

## **Our affair with Mila Kunis: A group ethnography of cinema-going and the ‘male gaze’**

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### **Abstract:**

Students on a sociology course<sup>1</sup> appropriated the concept of the ‘male gaze’ from film theory to describe and analyse their experiences of going to the cinema, particularly as regards situations of conflict and tension that arose between female students and their boyfriends. Their ‘mini-ethnographies’ of a class expedition to see *Friends With Benefits* are used here to analyse going to the cinema as a gendered, social experience. This is theorised in relation to Paul Cressey’s 1938 symbolic interactionist account of ‘going to the movies’ as a socially-embedded experience involving a ‘before, during and after’ of the event. Negotiating ‘who to go with’ in relation to gendered genres is shown to generate tensions in heterosexual relationships as well as in same-sex friendships. However, this is cross-cut by the viewing pleasure that men express towards a star like Mila Kunis, which can be invoked to overcome their ‘reluctance’ to see a film that might be labelled a ‘chick flick’. This pleasure in the gaze provoked discomfort in their women partners, who wrote critically about their boyfriends’ gaze during the film as well as their talk after it, all of which focussed on Kunis. However, women too focussed on the female star, and wrote about their experience of a ‘female gaze’ of envy and hostility towards Kunis. The conflicts recounted issue a challenge to the everyday male gaze which is here construed as a pervasive part of gendered, social life. They also support the notion of film meaning as socially embedded in experience through time, and arising in social interaction.

**Keywords:** Cinema audience, male gaze, ethnography, symbolic interactionism, gender.

### **Introduction: teaching popular culture/researching everyday life**

This paper arose out of a discussion that took place on an undergraduate course that I teach on ‘Gender and Popular Culture’. The course is for fourth-year students of Sociology in Dublin, and is organised around a well-worn dichotomy between ‘textual’ approaches to

popular culture, and empirical studies of audiences. In relation to cinema, film theory takes a textual approach, with the spectator being theorised as a viewing position provided by the film text. While this spectator-position had social attributes (Eleftheriotis, 2001: 181), spectator theory was used more to illuminate the meaning of particular films than the lives of those who watched them. Audience studies grew up as a reaction to this theory, which appeared to be reading off the meaning of films with reference to theoretical spectators without ever asking actual viewers what the films meant to them. Paradoxically, then, cinema audience studies have also been somewhat subordinated to the research aim of finding out what film texts mean, as opposed to researching what part these films, or going to the cinema, play in people's lives. As Boyle puts it, in relation to the 'chasm' between contextual studies of television viewing and studies of film audiences:

Studies of contemporary cinema audiences – at least in an Anglo-American context – can usually be more accurately understood as studies of *film* audiences, centring on how the audience (or a specific segment of the audience) understand, make sense of, or respond to, specific *texts...* (Boyle, 2009: 261).

However, in contrasting reception studies of film with studies of cinema-going as a social practice, Boyle inadvertently creates another 'chasm' (cf. Nightingale, 1996; Austin, 2002). In this paper, I use student research on how the 'male gaze' (Mulvey, 1975) of spectator theory entered into their social practices of cinema-going in a way that I hope can unsettle some of these well-maintained boundaries. By recuperating the symbolic interactionist tradition in cinema studies, I wish to argue that the main problem with both spectator theory and some audience studies lies less in their separation of text and talk,<sup>2</sup> and more in their treatment of viewers or spectators as individuals, rather than as subjects-in-interaction.

This student research came about because my teaching involves a series of 'workshops', where seminars discuss particular cultural texts or experiences (a film, a soap episode, reading a romance, listening to a song, going to a club, and so on). In the first week, I ask the class to pick a film currently showing in the cinema that we will all go and see before the next week's seminar groups, with the instruction to think about this film in the light of Mulvey's theory of the 'male gaze' (1975; 1981). The intense discussions that ensue mean that I myself have particularly vivid memories of *Amélie*, *The Duchess*, *Walk the Line*, *500 Days of Summer*, *Black Swan*, to name a few from recent years, and in October 2011, we got to see *Friends With Benefits* (dir. Will Gluck, starring Mila Kunis and Justin Timberlake). I have also experimented with a written assessment in the form of a 'reflective journal', where I encourage students not only to reflect on the 'texts' of cultural products, but also to take up an ethnographic stance (inspired<sup>3</sup> originally by Janice Radway's (1984) analysis of the 'act of reading' in the social context of women's caring lives). As I put it in the course handout in September 2011:

It can also be very useful to bring in mini-ethnographies, e.g. of conversations with friends or family, joint TV viewing, what people say walking out of the cinema or club, and so on. Get used to taking notes on everyday life! (Be aware of 'drama script' as the best way for taking notes on conversations.)

I had not anticipated what a difference my small phrase about 'walking out of the cinema' would make to the way students interpreted my introduction to the course in terms of Mulvey versus Goffman, psychoanalysis versus sociology. Many students readily took to the role of ethnographers, and recorded their observations of talk and interaction around going to the cinema in their journals. For the first time in many years of teaching this course, the workshop discussion focussed far less on a structuralist analysis of the film *à la* Mulvey, and much more on going to the cinema as a gendered experience. In further analysing this group of students' research here, I endeavour to follow the precepts of 'grounded theory' as a method of analysis that starts in an open way from data, believing that this best captures the 'open-ended' nature of my ethnographic invitation to the students (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Admittedly, my original, verbal instruction to the students could be construed as one deriving data from theory ('Is Mulvey's theory of the male gaze still relevant to films of today?').<sup>4</sup> However, these students did not go away and analyse the film *text*: instead, they took up the suggestion of recording interactions and thoughts around 'going to the cinema', one which works in the opposite direction, inviting data from which, hopefully, will arise new theories.

What was completely unexpected for me was the way in which these two, almost opposite strategies came together in a scissor-like way to cut through what now appear to me as the theoretical illusion of meaning as created between the film text and an *individual* spectator or receiver, and to show how the gendered gaze is *socially* situated in the interactions of everyday life. The process of making sense of the discussions and journal-accounts of the students evolves as a series of minor 'epiphanic moments' (Denzin, 1989: 15), both in the students' autobiographical accounts, and in my analysis of them. Such moments seem to transcend the boundaries outlined earlier between textual and ethnographic approaches, between the 'male gaze' as representation and as social practice, and between the reception of film, and cinema-going, as a social experience.

However, this point about the individualism of spectator theory and its failure to account for the social nature of cinema-going (and indeed post-cinematic film-viewing) runs alongside a more mundane aim of this paper, which is to show how young people today relate to one of the major planks of feminist theory of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely to issues of representation and gender. Mulvey's theory of the 'male gaze' is one of the starting points of my course, along with Goffman's (1976) work on *Gender Advertisements*. Mulvey proposes that the interlocking gazes of the camera, the hero on screen, and the cinema spectator involve the spectator in complementary sexual-psychological processes of voyeurism (pleasure in looking *at*) and narcissism (pleasure in identification *with*) (Mulvey,

1975: 9-10, 17-18). All of these gazes are, in a sense, male, but could be nothing else, since she follows Freud in arguing that the active sexual drive (including pleasurable scopophilia) is male, and that the female body connotes only the lack of a penis, or the threat of castration (ibid: 9-10: 13). The visual presence of the woman on screen – what is looked at – appears to conflict with narrative development and to ‘freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation’ (ibid: 11), the castration anxiety evoked leading either to ‘punishment’ or to a fetishisation of the female body as spectacle (ibid: 13-14). In this way, Mulvey posits the ‘male gaze’ in cinema as an effect of the unconscious working of the human mind.

In her 1981 ‘Afterthoughts’, Mulvey questions the universality of the male gaze, following Freud’s theorisation of femininity, and proposes that the female spectator experiences an ‘oscillation’ between an active, masculine identification, which is nostalgic for ‘pre-oedipal’ sexual activity, and a ‘mature’ feminine, passive one (Mulvey, 1989: 32-4, 39). This idea of women’s ‘restless transvestism’ (ibid: 40) in relation to visual representations is a potent one, which seems to form a bridge between psychoanalysis and sociology. Jackie Stacey’s (1987) subsequent work builds on Mulvey’s identification of different viewing selves, though she prefers to theorise them as differences within the female self or selves. In analysing films where two women protagonists play out their *differences* (of social status, age, gender and so on) in a combination of desire and fascination with each other, Stacey’s work was foundational in elaborating the theory of ‘the female gaze’ (Gamman and Marshment, 1988), which is not a symmetrical counterpart to the male gaze, but instead addresses the widespread practice of women gazing at images of other women.

