

CINEMA AS SOCIAL MASS MEDIA. HITS AND MISSES FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

El cine como medio de comunicación social. Luces y sombras desde la perspectiva de género

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ABSTRACT

This article studies cinema as a social mass medium, in relation to the influence it exerts on children and young people. Based on different aspects of cinema, we analyze in depth its role as a transmitter of stereotypes, with special attention to the gender perspective. The methodology used has been both quantitative and qualitative. On the one hand, a survey of 251 students of various university degrees has been applied and, on the other hand, in-depth interviews have been conducted with experts, and the 20 best-selling romantic films of the first decade of the 21st century have been studied through analysis files. The results obtained focus on the repercussion of cinema as mass media among its spectators, as well as its contribution to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, despite the fact that there is an evolution towards more equality.

Key words: cinema, stereotype, gender, mass media, socialization.

RESUMEN

El artículo versa sobre el cine como medio de comunicación social, en relación a la influencia que ejerce sobre niños y jóvenes. Partiendo de sus distintas vertientes, se profundiza en su papel como transmisor de estereotipos, con especial atención a la perspectiva de género. La metodología empleada ha sido mixta: cuantitativa y cualitativa. Por un lado, se ha aplicado una encuesta a 251 estudiantes de varias titulaciones universitarias y, por otro, se han realizado entrevistas en profundidad a expertos, y se han estudiado las 20 películas de género romántico más taquilleras de la primera década del siglo XXI a través de fichas de análisis. Los resultados obtenidos orientan sobre la repercusión del cine como medio de comunicación de masas en sus espectadores, así como su contribución a la perpetuación de estereotipos de género, a pesar de que se observa una evolución en pro de la igualdad.

Palabras clave: cine, estereotipo, género, medios de comunicación de masas, socialización.

1. INTRODUCTION

The significance of cinema as an audiovisual medium and its social repercussion on different areas is undeniable. It is mainly targeted at the masses, at the individual and at society; it establishes contact with the viewer, with the audience and, therefore, with the society of its time, in which movie-makers also take part.

Benet (2004) establishes a full circle that he calls the Communication Circle, which begins with the Filmmaker (emitter) and continues with the Film (connoted message), the Audience (receptor) and Society (context), to end again with the Filmmaker in an intercommunicated feedback of sorts. All these elements will be included in this article, which explores cinema from the perspective of its social repercussions, with a special focus on gender perspective.

Through cinema, this powerful medium, the audience comes into intellectual contact with other human communities —thanks to the film image—, and they capture —or they can potentially capture— the problems of some of their contemporaries, which may be analogous to theirs, in different social layers and in different countries. This sometimes results in a wider knowledge of other cultures and mentalities, which under normal circumstances would be relatively distant or incomprehensible.

The educational effectiveness of images is very relevant, because it has been observed that the human mind retains images much more than any other sign of communication. Therefore, any intellectual knowledge which reaches us through reality and praxis rather than theory is much more effective. Moreover, cinema is a selected interpretation of reality which, apart from entertaining the audience and letting them escape from reality, may be an element to reinforce or deconstruct ideas, stereotypes, myths, prejudices, etc.

In this approach to cinema, we will review its different traits to reveal its multiple aspects: as an artistic element, as a show and an industry, as a language and from the perspective of the viewers. Based on these premises, we will focus on its functions, beyond entertainment and being an escape from reality, in order to unravel the relationships it establishes with the survival of stereotypes, and particularly those related to gender issues.

2. THE DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF CINEMA

Adela Kohan is a necessary reference to approach the different functions of cinema. For her, cinema asks questions that make it possible to connect with oneself from new perspectives. A film activates personal stories, memories, needs and desires, and it opens doors that may have remained closed without it. It can act as a life guide (Kohan, 2006).

Several authors have verified the influence of cinema on the modification of attitudes and behaviors (Sell, Martínez-Pecino & Loscertales, 2014; Gómez, 2017), with special emphasis on children and young adults.

Cinema has an influence on our internal universe; it helps to solve conflicts and change attitudes and customs that limit us; it develops creativity and improves communication; and it also contributes to getting rid of negative emotions. For this reason, it has been used as a teaching support in the classroom. For Leigh (2002), cinema promotes the development of social skills, and it predisposes to reflection and critical analysis. From a wider perspective, and seen as a cultural production, it contributes to the formation of values (Blasco et al., 2015; Escámez & Gil, 2001; González, 1996; Alonso & Pereira, 2000) and to ethical intelligence (Jaimes, 2016).

The therapeutic use of cinema has also been reported in different studies, including specific applications in family education (Higgins & Dermer, 2001), medical training (Taberner, 2016; McCann &

Huntley-Moore, 2016), environmental education (Stadler, 2017), or the improvement of romantic relationships (Molina, 2016; Caballo, 2014).

