally* and *Friends with Benefits* both participate in the "contemporary phrasings" which, as Victor Luftig puts it, "define male/female friendship according to what it is not". Concepts such as "'just friends,' 'only friends,' 'not lovers'" all "in effect describe friendship negatively" (1) and testify to our lack of conceptions of male-female relations outside heteronormative frameworks. The films' plots confirm those frameworks in denying alternatives to heterosexual romance. I would like to suggest that at the core of the "friends turned lovers" theme is a particular dynamic of likeness and difference, and that the narration of a process of transition from friendship to romance allows a production of difference that serves certain purposes.

How to Fail to Stay Friends: Romantic Imperatives Revisited

1 They meet. They decide not to become romantically involved. They sleep with each other. And then they cannot be friends any more. In 1989 they were called Harry and Sally and their struggles over friendship vs. romance have become proverbial, even commonplace. In 2011, they are called Dylan and Jamie and it seems that little has changed. Obviously, popular culture feels the need to return, yet again, to Harry's statement that "men and women can't be friends" (*When Harry met Sally*, 00:11:30) in another of Hollywood's romantic comedies. *Friends with Benefits* (2011, dir. Will Gluck), as a close relative of the iconic *When Harry met Sally...* (1989, dir. Rob Reiner) in terms of theme and plot, is not only revealing with regard to concepts of friendship and/as opposed to romance. The romantic imperative it constructs and represents is certainly a gendered imperative, as well: The crucial issue is the avoidance of romance in a specific constellation, namely cross-sex friendship between two heterosexual individuals – attempts at which, the films suggest, are doomed to failure. In this sense the narratives are driven by (the question of) a "romantic imperative"[1], that is by debating and depicting the unavoidability of falling in love.

[1] The term "romantic" is here not supposed to designate the Romantic period – as in Friedrich Schlegel's "Romantic imperative", explained, for instance, in Frederick C. Beiser's The Romantic Imperative: The Concept

2 When Harry met Sally and *Friends with Benefits* both participate in the "contemporary phrasings" which, as Victor Luftig puts it, "define male/female friendship according to what it is not". Concepts such as "'just friends,' 'only friends,' 'not lovers'" all "in effect describe friendship negatively" (1) and testify to our lack of conceptions of male-female relations outside heteronormative frameworks. The films' plots confirm those frameworks in denying alternatives to heterosexual romance. I would like to suggest that at the core of the "friends turned lovers" theme is a particular dynamic of likeness and difference, and that the narration of a process of transition from friendship to romance allows a production of difference that serves certain purposes. These purposes are the affirmation of the privileged status of heterosexual romance and, contributing to this affirmation, a replacing of likeness with difference that can be read as expressing the need for otherness that Jean Baudrillard attributes to contemporary society. I would also like to debate, however, if maybe the films are not as single-minded as they appear to be. The dominant impulse is certainly to turn a relation that is difficult to grasp in terms of conventional gender concepts into something well-known and well-established, i.e. heterosexual romance. "Friendship" as starting point of the transitional process, however, is also the state which enables the transition in the first place, and is thus an essential part of the result. If those narratives – and others of their kind – want friendship to imply romance, do they not also want romance to imply friendship? If so, there is not only a need for difference that can be read in those stories; there is also – indirectly expressed – a need for likeness which would soften conventional boundaries. Ultimately, though, the unification of friendship and romance and the transcending of the paradigm of difference run into the same dead end that versions of "happily ever after" typically face: *Friends with Benefits* is no more "a movie about what happens after the big kiss" (Jamie in *Friends with Benefits*, 00:25:14) than *When Harry met Sally...* is. The characters in *Friends with Benefits* voice dissatisfaction with existing modes of partnership, but the film can only *announce*, in its final scenes, the union of friendship and romance, but it cannot represent an actual update of relationship models. The impulse to leave clichés behind is expressed, but is dominated by the imperative yet paradoxical happy ending of romance, which cannot represent what it affirms.

Same, Self, and Other

3 "Starting with modernity, we have entered an era of production of the Other", Jean Baudrillard argues. "It is no longer a question of killing, of devouring or seducing the Other,

of Early German Romanticism (cf. 19f.) – but rather "romance" and "romantic" in their everyday use as terms that refer to narratives and themes related to love and relationships.

of facing him, of competing with him, of loving or hating the Other. It is first of all a matter of producing the Other" ("Plastic Surgery for the Other"). Our "entire cultural movement" is driven by "a frenzied differential construction of the Other", a construction which actually consists in a "perpetual extrapolation of the Same through the Other" that ultimately serves "self-seduction to the extent that this likeness virtually excludes the Other and is the best way to exclude a seduction which would emerge from somewhere else" (ibid.). Both likeness *and* difference thus appear as sources of seduction in Baudrillard's reflections.