As a sociologist, I am particularly interested in ways of historicising what I acknowledge are very widespread representational practices found also in psychoanalysis, but which, as social constructions, cannot be eternal truths. In relation to Mulvey and Stacey, I want to know whether women viewers (myself, students) do experience a ‘trans-sex identification’ (Mulvey, 1989: 34) with stories told and visualised from a male point of view, and if so, can this be ‘liberating’ in a gender-performative way in contemporary social contexts? For me, this relates to the everyday fear that many women express around being thought or called ‘masculine’, which I see as symptomatic of unequal gender relations in society, rather than some eternal truth of femininity. Similarly, I want to know *how* women viewers relate to the spectacular female stars of mainstream cinema. Does our talk about them see them only as rivals, or do we in any sense desire them? And again, can allowing, or admitting, same-sex desire be liberating from the constrictions of social gender (hetero)norms? These are the kinds of questions I ask when teaching a psychoanalytic theory on a sociology course.

### **Enter Mila Kunis: making method, making sense**

I first became aware of how controversial the choice of *Friends With Benefits* had proved among students at the second of two seminar groups discussing the film, in October 2011.

After small group discussion, my memory is of one female student rather bravely explaining to the group of about twenty-five students how she had felt embarrassed and humiliated by the way in which her boyfriend had focussed on the female star of the film, Mila Kunis, and could talk about nothing else when they left. As I expressed surprise and interest,<sup>5</sup> other students recounted similar experiences. While I interpreted this as an instance of ‘the male gaze’ in action, several female students expressed their own envy and hostility towards Kunis, a stance which they interpreted with great conviction along lines of ‘the female gaze’ (Gamman and Marshment, 1988).

It was a few weeks later when a student came to talk to me in my office bringing a sample journal entry to see if this was the kind of thing that was expected. She showed me a two-page expansion of the ‘boyfriend and Mila Kunis’ scenario described in the seminar, interwoven with theoretical work from Mulvey. I remember remarking with some astonishment that this was indeed an ethnography of cinema-going, and that it showed it as a gendered experience, one that takes place within real social relations. The difference from film theory was clear, but at the same time, the ‘male gaze’ seemed to have left its theoretical pedestal and taken on flesh. The spectator was no longer abstract, and no longer an atomised individual, but a social interactant, a self in the midst of Meadian others (Mead 1934). I could no longer see the distinction between film theory and audience studies (long an axiomatic debate in my course) so clearly. This blurring remains with me as an almost physical dizziness – is this what ‘structuration’ *feels* like (Giddens, 1984)? What was crystal clear from this small, autobiographical epiphany is the awareness of ‘viewing’ as a *social*, meaning-making activity.

In December 2011, I received forty-nine reflective journals of 5,000 words each (students had been pushing for raised word-limits since mid-term). They came in multiple shapes and sizes – personalised scrapbooks, diaries in the form of a romance novel, online blogs, many of them profusely illustrated, and scrupulously referencing every source, website, and Youtube video.<sup>6</sup> A great number of these journals started from the topic of the male gaze and its application to *Friends With Benefits*, and while many of them stuck to the traditional film-theory type of analysis, several included ‘cinema ethnographies’. After returning these journals with my comments, I wrote an email to the class, congratulating and thanking them for all they had put into them, in which I mentioned the possibility of writing up an article using their ‘cinema ethnographies’. In March 2012, I wrote to the whole class again and asked permission to quote from their work. All those quoted in this paper have given me permission to do so. (I have anonymised all names in the text, but authors are thanked by name in endnote 1).

I subsequently retrieved the texts of all the diaries from the ‘Turnitin’ website, where students must submit digital copies of all assessed work. From these I was able to compile a single Word file containing 731 pages of text. I used simple word searches on ‘Benefits’, and on ‘boyfriend’, and was able to extract the relevant chunks of text and attribute them to their authors, giving me a file of about twenty pages. This can be seen retrospectively as a

first 'coding' of the data: in practice, I used the word-search facility and extracted text only where the student had included ethnographic detail on the cinema-going experience.

I then read through this document, and coded it again in a 'grounded' way, seeing what arose for me from the data. I came up with the following schema, as set out in my own notes:

## CODING

Before, During and After, like any social event, a build-up [*anticipo*],<sup>7</sup> the event itself, and the aftermath, goodbyes

What to go and see

Negotiation with friends – deciding what to go and see

Negotiation with boyfriends

Sub-category – the class negotiation

Breaching experiment? [I hadn't thought of it like this]

- surprised this was what we were going to do on a uni course
- gender conflict as a result of stepping out of prescribed normative gendered viewing

Who to go with

Boyfriend

Girlfriend

Female relative

[These two are linked (i.e. what to see and who to go with), since, once one person knew what they wanted to go and see (because they had to for class exercise), they had to negotiate who to go with]

Where to go, [not much info]

Audience during the film

Comments/heckling from audience

Boyfriend's behaviour during film [the gaze]

Other conversations during film

Inner feelings while watching

Conversations after the film

Impact of the viewing experience on friendship/relationship

Influence of academic reading

This schema represents my own mental summary of the different aspects and stages of cinema-going that emerge through the students' mini-ethnographies. As such, it draws attention already to several aspects and subtleties that are not prominent in audience studies of film and cinema. In particular, I was struck by how much social negotiation is involved in 'going to the cinema', particularly around the intersection of what to see and whom to go with.

Having devised this initial coding schema, which I call ‘procedural’ since it follows the stages of the event, I coded the text, using the Comments facility in Word. I added coding for gender of writer and reported-speaker in conjunction with my ‘procedural’ schema. I also made much use of the ‘inner/outer’ code as to whether the writers were talking about their own feelings while viewing or afterwards, or whether they were reporting conversations and interactions in the outer world. I was therefore coding along three main ‘axes’.

Coding for gender was complex, since there were three possible ‘actors’ in the writing, all of whom could be gendered. Firstly, there was the gender of the student writing, as they went about reporting on her/his feelings or speech. While the original idea had come from women talking about their boyfriends, men in the class soon became involved, and several wrote about it in their journals. Secondly, there was the gender of the actor on screen: students were mainly writing about their reaction to Mila Kunis, but several of them went on to talk in a comparative way about how they reacted to her co-star, Justin Timberlake. Thirdly, students reported conversations of, or with others, before, during and after the film, so that there was the gender of these speakers also to consider. However, this third category could also be broken down into gendered speakers talking about gendered stars, albeit in the reported speech of the journal-writer. I therefore decided to simplify my gender coding down to two variables, one combining writer and speaker (but privileging the speaker in cases of reported speech), and the other that of the actor on screen:

MF = Male writer/speaker - Female star

FF = Female writer/speaker – Female star

MM = Male writer/speaker – Male star

FM = Female writer/speaker – Male star

To exemplify, the following was coded ‘AFTER/FF, MF/OUTER’:

The reaction towards Mila Kunis, star of ‘Friends with Benefits’, in the tutorial was a chorus of ‘bitch’ from the women in the class, referring to her enviable physique, and an audible lustful reaction from the men (Gemma).

while its continuation was coded ‘DURING/FF, MF/INNER’:

It was clear that throughout the film we cast our eyes all over Kunis’s body and clothes paying little attention to what actually came out of her mouth (Gemma).

As these examples illustrate, the overwhelming focus of comments was on Mila Kunis as the female star (hence the MF and FF codes). This year’s students, led by the women in the

group, were virtually unanimous in endorsing the view that *women gaze at other women*. As Gemma also illustrates, alongside the gendered, social differences in reaction she notes in the first quote, she was willing to take on aspects of Mulvey's theory of the 'masculinisation' of the female spectator, as shown in the second quote. She there talks of 'we' getting lost in the spectacle of the female body on screen, a spectacle that in Mulvey's analysis interrupts the narrative of the film, or the words of the dialogue referred to here.

### **Discovering theory: symbolic interactionism and the cinema experience**

Parallel with compiling and coding this text, I was also writing 'memos to myself' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) about the ideas that had come out of this episode on the course, and I was revising and searching for more literature on cinema-audiences. The day after writing the above schema of coding the students' journals, I was excited to find that Paul Cressey had written about the 'before, during and after' of cinema-going in a theoretical article on cinema-going as social experience, first published in 1938 (see below). I also found Herbert Blumer's *Movies and Conduct* (1933), and his method of research using diaries elicited from his students. These two direct parallels with my own method inspired and guided my initial writing up of the data in a symbolic interactionist framework, as well as my attempts to compare my analysis with more recent audience studies. This section of the paper starts from my reading of audience studies of the last three decades, detailing the parallels I found there, firstly with respect to 'going to the cinema', including who goes with whom in terms of gender and how they interact, and secondly with respect to ways in which the 'male gaze' of mainstream cinema impacts on gendered audiences. I then return to the work of Cressey, Blumer and others, and show how the symbolic interactionist approach diverges from the predominant approach of recent audience studies, and how I used and adapted this work in developing an understanding of the data examined here.

