

Loathe, Actually

10 beloved romantic movies that are annoying, cloying or unintentionally dysfunctional

*By Kim Morgan
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Oh boy. Valentine's Day. A holiday that reminds couples of their romantic feelings for one another, a day that inspires wooers to turn up the volume on their courting, and a troubling time that (sorry) brings out the most desperate, obnoxious, guilt-ridden, dysfunctional sentiments in those forced to partake. Because, let's face it, many feel pressured by a day filled with conspicuous bouquets, ridiculous balloon arrangements and couples engaging in too many public displays of affection.

And then there are "romantic" movies ... perhaps some of the worst Valentine's Day offenders of all. Though mostly harmless diversions, entertainments we watch knowing full well how unrealistic they are, they also work as a reminder of how your life isn't anything like the movies or, worse, how delusional some viewers are. And no, I'm not talking truly great romantic movies like "Casablanca," "The Philadelphia Story," "The Apartment," or "The Big Sleep." I'm talking movies that are either overrated or, in some cases, just plain creepy. Here are 10 beloved modern love "classics" I find most egregious. Read, disagree, call me a cynical jerk, whatever. Just know I'll never sit through "Ghost" again.

"Pretty Woman" (1990)

Here's my problem with "Pretty Woman" -- it's not that Julia Roberts is a prostitute; rather, it's why is she a prostitute? Aside from discussing how her mother used to "lock her in an attic" (who wrote this? V.C. Andrews?), the picture rarely delves into that troublesome area called backstory or motivation, and we can only assume Roberts' incredibly healthy, sweet-hearted, model-beautiful Vivian is a streetwalker because she was abused or super depressed or hated her job at the Sizzler. Maybe she's just clinically perky. But who cares, right? We don't need to know why she has taken to the streets -- over becoming, say, one of Heidi's girls, a much more realistic Hollywood option for a woman who looks like Roberts. As long as we know it's not really what she wants to do with her life, it's fine. She wants, as she says, the "fairy tale," which she does indeed receive via Richard Gere's wealthy businessman, a guy who gives her the full Henry Higgins treatment while paying her to sleep with him (that part is realistic, sorry Eliza Doolittle). There's so much about this movie that's not romantic -- from the first embarrassing seduction scene, to the breakthrough moment when the couple fornicates and kiss on the lips, to the whole "you and I are both whores" reflection, to anything involving utensils. I've simply never understood why it became so instantly beloved. And the final scene is such BS lip service. When Gere plays the white knight, wooing and rescuing his princess from the clutches of a dumpy hotel room, she says, supposedly all plucky feminist, that, "She rescues him right back." Rescues him from what? The piles of money she's going to spend on Rodeo Drive?

"The Way We Were" (1973)

This is a tough one. For the most part, I revere Sydney Pollack. Not only did he direct one of my favorite downer movies of all time (the masterful "They Shoot Horses, Don't They?") but also the political-romantic gem "Three Days of the Condor." He also directed "Tootsie" and contributed a memorable performance as Dustin Hoffman's frustrated manager ("A tomato doesn't have logic!"). He also offered some of the most scathing moments in Woody Allen's brilliant anti-romance movie "Husbands and Wives." He's pretty much golden in my book. Except for his ridiculously overrated "The Way We Were," a movie that paired the mismatched Robert Redford with Barbra Streisand in a forced, syrupy period piece filled with cloying Marvin Hamlisch music and bland political tension. It hasn't aged well. Stick to the aforementioned Pollack, watch Redford in just about anything else, and check out Barbra in the infinitely superior and underrated "The Owl and the Pussycat," in which she plays a lovably obnoxious prostitute. Huh. Streisand plays a better hooker than Julia Roberts. Go figure.