4 They do so, too, in romantic comedies of the "Harry and Sally"-kind. There is the "seductive lure of like-mindedness" – which Claire Colebrook names as one of the structural aspects of friendship (109) – as well as hetero-sexual attraction.[2] That the couples start out from the likeness often allocated to friendship – where people find 'kindred spirits' – to the difference allocated to romance – where people find their 'counterparts' – quite tellingly illustrates Baudrillard's point about a quasi-compulsive production of difference: A "frenzied differential construction of the Other" might be read in the fact that romantic comedies continue to turn symmetrical into complementary relations.[3]

5 To turn friendship into romance is a production of otherness also in the literal theoretical sense: It means to instantiate an other, an object of desire that structures and thus stabilises a relation that is otherwise hard to grasp. Friendship as likeness is not based on difference, difference being "the mark of the signifier" (Belsey 10), and thus, one might say, structurally opposed to the symbolic as we know and employ it. Stories like Harry's and Sally's and Jamie's and Dylan's cannot end with friendship: Friendship appears, in contrast to romance, as the 'non-symbolic' – the non-symbolisable and non-symbolised – relation, the relation that those narratives are puzzled over and that they abandon in favour of a relation based on difference and thus in tune with the symbolic order. The meaning of romance might be taken for granted rather than spelt out, yet where friendship as likeness remains as mysterious as the pre-symbolic and hence structurally inconceivable inside a symbolic framework, romance as complementary relation and thus instance of difference generates meaning. That we experience far less difficulties in conceptualising male/male- and female/female-friendship is certainly attributable to the fact that those relations are in a sense "protected" by heteronormative standards: Friendship does here not compete with the

[2] "Empirically, you are attractive", Harry explains to Sally shortly after they meet for the first time (00:10:23); when Dylan asks Jamie, who visits him at his office, to join him for lunch, she immediately assumes he is asking her out (cf. 00:20:15).

[3] When "friendship is figured as dialogue or cooperation between men and women, expressions of sexual identity may at least be posited as coequal, rather than inherently oppositional or hierarchical", Luftig argues (9). This illustrates our intuitive configuration of friendship as symmetrical and romance as complementary.

romantic union as the 'default case'. Rather, those standards exclude a romantic/sexual relation in this constellation, or at least make it appear an "exception to the rule".

6 Accordingly, "sources to which one would turn for a true story of friendship between the sexes" – that is, for a representation and thus symbolisation of friendship – are rare, as Victor Luftig points out (cf. Luftig 2). "'Friendship'", he says,

> marks a challenge to basic and accustomed categories for relations between the sexes. [...] 'Friendship' between the sexes is, and has been for some time, a fundamental threat to the stability and separateness of the prevalent categories for gender relations; it challenges the boundaries of socially acknowledged interaction between men and women. [...] Where discourse would validate only a few mutually exclusive categories for relations between the sexes, 'friendship' invites the likelihood of exceptions, trespassing across borders that commonly accepted expressive modes would preserve. (3)

This kind of friendship and with it a category Luftig speculates might be called "heterosocial" draws "attention primarily to the social, public significance of dynamics whose sexual identity is hardly ever challenged" (7). It holds subversive potential because "it may help show heterosexuality to be diverse", so that it may "be figured as no more or less stable than other sexual identities" (8).

7 Before the protagonists are officially turned into a "proper" romantic couple, their relation is rather obscure. The films themselves seem unable to make sense of its nature. Apart from Dylan's and Jamie's official agreement to "stay friends" even if they sleep with each other and Jamie's later observation that what is important about friendship is that "friends don't go talking shit about each other" (01:21:35), *Friends with Benefits* does not even get close to making a coherent suggestion about the nature of friendship other than suggesting it is different from romance. *When Harry met Sally...* does not contribute a lot to this question, either. It has one great advantage in terms of defining the relationships it portrays, though: It excludes sexual from friendly relations and thus has a simple tool at its disposal to sort out who is a romantic couple, and what makes a romantic couple a romantic couple. Right from the beginning, in Harry's and Sally's (in-)famous debate on the journey from Chicago to New York, sex is seen as what precludes friendship between "men and women" (00:11:36).[4] The night that they spend together is the turning point that shifts their relation to romance; no further definitions are needed. Things are not quite as easy for *Friends with Benefits*. Because the mere fact of sleeping with each other is not sufficient any more to define romance, the film goes to great lengths to make sex outside of romance appear a technicality (a business-like deal: "No relationship. No emotions. Just sex." – "So I guess we

[4] *When Harry met Sally…* does not bother to point out that it only considers heterosexual relations.

should just start." – "What's wrong with the couch? It's less emotional." – "The bedroom has better light." (00:28:00-28:30)).