My course teaching had been located in work on Irish audiences, starting from Barbara O'Connor's series of sociological, reception studies (O'Connor, 1987; 1990; 1997; 2007). Carol MacKeogh's ethnographic study of television watching in Irish homes was another inspiration for the current project, with her use of student diary-ethnographies to capture the conversations that go to make up the 'distracted', or in her theoretical elaboration, the 'critical' viewer (MacKeogh, 2001; 2002). On cinema-going, Helen Byrne's work on 'Going to the Pictures' in 1950s Waterford had used recall interviews to research how Irish women interacted with the social world and gender roles of US films of the time (Byrne, 1997).

Despite O'Connor's early focus on a (TV) *film*, these studies are illustrative of more general trends whereby audience studies of contemporary productions were pioneered in relation to television rather than cinema (e.g. Morley, 1980; Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985), while cinema/film audiences seem to have been first approached historically (e.g. Staiger, 1992; Stacey, 1994; Stokes & Maltby, 1999; Kuhn, 2002; Maltby, Stokes & Allen, 2007). These interests quite quickly extended to contemporary film audiences, but, as noted above,

mainly in relation to the reception of particular titles or genres (Hill, 1997; Barker & Brooks, 1998; 1999; Austin, 2002).<sup>8</sup>

A tension then arises between the literary derivations of reception theory, and the sociological study of cinema audiences and of cinema as a social institution. As Nightingale's critique notes: 'the cultural studies audience experiment used its "ethnographic" data to achieve textually defined aims rather than to explain social process' (1996: 115). This tension is well illustrated in Barker and Brooks' study of audiences for the film of *Judge Dredd*. Commenting on the transcripts of two focus-group interviews with teenaged boys in Bristol, they admit to puzzlement:

There is a great deal in particular about the process of cinema-going, but it is not at all transparent how this might be relevant to understanding their relations with *Judge Dredd* – how might the ways they organise their watching of films like this shape what they take from them – this being, after all, a central question our research had set itself? (Barker & Brooks, 1998: 51)

This could be compared with a similar frustration in Kuhn's historical study:

What came across from the interviews as a whole...was a ready recollection of people's earliest cinema-going experiences, along with quite detailed accounts of where and with whom this activity took place. Memories of film stars were usually less vivid ... than those relating to the experience of 'going to the pictures'...Moreover, other than in stories of early cinema-going, individual films are rarely discussed in any detail (Kuhn, 1999a: 136-7).

Despite this tension between what emerged in interviews and the prior objectives of research, both of these studies yield information on the social process of cinema-going. Kuhn sums up the sociability and gendered social context of cinema-going in 1930s Britain:

Going to the pictures was a normal everyday activity, particularly for young people at this time. Our respondents remember it, too, as a sociable pastime: they went to the pictures most often with family or peers, somewhat less frequently with sweethearts, and relatively rarely on their own. There is a noticeable difference between men and women here, though, with women more likely to recall going to the cinema in the company of others, and with family members in particular (Kuhn, 1999b: 535).

However, Kuhn provides little further investigation of 'who went with whom'. Barker and Brooks go much further in their chapter on 'What Do Audiences Do?', discussing the varying acceptability of going to the cinema alone among different male respondents (1998: 73-5), 'under age' practices in relation to cinema admissions (ibid: 69-70), choice of different

cinemas by different social groupings (ibid: 61-2), and the social practices, including the talk afterwards, of an 'evening out' around the cinema (ibid: 70-71). For these authors, 'choice of company' is an important aspect of the 'patterns of cinema-going' (ibid: 72), both in the sense of immediate companions, and in that of the crowd in the cinema (ibid: 79-80). Importantly for the present study, they note the connections between 'choice of company' and genre. ('The viewer, then, chooses his company by kind of film': [ibid: 65].)

Turning to issues of gender, Steve Derné's ethnography of men's cinema-going in present-day India provides a clear precedent to the research presented here in his operationalisation of the 'male gaze' as an everyday, rather than theoretical, aspect of cinema and its influence on gendered, social life (Derné, 2000; Derné and Jadwin, 2000). Despite the different gender and familial context, the sociable aspects of cinema-going in his Indian study are not dissimilar to Kuhn's summary quoted above: young men often go to the cinema alone or with friends, married men go in the company of their wives or other relatives; and for a woman to go alone is frowned upon if not outright forbidden by male relatives, and risks harassment.

However, the near 'collective effervescence' of the male gaze in Derné's descriptions of Indian cinema audiences can be contrasted with the 'embarrassment' found by Thomas Austin among young straight men in Britain, who preferred to watch the 'sexual' material of *Basic Instinct* at home alone, rather than in the company of others in the cinema (1999: 153, 155). Austin's conclusion that the film text is 'embedded in particular social locations, so that questions of context and of textual interpretations, pleasures and uses appear inextricably linked' (1999: 153) provides a precedent for my own explorations around text and context, social and interpersonal relations. Similar con/textual embarrassment around gender and sexuality in public places can be discerned in the interview material presented by Barker and Brooks: in two instances (1998: 30, 65) laughter erupts when there is a suggestion that boys might go to the cinema with girls.

Austin's analysis of viewing as a socially interactive process echoes Annette Hill's work on 'film violence as an interactive phenomenon' (Hill, 1999). Audiences at violent films have 'a distinctive social awareness of other viewers, and a shared social knowledge of the types of responses considered appropriate to the viewing experience' (Hill, 1999: 175). Hill discusses viewers' accounts of their reactions of/to other viewers in the cinema, including how they reacted to the laughter of other audience members as 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' (ibid: 184-5).

However, despite using the term 'interaction', these authors do not embed their work within symbolic interactionism, and the work of Norman Denzin (1992) in attempting to reconcile symbolic interactionism with cultural studies is not a reference-point in the 'new audience studies'. In my view, the radically *social* framework of symbolic interactionism is missing from this body of work, which seems to derive more from Fish (1980) and Hall (1980), where 'interpretive communities' are constituted in relation to texts, even where findings on the social processes of viewing come to dominate the project of finding meaning in certain texts. The accounts in my students' work were making me see cinema-going and

interpreting films as much more closely interconnected, both being simultaneously embedded in ongoing social negotiations. Following Denzin and others, I believe we can use the framework of symbolic interactionism to show how micro aspects of people's lives are involved in making up the grand picture of 'cultural studies', of which feminist critiques of gendered representations form a part.

Returning to the work of Paul Cressey in the 1930s, his theoretical article on 'the motion picture experience' was published only a year after the first use of the term 'symbolic interactionism' by Herbert Blumer (1937), and long before the approach had been systematised and distinguished from positivist sociology and psychology (Blumer, 1969). Nevertheless, while clearly arguing for a genuinely *social* psychology that places film viewing and spectator reactions within their social context,<sup>9</sup> Cressey also continually pushes beyond the language of positivistic psychology towards a more interpretivist approach, as is evidenced in the passage which first caught my eye in relation to my own 'coding' of the data from students' journals:

This requires not only a comprehension of specific personalities and social backgrounds, but also a knowledge of collateral experiences, of the imaginative response to movie patterns and ideas *before, during* and *after* cinema attendance, and of later successes and failures in utilizing movie patterns, ideas, and values. It also involves tracing the imaginative and social interrelationships between screen and subject and between the subject and his social world in an effort to perceive the cinema's 'contribution' in the light of this broader perspective (Cressey, 1938: 521, italics in original).

Cressey's very insistence on cinema-going as *experience* is in line with later symbolic interactionism. However, his principal contention in this article is around the need to consider 'all essential phases of the motion-picture experience', a phrase he repeats four times (ibid: 518, 519, 521). He castigates the way in which both academic and popular writers 'have made sweeping statements about the motion picture's "effect," even though their information pertained to but one phase of the cinema experience' (ibid: 518). Instead, his own approach insists on understanding the cinema experience only in relation to a 'before' and an 'after', with the latter allowing the possibility of subsequent redefinition:

This conceptualization must take cognizance of the interrelationships between film content and the spectator's personality and social background, his special interests and values, and the events which are subsequent to the motion picture experience but which may serve to redefine it (ibid: 521).

And again he emphasises the 'after', in writing that 'the ultimate meaning of the cinema experience cannot be determined without consideration of subsequent events which have reference to it' (ibid: 521).

This pursuit of what the cinema experience means in people's lives is consonant with the 'basic premises' of the symbolic interactionist approach as spelled out by Blumer thirty years later in 1969. Blumer was keen to differentiate this approach from that of sociologists and psychologists who saw human behaviour as the effect of various social 'factors' on the individual; instead, symbolic interactionism argued firstly that it is only through the *meaning* that things have for people that action occurs, secondly, that this meaning only arises through *interaction* with others, and thirdly, that meanings are handled and modified through an *interpretative process* (Blumer, 1969: 2-4). Cressey's highlighting of ongoing redefinition of film meanings in the light of subsequent events is a particularly apt anticipation of Blumer's third premise, while the first two are exemplified well in his insistence on seeing movie-going within the overall social world of the spectators, and also in his implication that the audience is *active* in taking meaning from films: it is an 'erroneous conception' that 'the patrons are wholly passive agents who are merely "played upon" through the arts and skills of cinematography' (Cressey, 1938: 522; Buxton, 2008).