These uses of cinema apart from entertainment are not new. San Román (2010) claims that, from its beginnings, cinema has had an educational and moralizing aim, rather than being conceived for entertainment purposes.

Immersing into cinema is looking at ourselves in a mirror in which we had not looked until that moment, and to see another person who goes through similar experiences to ours (it is also good to develop empathy), who does what we could do but do not dare to do, and it makes us wonder about the meaning of our own life and the decisions we have made. Feelings are activated because the film is specifically conceived to do that. Sometimes a character will make us cry because we see ourselves reflected in him or because he embodies what we desire the most (Kohan, 2006).

Cinema as a social medium is a complex element. For a better understanding and analysis of this phenomenon, this study presents an approach divided into three sections; three aspects of one same reality which will make us see the film phenomenon from different angles: as an art, as a show and an industry and through its viewers.

Cinema as art.

The *Manifesto of the Seven Arts* in 1911 brought cinema to the category of “the seventh art” (Montiel, 1999). This title, which is over a century old by now, carries an implicit recognition to cinema and its social relevance. As Ruiz (2013) points out, cinema is the confluence of theater, music, literature, painting, architecture and dance, and that is why it was considered the “mother art”, because it gathered all the different arts that came before it.

In the 1920s, the expressionist artist Paul Wegener described it as “the art of photographic images in motion”. That is why cinema is framed within the ideas of fine arts expressed by philosophers and aestheticists: from Santayana and Spengler to Santis and Lange, including Gilson, Croce, Maritain or Ortega y Gasset.

More recently, Alain Badiou declared that “cinema is a mass art because it is the art of images, and images can fascinate everybody” (2004, p. 31).

However, cinema as art involves *savoir-faire*, because it involves science (knowing) and technique (doing). All films tell a story that needs to be expressed in a cinema script to be operational. The script is a key element in film art, and there are several requisites that it must fulfil: linguistic quality, wit in dialogues, coherence in reasoning, dignity in its expression, etc. However, the film is more than just the script; photography and atmosphere are plastic elements of cinema. Apart from the technical quality, there are other important aspects to take into account: the use of light and color depending on the situations, the states of mind or the locations. All these factors must be coherent with the development of the narration and help the viewer see what the script is omitting. Finally, there are two other basic pieces of filmmaking which “move the film forward” from different —although convergent— positions: the actors and the director (Benet, 2004).

Technological inventions have been part of cinema from the beginning, although new technologies have changed the way in which movies are created so much over the last decades that digital cinema is considered a revolution in the industry in the 21st century (Sabeckis, 2013).

Cinema as a show and an industry.

“Cinema is also a show, a wondrous device that captures the attention of the viewers, of an audience which would soon transform cinema into a vehicle for their own dreams and ideas, and some-

times inhibitions, such as: escaping from their daily reality, identifying with the heroes and the main characters, living the story that is being told on the screen. Through that collective distraction or entertainment, people can forget about or get away from their troubles for a few hours” (Caparrós, 2007, p. 58).

In this regard, we must refer to the concept of cultural industry that was first coined by the School of Frankfurt to reflect the great changes that had taken place both in the production and the social effects of culture (Zallo, 1992). Of course, one author that took an interest in this approach is the Mexican Othón Tézlez, who establishes a triad of cultural products in which he draws a difference between production, distribution and consumption: “In cinema, the rhythm of a film can make us move it in time and space (...) Artistic consumption is the one that allows the viewer to capture most of the formal elements that have been used: composition, rhythm, color, sound, timing, among others, based on the discipline itself and on the value that each of these elements provides to the cultural consumer as part of their training as an individual, motivating multiple interpretations and meanings with regard to the cultural product that they consumed” (Tézlez, 2005, p. 45).

With all the changes that took place in this global age of information, cinema as an industry has expanded its borders by becoming integrated in the much wider audiovisual market and by assuming close links with cable and satellite television. Its consumption has grown and is no longer restricted to movie theatres. Instead, it is a common practice in many homes. Therefore, its economic potential has diversified while audiences have increased considerably.

Cinema through its viewers.

Combining art and show, culture and business makes it possible to commercialize movie productions because they adapt better to the entertainment demands of the viewers (Lozano et al., 2009). That is, cinema represents an economic industry which connects buyers (viewers) with sellers (artists, producers...) (McConnell, 1997).

In general terms, we talk about conventional and commercial cinema —the one we watch more regularly— as a place of escape and entertainment. For McKee (2011), the ritual of watching a movie and its relation with emotions represents an important activity for our current society.

In the case of viewers, according to Mayne (1993), we can observe three levels: the real person who goes to the cinema (including their psychical dimension), the subject that has been constructed theoretically by culture and, between both of them, the viewers themselves. Establishing a difference between these levels may be helpful to understand better the interactions that determine the history of cinema from its creation to its reception.