8 The dubiousness of Harry's and Sally's and Dylan's and Jamie's relation before they are officially a couple is also conveyed through the reactions of the protagonists' (same-sex) friends. Harry and Sally are, repeatedly, prompted to explain to their acquaintances who "don't understand this relationship"[5] (00:41:38) that they are "just friends" (00:50:02). Dylan's colleague Tommy refuses to believe that 'friends with benefits' is a realisable concept (the reason, for him, is that all women are unable to exclude emotional attachment from sexual relations): "She's a girl", he insists. "Sex always means more to them even if they don't admit it" (00:40:30). Both films in this respect assign almost the same conventionalised roles to their male and female protagonists, respectively. Even though *Friends with Benefits* seems to be trying to add details that dissolve the all-too-obvious sentimental-girl-rational-boy-combination, it ultimately cannot resist placing its protagonists in precisely those categories.

"Shut up, Katherine Heigl!"

9 In particular at the film's beginning, *Friends with Benefits* attempts to emphasise parallels in its protagonists' emotional states. Both are shown to be broken up with right at the beginning, making them, independently, announce that they are going to "shut" themselves "down emotionally"(00:04:33). Both are presented as "career types", Jamie being a headhunter and Dylan the one that is recruited. When they first meet, though, a piece of dialogue already hints at Jamie's turn into the conventional romance heroine, whose genuine feelings for the hero finally make him admit his "true", caring nature.[6] When Jamie picks up Dylan's suitcase when she is meeting him at the airport to convince him to accept the offered job, he asks her: "You're really gonna carry my bag? You're that girl?", and Jamie promptly replies: "I'm gonna change your life. I'm *that* girl" (00:06:53-06:57). Still, she acts as the sober one at first, excluding potential romantic involvement between her and Dylan right away:

> Dylan: "Hey, I was thinking of getting some lunch. Do you know a place?"
> Jamie: "Are you asking me out?"
> Dylan: "Whoa, I'm not asking you out. I'm asking you to show me a restaurant."

[5] "You enjoy being with her?", Harry's friend Joe asks, "you find her attractive? […] And you're not sleeping with her?" When Harry agrees to all aspects, Joe concludes, "You're afraid to let yourself be happy" (00:41:40-41:49).

[6] As Janice Radway says about the typical romance hero, his "tenderness […] cannot help but reveal itself when he learns to trust and love a truly good woman" (128f.).

Jamie: “I mean, I’m the only friend you have in New York. You don’t wanna complicate that.”
Dylan: “I know. I’m not asking you out.”
Jamie: “I mean, sure, we’d have fun, roll around, get into some erotic humiliation fantasy...”
Dylan: “Erotic?”
Jamie: “...but it’d all blow up in our faces, end badly, and we’d never speak to each other again.”
Dylan: “I’m not fucking asking you out! I swear to God!”
Jamie: “Okay...you don’t like me like that. You don’t have to be so mean about it.”
Dylan: “I’m sorry, I didn’t...”
Jamie: “Haha, God, you’re such a girl. Come on, it’s my treat.” (00:20:15-47)

Despite the obvious note of paranoia, Jamie manages to make Dylan look like a fool in this exchange. She quickly loses the upper hand throughout the course of the film, though: She is characterised by her mother as a “true love sort of girl” who looks like a “princess” with her hair braided.[7] Most significantly, it is her who, just like Sally, ends up “wanting more”. Dylan’s prediction when they set the parameters for their explicitly non-romantic sexual relation – “I know how you girls get” (00:27:30) – turns out to be true after all. Just as Sally does when she sleeps with Harry, Jamie experiences a crucial moment which is shown to break her composure.

