

Beauty in the Eye of the Director: Reassessing Body Image in Film

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Introduction

In her 1990 feminist classic *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, Naomi Wolf called for artistic work to “undermine and overwhelm” society’s devastating beauty ideals (277). Twenty-eight years later, three commercial, mainstream films set about doing just that. *I Feel Pretty* (2018), *Dumplin’* (2018) and *Isn’t It Romantic* (2019) each seek to question the status quo around body image, and to boost women’s self-esteem. This essay will discuss whether these films live up to their aim. I propose that *Isn’t It Romantic* is the most successful, due to the construction of its narrative. *I Feel Pretty* and *Dumplin’* both have significant issues that undermine their potential, such as insensitive casting and problematic messages around sexual harassment.

By establishing the qualities of these films that are capable of positive impact, and the qualities that detract from their overall message, I also hope to provide a foundation for more effective work in future. This is because when crafted thoughtfully, mainstream films with large audiences have the capacity to reach and support the vast number of women with negative body image¹. Given the mental and physical health conditions that such low self-esteem can lead to, this is vital.

The films all follow their protagonists as they find their place in a world that defines their worth by how they look. Renee, in *I Feel Pretty*, works with a makeup company and struggles with low self-esteem until she wakes up after a head injury believing that she is beautiful. *Isn’t It Romantic*’s Natalie similarly has low body confidence which is restored by the end thanks to her experience in a fantastical rom-com universe. *Dumplin’* is slightly different in that its central character, Willowdean, has a fairly positive body image, though it is rocked by events in the film. She and her friends Hannah, Millie and Elle enter a local beauty pageant to ‘make a point’, but in the end, their unconventional beauty is celebrated by the judges and audience. The films also follow a romance narrative, but this is not the primary plotline, except for arguably in the case of *Isn’t It Romantic*.

The Importance of Representation

Both *Isn’t It Romantic* and *I Feel Pretty* end with the male love interest telling the protagonist that he’s never stopped “seeing” her: “I’m always looking at you” (*IIR* 1:17:57); “I’ve always seen you” (*IFP* 1:44:57). The resemblance between the two lines is uncanny and highly significant. It indicates that for those who struggle with body image, being ‘seen’ and recognised by society is vital. This is no surprise. In their day-to-day lives, larger, older, and disabled women can experience a sense of invisibility (Owen 298; Hofmeier et al. 8-9; Zitzelsberger 400), and film, fundamentally a visual medium, has not helped this. For decades, women who did not fit a particular beauty ideal were relegated to background roles in almost all mainstream movies, if ever shown at all. Yet cinema’s very visuality means that it can also offer an emancipatory alternative to this history of obscurity. Indeed, I will argue that *I Feel Pretty*, *Dumplin’* and *Isn’t It Romantic*, do.

¹ Negative appearance-related feelings affect over 6 in 10 UK women (GB. Women and Equalities Committee 3).

The three films each illustrate, to a different extent, the experience of negative body image. As *Vogue* critic Bridget Read noted, there is a brutally relatable moment in *I Feel Pretty* where Renee stares into a mirror as her eyes well up with tears (6:47); Natalie, in a similarly relatable manner, expresses her sense of invisibility in *Isn't It Romantic* (6:53). Both Renee and Natalie are sensitive to rejection based on their appearance, a common tendency amongst those who frequently compare their looks with others (Park 490, 502). In Natalie's case, the fear almost inhibits her from achieving success at work. Moreover, exercise and sex reflect some of the most sensitive areas for larger women, alongside fashion (Hynnä and Kyrölä 4). It is significant, therefore that Renee and Willowdean are excluded from the fashion industry (42:25; 05:04), that Renee feels initially like an outsider at her SoulCycle class (01:15), and that Willowdean becomes suddenly insecure when making out with her boyfriend (36:55). These scenes enable the films to accurately illustrate the difficulties of many women.

Representation of these experiences is vital. The British Board of Film Classification has proven that positive on-screen portrayals of concerns like body image help young people break down stigma and engage in important discussions. Moreover, psychologists Jennifer K. Bosson, Elizabeth C. Pinel and J. Kevin Thompson believe we should validate negative body image as a real difficulty, rather than minimise the often distressing concerns that women experience (262-3). The films certainly do legitimise these struggles - and for *Isn't It Romantic's* Natalie, this is especially powerful. Explicitly feminist (she goes on marches and rails against sexist conventions in romantic comedies (00:43:09; 08:40)), her experience legitimises being a feminist and simultaneously battling with body image. Such validation has been constructive in the past, since it is a struggle women can feel guilty about (Rubin, Nemeroff and Russo 35-6).