"Sleepless in Seattle" (1993)

Oh, the early '90s ... such innocence. No personal e-mails for every household, no endless scrolls of confessional blogging, no chat room flame wars, no abysmal reality TV dating shows. Paris was still a place for lovers, New York had nothing to do with Tiffany Pollard, and Seattle was ... sleepless. It actually makes me a bit misty thinking how little we knew back then -- that we were on the precipice of a communication explosion. This watercolored memory steered me back to 1993's "Sleepless in Seattle," a movie where Meg Ryan falls in love with Tom Hanks the old-timey nontraditional way: from a call-in radio talk show. For some reason I thought the film's period quaintness might make me reassess what I disliked about it the first time around (boring, unlikable leads, silly side characters including Bill Pullman and Rosie O'Donnell, and an all-around hollow feeling). But, alas, it continues to disappoint. Maybe I'm a little paranoid, but there's something a tad stalkerish about Ryan's character as she falls for Hanks' architect widower, traveling from Baltimore to Seattle to track him down. There's a lonely feeling to this movie that's actually quite interesting, but rather than creating intriguing characters from such a predicament (and both Hanks and Ryan would be up to the task), the movie relies on lame clichés regarding men and women (did you know all women love "An Affair to Remember?") and stock romantic scenarios. Interesting that Tom and Meg would fall in love through technology, yet again, in the equally sappy "You've Got Mail." Which brings us to ...

"You've Got Mail" (1999)

Through that magical innovation called e-mail, a woman corresponds with a man she's never met. They fall for each other and decide to meet not knowing that the woman, who runs a small, children's book store, and the man, a big-business, chain-store retailer, are archenemies. But, gosh darn it, they're both lovable moppets with crinkly smiles and that means everything when faced with this kind of narrative opposition. Reunite "Sleepless in Seattle" stars Ryan and Hanks, add some wacky sidekicks, slate Nora Ephron ("When Harry Met Sally ..." and "Sleepless") as screenwriter and director. Add a dash of modern pontificating, but not enough to make it too foreign-tasting, and whip to a light, fluffy froth. Serve lukewarm. Voilà! Modern Romantic Movie Soufflé! Blech! Delete! I want Billy Crystal back!

"Ghost" (1990)

Do I need to discuss the plot of this picture? You already know it's about Demi Moore's poltergeist paramour Patrick Swayze as he attempts to both move on to the heaven world and solve the mystery of his murder. Trouble is, he can't properly communicate with his beloved, requiring the assistance of sassy psychic Whoopi Goldberg. Goldberg won an Oscar for her performance, and though she may not have deserved that, she is the only entertaining aspect to this endlessly cornball movie. And I know the scene is famous, but please -- pottery isn't sexy. It may look hot handling all that clay, smoothing its creamy consistency into a flower pot, or vase, or bong, or whatever you're crafting, but it requires some attention and skill and strong hands. (OK, now it's starting to sound kind of sexy.) But really, it's not something you want to attempt while Swayze is hovering behind you, turned on because your potential planter looks, well, phallic. Demi should be annoyed when he touches her clay, laughing over wrecking her possible "masterpiece." Thanks, buddy. No "Ditto" for you.

"Love Story" (1970)

Here's one thing I do know, love means having to say you're sorry -- a lot. Like all the time. Don't listen to the clichés of Arthur Hiller's "Love Story," a picture that seems frozen in a time that never was, and one that remains eternally baffling for popularity alone. Released in 1970, the same year as cinematic classics like "M*A*S*H," "Five Easy Pieces" and "Little Big Man," you have to wonder who was buying this load of malarkey ... especially with the performances of Ryan O'Neal as Harvard hottie Oliver and Ali MacGraw as sassy, working-class, Radcliffe-attending Jenny. They may photograph well, but the famous leads didn't and still don't have any chemistry -- just a lot of magazine layout emotions and zombielike banter. Unless you're filling the movie with your own memories of love and loss (and really, you have to), getting teary by the film's famous ending (yes, Jenny dies ... sorry!) is near impossible. For this, the movie should definitely say it's sorry.

"While You Were Sleeping" (1995)

Love sure makes you do crazy things. Especially unrequited love. Ask Sandra Bullock, who is so besotted with Peter Gallagher that she pretends to be his fiancée after he's hit by a commuter train. See, he's in a coma, so what does he know? And who is she hurting anyway? And besides, Jack Warden tells her she's a positive influence and shouldn't feel badly about her behavior. This gives her a pass to look through his personal belongings, spend Christmas with his family, fall in love with his brother (played by Bill Pullman) and ... well, it's all really complicated, OK? Um ... no? Not OK? Alright, I know this is a movie and one wonderful aspect to cinema is removing us from the reality of day-to-day existence, but come on! Bullock's high quotient of cute can't save this picture from being flat-out creepy. Even the title, "While You Were Sleeping," is scary. Give Bullock a blond perm, a rabbit and some psycho "Madame Butterfly" moments and the innocent sleeping swiftly becomes ... "Fatal Attraction." Hmmm ... maybe he didn't fall in front of that train after all.