10 Together with Dylan, she visits his family home, which is run by his sister Annie, who takes care of her son Sam and Dylan’s father, who suffers from dementia.The film clearly commends Annie as a character: Her perceptiveness anticipates Dylan’s feelings for Jamie long before Dylan admits them himself. It is quite telling that Annie, in taking care, as it were, of the children and the sick, also fulfils a stereotypically “female” role, and is portrayed as fully accepting this role. Jamie, whose own mother is portrayed as highly unreliable and who does not know her own father. The issue of who Jamie’s father is is discussed repeatedly between Jamie and her mother – unsuccessfully, since Jamie’s mother does not remember. Jamie’s mother’s unreliability puts Jamie in the position of the typical romance heroine, who more often than not is portrayed as being socially isolated at the beginning of the narrative (cf. Radway 134)., seems to quickly find her place in the family. She spends a night with Dylan which, the film suggests, is quite different from the ones before. Missing all the “technical talk” and comic effects from before – “My chin is ticklish”, “I don’t like dirty talk”, “I keep my socks on” (00:28:48-29:03) – the scene is more or less an average mainstream Hollywood love scene, the difference reminiscent of the difference Sally makes

[7] Jamie’s reaction to a romantic movie she watches with Dylan, for example, confirms this assessment: She knows the final dialogue of the happy end by heart and concludes, when the film is over: “God I wish my life was a movie sometimes” (00:24:24-24:45).

when she talks about "making love to somebody when it is making love"(01:00:56). Just as in When Harry met Sally..., the scene arises from the female protagonist's emotional disappointment – Jamie just being "dumped" (01:02:04), Sally learning that her ex-boyfriend is getting married – and it is suggested that in their request for emotional support, Jamie and Sally respectively initiate serious romantic and physical involvement. There is a shift in expectations and responses after this turn of events. The next morning is shown to be an interplay of caring gestures from Jamie – removing a smudge from Dylan's chin during breakfast, trying to cheer him up with regard to his father's illness – and evasive reactions from Dylan – changing the topic when his nephew Sam mentions Jamie, refusing to talk to Jamie about his feelings (just as when in When Harry met Sally..., Harry signals that he is refusing emotional involvement). When Jamie confronts him about "acting weird" and asks him, "Is this about what happened the other night?", her reaction clearly appears as somewhere between annoyed and seriously hurt when Dylan cuts off the topic by insisting, "What, sex? You know that doesn't mean anything. [...] And I haven't been acting weird" (01:13:05-13:20). Just as Harry backs out of potential commitment, Dylan is presented as being unable to admit romantic feelings. The film voices this opinion through Dylan's sister Annie, whose sisterly advice positions her as the clear-sighted and Dylan as the overly-defensive one. When she tries to demonstrate to him that he and Jamie should be a couple, he insists: "I could never go out with her. She's too fucked up. Okay, she doesn't want a boyfriend. She's too damaged. Magnum P.I. couldn't solve the shit going on in her head" (01:15:36-01:15:43). Jamie, accidentally overhearing this, hurriedly leaves Dylan's family home. Now, at the latest, both Jamie and Dylan fit the templates the audience knows from When Harry met Sally... and related narratives.

11 All of this is, quite obviously, a rather unoriginal repetition of commonplaces concerning gender and genre stereotypes: the heroine struggling with "emotional isolation", but "compassionate, kind, and understanding", the hero hurt by previous negative experiences and thus acting "harsh" (cf. Radway 127-129). It affirms conventional models of gender roles and modes of partnership. It portrays the "defeat" of less conventional relations and gender identities – *Friends with Benefits* even more so, maybe, than *When Harry met Sally...*, because it abandons the "headhunter Jamie" for the "emotional Jamie", whereas Sally does not change much throughout the film. Both Harry and Dylan change, of course, when they finally come to admit their respective affections at the end of the respective films, but this change is generally included in the formulae of popular romance (cf., for example Radway 128).

12 In particular in *Friends with Benefits,* the force of romance is emphasised by a double strategy: Its protagonists are presented as being aware and tired of romantic clichés. „I really have to stop buying into this bullshit Hollywood cliché of true love", Jamie announces at the beginning of the film. "Shut up, Katherine Heigl! You stupid liar!" (00:04:22-00:04:28). Right after Dylan has moved to New York, he and Jamie exchange their annoyance with ex-partners, claims to "stay friends" after break-ups, and relationships in general:

> Jamie: "You're emotionally unavailable? […] Oh my God, I'm emotionally damaged. I haven't seen you at the meetings."
> Dylan: "I'm *done* with the relationship thing."Jamie: "Girl, you are preaching to the congregation!" (00:20:50-21:22)

Yet in spite of those claims and their explicit intention to have sex like "playing tennis" (00:25:23) – with no emotions involved – the two end up as a happy couple. Thus, the protagonists and with them, the film supposedly avoid "false innocence" (Eco 67) and at the same time strengthen the concept of all-powerful, inevitable romance – the message seems to be that love conquers all, even those who do not believe in it.

