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Let's Ask for the Moon! - Tracing the 'Narrative of Desperation' Across Films for Women

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Writing on *Desperate Housewives* Ann Marie Bautista notes:

“The figure of the housewife has commonly been associated with the space of the home, and the desperation that has come to signify domesticity has arguably become an integral component of her construction”.

Many would agree with her, since the melodramatic premise of screen incarnations of ‘the housewife’, implies a ‘natural’ correlation between desperation and domesticity. However, my research challenges Bautista’s statement and argues that these and other screen women are desperate not solely because they are restricted to the home, but more importantly because they are faced with the expectations and anxieties imposed on them by men. Men are, and have often been represented as the fundamental catalysts for desperation, since their actions and reactions are the cause of both suffering and desire for these onscreen women. Therefore, whilst it is argued by Bautista that *Desperate Housewives* impacts negatively on the representation of the modern woman through re-uniting the terms ‘desperate’ and ‘housewife’, my research embraces the re-entry of the desperate housewife into the feminist frame for the opportunity it provides to connect up and flesh out what I have called a ‘narrative of desperation’.

The narrative of desperation can be understood as taking its generic cues from the woman’s film as it is described by Mary Ann Doane and Jeanine Basinger. I will chart the history of desperation across films made for women through the brief analyses of four case studies - *Now, Voyager* (1942), *An Unmarried Woman* (1978), *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1988), and *Bridget Jones’ Diary* (2001). Ultimately the narrative of desperation could include a much wider range of films however for the purpose of this paper I will focus on these four examples. Aside from the obvious chronology of the films, I have chosen them because they are centred on a female protagonist travelling an emotional journey, an experience that I argue is crucial to the narrative of desperation.

My main point that I hope to illustrate in this paper is that, although the emotional journey shown in these films often poses obstacles, happiness and independence are within reach. Further I will argue that highlighting the narrative of desperation is important for feminist media studies in that it manages to remove the negative connotations associated with being 'desperate' and allows onscreen women to progress, emotionally, through their individual narrative journeys. Desperation, I argue, is an essential phase of that journey.

From my research I have constructed a handy template identifying four fundamental themes that constitute the emotional journey situated between what I term the protagonist female's 'desperate reality' and her 'desperate fantasy'. These four phases are: physical transformation, therapeutic discussion, sexual exploration, and making an important choice. Each of these themes marks a significant stage of growth for the protagonist female. In the rest of this paper I will explore these four phases through examples from my chosen films in order to show how, whilst desperation is an important term through which to explore women's narrative choices, we must explore it beyond its narrow association with the domestic space.

It is often assumed in film narrative that a **physical transformation** is necessary to achieve happiness and secure a man, as is the case in recent films such as *Miss Congeniality* and *The Princess Diaries*. However, in the narrative of desperation it is in fact the protagonist's realization she does not need to transform for the sake of a man that is important. Consequently the makeover scene functions solely as a metaphor for her own increase in emotional confidence. Physical transformation is not a conclusive action but rather a catalyst for self-belief. Rather than being made over for the sake of a man, physical change becomes a springboard for a new course of action.

In the film, *Now Voyager*, Charlotte's life takes a positive turn when her psychiatrist, Dr. Jaquith

encourages her to visit his sanitarium where she is both physically and emotionally transformed from a frumpy spinster into a confident and elegant woman. The film opens on the stairwell in the Vale house. As her mother (in voiceover) describes Charlotte's upbringing and her position in the family as the 'ugly duckling', we witness a close-up shot of thick stocking-clad legs coming down the stairs. She is represented as severely hindered both in terms of her appearance and her mannerisms.

Encouraged to assume an alternative identity on a cruise ship to South America, Charlotte falls in love with a married man, Jerry Durrance and thus the story continues. The first shot of 'post-makeover' Charlotte is constructed as a match to the first scene. As the camera tracks up her body we see that Charlotte's oversized dress and frumpy stockings have been replaced with fancy shoes, a fitted suit and a hat. In direct contrast to the film's opening, Charlotte (or "Miss Beauchamp" as she is known on the cruise) walks gracefully down the ship's ramp and is greeted and gazed upon by a group of admirers. Although she cannot allow her relationship with Jerry to progress, Charlotte develops a strong bond with his introverted daughter, Tina. Thus Charlotte's makeover in this film is not to impress a man; rather it marks a situational shift. Her new physical identity allows her to embark confidently on the cruise and thus is an integral component of her emotional journey.

Therapeutic discussion here centers on woman's talk – the process whereby the film's protagonist female meets with an external party, whether that be a therapist or a group of close friends, with the aim of discussing problems. The external party can be relied upon to offer up advice that aids the protagonist.

In the opening scenes of *Bridget Jones' Diary* we witness Bridget on the phone, counseling best friend Jude through a messy breakup. The tables soon turn as the film shifts focus and Bridget is

identified as the sole individual in her friendship group needing advice. As Bridget moves through various stages of her emotional journey, she frequently requests regular meetings with her close friends – Shazza, Jude and Tom – who congregate to discuss Bridget’s life and advise her on how she can better things for herself. We meet Bridget’s group of friends on various occasions, the first of these is described by Bridget (through voiceover) as an, “emergency summit with urban family for coherent discussion of career crisis”. As Bridget briefs the group on the flirtatious advances from her boss Daniel Cleaver, the general consensus is to take a risk and agree to date him. Bridget’s upcoming rendezvous with Daniel provokes the group’s second meeting, where the friends offer a detailed step-by-step guide to date preparation. The group’s advice functions to instill a humorous kind of fear into Bridget. They often outline both the best and worst case scenarios of Bridget's situation and collaboratively form a conclusion.