Perhaps most radically interpretivist is Cressey's downplaying of actual spectator-screen viewing as 'extra-social', and therefore of necessity only having meaning when taken in conjunction with the before (social background, social world) and after (subsequent events and redefinition) of film viewing:

the motion picture situation...is not essentially a social situation, since it does not involve social interaction. The spectator obviously ... cannot participate in the screen action. Except for emotional 'contagion,' the incidental and quite extrinsic interaction among spectators, social participation is wholly absent. Yet the motion picture situation involves important social features. The spectator's reactions to the screen, his interests and affects are socially conditioned, and what he 'carries away' with him is altered by later social contacts. Strictly conceived, the motion picture situation is neither wholly 'social' nor wholly 'nonsocial'; it is *extrasocial* (Cressey, 1938: 519, italics in original).

Cressey qualifies this by saying that, in the relationship between screen and spectator, an 'imaginative relationship' takes over from the social relationships of the subject's social world.

Instead of facilitating social interaction, the cinema serves chiefly to set up imaginative states. In these, imaginative participation takes the place of social participation and identification becomes the means by which a semblance of vitality and substance can be discovered in the movies. It is significant that this imaginative participation constitutes really the essence of social participation, as Mead, Cooley, Stern, and others have shown in studies of 'role-taking' or 'personation'; and that the spectator at the cinema is but

continuing, in this more symbolic form, the type of behavior which is basic to all face-to-face social interaction. (Cressey, 1938: 510)

What I take from these passages is that the interior life of the watching spectator *during* the screening is not part of meaningful social interaction until it is articulated with/in the *before*, and *after* of viewing (and even the *during*, when, as we shall see, it surfaces as a reaction to the social reactions of others). Cressey seems here to implicitly question Blumer's (1933) focus on the *imaginary* life of his student-informants in relation to stars and film narratives, and at the same time to validate the way in which Blumer's film-autobiographies recount actual social interactions after cinema viewings. What Cressey problematizes is the nature of the relationship between the two.<sup>10</sup> Cressey's overall *temporal* framework of the movie-going experience also anticipates Stanley Fish's much later formulation of 'reader-response' theory in literary criticism, with his insistence on 'the reading experience' as a temporal one, replacing the illusory 'spatial' structure of the text in formalist analysis (Fish, 1980: 43-4). Fish makes explicit also that meaning is experiential: a formalist analysis 'has nothing to do with the logic of the reading experience, or, I would insist, with its meaning. That experience is a temporal one' (Fish, 1980: 26).

In what follows, I take Cressey's symbolic interactionist framework as legitimation for studying the *sociable* aspects of the 'before, during and after' of cinema-viewing, and use some of his concepts as 'sensitizing' ones (Blumer 1969). I therefore keep the focus on interactions between people (rather than between the screen drama and the individual viewer), maintaining that these are the only places where *meaning* of cultural products can be made and experienced. Rather than starting from individuals' experiences of film texts, however socially embedded that may be, I try to start from people-in-interaction,<sup>11</sup> however much that may involve the invocation of film texts and their surrounding expectations. This is to take seriously the idea of cinema as a *social pastime*, one that has ritual, but also interactive, i.e. unpredictable, negotiable, sense-making, qualities.

In terms of method, individual questionnaires (Kuhn, 1999), interviews (Treveri-Gennari et al., 2011), or written memories of film and film stars (Stacey, 1994; Richards, 2003), inevitably tend to collect rather limited data about people's interactions, and foster the illusion that the meaning of film is somehow generated between the individual and the screen. The more collective context of class interaction from which the current project arose encouraged the recounting of these and other interactions in the students' journals. While written up by individuals, these 'mini-ethnographies' recount conversations between people, which show them 'making sense' of their viewing experience in a context which is simultaneously that of making sense of intersubjective relationships. Importantly, these 'reflective journals' were conceived of as a reflection on the mutual interaction of popular culture and society. When I adopted this term, I was not aware that Cressey's work on cinema had articulated a similar 'reflexivity' in his article published in 1938, the very year that Anthony Giddens was born:

The chief importance of this comprehensive approach, however, is the different order of findings obtained. The cinema's role in general conduct is found for the most part to be reflexive, to take its specific character from the social configuration, the social-psychological 'frame' in which the motion picture is experienced and in which responses to it arise (Cressey, 1938: 523).

### **Before: 'imaginative and social interrelationships' (gender and genre in interaction)**

Even when told they have to go to the cinema by their lecturer, viewers do not arrive at the cinema as asocial beings outside of their everyday social relationships:<sup>12</sup>

Myself, my boyfriend and a female friend of mine went to see the film together. Before entering the cinema theatre my friend reassured my somewhat unenthusiastic boyfriend not to be put off by the fact that it's a 'chick-flick' because 'apparently Mila Kunis (female lead) is naked the majority of the time!' (Caroline)

In recounting this conversation, Caroline does not comment on the implication of a strict gender norm around films marketed at women, or 'chick flicks' as they are derogatorily called. This social norm of segregation of women's films is *taken for granted*: though many students mention it, none seriously discussed it even where, as here, it seems to be pushing in the opposite direction from the attraction of male visual pleasure. Instead, Caroline focusses on the phrase she has put in direct quotation marks, and goes on to ask:

[W]as my friend reinforcing the long-standing sexist assumption that women are merely sexual objects for men to blankly stare at? That, in line with Laura Mulvey's work, film is an instrument of the 'male gaze'?

This formulation can of course be seen as provoked by the discussion of the 'male gaze' in class. However, this is no abstract theoretical analysis for Caroline, but is felt on an emotional level, as is seen in her articulation of her 'inner thought' at the time her friend made this remark:

This statement also led me to actually consider why my boyfriend had agreed to come with me to see this film. Did he merely agree because he knew it starred the attractive, and often naked, Mila Kunis?

Caroline here shows us that her female friend's cajoling of her boyfriend with visions of the naked star sets off conflicting emotions for her. The implication is that prior to her female friend's remark, she had thought that her boyfriend had agreed to come to a film because he

wanted to accompany and spend time with *her*. This expectation is that of a 'modern' relationship, where roles and spheres are negotiated rather than segregated, and where there are expectations of equality between 'partners' – in fact, very much the problematic that is set up in *Friends With Benefits* in relation to sex and gender. The conversation outside the cinema undermines Caroline's view, not just of the incident, but of her entire relationship, since the suspicion enters her head that her boyfriend in fact was motivated to see Mila Kunis on screen. It matters not to the social outcome whether or not such motivation existed in the boyfriend's mind. The interaction between her friends had effected a change in her trust in her boyfriend, as well as setting up an imaginary sexual triangle where she feels inferior to the screen star in the eyes of her boyfriend.

Similar, ambivalent feelings of 'reluctance' towards going to see this 'chick-flick' as a heterosexual couple appear in other journals. The reluctance can be on the part of the boyfriend, on the gender/genre grounds already noted, or, if he *wants* to go and see it, the girlfriend partner then becomes reluctant to go with him, on 'male gaze' grounds:

My boyfriend and I went to the cinema together to see it. He was not really looking forward to it, as he claims to hate chick flick type films (Patricia).

I was reluctant to go with my boyfriend after seeing the semi-naked Mila Kunis in the advertisements but unfortunately nobody else seemed interested in going (Fiona).

In this way, as with Caroline's case, the gender/genre social norms seem to operate in a contradictory way to the imagined 'male gaze', lying in wait at either side of a social negotiation that is fraught with gender anxiety.

The converse of this situation is described by a male student, who we can infer was previously 'reluctant' to go see the film, against his partner's wish to see it:

Conveniently my girlfriend was delighted with the opportunity to accompany me to a movie which she had been lobbying to see in the weeks previous (Eoin).

One female student wrote of her *own* reluctance in terms of genre:

As not an avid fan of Rom-Coms or Chick-Flicks I was slightly reluctant towards the idea of a two hour cinema trip but was none the less intrigued to see in what way the 'Gazes' discussed in class would reveal themselves (Eva).

Like Caroline, several female students went with both a female and a male friend, which some saw as 'balance':

I ... went to the cinema with a female friend ... her brother, a 17 year old, decides to join us. This lent some gender balance in my little observational experiment (Megan).

After watching it a second time, accompanied by a male and female friend, (Nadia).