"Men and Women can't be Friends"

13 There are, of course, the conventions of the romantic genre and narration in general to consider. As Victor Luftig points out:

> One of the greatest challenges to representing friendship [...] is a set of narrative conventions according to which friendship must always give way for the sake of narrative closure. *When Harry met Sally...* is, from its title to its final scene, a romantic comedy whose narrative is impelled by attraction first suppressed, then acknowledged, then countered, then consummated [...]. The film is designated so that, as a comedy, it can *only* end in sexual union. If the couple at the film's center were to remain 'just friends', there would be no way for it to end happily – indeed, there might be no way for it to end at all. *When Harry met Sally...* illustrates the continuing pertinence of a problem registered by a number of [...] texts [...]: how can a story remain genuinely about friendship, rather than position friendship as a merely temporary stage on the way to something the story is more essentially about? (13; emphasis in original)

Friends with Benefits, as a recent Hollywood production, illustrates not only that the romance genre still employs the same formulae[8], but also its restrictedness with regard to interpersonal relations, romantic, sexual, and otherwise – friendship can only end in romance and romance is primarily heterosexual in nature.

14 *When Harry met Sally...*, in its initial debates about the possibility of "friendship between men and women", does not even consider same-sex relations: Harry's and Sally's

[8] Corinne Saunders expresses the genre's unbroken vitality in saying that the "timelessness" of romance makes it "an enduring mode of infinite potential" which is indeed "thriving as we enter the twenty-first century" (539f.).

discussion assumes heterosexual attraction as natural automatism ("Men and women can't be friends", Harry clarifies, "because no man can be friends with a woman that he finds attractive." It is irrelevant if the woman in question returns those feelings, since the "sex thing is already out there so the friendship is ultimately doomed, and that is the end of the story" (00:11:36-12:23)).

15 Friends with Benefits, being not quite as narrow in scope, does include homosexual relations, with Dylan's colleague Tommy as a representative. Yet due to the eccentricity of Tommy as a character, those relations are nevertheless marked as a "special case". Also, the considerations are limited to male relations: Not once are female homosexual relations even mentioned. Tommy is clearly meant to be a comic character, constantly shown trying to dissuade others from their heterosexual orientation. "Are you sure you're not gay?" he repeatedly asks Dylan (00:19:05), "Any of you gay?" his basketball team, adding: "Not even you? Oh, come on, man. Come talk to me after. Give me five minutes of your time. I might be able to let you see some reason" (00:40:00:40:07). Tommy does have a short moment in which he suddenly fulfils a serious function. It does not last long, though; at the end of the scene, the character is set back into a comic and exaggerated mode. He is advising Dylan that his arrangement with Jamie cannot be kept up without emotional consequences:

> Dylan: "What do you know about women anyway?"[...]
> Tommy: "[...] I would be with women to my dying day, but [...] I'm strict-aly dick-aly."
> Dylan: "So it's always just about sex then?"
> Tommy: "No. I've been in love. I went down that rabbit hole. You know what I discovered? It's not who you want to spend Friday night with, it's who you want to spend all day Saturday with. [...]"
> Dylan: "Yeah but then it's every Saturday for the rest of your life..."
> Tommy: "It's ok. You don't get it. It's no big deal. But you will. One day, you'll meet someone and it'll literally take your breath away. Like you can't *breathe*. Like, no *oxygen* to the *lungs*. Like a *fish*–
> Dylan: "–yeah I get it Tommy." (00:40:17-41:38)

Tommy's proclaimed promiscuity in combination with his views on love indirectly implies that the inevitable failure of an arrangement like Jamie's and Dylan's is not that much due to the nature of romantic attraction, but mostly due to the fact that women are involved. In this case, we would be confronted with a construction of femininity rather than heterosexuality. Still, it is hard to judge which stance the film actually takes in this regard, since Tommy is the only concession the film makes to the diversity of romantic and sexual relations, and this concession only takes male homosexual relations into consideration. With Tommy's obvious eccentricity added on top of that, the view the film presents on interpersonal relations ultimately stays a heteronormative one. There are some instances where Dylan's sexual

identity is thematised. When Tommy and Dylan meet for the first time, Tommy immediately assumes – "art director, and, you know..." (00:18:48) – that Dylan shares his sexual orientation. In another instance, talking about his teenage idols, Dylan says, "I was a little into Harry Potter back then". When Jamie comments by asking, "Were you also gay back then?" he answers, rather sharply, "Harry Potter doesn't make you gay!" (00:34:26-34:30). These are scenes, though, which ultimately confirm heterosexuality as the norm by associating other possibilities with comic effects.