There are three narrative factors that generate satisfaction on the viewers: the main character, the antagonist and the tension (Lozano et al., 2012).

A review of different works that analyze cinema guides us towards the idea that the viewer is not merely a subject or a group of people in front of a screen, but an institution and an essential element with important influences on cinema as an art and as an industry.

The influence that the cinema has on the viewer has been the subject of analysis in different studies (Sell et al., 2014; Mangot & Vasantmeghna, 2017) which concluded that the former has a great influence on the latter.

3. STEREOTYPES AND MASS COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS: PRESENCE, FUNCTIONS AND MEANINGS

“The best way to control stereotypes and, if we want to, to banish them, is to study and understand them. And the Media are the perfect place to undertake that task” (González Galiana, 1999, p. 26).

The current system of mass media has a strong tendency to prioritize contents to escape from reality and fiction products. These creations represent a true area of expression which is structured around different types of messages which are very different among them and are targeted at different audiences. However, they seem to develop a similar function and to acquire similar meanings. At the same time, we are faced with a highly accessible product which is increasingly linked to television, but also to the publishing world, the press (ranging from the society pages to soap operas) and, of course, cinema. All these media have one thing in common: they promote reflection about stereotypes, because they show and broadcast socially accepted clichés and patterns that are considered constant.

Cinema, together with other media that are used to escape from reality, and due to its nature as an object and an opportunity to exchange time with peer groups, is an integral part of the process of formation of an initial collective identity with an enormous socializing potential. There are many studies that focus on the relationship between cinema and socialization (Ojeda, 2016; Castro, 2006). Within this group, there are works that analyze cinema productions for children from this approach (Martínez & Merlino, 2006; Porto Pedrosa, 2010). It has been proven that boys and girls learn from a very early age to recognize themselves in others, and this process is highly affected by the topics and contents that are shown by fiction programs.

“What we are and what we think we are; what we see and what we think we see can be deduced from the media. The consensus is established there, at the point where we all come together” (Gutiérrez, 2007, p. 67). In that same line, Almacellas (2004) mentions that cinematographic works are a space in which viewers can think and reflect about their own lives, thus contributing to the construction of individual and collective identities. Therefore, cinema may contribute to creating and building images that can be sexist, racist or classist. On the other hand, it can dilute stereotypes and preconceived ideas that are a burden on human relations. In this sense, cinema can contribute from a gender perspective to creating images of egalitarian love relationships which get rid of the old patriarchal and male-chauvinist clichés. Charkow & Nelson (2000) pointed out that within the process of socialization, and as in our daily lives, cinema holds some prevailing values which are linked to the patriarchal system.

“If sexism in language has survived through history it is because society has not asked for a change. In our culture there are powerful institutions, like the Catholic Church, which have promoted the continuance of sexist manifestations of language, based on a long history of patriarchal existence.” (López, 2008, p. 37).

Scientific literature generally considers stereotypes an element with clearly negative connotations, although there are some examples that show that some stereotypes may also be useful and have a reason to exist. One example is bureaucratic language, a set of stereotypical sentences that, thanks to their very nature, make it possible to learn them quickly and easily, thus allowing even people with low linguistic skills to use them (Morales, 2015).

As Puleo points out (2005), the media promote gender inequality in real life through the images, stereotypes and myths that they broadcast; and they contribute to maintaining a “consented” patriarchy. In that same line, Caparrós (2007) argues that mass media tend to show the most stereotypical social situations, thus perpetuating them, and even enlarging their scope.

4. METHODS

Objectives

This work analyzes cinema as a medium from a social perspective, that is, with a special emphasis on its social impact and contributions. It wants to give an answer to the following research objectives: to determine whether romantic cinema conveys a conservative or an egalitarian image of love relationships and, on the other hand, to analyze the influence it has on its viewers.

To do so, this study analyzes some intrinsic aspects (such as the influence of producing companies or other business-related questions) and extrinsic aspects of romantic cinema (its influence on viewers, the potential of manipulation of perceptions, etc.). It tries to determine their reach with regard to gender stereotypes and to verify whether they perpetuate them or contribute to diluting them.

Research design

We have applied a non-experimental design, based on a mixed methodology, both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (personal interviews and film analysis of the selected works).

Each of the three methods of research was implemented separately. First, the survey was validated by 4 experts on the field regarding its contents and phrasing. Once that the requested changes were made and the survey was approved, it was applied in different Universities.

Next, experts were chosen to perform semi-structured interviews.

In parallel, the 20 highest-grossing romantic films from the first decade of the 21st century were selected and analyzed.

Sample

The sample in the study is made up of 251 undergraduate students in degrees related to the fields of Education (Teacher Training and Pedagogy) and Communication (Advertising and Public Relations) in the cities of Salamanca and Ávila. Figures 1 and 2 show the composition of the sample. Figure 1 clearly shows that women outnumber men. Consequently, we will work with relative figures; that is, percentages rather than absolute values, although both will be included in the contingency tables. Figure 2 shows the number of students from different degrees in the sample.