One male student recounts his negotiation with his flatmates to get them to go to the film:

The film itself wouldn't necessarily be the one my friends and I would have picked first. The genre being a romantic comedy is usually a good way to put off 22 year old guys from going to the cinema; especially with each other. Thankfully, Alan and Colm were easily persuaded following a 2 minute trailer showing exactly what they did want to see: Mila Kunis! (Keith)

Like Caroline and Patricia's boyfriends, Keith presents himself and his friends as accountable to a script of conventional masculine gender in articulating his gender/genre aversion, which is here supplemented with a humorous implication of homophobia ('especially with each other').<sup>13</sup> Once again, this works in a contradictory direction to the excited 'male gaze', which is in this case strong enough to overcome the gender/genre reluctance.

In this study, the genre was a fixed item in the negotiation, and people had to negotiate who to go with in relation to the genre. However, when someone is 'in a relationship', the issue of who to watch with is often fixed, while the genre is variable. An episode from a different context (of choosing a DVD) recounted by a student shows how genre then becomes an expression of ongoing gender conflict in the relationship:

Myself and my boyfriend always watch DVDs together and there is always an argument over what we are going to watch. One night we were both in Xtravision trying to decide on a film that we could both agree on. He kept picking up various 'boyish' films and I kept saying 'no, no, no.' In the end I told him exactly what I was looking for, 'I want something with young, pretty girls with nice clothes.' He laughed and has mocked me for this ever since. Still every time we are getting a DVD he quotes me on this (Tara).

In all these accounts, negotiating who to go with is influenced by the 'imaginative' relationship of what is already known about the film to the 'before' of viewers' lives, including existing social relationships with possible companions. This imaginative relationship is akin to what Austin (2002) has described as the 'hype' surrounding a film – in this case, not just the advance publicity itself, but also the aura, and 'male gaze' that had grown up socially around the star, Mila Kunis. However, it is also important to point out that these social manifestations of imaginary male gazing are not the only parameters around

decisions about who to go to the cinema with; there is also an opposing, taken-for-granted, norm of gender/genre separation in relation to films, particularly in relation to the notion that women's films are a separate sphere. Since there are no clear or fixed boundaries around what is a woman's film, or 'chick flick', this norm manifests more as an anxiety for men, lest they should be caught unawares, or trapped by the ideology of a modern, 'companionate' relationship into going to see a woman's film. As a corollary, the bachelor boys of Eoin's entry assert their independence through expressing a dislike of women's films.

The analysis of the conversation around Caroline's boyfriend, on the other hand, seems to show that boys may show gender accountability by evincing 'unenthusiasm', but that in certain circumstances, this may be read as a 'front' hiding an enthusiastic, anticipatory male gaze. The two tendencies, however, still work in opposing directions. For some, such as Fiona, or Caroline's thought to herself, the presence of this male gaze may even undermine the pleasure of women's viewing of the 'chick-flick'. However, in no case is the meaning of this film in the context of cinema-going *solely* determined by the idea of the 'male gaze'. In Cressey's terminology, these opposing tendencies represent the meeting of the 'imaginative' state with real social relationships.

### ***During: 'extrinsic' audience interactions in the cinema***

I here borrow Cressey's term of the 'extrinsic' interactions of the audience in the cinema, but hope to show that while audience actions and interactions, from eating popcorn to verbal responses to the film, are in themselves extrinsic to the film, the ethnographic narrative accounts make them an intrinsic part of the socially accomplished 'meaning' of the film. Once again, these cannot be reduced to a universal 'male gaze', but also convey the opposing tendency of accountability to gender/genre norms.

Several students write of their own monitoring of their boyfriend's 'gazing' behaviour in the cinema, indicating that the interactive triangle between themselves, their boyfriends and the female image on screen was one that required ongoing interactive 'work' inside the cinema:

[D]uring the whole movie he never took his eyes off the screen (Patricia).

I found myself constantly looking at my boyfriend, who was beside me in the cinema, to gauge his reaction every time Kunis took her top off, or the camera followed her backside in a pair of tiny shorts as she walked out of a shot (Shannon).

If only I had a blindfold I could have covered my boyfriend's eyes (Fiona).

This same interactive triangle prompts women to monitor and censor their own 'extrinsic' cinema behaviour, particularly in relation to eating:

As soon as the film began I regretted buying the large butter popcorn that sat on my knees. The regret stemmed from the absolutely perfect image that shone in front of me – Mila Kunis. Her figure, her beauty, and particularly her eyes were incredibly striking. Envy was steaming up inside me. I hated her and everything about her. In fact, it wasn't so much that I hated her but instead, I was undoubtedly jealous (Fiona).

I caught myself thinking 'she looks so amazing in her underwear... I wish I looked like that ... I bet my boyfriend wishes I looked like that ... I'm not eating any more of this popcorn ... I'm going to the gym first thing tomorrow!' (Shannon)

There are a few accounts of audible audience responses to the film in the cinema. In all cases, these responses come from men in the audience and are noticed by women students. The first is a kind of verbal-bodily manifestation of the 'pleasure of the gaze':<sup>14</sup>

At one stage in the film where Kunis is, as said, undressing alone, a member of the cinema audience in which I was a part of let out a thankful 'Oh Yes' in appreciation for the visuals on screen. ... At first I was surprised by this male remark... (Eva)

Another indicates male identification with the hero-on-screen, the 'bearer of the look' in Mulvey's terms:

The males in the class or the male who accompanied me to the cinema were not jealous of Timberlake because he was handsome or rich. (In fact, I heard a few 'fair play to him' in the cinema.) (Aoife)

The third reverts back to the 'reluctant' male audience, uneasy with the clash between their gender and the genre which the ending of the film reveals:

'I didn't ask you to ...' *he* cuts off her commanding line by seizing control again and kissing her; the 'perfect' romantic ending that most girls desire. ... At this point in the cinema, I reluctantly realise that I have a smile spread across my face, while the general reaction in the theatre is a knowing groan coming mainly from the male audience (Megan).

The 'knowing groan' of Megan's description is an economical way of expressing the idea that the male audience felt *deceived* by the ending – which, we can surmise, they take as evidence that they had in fact been watching a 'chick-flick' or 'rom-com', the dreaded 'women's film'. Once again, the pleasurable 'male gaze' is shown not to be the *only* relevant

gender parameter for gendered viewing; rather, a convention around appropriate gender/genre fit is also invoked through audience interactions with each other in a way that continually cuts across the 'male gaze'.

There are also many accounts of 'inner' thoughts and feelings from women about Kunis as they watched the film, as in the extract from Fiona above. One female student talks of conflicted feelings of desire towards Kunis during the film:

I remember once thinking, 'I don't know whether I want to *be* her or be *with* her!' ... When I saw Mila Kunis in her underwear I thought 'Damn you, Mila Kunis!' ... First I begin to doubt my sexuality and, secondly, I feel like insulting Mila Kunis for awakening the competitive comparing streak within me (Megan).

Finally, I quote in full Eva's writing on her 'epiphanic moment' during the cinema viewing, not least because I am aware that in cherry-picking the ethnographic fragments from my students' texts, I am violating the way in which they were themselves skilfully weaving theoretical arguments into their reflections:

At one stage in the film where Kunis is as said, undressing alone, a member of the cinema audience in which I was a part of let out a thankful 'Oh Yes' in appreciation for the visuals on screen. It was at this point I became aware of my own position as an audience member and how I myself was watching or more so gazing on the female lead. At first I was surprised by this male remark and in a way thought it nearly rude that he would vacate his own enjoyment so overtly. However thinking about it soon after it was clear that my annoyance, was more so due to the fact that I was so zoned in on what I was watching, subconsciously caught in the moment of Freud's '*scopophilia*', that I was unaware or had forgotten that there were others in the cinema who too were watching this, spectating this. It was then and only then that I was aware of my own enjoyment of the voyeurism of cinema (Eva).

Eva's piece illustrates how the audible 'extrinsic' remarks of others in the cinema audience were what released her own self-awareness of her 'love of gazing' (Gk. *scopophilia*). There is a moment of consciousness where the self, absorbed into the screen image in Cressey's 'extra-social' state, is interrupted and brought back to social interaction by what I called above the verbal-bodily manifestation of male pleasure in gazing by a man in the audience. While distancing herself from these social expressions of gazing men, the double-take provokes admission and awareness that she, too, is pleurably gazing on the same *female* body. The whole paragraph seems a fine instance of Cressey's 'reflexivity' of social self and film-meaning.

### **After: ‘what he “carries away” with him’**

Several students recorded conversations that happened as they were leaving the cinema. Patricia’s fears around her (previously ‘reluctant’) boyfriend’s gaze were confirmed:

Afterwards, he said he really enjoyed it and said that Mila Kunis was ‘unreal’ (Patricia).

A male student alludes to the conversation with his girlfriend on leaving the cinema, and his summary of his feelings seems to provide grounds for the many female students’ fears:

After seeing the movie in the Savoy we both left the cinema with the exact same viewpoint – Mila Kunis! To me, Mila Kunis is the picture of female perfection – she seems to entwine all the characteristics that a man looks for in a woman (Eoin).