However, the films certainly do not represent all experiences and this weakens their impact. The Body Positivity movement that encourages 'loving your body' has been criticised for using white, cisgender models with 'curvy' but not radically large bodies, ignoring alternative figures (Lechner 76). Many critics² and members of the public³ took issue with the three films for these reasons. In particular, *I Feel Pretty* may feel alienating to non-white audiences because the filmmakers do not necessarily align themselves with an inclusive agenda by casting Amy Schumer, whose comedy has been considered racially insensitive (Heisey). *Dumplin'* might also estrange viewers. Sarah A. Shelton writes how 'whole characters are cut' or changed from the Young Adult novel, *Dumplin'*, that the film adapts. Hannah, for example, is no longer half-Dominican (86). I would build on this to note how the bodies shown in the film are more conventionally 'attractive' than those in the book: Millie and Lucy (Willowdean's aunt) are slimmer, and Hannah loses her "giant" "crooked" teeth (Murphy 203). Teenagers who identified with these characters when reading the novel are therefore likely to question why their race, body size or facial characteristics cannot be shown on a screen. Consequently, with regard to representation, *Dumplin'* is certainly the weakest film.

'I Love Me!': Helpful and Unhelpful Messages for Tackling Low Self-Esteem

² E.g. Herman, Freer.

³ IMDB User Reviewers and Twitter users.

Currently, those seeking to help individuals with negative body image generally promote one of two ideas: “body positivity” or “body neutrality” (Kessel; Cohen et al. (2021) 2368-71; Tylka and Wood-Barcalow 118). The former celebrates the beauty of all bodies, and the latter ‘is the idea that women’s bodies should not be commented on at all’ - that you do not have to love every part of your body, but that you do not have to hate yourself either (Kessel; Noor). The three films under review here can be placed on a spectrum with regard to these two ideas. *Dumplin’* is undeniably body-positive, ending with a plus-sized teenager achieving second place in a beauty pageant and thus the celebration of beauty at every size. *I Feel Pretty* seems unsure about its message, claiming both that “real women” should not care about appearances (1:41:09), and that “real women” are “beautiful” (1:42:37). Natalie, however, states in *Isn’t It Romantic* that she will never fit the beauty ideal (1:08:41). Instead, in a truly body-neutral manner, she decides to love herself regardless. Given that the research is currently inconclusive, it is impossible to say which of the films has the better message. However, *Dumplin’* does not convey its body-positive moral particularly well. It seeks to widen beauty standards by suggesting that Millie and Willowdean are pretty, but does not claim that all women are beautiful, just these two. Consequently, women who consider themselves uglier than these two characters may find it harder to engage with the body-positive message.

Therefore, *Isn’t It Romantic* and *I Feel Pretty* have more potential for positive impact than *Dumplin’*. *I Feel Pretty*, however, depends on a speech (1:40:32-1:42:46) to communicate its principles, which weakens its effectiveness. The message becomes rushed, to avoid being unentertaining. Moreover, the abstract concepts in the speech, such as believing in yourself, are not always easy to define practically. *Isn’t It Romantic*, alternatively, uses the plot rather than dialogue to impress its point. Natalie visually demonstrates what self-love looks like, ‘falling in love’ with herself at the end and modelling many behaviours which are known to improve self-esteem⁴ (1:08:41-1:20:21). The imagery of Natalie growing in confidence should, according to cognitive science (Christiano and Neimand 30), enable us to “understand and remember” the message “far better” than in the case of Renee’s words, because of its visual nature.

However, the messages of *Isn’t It Romantic* and *I Feel Pretty* are undermined by their stars’ public images. It is hard to disassociate the character from the celebrity when watching the films: the roles each depend significantly on their actresses’ particular comedic brands, and both women have spoken publicly about body image and their experiences with it (e.g. Torgerson, BBC World Service 8:44, TODAY). This means that, though I would by no means criticise them for it, Rebel Wilson’s recent weight loss ‘journey’ (BBC World Service 7:50) and Schumer’s liposuction surgery (Rose), affect how we interpret the films. When Renee and Natalie tell us to ignore other people’s criticisms and to love ourselves, it is harder for audiences to take them seriously, because we doubt that the actresses themselves have practised this.

Differences aside, all three films are alike in their use of a romance narrative. On the one hand, research has shown (perhaps controversially) that female body satisfaction increases

⁴ She lists her positive attributes, grows in assertiveness, and begins to say ‘no’ to colleagues who demand too much of her, all of which are NHS recommended practices.

when they are told that men find larger women attractive (Meltzer and McNulty 396). However, the romantic ending in *Isn't It Romantic* becomes the film's focus, detracting from its celebration of self-love. In *Dumplin'*, moreover, the romance could actually undermine its intended effect. Bo's preference of Willowdean over Bekah Cotter (who perfectly exemplifies society's beauty ideal) may well make audiences reflect on how infrequently this occurs in real life. In a similarly disadvantageous manner, Ethan's attraction to Renee in *I Feel Pretty* seems to arise from her confidence. This implies that women need to love themselves more to secure a partner, an approach which Laura Favaro claims, in her discussion of women's magazines, unhelpfully burdens women (286-7).

Overall, *Isn't It Romantic* remains the most effective in promoting its message. Its use of the narrative rather than dialogue to convey its core idea sets it above *I Feel Pretty*. *Dumplin'* remains weak because of its casting and use of romance.