Figure 1. Sex of the participants in the study.

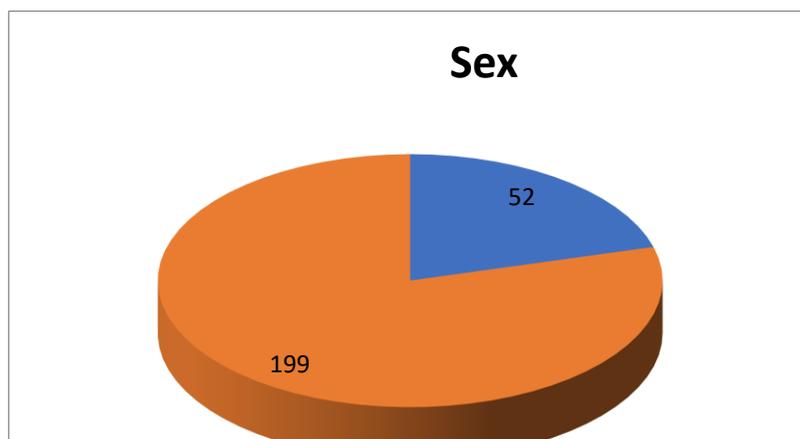
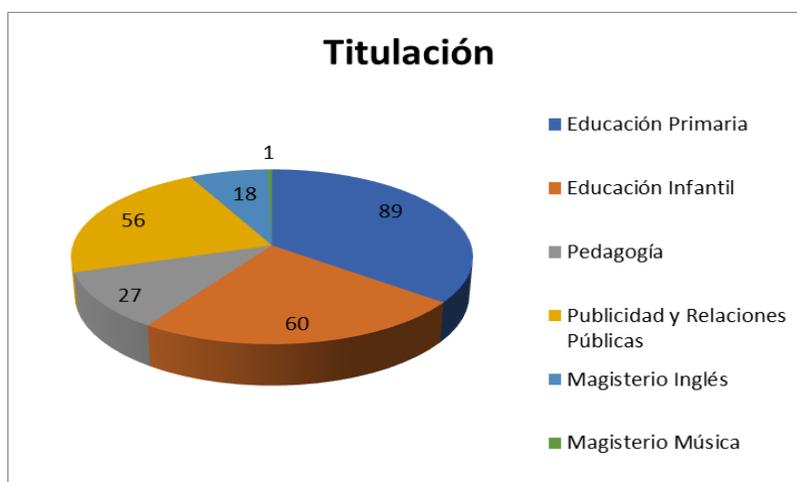


Figure 2. Degree studied by the participants in the study



A non-probability sampling has been used due to the convenience of its operational simplicity and low costs. To do so, different university professors in the selected degrees were asked to take the survey in their classes.

In the qualitative research section, 6 personal interviews have been made with different professionals in the fields of education, communication, gender and equality, who have been selected because they were carriers of meaning regarding our subject of study.

The selected professionals belong to the following profiles:

E1: 52-year-old woman. Professor of Audiovisual Communication in a Spanish University.

E2: 45-year-old man. Professor in the area of Philology in a Spanish University.

E3: 59-year old woman. Full professor in the Master's Degree of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies.

E4: 47-year-old man. Senior lecturer in the area of Communication in a Spanish University.

E5: 28-year-old woman. Graduated in Sciences for Physical Activity and Sports Sciences and student in the Doctorate program of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies in a Spanish University.

E6: 36-year-old man. Lecturer in the Master's Degree of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies.

With regard to the movies, the 20 highest-grossing romantic films produced in the first decade of the 21st century were: *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *What Women Want*, *Hitch*, *Meet the Parents*, *Sex and the City 1 and 2*, *American Pie 2*, *Dan in Real Life*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, *50 First Dates*, *Valentine's Day*, *Couples Retreat*, *How to Lose a Guy in 10 days*, *He's Just Not That into You*, *Save the Last Dance*, *The Ugly Truth*, *The Notebook*, *Dear John*, *Chocolat* and *Letters to Juliet*.

Data analysis

Along this interpretative and inferential research, different steps have been followed to extract all necessary data.

1. Individual analysis of the data from the three research methods used; that is:

Survey: As part of the quantitative approach, a descriptive-correlational analysis was made with the statistical software package SPSS 24.0.

Interviews: After a comprehensive transcription, the information was coded by classifying it into different categories corresponding to the objectives of the study. Within each category, the most representative *verbatim* quotes were extracted.

Films: In this stage, analysis files have been used to study the love relationships shown in each film. Two different models are used: a Traditional model based on gender stereotypes, inequality and sexism, with different variables with a negative connotation; and an Alternative model, based on an equality relationship between both members of the couple, and on love, respect and consideration for each other. The implementation of these files to each film tries to identify whether their love relationships best fit one model or another based on the verification of the existence of different variables in the sample of selected films.