Others were struck by how these conversations showed that both genders of audience members were gazing at the female image on screen:

I went with a group of guys and girls and at the end of the movie various remarks were made. One of the girls said ‘I am going to the gym tomorrow until I have her body’. Another girl said ‘Oh my god I spent the entire movie staring at Mila Kunis, Wow’. A male friend asked the question ‘What would I have to do to get a girlfriend like that?’ I did not stop talking about how amazing Mila Kunis was for days. I came out of the cinema thinking about her and not the lead male Justin Timberlake (Niamh).

The two girls whose remarks are here recorded by Niamh can be seen as a social exemplification of Jackie Stacey’s theory of the pleasures of female spectatorship as involving the interplay of *both* desire and identification (1988: 129). Nadia provides further evidence of how conversations with both genders revolved around the female star and her appearance:

Throughout the conversations after the film, the girls talked about how beautiful the female protagonist was, and they wondered whether the actors had been romantically involved off-screen, while the boys talked about how ‘hot’ Kunis was and how they wondered if there were any other films available to watch with her starring. It was fascinating to observe that not one conversation arose concerning the storyline of the film and when I tried to bring it up (although in truth I had no interest in talking about what had actually happened in the film either) my efforts were shunned aside in favour of the more popular subject of Kunis’ appearance (Nadia).

Nadia sums up her findings in a threefold division of the audience:

[A]fter discussing this later with my friends and a few other people coming out of the cinema, I realised that the majority of the audience, both male and female, were also distracted by the beauty of the female protagonist throughout the film. The females seemed to be comparing themselves to her in some cases even envying her, the heterosexual males desiring her and the homosexual males fascinated by her.

While these writers all agree that both genders focussed on the female star in their after-film talk, many of them, and particularly the female students, document clear gender differences in this talk. It is in this male post-film *talk* about how ‘hot’ Kunis was that the ‘imaginative state’ of the cinematic male gaze is made social and has ongoing social effects. Patricia’s narrative shows how previous gender/genre reluctance can be easily forgotten (a ‘subsequent redefinition’) in this celebratory boys’ talk after the film. It is in conversational interaction with this sexualised male discourse in relation to Kunis that women develop their own, apparently non-sexual discourse of how ‘beautiful’ or ‘amazing’ she was.

The apparent emotional neutrality of these accounts of conversations, however, is belied by the use of ‘envy’ in Nadia’s account above, and when we turn to how female students wrote about their *inner* feelings on leaving the cinema, we find stronger expressions of emotions such as jealousy and guilt in relation to the female star:

Leaving the cinema I felt very strange. I hadn’t paid attention to Justin Timberlake at all but instead was fixated on the female character. Is this normal? Is it normal for a female to be jealous of a semi-fictional character?  
(Fiona)

I know personally after seeing this movie I felt like I needed to go to the gym to try and feel less guilty for not looking like Mila Kunis (Emma).

Now, Kunis’ appearance was indeed a popular subject abroad at the time, and our analysis of the conversations prior to going to the cinema shows that most film-goers were aware of this. One student wrote a journal entry about the ‘Pixiwoo’ make-up website where a video shows viewers how to do ‘Mila Kunis Friends With Benefits’ make-up. In the introduction, Pixiwoo states:

Recently Ian and I went to go and see *Friends With Benefits* which made me extremely depressed because she [Mila Kunis] looks *absolutely* gorgeous and thin...So um, I came out going ‘Meh, I feel rubbish about myself’ (Zara, transcribing Pixiwoo’s voiceover at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQNLiHnJnbY> )

This particular version was uploaded on 6 September 2011, just weeks before the class went to the cinema. In a climate of online discussion about Kunis's appearance, it is possible that students were influenced directly by online remarks like Pixiwoo's. However, I would prefer to argue that there was a kind of subculture of 'learning to feel rubbish about yourself in relation to Mila Kunis', which crossed online and offline contexts.

In contrast to this majority focus on Kunis, one female student recounts a conversation which she interprets as indicating a possible 'jealous' disposition of male viewers towards Justin Timberlake:

'I'm so jealous of her body', I told my boyfriend, who said nothing in reply. However, when I mentioned how attractive JT was, he did reply '*Oh yeah? Sound*', suggesting that he may have been equally jealous. Perhaps the male gaze has more than one meaning – do men get jealous of other men? (Julie)

And one male student wrote about possible feelings of inadequacy in relation to Justin Timberlake:

[F]rom my male perspective also ... Justin Timberlake's character had the potential to stir up similar feelings of inadequacy in males. ... The film portrays Timberlake's character as being successful in the public and private spheres of work and relationships respectively...this idealised male stereotype could be construed as a means of making male viewers feel inadequate (Cathal).

Cathal goes on to refer to a joke about premature ejaculation in the film, which he sees as further stirring feelings of inadequacy, since the couple 'laugh it off' and Timberlake appears as 'sexually able'. These contributions suggest more symmetry between female viewers' reaction to Kunis and male viewers' reaction to Timberlake than has been suggested up till now in this paper. However, in Cathal's entry, we are presented with a slightly abstract 'potential' for making men feel inadequate, rather than the strong gut reactions coming from the female students towards Kunis. In Julie's entry, the boyfriend's remark seems more emotional, and according to the girlfriend writing, is 'suggestive' of jealousy towards Timberlake; however, the remark is brief and cryptic, and the possible sarcasm difficult to interpret outside the context of that actual conversation.

These considerations diminish the suggestion of gender symmetry, which is anyway very minor in comparison with the large amount of data that deals with both genders' reactions to the female star. There certainly seems to be less at stake on the interpersonal front than in the constant repetitions of anxiety about the male gaze found in the women's contributions. Indeed, another male student makes just this point in realising that he had

never felt anything like the strong negative emotions being experienced by women in this context:

According to my friend Gemma, the ‘picture of perfection’ presented by Mila Kunis was ‘uncomfortable to watch at times’. ... it is possible that many female viewers feel under pressure to look a certain way after leaving the cinema. From a male perspective, *never once did I experience such feelings of self-loathing or inadequacy* (Keith: italics added).

### **Subsequent redefinitions: the ‘female gaze’ as subcultural refuge?**

Overall, these observations on what happened after the cinema viewing seem to support the notion that if, beforehand, there had been ambivalence on the part of men towards going to see this film at all, once they *have* seen it, the pleasure of male viewing becomes enough of an account in itself to justify their having been to it. However, as has already been noted, the expression of this male viewing pleasure within the context of ongoing partner-relationships is often controversial and leads to conflict. In the current context, these conflicts first surfaced publicly in the accounts that female students gave in class the week after they had been to the cinema, which several students wrote up in journals:

Another example [of the Female Gaze] is the girls in our tutorial class' reaction to Mila Kunis in the movie. Some, like Gemma and Holly spoke of how they reacted by calling her a ‘bitch’. They were not comfortable watching the movie with boyfriends because her beauty made them feel inadequate. They felt ugly in comparison to this sculpted masterpiece and that’s because they claim they were watching her with a male gaze and not identifying with her (Eoin).

[T]he females in the class had envied Kunis and felt somewhat self-depreciated. One contributor in the class had expressed how badly she felt about herself after seeing the movie with her boyfriend who was in awe of Kunis. She remarked that she looked nothing like Kunis and felt embarrassed sitting next to her boyfriend lusting over a woman she bore no physical resemblance to (Aoife).

One girl called her a ‘fake bitch’, perhaps because she found it difficult to emulate Jamie’s<sup>15</sup> undoubted beauty. It was also discussed that some women felt embarrassed going to see the film with their boyfriend because they knew their men were constantly ogling the female protagonist (someone they felt they could never live up to) (Keith).

Patricia's reflection on her initially 'reluctant' boyfriend continued well after the cinema outing, and shows how there is redefinition of the film experience in the light of subsequent events, and how the imaginative and social relationships of the cinema experience subsequently redefine her interpersonal relationship in troubling ways:

[W]hy then did my chick flick hating boyfriend like it so much? Well it's difficult to watch the movie without realising that Mila Kunis is a beautiful sultry woman. The fact that my boyfriend's first words about the movie were about her and how beautiful she was, makes me think that perhaps he liked it because he liked looking at her. After reading Mulvey's book I began to think, 'Was my boyfriend an active viewer? And when Justin Timberlake finally possessed Mila Kunis did he feel like he indirectly possessed her too?' I began to feel a little insecure about this idea. Thoughts about Mila Kunis filled my head for days later. I discussed the film with girl friends a few days later and the majority of what we spoke about was Mila Kunis (Patricia).

Megan, too, recounts a conversation which shows the enduring effect of this cinema-viewing experience on a relationship, so justifying Cressey's insistence on looking at 'all phases' of the experience:

One male friend told me that it was 'a crap film' but Mila Kunis made it bearable for him although his girlfriend kept hassling him about how he compares her body to Kunis's (Megan).