16 *When Harry met Sally...* provides its protagonists each with one major same-sex friend, Marie and Jess. *Friends with Benefits* does not parallel its central cross-sex friendship with same-sex friendships in the same way. *When Harry met Sally...* takes clear and simplistic stances in this regard: Friendship excludes sex, whereas sex marks romance; friendship is what holds between individuals of the same sex, romance (inevitably) between those of different sexes. Because *Friends with Benefits* does not stick to the first principle, it cannot quite as easily "define friendship" at least "negatively". Ultimately, though, it does return to *When Harry met Sally*'s categories in suggesting that any relation that does not keep friendship and sex apart – that does not restrict sexual to romantic relations – must fail.

Update the Fairytale

17 Which place, if any, does friendship hold in this affirmation of (heterosexual) romance both as a genre and as a model for interpersonal relations? Even though the films experience difficulties conceptualising friendship, they do seem to share the idea that friendship is in some way about conversation, about exchanges of opinion and about lending company to each other. Harry and Sally, when they meet again in New York after several years and decide that they are "becoming friends now" (00:32:52), are shown in phone conversations, talks in the park, discussions over dinner tables on past relationships, dates, and trivia. The same goes for Dylan and Jamie – discussing music, "who's your type", stories from their youth. Both couples, who are shown to have skipped the romantic part, thus confirm, albeit often on a rather trivial level, Claire Colebrook's theoretical conception of friendship as something that lies "beyond" seduction, that is more advanced than romantic or erotic involvement: She conceptualises "the passage from seduction to friendship" as "the theoretical ideal"[9] because "rather than relating to the other as one who promises a way to pure plenitude, rather than relating to the other *sexually* as a conduit to *jouissance*, one would allow the other to stand

[9] By "theoretical ideal", Colebrook means to express the structural parallels and interactions between friendship, seduction and theory. Although scientific theory is not an issue here, her model of "converser" fits the fictional representations of friendship discussed here quite well.

apart as a converser rather than an object" (111; emphasis in original). In more simple terms, it is precisely this function as "converser", as undemanding companion and confidant for exchanges of opinion, that is expressed as the value of friendship – and in particular, of friendship as opposed to romance – by the protagonists. Their great advantage is that they can "tell each other things" precisely *because* they are not a couple: Dylan, in a discussion with Jamie, for example says "Now see? If you were my girlfriend, I couldn't tell you to shut up right now" (00:37:30); Harry celebrates his relation to Sally as "freeing" because, since he is not romantically involved, he can "say anything to her" (00:42:09-42:12). Colebrook's theoretical deliberations reflect this idea of liberation when she says that to transcend the mechanisms of seduction is to "abandon[…] the ethics of dependence that would strive to obtain the other as object who would then guarantee our pleasure" (111).

18 "The tradition of courtly love", in contrast, "is one of sexual difference and seduction" (111). The object of desire, Colebrook states with reference to Lacan, is "beyond dialogue" (ibid.), which is why it can become the object of desire in the first place: it is unattainability which constitutes desire, and desire which constitutes unattainability (cf., for example, Žižek 4). It is, both in Colebrook's reflections and in the narratives discussed here, presented as the great advantage of friendship that it foregoes this chase in which both participants are denied autonomy and non-relational individuality and that thus holds the potential of a relation in which partners are "liberated from [their] definition through an other" (109). "Indeed", Colebrook formulates, "if you are to be my friend, if you are to regard me as a worthy other, then I need to be more than a helpful, recognised and fellow human; there must be that in me which resists appropriation" (115f.). Appropriation of the other, though, is what the narratives ultimately cannot resist. They succumb to seduction – are seduced by their genre, one might say – after all, and thus to a situation where partners are driven by the "desire that one be an object for an other" (Colebrook 113). Harry's and Sally's and Dylan's and Jamie's development is a vivid illustration of the centrality of seduction which means that "we speak and live always with a sense of the desire the other directs towards us, that we live our very selves through the enigmatic gaze of the other" (Colebrook 113).

19 Psychoanalysis is said to grasp "the truth of the ego's relational being" when positing "the primacy of seduction" (cf. Colebrook 112). Indeed the primacy of seduction is, as is exemplified by the two stories discussed here, evident in narrations of this kind (in romantic narratives in general and in those of the "Harry and Sally"-kind in particular) and maybe essential to narration as such. "Narrative is on the side of desire and opposed to the death drive" Rob Lapsley and Michael Westlake explain (193); it is so because it stages the struggle

for obtaining the object of desire and it suggests, in its happy ending, the success of this struggle; but it does not depict "ultimate satisfaction" but rather projects the final union of its lovers "to an imaginary time outside the text" in "the standard happy ending in which the lovers come together all set to live happily ever after" (195). It thus does and does not depict what is "unrepresentable" (193). Both films resolve the major conflict that arises between the couple towards the end of the movie, and as soon as this is accomplished, they end in the usual "happily ever after" of romantic comedy […] that excludes the romantic union as such from representation.