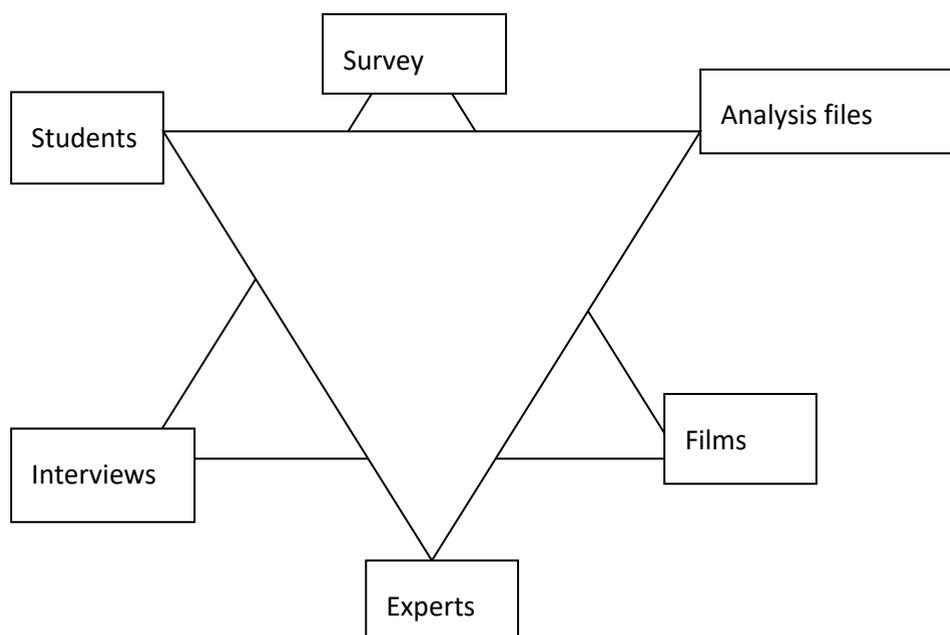
Table 1. Analysis file for love relationships

| TRADITIONAL MODEL | |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Submissiveness | Manipulation/deceit |
| Dependence | Inevitability |
| Violence | Love-suffering |
| Abuse | Jealousy |
| Concealment/infidelity | Reject/fear |
| ALTERNATIVE MODEL | |
| Friendship | Fidelity |
| Equality | Tenderness |
| Love | Transparency |
| Independence | Sharing |
| Respect | Dialogue between equals |

Source: Compiled by author

1. Data triangulation. More specifically, the three methods have been triangulated (the “archetype of triangulation”). The inter-method variation measures the degree of external validity of the data.

Figure 1. Triangulation diagram.



Source: Compiled by author

5. RESULTS

Our research has produced different data that will be structured around the two topics analyzed: cinema as social media and its influence on the education of children and young people.

Cinema as social mass media.

Both the interviews and the surveys have referred to cinema as a medium with multiple aspects, influences and meanings. The experts have repeatedly associated cinema with society and with the reflection of an image linked to the social reality of its time. However, it seems that their evolution is not linear.

Almost half of all the students who completed the survey agree that cinema “often” represents an escape from reality, and almost 40% claim that it achieves that purpose “sometimes”. Men consider cinema as a medium that helps them to escape from reality more often than women (56% vs 44.7%). In spite of the percentage differences between men and women, the sex variable is not statistically significant.

Table 2. Cinema as an escape from reality.

| | | | Never | Sometimes | Often | Always | Total |
|-------|---|----------------|-------|-----------|-------|--------|--------|
| SEX | M | Absolute value | 1 | 14 | 28 | 7 | 50 |
| | | % | 2.0% | 28.0% | 56.0% | 14.0% | 100.0% |
| | W | Absolute value | 5 | 81 | 88 | 23 | 197 |
| | | % | 2.5% | 41.1% | 44.7% | 11.7% | 100.0% |
| Total | | Absolute value | 6 | 95 | 116 | 30 | 247 |
| | | % | 2.4% | 38.5% | 47.0% | 12.1% | 100.0% |

Source: Compiled by author

For male students, cinema reflects a more biased social reality than for female students. Surprisingly, 16% of the former thought that this happens all the time, while only 1.5% of women believe so. The most common answer for both sexes was that cinema offers a biased image sometimes, but men appreciate a higher degree of bias.

In the last question of the survey (open-ended question), participants were asked to give their opinion about the image portrayed of women, men and love relationships in romantic cinema. The general trend remained stable. We include here five answers that claim that romantic movies represent an unrealistic model.

Love was too surreal. C2

In movies everything is very beautiful, but it is far away from reality. C6.