In this economical statement, Megan shows how her friend's boyfriend has apparently reconciled his gender/genre conflict both by resort to expressing male visual pleasure, but also by denigrating the film he saw, and by implication, his girlfriend's taste. Furthermore, he is now able *also* to denigrate his girlfriend's anxieties about her body in relation to Kunis's as her 'hassling' him, despite the implication that *he* is indeed expressing such unfavourable comparisons to *her*.

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It is hard to read and feel the almost passionate engagement of students with this topic and argue that the 'male gaze' is an irrelevance in analysing everyday cinema encounters. While students do not, on the whole, accept the psychoanalytic underpinnings of 'gaze' theory, the presence of something like the male gaze, overseeing their interactions and relationships, seems almost omnipresent in their lives.

Yet, it is also noticeable how quickly students slip from talking and thinking about women's active partaking in a 'male gaze' to talking about a 'female gaze'. This general move could be seen as one form of 'subsequent redefinition', along Cressey's lines. It is also

possible that for female students the way in which they appropriated 'female gaze' theory acted as some sort of refuge away from *either* a 'passive' subordination to the pervasive 'male gaze', *or* the unthinkable implications of Mulvey's 'masculinisation' thesis. In their discussions of the film and seminar, several students did use Mulvey's thesis in 'Afterthoughts' that the female spectator is 'masculinised', or as one student put it, 'transsexualised'. But Mulvey herself softens this position by introducing the ambivalent 'oscillation' of the female screen-heroine 'between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity' (1989: 32). As translated to the cinema spectator, then, this is no longer a 'position', but a fluid movement, and Mulvey *almost* lets the female spectator out of her fixed cinema seat when she describes her as 'restless in ... transvestite clothes' (1989: 40).

Female students were undoubtedly more comfortable with this temporary reprieve from masculinisation. At a conscious level, the class was supportive of students who wanted to talk about their or others' lesbianism, but this was against a climate of unthinking 'lesbophobia' that inhibits girls' activity.<sup>16</sup> Yet, students were definitely not comfortable either with the idea of femininity or female spectatorship as being simply 'passive'. Their journals are replete with instances of the intense *activity* and, indeed, interactivity, which women engage in around looking at other women. Celebrity gossip sites, chick lit and chick flicks, *Sex and the City* and *The X Factor*, *The Hills* and *Made in Chelsea* were all popular discussion points on the course. Students also frequently recorded everyday *conversations* about these topics in their journals. Many were evidently intrigued to have this important part of their leisure activity become part of their college conversations also, something that could be theorised and valorised in a way that was challenging even (or perhaps particularly) to those who already devoted a lot of time to 'female gazing'.

One way of seeing these intense interactions around female images is as a form of 'girlie culture', a term students used in discussions, where I understood it to mean a delight in things feminine, though not quite in the postfeminist celebratory sense of Baumgardner and Richards, where 'embracing pink' is a 'confident gesture': 'What we loved as girls was good, and because of feminism, we know how to make girl stuff work for us' (Baumgardner and Richards, 2010: 136). Students' use of the term was somewhere between this and Angela McRobbie's much older 'culture of femininity' (1978), where there is more sense of a separate female space and culture, at least partially hidden from the gaze of men, teachers, and parents. An ambivalence between these two kinds of discourse of femininity could explain the difficulties that arose about whether to go to see something that was potentially a 'girlie' film in the company of men.

However, both these sociological concepts of femininity are *pleasurable* in a fairly uncomplicated way. By contrast, the students' development of 'female gaze' theory in relation to their film-viewing seems much less about pleasure. Instead, it included elements of introspective negativity (the intimidation, inadequacy, self-loathing that we have seen) as well as expressions of hostility and aggression towards the favoured star (the 'Damn you', and 'bitch' name-calling). In relation to one of the questions posed earlier in this paper, only

one student wrote in any 'fluid' way of a fantasy, active sexual desire towards Kunis, and even that was accompanied by the much more prevalent emotions of 'envy' or 'jealousy'.

It is here tempting to step back into psychoanalytic thinking, where triangular jealousy is so fundamental to the self; and I was struck myself by the way that the female students' at times almost masochistic pleasure in comparing themselves with Kunis resonates with the theory of psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch, that the female psyche involves a peculiar combination of narcissism and masochism. However, a closer reading of Deutsch's writing on masochism shows it to be argued on rather firmly sociological grounds, allocating a key role to 'the social environment' in inhibiting girls' activity and aggression and turning it inwards (1944: 250-1). She clearly saw this environment as susceptible to and needing change, rather than a universal and unchanging structure. It is in this sociological sense that I find her analysis of female narcissism and masochism helpful in thinking about the students' angry reaction to Kunis. However, I also wish to stress that the students' anger and self-loathing occurred mainly in the *social context* of cinema-viewing in the company of boyfriends, and, to conclude this paper, I now return to the themes that arose from pursuing a symbolic interactionist analysis of the 'phases' of cinema experience.

### **Contesting the male gaze through 'all phases of the cinema experience'**

In contrast to previous work on cinema-going, this paper has found that there is a lot of prior social 'work' to be done *before* going to the cinema, and that, in the contemporary context of advance publicity and 'hype', displays of taste and judgement are being made even in stating an intention to go and see a certain film. Since cinema is still a 'sociable pastime', and it is considered 'sad' for women to go alone, the group project brought abundant evidence of the negotiations that went on around 'who to go with' and, for those so invited, whether the film was an appropriate one for them to see. Here, a strong convention of gender and genre was evident which meant that men, particularly, could be subject to ridicule or embarrassment if it were known that they had been to a film seen as appropriate for women. It is within this context that the findings about the 'male gaze' are situated by many, though not all, of the student writers, since male visual pleasure could override the reluctance of men to see the film on gender/genre grounds.

What I had not anticipated in the diaries, or even realised was going on at the time, was how the choice of film at the end of my first lecture had itself played out frictions around gender/genre and the male gaze actually in the lecture theatre. Two students wrote about this. One male student gave an elaborate account of how choosing *Friends With Benefits* meant going against social norms of macho masculinity. I quote this in full, to show how he positions himself from the start as part of a 'back row' male-bonding contingent in the class, using a pun on the film-title:

Week 1 began and ended with a *Friends with Benefits* theme. My friend and classmate Maurice Smyth was of huge benefit to me before the lecture even started as I was lost and sitting in the completely wrong lecture hall – before

his assistance guided me from 2041A to 2041B! As the opening lecture drew to a close we were presented with our first dilemma of the year. We were (as a class) to choose a movie we would all go and see and then discuss in next week's tutorials. The key criteria which the movie had to portray was gender issues. With 50 strong minded people in one room divisive discussions always come to the fore.

After much heated debate it came down to three movies ...

- 1 What's your Number?
- 2 Friends With Benefits
- 3 Drive

I personally was arguing for *Friends With Benefits* – and it was interesting to see that many of my male colleagues in the class were in agreement with me. Social norms would usually lead us to choosing *Drive* as this was the masculine, macho option – but on September 28<sup>th</sup> this was not the case! (Eoin)

A female student's account of the same process forms an instructive contrast:

This week the class and myself learnt about the course structure and most importantly learnt about this journal. At first I felt it a little daunting. But, the daunting feeling did not last for long, I can assure you. Barbara Bradby quickly excited us by informing us that we would be analyzing a film of our choice. Not just any film, but a recent film. I thought to myself, fantastic! The class discussion about which film to choose was quite amusing. A group of guys in the back row pushed for 'Friends With Benefits'. This I found very amusing because they obviously fancied the main actress, Mila Kunis. One girl mentioned how it would be impossible to analyze such a film because it is a stereotypic Hollywood film. ... I was looking forward to seeing the film and putting forward my own ideas and arguments (Fiona).

For this writer, the social manifestation of 'the male gaze' at the back of the class was something 'amusing', which she looked forward to challenging in the seminar. However, her subtle account of the play of interactions in this class discussion also suggests that 'one girl' was perhaps already contesting the 'group of guys in the back row' by questioning the cultural credentials of the film.

Only when I came to reflect on the whole 'class exercise' did it occur to me that, far from observing 'ordinary, everyday cinema-going', my exercise had in fact created an 'extraordinary' situation. If norms of gender and genre in cinema viewing are as my students describe them, then for a man to go and see a 'chick-flick' is to cross a somewhat taboo boundary. In the instance of the all-male cinema-outing, this taboo, and the additional

implications of homo-eroticism, could be overcome by an ostentatious braggadocio expressed in the male gaze towards the female star. In heterosexual 'partnerships', this request for the man to go to a 'woman's film' (and it may have been defined as such simply because the woman initiated the invitation in cases where it had been imposed on her as class 'homework') placed him in the 'reluctant' position: this was not something he would normally do. He could justify it for himself, or it could be justified for him by other women anxious to assuage his ego, only by resort, again, to an ostentatious 'male gaze'. The latter, of course, led to the anxieties on the part of girlfriends that formed the starting point for this paper.