"My Big Fat Greek Wedding" (2002)

"Moonstruck," a genuinely romantic, inspiring slice of romanticized Italian-American life, this was not. And yet, this picture, adapted from star/writer Nia Vardalos' one-woman stage show, was a big, fat, independent hit, striking a chord with viewers seeking mindless fluff or a big-screen version of every stupid ethnic sitcom they'd ever seen. The story finds 30-year-old frumpy Greek waitress Toula (Vardalos) transformed by computer college, a makeover, a job at a travel agency and, yes, the love of her life -- the tall, WASPY drink of water Ian (played by John Corbett). But how can she reconcile her colorful Greek family -- one that finds the Greek root to all words or thinks vegetarians only eat lamb or believes Windex a miracle cure -- with her fiancé? And what will her proud Greek father have to say? Too much, unfortunately, and in a coarse, pandering way. Not surprisingly, this movie was turned into a TV show. Not surprisingly, it was soon canceled.

"Four Weddings and a Funeral" (1994)

Oh dear ... I know there are some of you out there who absolutely adore this movie, and I will concede there's lots to admire here. Hugh Grant is self-deprecating and charming (though I prefer the nastier "About a Boy" cad Grant over this); Kristin Scott Thomas is immensely likable; and John Hannah reads a mean W.H. Auden. But ... Andie MacDowell (or, as one of my friends calls her, "the woman who almost ruined 'Groundhog Day'") ... why did director Mike Newell agree to cast her? Not only is she uninspired, but she's incredibly unlikable as the object of Grant's longstanding affection. Aside from her beauty, it's unclear why timid Charles (Grant) falls instantly in love with Carrie (MacDowell), whom he meets at a wedding and then meets again, at another wedding where she brings her fiancé. She has no idea he's devastated (yeah, right), he tries to make sense of it all while, sadly, not understanding that Fiona (Thomas), who pines for him, is the real catch. Worse, we're rooting for Fiona, not Carrie, making the picture's ending "happiness" so entirely irritating. I suppose that's how it works in the real world: The nice guy prefers the annoying, brittle, trophy girl. But I don't think that's how the movie intended us to feel. I mean, he actually says to her, "In the words of David Cassidy, 'I think I love you.'" She doesn't deserve such soaring romantic sentiments.

"Dirty Dancing" (1987)

Remember when people loved this movie unironically? I sure do. I recall sitting on the school bus with girls gushing over Baby and corners and the Catskills and "Wipeout" and wondering what the hell was wrong with them. To be fair, we're talking girls, not adults, but even certified grown-ups were gaga over this and still are, making the picture some kind of '80s classic. While I do get that viewers found non-knockout Jennifer Grey refreshing as the privileged girl enjoying summer vacation with stud muffin dance instructor Swayze circa 1963 (though I'm pretty sure girls back then didn't wear denim cutoffs the way she did), that doesn't excuse the picture's endless procession of cheesy, cringe-inducing moments of romance and ridiculously "dirty" dancing. Yes, Swayze is a talented dancer. Yes, it's nice to hear an Otis Redding song in a movie. Yes, yes, Jerry Orbach is a class act, but ... oh god ... that crawling "Love Is Strange" moment? No amount of post-'80s irony can make that moment not embarrassing. And can someone please explain to me what, "She's like the wind, through my tree" means? Ugh. Stay in the corner, Baby.

Biography of the author: Kim Morgan is a film writer who runs the MSN Movies Filter blog and has contributed to many outlets including LA Weekly, Reel.com, DVD Journal, Salon and The Huffington Post. She was a film critic for The Oregonian and served as DVD critic on Tech TV's "The Screen Savers." She's also appeared as guest film critic on AMC's "The Movie Club," E! Television, Reelz, Starz and "Ebert & Roeper." Read her blog at SunsetGun.com.