They generally show a submissive man who is manipulated by the woman. The woman is described as a fussy character who does not stop until she gets what she wants. That does not happen in real life. C7.

The love relationships shown in romantic cinema are nothing like the ones in real life, and the concept of a couple is completely idealized. C8.

In romantic cinema there are generally ideal characters that do not exist in real life. There are often perfect and idyllic stories to call the attention of the viewers and capture their interest. C10

Businesspeople linked to the cinema industry, filmmakers and producers have not been included directly in any of the questions in the script of the interviews. However, the answers to the interviews have referred to them in different ways, and have pointed out the need to have producers gain awareness of the importance of conveying a proper model of men and women. In the survey we did specifically ask about the intentions of filmmakers and producers, and the results show that men distrust their intentions more than women. More than half of the men in the study consider that cinema mainly shows what filmmakers and producers want (60% answered “often” or “always”). None of them believes the opposite.

Opinions are rather divided, both among men and among women, regarding the three answers to the question of whether cinema serves the interests of businesspeople in the world of cinema (Table 3). Differences with regard to sex are statistically significant.

Table 3. Cinema as a sample of the interests of filmmakers and producers.

| | | | Never | Sometimes | Often | Always | Total |
|-------------|---|----------------|-------|-----------|-------|--------|--------|
| S E X | M | Absolute value | 0 | 20 | 12 | 18 | 50 |
| | | % | .0% | 40.0% | 24.0% | 36.0% | 100.0% |
| X | W | Absolute value | 10 | 71 | 78 | 38 | 197 |
| | | % | 5.1% | 36.0% | 39.6% | 19.3% | 100.0% |
| Total | | Absolute value | | 91 | 90 | 56 | 247 |
| | | % | | 36.8% | 36.4% | 22.7% | 100.0% |

Source: Compiled by author

With regard to the data in Table 3, several experts claim that, based on the premise that gender stereotypes have not changed much over time, this situation occurs because the director of the movie needs to be very brave to break the vicious circle of what has traditionally been produced. The survey proposed a possible way to reverse the situation: a higher control of contents in cinema to prevent the transmission of harmful ideas. Although three quarters of the participants are in favor of a stronger control, one quarter—more often men (36%) than women (22%)—believe that the contents should not be subject to further control to prevent the transmission of damaging ideas.

Table 4. Agreement to control contents in cinema to prevent the transmission of harmful ideas.

| | | | Completely disagree | Disagree | Agree | Completely agree | Total |
|-------------|---|----------------|---------------------|----------|-------|------------------|--------|
| S E X | M | Absolute value | 2 | 18 | 20 | 10 | 50 |
| | | % | 4.0% | 36.0% | 40.0% | 20.0% | 100.0% |
| X | W | Absolute value | 6 | 44 | 98 | 51 | 199 |
| | | % | 3.0% | 22.1% | 49.2% | 25.6% | 100.0% |
| Total | | Absolute value | | 62 | 118 | 61 | 249 |
| | | % | | 24.9% | 47.4% | 24.5% | 100.0% |

Source: Compiled by author

In this same line, we asked the participants about their opinion of cinema as a manipulator of perceptions. The majority of answers pointed out that manipulation does exist, and there seems to be again a stronger answer in men than in women, who show a more moderate response.

Table 5. Cinema as a manipulator of perceptions.

| | | | Never | Sometimes | Often | Always | Total |
|-------------|---|----------------|-------|-----------|-------|--------|--------|
| S E X | M | Absolute value | 1 | 18 | 28 | 3 | 50 |
| | | % | 2.0% | 36.0% | 56.0% | 6.0% | 100.0% |
| X | W | Absolute value | 12 | 95 | 81 | 9 | 197 |
| | | % | 6.1% | 48.2% | 41.1% | 4.6% | 100.0% |
| Total | | Absolute value | | 113 | 109 | 12 | 247 |
| | | % | | 45.7% | 44.1% | 4.9% | 100.0% |

Source: Compiled by author

University students were clearly in favor of cinema contributing to convey socially appropriate ideas and values, and there were more women than men who thought that this should always happen: almost one third of women compared with 16% of men. A small fraction of 10% did not believe that this should be one of the tasks of cinema. Experts also agree, but they have identified many obstacles

of different types that prevent this from happening, including the relevance of “commercial cinema”, which is often loaded with sexist stereotypes.

Based on the data in Table 6, we may say that university students largely agree that cinema must be at the service of society. Three quarters of the sample believe it, both men and women. 60.7% of the sample agree and 14.6% of the sample completely agree, while 24.7% disagree with this statement.