A version of this braggadocio of the male gaze was already present in the nomination and voting on 'which film to see' in my first lecture. It was being performed by the 'group of guys on the back row',<sup>17</sup> perhaps as a way, even then, of overcoming their embarrassment at having to go and see a 'chick flick'. I had, unintentionally, created a 'breaching experiment', Garfinkel's (1967) term for a series of subtle experiments in breaching social norms and observing the consequences. Perhaps all teaching in the area of gender entails some kind of breaching. In relation to the cinema audience, what the 'breaching' reveals is not only how strong are norms of gender/genre accountability, but also that these norms are not fixed but *negotiable*, and that 'going to the cinema' tends to involve some kind of negotiation along these lines. Actual men in this study oscillate between 'reluctance' and this 'ostentatious' male gaze, neither position feeling very comfortable either for them or their friends of either gender. Most of the women in the study, however, see both these positions as 'traditional' and as threatening to their attempts to build 'modern' relationships based on equality and negotiation.

In many ways, *Friends With Benefits* could be said to be 'unthreatening, predictable Hollywood content' – Hubbard's words for describing typical 'multiplex' fare in his discussion of contemporary cinema-going in the UK: 'multiple previews and reviews ensuring the audience know what to expect' (Hubbard, 2002: 1253). Yet if the student-audience was well aware of the content in advance, this does not, it seems, make the film 'unthreatening' *if we study the social context of sociable cinema-going in which it was consumed*. While most of the interchanges described in this paper are gently humorous, and while the male gaze in the contexts described here is not 'threatening' in the way that Derné and Jadwin document the gaze as linked to violence against women in the Indian context (2000: 265), the issues raised by students are indeed threatening to comfortable notions of equality in heterosexual relationships and in gendered media representations. It has been the intention of this paper to show that the interactions around going to the cinema in some way constitute the meaning of the film for viewers. Since the narrative of *Friends With Benefits* posed several questions around gender equality in sexual and romantic relationships, it is significant that students experienced this narrative as almost permanently 'frozen' by the spectacle of Mila Kunis on screen. If the film suggests a comfortable gender equality – both partners experiment with a purely sexual relationship, both partners eventually succumb to romantic

love for the other – the students challenge this by their critical focus on the male gaze which pervades the way this narrative is represented and experienced in the cinema.

*Before we even went to the cinema*, viewers were (unstably) positioned between two gendered discourses – that men do not go to women’s films, and that the female body on screen affords pleasure to the male gaze. This instability was played out, or ‘performed’ in the context of group interaction, first of all in class, and later in the interpersonal negotiations around ‘who to go with’. By the week *after* the film-viewing, women students had come to class prepared to speak in a frank way about how male gazing in the cinema had impinged on their relationships. The initial students who spoke up were showing the effect of their cinema experience on subsequent events, while others began to redefine their own experience in the light of these subsequent events, in this case the class discussion that ensued, and which continued all term and into the students’ writing.

Perhaps the conflict occasioned by this slightly artificial class exercise, with its disingenuous appeal to the ‘everydayness’ of cinema-going, was what enabled female students to speak out about their everyday relationship to the gaze of boyfriends. While there is much in the student data that might justify a resigned pessimism around functionalist conformism to gender roles, I end here on a more optimistic note in regard to the conflict I unwittingly stumbled upon and the way students used this to articulate a challenge to ‘the male gaze’.

### **Biographical note:**

Barbara Bradby is a lecturer in Sociology at Trinity College, Dublin. She has worked on gender and popular song, on audiences for popular music, and popular music in Peru. She served for twelve years on the Editorial Board of the journal *Popular Music*, and in 2011 co-edited, with Jan Fairley and Patria Roman-Velasquez, a special issue of the journal on *Crossing Boundaries: Music of Latin America*.

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks are due to the whole class of 2011-12, and especially to those whose written work I have quoted in this paper, here listed in alphabetical order of surnames: Isabel Barker, Rebecca Bell, Rachel Breen, Joanna Butcher, Clare Daly, Richard Duggan, Rachel Egan, Paul Galbraith, Hugh Gallagher, Katie Greene, Eavan Ivory, Aedin Kelly, Fiona Lane, Hannah Lennon, Hannah Little, Orna Lyons, Danielle Murphy, Maebh McCrann, Aine Pennello, Alison Swaine. Thanks also to the editors, and to Kerstin Leder and Peter Krämer for their detailed comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> I have argued in relation to popular music that the texts of songs 'traverse' fans' talk (Bradby, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> I am (still) grateful to Sharon O'Brien for her guest lecture on this course in 1988, when she was a Fulbright Scholar in Ireland, for this insight into how to incorporate ethnography into teaching popular culture.

<sup>4</sup> It may be thought that I 'suggested' to the students in this way to go out and find instances of Mulvey's theory, but this would be to misunderstand the social context in which 21<sup>st</sup> century students confidently dismiss 1970s feminist writing as 'hopelessly outdated'. This was a question on my part expecting the answer 'No'. And indeed I construed the choice of *Friends With Benefits* that ensued in the class as intended as a challenge to outdated feminism in this way. This was a film loudly positing a situation of equality in the spheres of sex and gender.

<sup>5</sup> It may well be objected that my own expressed interest stimulated students to find data that would please their lecturer. I would reply that I very frequently express 'surprise and interest' at examples that students bring to seminars, and that the 'emotional contagion' around *this* topic took on a life of its own among the class.

<sup>6</sup> It was my subsidiary aim in introducing journal writing to encourage students to start referencing popular culture in a way that means 'stopping the flow', since we bombard ourselves with websites, Jstor articles, Youtube videos and other sources at such a speed that much is lost to memory.

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<sup>7</sup> This Spanish word for the 'build-up' to an event is used in Peruvian fiestas for one of the days before the principal 'day' of a saint. The 'eve' or *vispera* in Spanish is a further 'stage' in this build-up. These anticipatory days are paralleled in a symmetrical way by named days 'winding down' after the central day. (See Bradby, 1987)

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Boyle (2009) for a succinct statement of these points and debates.

<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere Cressey uses his own, powerful ethnography of East Harlem in the 1930s to show that the perceived effects of the cinema on criminal behaviour are as much to do with the social practices and context of cinema-going, at a time when cinemas were crowded and darkened public spaces in city centres, as they are with the way in which films sometimes provide 'a source' of criminal techniques (Cressey, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Some might argue that symbolic interactionism has never shaken off its roots in these 'imaginary' autobiographies; however, I find the tension between meaning as made in subjective interpretation and in social interaction a productive and necessary one.

<sup>11</sup> This, for me, is the more radical purport of symbolic interactionism as set out by Blumer in 1969, in the wake of the 1950s/60s work of Becker and Goffman. This position is not unlike that of ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis, though these are derived from different intellectual roots.

<sup>12</sup> The class vote to see this film had narrowed the social parameters – in normal, everyday life, one would be negotiating *both* what to see *and* who to go with (along with other decisions such as where and when, on which there was little information in the diaries).

<sup>13</sup> Derné and Jadwin find a homosocial element in the bonding between young men in Indian cinema-going: 'For most unmarried men, filmgoing is a practice that celebrates their bonds with each other. Young, male filmgoers joke, dance, and rough-house together. They hold hands and put their arms around each other in and around cinema halls. Unmarried men fighting to buy tickets or pushing their way into movie houses often press tightly against each other' (2000: 261).

<sup>14</sup> Although this scenario is very muted compared to Derné's descriptions of the more theatrical, male behaviour in Indian cinemas (2000: 63), it is structurally similar in the use of the body to express publicly the pleasure of the male gaze in relation to the female figure on screen. Derné and Jadwin write that 'poor urban men gawked at the heroine as they rustled in their seats, some hooting, clapping and dancing' (2000: 250).

<sup>15</sup> Jamie was Mila Kunis's character in *Friends With Benefits*.

<sup>16</sup> See Hamilton (2007) for evidence of how lesbianism becomes a performance for the male gaze by 'straight' women in the Fraternity context on a US college campus, to the detriment of actual lesbian women.

<sup>17</sup> To set the record straight, it must be said that this expression of alienation in the first week was not a permanent feature of the course: one male student wrote in the introduction to his journal: 'I entered into our cave of debate not knowing what to expect or how to react. Twelve weeks on and I can now reflect on what has been the most enlightening but also enjoyable class of my college career. I have spoken to many of my fellow classmates and they all say the same. Although we as a male population were outnumbered quite significantly, we always relish the debate within the class surrounding issues of interest, as it was always stimulating and quite edgy' (Eoin).