Feminism and Cultural Critique

'Neoliberal feminism' emphasises individual responsibility and self-growth as responses to structural inequalities (Rottenberg (2014) 419). *I Feel Pretty* and *Isn't It Romantic*, in seeking to advise women on how to improve their own body image, are examples of this. However, Catherine Rottenberg suggests that neoliberal feminism takes the focus away from, and prevents, collective action against institutional sexism ((2014) 426). As Amanda Hess stresses in a *New York Times* article about *I Feel Pretty*, the film's viewpoint puts all the pressure on individuals to help themselves, rather than society. Fundamentally, films hoping to ameliorate women's self-esteem would be most effective if they challenged the culture that keeps women striving to attain a particular ideal and continues to objectify them.

Dumplin' comes closest. The local beauty pageant - the ultimate symbol of performative femininity, given that it is quite literally a stage - is scorned by the characters, and so they decide to "revolt" against it (33:00). By the end of the film, this locus of femininity becomes a platform upon which different versions of womanhood can be paraded and celebrated, from plus-sized women to those who, like Hannah, challenge gender stereotypes. But it is equally important to note that the pageant itself, and the culture of objectification that it signifies, are not criticised. What began as a rebellion becomes instead a widespread celebration of the desirability and beauty of all women. The film's only obvious social commentary is voiced by Hannah (33:05), making it easily dismissable as part of her acerbic, ultra-feminist personality, rather than the filmmakers' opinion.

One effective casting decision in *Dumplin'* was the choice to have Jennifer Aniston play Willowdean's mother, Rosie. Aniston perfectly fits the beauty ideal that magazines constantly tell women that they have to strive to attain. Yet in publicity around the film, Aniston revealed that she really believes in its body-positive message (Hastings; *TheEllenShow* 1:03). Wolf writes that we all need to unite against the pressures of beauty, no matter how conventionally attractive we are. Only this will enable us to stop seeing each other as competition, and realise that every woman is a victim of objectification and unfair treatment (284). Aniston's action acts as a step toward the kind of unity that Wolf was calling for.

I Feel Pretty, on the other hand, is not nearly as politically impactful as *Dumplin'*, despite having the potential to challenge culture. A major storyline centres on an exclusive, expensive make-up brand establishing a diffusion line at Target. The film here so clearly emphasises the intersection of class and beauty, and yet avoids making any commentary on how beauty standards impact women's financial resources and disadvantage those who cannot afford to "invest in attractiveness" (Rhode 85). Instead, Renee's final speech actively promotes the makeup industry (Read; Hadadi). *I Feel Pretty* is further limited by the way it excuses society's objectification of women. I would build on Roxana Hadadi's criticism of the way Renee seems to like being catcalled (26:16) to note how she also idolizes the way strangers constantly flirt with her friend Mallory (18:29). This implicitly suggests that unwanted sexual attention should be considered a compliment. There is, furthermore, an uncomfortable scene in which her boss' brother, Grant, comes into her hotel room and then, without her consent, plays with her pigtails, picks up an item of her underwear, sits on her bed, and reads her personal notes for the speech she is giving the next day (1:14:19-1:18:16). Not only is Grant aware that Renee has a boyfriend, but she gives no indication that she feels at all comfortable with this. Despite this, romantic music plays and Grant is presented as a supposedly likeable character for the rest of the film. His ability to see Renee's beauty is presumably meant to be a virtuous characteristic - yet women should expect more from men than just the ability to look beyond beauty ideals.

Isn't It Romantic does not particularly challenge culture, but it is less problematic than *I Feel Pretty*. There is a slight implication of a double standard when a male colleague of a similar size to Natalie assumes a superior position, but no explicit comment is made (03:53). Intriguingly, when Natalie gains confidence, she wears significantly more makeup than she did initially. This does not necessarily contradict feminist discourse, however, which has, especially in recent years, encouraged, rather than condemned, the "playfulness and pleasure" that beauty and fashion afford (Elias, Gill and Scharff 21).

Overall, none of the films seriously approach a significant critique of the patriarchal systems that affect female self-esteem. *Dumplin'* constructs a narrative of activism against prevailing beauty norms, but avoids discussion of the way female objectification pervades the culture it depicts. The other two films place pressure on women, rather than society, to change their perspectives of themselves - and *I Feel Pretty* is especially problematic in this regard. Therefore, though *Dumplin'* presents more of a critique than the others, this is not significant enough to make it particularly powerful. *Isn't It Romantic* remains, overall, the film with the greatest capacity to affect audiences.

Conclusion

I would echo feminist criticisms of neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg (2018); Favaro 297-8) to say that, in future, films hoping to challenge widespread body negativity need to put more pressure on society to stop defining women by their looks. Yet there is still a place to do this and simultaneously promote body-positive or body-neutral messages. After all, the cause of negative body image cannot be simplified to just the 'male gaze'. Body-positive films, however, need to be aware that using their protagonists to expand beauty standards may isolate some viewers. Care should, moreover, be taken with the casting to avoid a lack of diversity, and when depicting wanted or unwanted sexual and romantic attention. However,

the accurate representation of low self-esteem in these three films, especially in the case of Natalie's feminism in *Isn't It Romantic*, promises to be highly effective in future films.

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