Table 6. Agreement on the idea that cinema must be at the service of society.

| | | | Completely disagree | Disagree | Agree | Completely agree | Total |
|-------------|----------------|----------------|---------------------|----------|-------|------------------|--------|
| S E X | M | Absolute value | 1 | 13 | 25 | 11 | 50 |
| | | % | 2.0% | 26.0% | 50.0% | 22.0% | 100.0% |
| S E X | W | Absolute value | 2 | 45 | 125 | 25 | 197 |
| | | % | 1.0% | 22.8% | 63.5% | 12.7% | 100.0% |
| Total | Absolute value | | | 58 | 150 | 36 | 247 |
| | % | | | 23.5% | 60.7% | 14.6% | 100.0% |

Source: Compiled by author

Influence of cinema on the behavior of children and young people

When experts were asked about the repercussion on children and young people, they state that the influence of cinema is clear, but also similar to that of other cultural formats. Interviews also mention the role of cinema as a socializing agent, and even more, as an element with a larger capacity of influence than education.

The first item in the survey tackled the influence of cinema on the socializing abilities of children and young people. Almost all the participants in the study, with the exception of one person, defend that cinema can spread values that have an influence on the socializing routines of children and young people. The qualitative analysis concludes that the capacity of cinema to influence does not only affect children and young people, but society at large. More specifically, the influence of romantic cinema on its viewers has a different scope based on three variables: gender, education of the viewers and age. Although it is thought that it affects both genders, it does not do it in the same way, and it has a larger impact on women than on men, because 63.3% of women identify with characters in cinema while only 42% of men do.

One item with a more equal distribution of the degree of agreement is included in Table 7, which shows the opinion of the students on whether the gender images portrayed in romantic cinema have an influence on the real relationships of viewers. 48.4% of the participants believe that cinema does not have an influence on the relationships of the viewers, whereas for 51.6% of them there is an influence. Women agree with this statement in a slightly higher proportion than men, but the data are very similar regarding sex.

Table 7. Agreement that the images of men and women portrayed in romantic films have an influence on the real relationships of viewers.

| | | | Completely disagree | Disagree | Agree | Completely agree | Total |
|-------|---|----------------|---------------------|----------|-------|------------------|--------|
| SEX | M | Absolute value | 2 | 24 | 21 | 3 | 50 |
| | | % | 4.0% | 48.0% | 42.0% | 6.0% | 100.0% |
| | W | Absolute value | 11 | 82 | 96 | 7 | 196 |
| | | % | 5.6% | 41.8% | 49.0% | 3.6% | 100.0% |
| Total | | Absolute value | | 106 | 117 | 10 | 246 |
| | | % | | 43.1% | 47.6% | 4.1% | 100.0% |

Source: Compiled by author

In general terms, the interviews show a slight preference for the idea that romantic films are addressed at a population sector with specific traits, although they are not exclusive and they may not be always present. While some experts think that romantic cinema is clearly targeted at a female audience, there are others that disagree.

The survey shows that there are no significant differences between men and women with regard to their opinion on whether romantic films are meant for a specific audience. 58% of the sample agree with this statement, whereas 42% of the sample disagree. If we take a closer look at the more extreme positions (those who completely agree and those who completely disagree), there are not large variations. Therefore, there is a slight majority of participants who believe that these films have a specific population profile as a target, but we cannot deduce from the quantitative data that romantic films are targeted at a specific audience. The differences in data are very similar for men and women.

Table 8. Agreement that romantic films are targeted at a specific audience.

| | | | Completely disagree | Disagree | Agree | Completely agree | Total |
|-------|---|----------------|---------------------|----------|-------|------------------|--------|
| SEX | M | Absolute value | 8 | 12 | 22 | 8 | 50 |
| | | % | 16.0% | 24.0% | 44.0% | 16.0% | 100.0% |
| | W | Absolute value | 14 | 71 | 91 | 22 | 198 |
| | | % | 7.1% | 35.9% | 46.0% | 11.1% | 100.0% |
| Total | | Absolute value | | 83 | 113 | 30 | 248 |
| | | % | | 33.5% | 45.6% | 12.1% | 100.0% |

Source: Compiled by author

Parallel to this, the open questions show some specific references to the idea that this type of cinema is targeted at women.

They are not very real; they show unreal and Utopian relationships. They always end up together, and finding their love. However, I think that most people like them because they are an illusion and they make us think that they can be real or that something like that could happen to us, particularly to women. C53

I think that cinema still shows a social reality: women look for Prince Charming and they find some consolation in romantic films. However, society is starting to move forward and women's liberation is increasingly evident. Therefore, I think that they should be portrayed more faithfully. C100

On the other hand, the data from the survey reveal clear differences between romantic films watched by men and by women. The first difference has to do with their number. Out of the 20 films included in the survey (which were the ones in our analysis), female university students had watched an average of 10 films, while their male counterparts had watched an average of 4. Also, the most popular films among women were the most classical works in their genre, with *The Notebook* clearly in

the first position. It is also the film which includes most myths: the myth of Romantic Love, Love as a magical and uncontrollable force and the myth of the soulmate. Men, however, preferred comedy, with an overwhelming majority of them having watched *American Pie 2*, which does not portray any of those myths.