The third time we meet Bridget’s friends is during her birthday dinner. Having arrived to find Bridget and Mark Darcy cooking in the kitchen, the group appears caught off guard by her decision to entertain him without their consultation. As they realize Mark’s potential as a suitor for Bridget, they toast, borrowing his earlier affirmation “just as she is”. By toasting in such a way the group are both sending a message to Mark that they are aware of his actions and his character, whilst at the same time offering a kind of acceptance of his intentions towards their friend. Although in the film’s conclusion the group pulls back allowing her to make her own decisions, the support and therapeutic discussion made available throughout the film sees Bridget finally able to make up her own mind and pursue her desires.

Whereas third-wave feminist texts often emphasize the importance of pleasurable sex, the narrative of desperation uses a character’s **sexual exploration** (pleasurable or not) to represent a turning point in the protagonist female’s emotional journey. Sex marks both an increase in self-confidence

and a turning point of sorts, directing the protagonists toward the next stage of their personal growth.

Having lived in a “perfect” marital state for so long, indulging in single life is a difficult transition for Erica in *An Unmarried Woman*. Her husband’s infidelity results in a severe loss of self-confidence and it takes a casual sexual experience with a friend to help Erica over this hurdle. The role of men in *An Unmarried Woman* is interesting in that each male character is symbolic of both a different phase in the film’s narrative and at the same time is indicative of a new stage in Erica’s life. Martin, her cheating husband, provides the basis for Erica’s initial desperation, Charlie, her work colleague, provides an outlet for Erica’s sexual needs, and finally, Saul, who provides remedy for her broken heart. With Charlie, Erica is able to discover sex with someone other than Martin for the first time. She is aggressive in her actions and makes her intentions towards him immediately clear; however, on entering his bedroom she becomes vulnerable and requests the lights be turned off. Charlie manages to help Erica relax through tickling her and laughing with her. Although the two will never become a regular couple as such, Erica’s brief encounter with Charlie helps her overcome the initial awkwardness of being with another man. He has essentially served his purpose as a secondary character and is not referred to again until later in the film. At the point in the narrative at which we meet Saul it appears that Erica’s inhibitions are long forgotten due to her explorations with Charlie. In the presence of Saul, Erica is a whole new woman, and says of the relationship, “I feel great. I feel happy”.

In order for the narrative of desperation to conclude effectively, the protagonist female is required to **make a choice** that will essentially define her immediate future. Roberta’s character in *Desperately Seeking Susan*, who has overcome her state of amnesia, is faced with the choice either to return to her unfavorable marriage with Gary or to take a chance with the bachelor, Des. The

male characters in *Desperately Seeking Susan* function within a binary; Gary, the focus of Roberta's life before her amnesia can be understood to represent her suffering, and Des, with whom she becomes involved after the accident, can be seen to represent that which she has subconsciously desired throughout her marriage.

The unorthodox nature of the romance between Roberta and Des reinforces her desperation to escape the banal realities of her life with Gary. Although Gary can provide her with material possessions, the marriage lacks the excitement and adventure, which Roberta so obviously craves. Gary is both arrogant and oblivious when it comes to his wife, and his passion appears to stem from matters concerning business and finance. Life with Gary is the 'desperate reality' in which Roberta finds herself, so it is not surprising that Des so easily intrigues her. Over the course of the narrative Roberta makes the choice to shift from a life of quiet desperation to one of independence, confidence and sexual liberation, a change that is paralleled significantly with her shift in love interest and the growth of her self-confidence. *Desperately Seeking Susan* marks a shift in female values, thus emphasizing the importance of finding the perfect partner. In the beginning of the film Roberta lives a wealthy lifestyle envied by many, however, she is desperate to somehow escape her suffering. Although Des cannot offer her the same financial support, it is his genuine love and devotion to her that reigns supreme.

To conclude, the release of *Desperate Housewives* in 2004 saw the alliance of the term 'desperation' with the domestic space of the housewife thrust back into critical discussion. My research argues that desperation must be associated with more than just the domestic space and I have explored a 'narrative of desperation' that emerges across a brief sample of films for women. The films deliver the message that, although the emotional journey they chart often poses obstacles, happiness and independence are within reach. The films I have briefly discussed remind us of the

historical origins of suffering, choice and desire experienced by women as a result of their relationships with male characters. As we have seen in the pilot episode of *Desperate Housewives*, narrator Mary-Alice opines: “We all have moments of desperation. But if we can face them head on then that’s how we find out how strong we really are.” Juxtaposing Mary-Alice’s words with the infamous words of Charlotte in *Now, Voyager*, “Don’t let’s ask for the moon, we have the stars”, provides the trajectory of the desperation narrative which develops from Charlotte’s modest plea that desire is forgotten, to Mary-Alice’s insistence that desire should be acted upon. Whereas post-feminism has associated notions of strength with physical power and the struggle between men and women, the narrative of desperation brings to the forefront the importance of emotional strength and values the self-knowledge gathered on a woman’s narrative journey.