20 In *When Harry met Sally...*, Harry, after finally realising that he is in love with Sally after all, runs to catch her at a New Year's Party. When Sally refuses his declaration of love, explaining that "it doesn't work this way", Harry protests:

> Harry: "Then what about this way: I love that you get cold when it's 71 degrees out. I love that it takes you an hour and a half to order a sandwich. I love that you get a little crinkle above your nose when you're looking at me like I'm nuts. I love that after I spend a day with you, I can still smell your perfume on my clothes, and I love that you are the last person I wanna talk to before I go to sleep at night. And it's not because I'm lonely, and it's not because it's New Year's Eve. I came here tonight because when you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible."

Sally gives in to this speech, saying: "You see? That is just like you Harry, you say things like that and you make it impossible for me to hate you!" When they kiss to "Auld Lang Syne" playing, Harry asks: "What does this song mean? My whole life, I don't know what this song means." And Sally, reminiscing their personal history, tells him: "It's about old friends" (01:23:00-01:27:30). And with this – and the added information that the two marry a few months after – the film ends.

21 In *Friends with Benefits*, Dylan sets up flash mob for Jamie to a song they both like in order to apologise for rejecting her:

> Dylan: "You said you wanted your life to be like a movie. [...] I messed up. I was scared. Look what happened with my mom and my dad. Of course I was scared. So I ruined it. Everything that happens in the day, all I can think is, 'I can't wait to tell Jamie about this'. When I see someone cursing, all I can picture is you blinking. And when I hear a kid's been cured of cancer, I pray it's not by that douchebag tree-hugging fucking doctor who ran out on you. [...] Hey, I miss you."[...][Dylan kneeling]
> Jamie: "Oh, no, no, no-"
> Dylan: "-shut up, it's not what you think. Jamie, will you be my best friend again?"
> Jamie [laughing]: "That is so lame."
> Dylan: "Oh I know. That's some Prince Charming shit though, right? [...] Look, I *can* live without ever having sex with you again. It'd be really hard. Hey, I want my best friend back – because I'm in love with her."
> Jamie: "Under one condition."

Dylan: “Anything.”
Jamie: “Kiss me.”[...]
Jamie: “Okay. So. What do we do now?”
Dylan: “Have our first date.”(01:34:44-01:38)

Friends with Benefit’s tendencies are maybe a little less straightforward, since the film displays a certain awareness that what it is showing at its end is a beginning and not a final resolution. Still, the audience is obviously meant to think of Dylan and Jamie as a happy future couple.

22 Symbolisation thus ends when the struggles are resolved, representation and the romantic union not compatible. The narrative stops where romance proper begins. It is not essentially surprising to see language – representation – and the fulfilment of desire thus opposed: Signification is often seen as what “alienates” the subject and its needs, thus producing desire and preventing its fulfilment at the same time (cf. Belsey 57). This can also be transferred to the dynamics of friendship vs. romance: In Colebrook’s reflections, “dialogue” is posited, as it were, as the “beyond of seduction” (it allows “the other to stand apart as a *converser* rather than an object” (emphasis added)). This implies that whatever it may be, romance is something else than dialogue and conversation. *Friends with Benefits* illustrates this nicely in the way it distinguishes love scenes between Dylan and Jamie into scenes of casual sex vs. scenes of lovemaking: When emotional attachment breaks its way through, as the film suggests, during the friends’ visit with Dylan’s family, there is none of the “touch my ears”-sort of talk that adds a comic angle to earlier love scenes between the two (cf., for example, 00:29:45-30:00). Following pop culture’s commonplace[10], the film suggests that true romance does not need words.

23 That leaves us at a point where we have to conclude that essentially, neither romance nor friendship are symbolisable, expressible in the language of the protagonists or the fiction as such.[11] Romance might be presented as the less puzzling relation – it is Harry’s non-romantic/-sexual relation to Sally, for example, that Joe explicity does “not understand”. Yet what is well-known about romance are, ultimately, a) the conventions of the genre, and b) the struggles that lead to it and that enable the genre in the first place. There “can be little doubt”, as Lapsley and Westlake say, that “our culture does want romance and the promise of happiness it brings” (180). It does not search for “mere friendship” and thus cannot contain itself with a relationship that must necessarily appear vague and unclear in a conceptual

[10] As it is regularly expressed in song lyrics, for instance (think of Depeche Mode’s “Enjoy the silence” or Ronan Keating's "Nothing At All", for example).
[11] Actual friendships might be seen to be made up out of conversation, but the concept itself is at odds with explanations.