Finally, based on the analysis files of the love relationships portrayed in the 20 films in our study, in 9 of them there is coexistence between the Traditional and the Alternative models; while in 2 films only the Traditional model is shown, and in the remaining 9 films there is a predominance of the Alternative model. It is necessary here to qualify this analysis by stating that we are not talking about pure models. That is, each film does not necessarily have to include all the variables that have been considered for each model, although it must contain most of them. These data contrast with the perception of university students, which suggests a predominance of the Traditional model. Instead, they are in line with the opinion of experts, who claim that there have been changes and that films now show more egalitarian and less stereotypical relationships than before.

6. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The sample of university students who participated in the survey may have partly determined the results obtained. Their being part of degrees related to the fields of education and communication may have increased their sensitivity and critical attitude towards some questions. It would be convenient to pursue this line of research with students from other degrees in order to verify whether there are significant differences with regard to our data.

Cinema, like other mass media, has for decades been a tool that perpetuates stereotypes (Loscertales, 1999; Gordillo, 2007). More recently, it seems that there has been some evolution towards more egalitarian approaches. In spite of this change, mass media tend to repeat and standardize social stereotypes. Cinema and television, and more recently the Internet, are perhaps the most influential media in the spread of stereotypical information.

One of the reasons why stereotypes are generally dangerous is because they hide within them a fixed idea that refuses to be analyzed or contrasted with reality (Mazzara, 1999). If mental schemes are not revised, analyzed or criticized, they tend to become ways of being that lead to ignorance, bigotry and irrational actions.

When we assume that men behave in a specific way and, similarly, that they treat women by assuming that they meet some specific expectations, we deny the evidence that shows that people are different, that they are individuals who can change, alter their own behavior, establish new patterns for coexistence, transform their personal history, etc., and that their sex does not predefine their attitudes, thoughts and actions. Stereotypes tend to immobilize individuals and assign them a fixed pattern that cannot be modified. Treating other people based on prejudice and stereotypes is the worst possible way to establish a relationship with others. We can state, in line with Aguilar (2011) that stereotypes create prejudices that, when put into practice, promote wrong attitudes, ignorance and intolerance in all their forms.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The adjective “social” has been present in the approach to cinema of this article. As a medium, cinema has evolved, although its development has not been linear. From its beginnings, cinema has been very closely linked to the social context in which it is produced and consumed. In this same line, the article has analyzed the genre of romantic films to determine whether what is shown reflects a conservative or an egalitarian gender perspective, as well as the influence it has on its viewers.

Apart from representing a mechanism to escape from reality and to advance the interests of a cultural industry, cinema has turned out to be an influent medium for society in general and for viewers in particular. Data show that it has the potential to manipulate perceptions, and this has significant consequences with regard to the repercussions of the contents, dialogues and images that are portrayed. University students are in favor of cinema being at the service of society. Almost half of the sample consider that it even has an influence on the actual relationships of viewers.

The differences between men and women were not significant regarding most items in the survey. However, the analysis of the 20 highest-grossing romantic films of the first decade of the 21st century shows significant differences with regard to the frequency with which they were watched (women had watched an average of 10 films compared to an average of 4 films in the case of men) and with regard to the type of film that each sex watches (for women, the most-watched film was *The Notebook*, and for men it was *American Pie 2*).

This selection has shown that the romantic genre has internal differences, and that there is diversity in its plots and in the way it reflects values and counter-values. Whereas some films follow the patterns of the archetypical romantic genre, there are others that portray love relationships by contrasting many types of relationships, by showing the differences between the relationships of two different generations or by showing models based on gender equality. This translates into films that promote a Traditional model of love relationships and other films that portray an Alternative model, and also into many of them —almost half of the films in our sample— that show both models.

On the other hand, there is no consensus to determine whether romantic cinema is targeted at a specific audience. It seems that gender, age and education may have an influence in some cases, but they cannot be considered determining variables. Beyond the sociodemographic elements, a preference for the romantic genre (which is not very highly rated among experts) would rather depend on personal tastes.

There is a generalized idea that cinema has evolved, like society has, towards higher levels of equality. In spite of this fact, there are still many examples of gender stereotypes, myths in love relationships and models of relationship which are very conservative and are still shown in films watched by millions of viewers. It is necessary to keep moving forward so that cinema reflects egalitarian love relationships, deconstructs gender roles and stereotypes and, ultimately, contributes to create a less patriarchal society.

Cinema can spread values that influence viewers; it reflects a social reality which is sometimes separated from the truth; and it has the power to manipulate the perceptions of viewers. Therefore, it is a medium with a great potential. These characteristics can be used, among other things, to reduce gender stereotypes and to promote more egalitarian ideas about love relationships between children and young people, who use the media, including cinema, as one of their socializing agents.

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