framework that privileges romance and with it, an understanding of subjectivity through difference and otherness. Friendship maybe does not by definition disenable the reciprocal construction of subjectivity through the respective partners' gaze that conventional romantic models offer, but when it is conceptualised as "conversation" between ultimately independent individuals, it does not hold the same promise as romance does for "self-expression" (of which, as Lapsley and Westlake put it, "relations of love between individuals" are "held to be the supreme form" in western culture, 185).[12]

24 In this sense, it is quite fitting that Victor Luftig's examination of textual depictions of friendship is called "Seeing Together": The conversational structure attributed to friendship implies that one looks in the same direction, instead of looking at each other. There is less potential for the consolidation of subjective identity, at least no potential that is as well-established as the gaze of the romantic couple, who "only have eyes for each other". *Harry and Sally* and *Friends with Benefits* as chief examples of their genre confirm this analysis of culture's concepts of love and friendship; the latter one in particular, since it illustrates that the subject matter is still held to be of interest.

25 In spite of all the conventional and conventionalising impulses of the films, though, it should be taken into consideration that while friendship has to make way for romance in those narratives, romance is depicted as arising from friendship and as actually being indebted to a relation which does not hinge on the partners' difference, but rather on their likeness. In this genealogy from the "seeing together" of friendship to the "seeing each other" of romance, a valorisation of friendly dialogue is included after all. In *When Harry met Sally...*, this valorisation might be reduced to a short rhetorical gesture to "old friends" in the final scene, but *Friends with Benefits* puts friendship at the centre of its final dialogue and thus its happy ending: Dylan explicitly wants Jamie to be his best friend *and* his lover. In this, the film might be repeating a commonplace, but it does assign value to a relation of likeness and symmetry instead of sticking to complementary relations only. That a couple is depicted as being not only lovers, but also 'best friends' is hardly a revolutionary claim; yet the progress from friends to lovers that provides the material for romantic comedy does implicitly allow that interpersonal relations can be varied and (at least) two-dimensional. One might read Dylan's words in the final scene – "Everything that happens in the day, all I can think is, 'I can't wait to tell Jamie about this'" – as asking for more than the conventional romantic model includes: namely that dialogue and conversation should not be excluded from "happily ever after".

[12] A promise that, following Lacan, can never be fulfilled, since we have no control over the other's gaze: "When, in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that – You never look at me from the place from which I see you. Conversely, what I look at is never what I wish to see." (102f.)

26 “You gotta update your fairytale, baby”, Jamie’s mother informs Jamie towards the end of the film (01:28:11). In fact, *Friends with Benefits*, in contrast to *When Harry met Sally...*, does seem to feel the urge to update the concepts – gender- and plot-wise – that make up its narrative. We can see this in certain aspects of Jamie’s character – mostly her initial, supposedly dominant position with regard to Dylan – and in the awareness of its own genre conventions that the film voices through its characters’ initial attitude towards relationships. Phrases like the “bullshit Hollywood cliché of true love” that Jamie refers to express an awareness of stereotypes, to which to fall prey to would have to appear naive. In order to avoid this “false innocence”, the film starts out as if to abandon those stereotypes, making its central couple less chaste, more casual. By referring to its own species (“Hollywood love story”) as if from a meta-position, the film establishes a (pseudo-)distance towards its own genre which suggests that it will try to add a “new” twist to an “old” story.

27 The logic of “happily ever after” is perfidious, though. “Happily ever after” does and does not represent the ideal union: It *announces* the fulfilment of desire and thus simultaneously includes it into and excludes it from signification. It thus enjoys what Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* refers to as the “speaker’s benefit” (6), namely the benefit from the function of prophecy (cf. 7) that puts the speaker in the position to be the one to “pronounce a discourse that combines the fervour of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights”, the one to make “the proclamation of a new day to come” (7). The happy ending of *Friends with Benefits* evades having to present an *actual* update of romance and thus the obligation to really suggest what this merging of friendship and romance that it announces might look like. The paradigm of difference prevails and thus illustrates what Catherine Belsey refers to as “desire’s impossible project”:

> Desire is desire of the other precisely as other, and it characteristically includes the longing for closure. The quest for closure represents the wish to master difference, the very alterity on which desire depends. This, in the end, not the unity of mind and body, nor unity within the subject, is desire’s impossible project. (37)

“Happily ever after” thus figures as a relief from signification but is also proof of its power. The beyond of signification, in which romance is positioned – even more so because it is set off from the conversational mode of friendship – is conceptualised as desirable, which is precisely why it remains and has to remain out of reach.

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