

Reassessing Body Image in Film

Low body image affects over 6 in 10 UK women, and more than two thirds of children (GB. Women and Equalities Committee 2-3). With negative mental and physical health consequences, this is not a minor concern. Some recent commercial films have, therefore, tried to use their wide reach to deal with this issue. *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 low self-esteem. I researched whether these films live up to their aim. By establishing the qualities of these movies that have the potential for positive impact, and the qualities that detract from their overall message, I also hope to provide a foundation for films to be more effective in future.

Helpful and Unhelpful Messages

Psychologists generally promote one of two ideas with regard to body image: 'body positivity' (a celebration of all bodies) or 'body neutrality' (the idea that appearances don't matter) (Kessel; Cohen et al. (2021) 2368-71; Tylka and Wood-Barcalow 118; Noor). While the other two films promote body neutrality, *Dumplin'* is body-positive. Given that the research is currently inconclusive, it is impossible to say which is 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.

I Feel Pretty depends on a speech (1:40:32-1:42:46) to convey its moral, which weakens its effectiveness. The message becomes rushed, to avoid being unentertaining. Moreover, the abstract concepts in the speech are not always easy to define in practice. *Isn't It Romantic*, alternatively, uses the plot rather than dialogue to impress its point. 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.

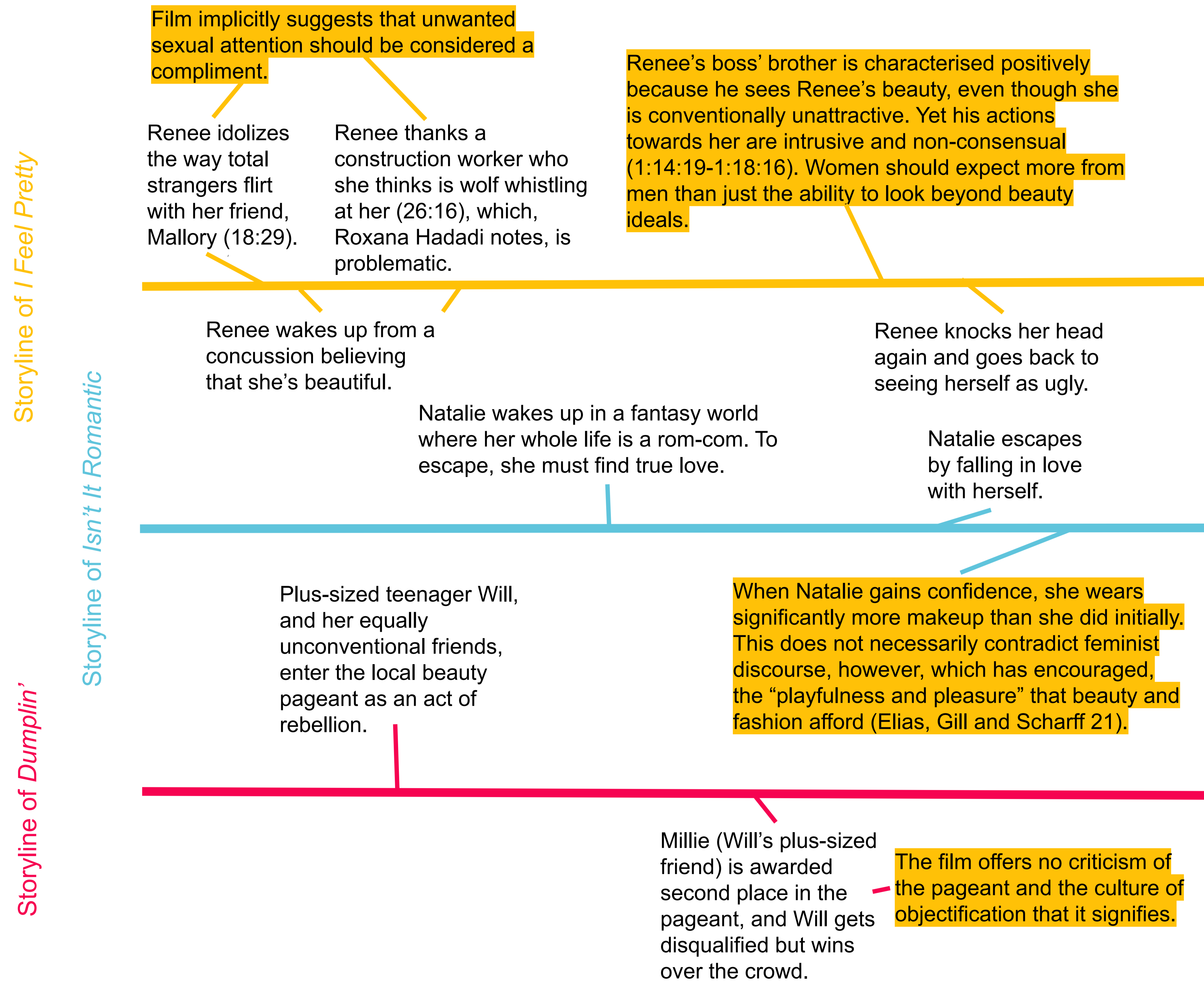
The protagonist from each film secures a heterosexual romantic relationship. Research has shown (perhaps controversially) that female body satisfaction increases when they are told that men find larger women attractive (Meltzer and McNulty 396). However, the films do not deal with the romance plots particularly well.

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 *Isn't It Romantic* and Natalie's feminism, promises to be highly effective in future films.

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Representation

The three films each illustrate, to a different extent, the experience of negative body image. Representation like this helps young people break down stigma and engage in important discussions (BBFC), and, in a constructive manner, validates negative body image as a real difficulty (Bosson, Pinel and Thompson 262-3).

However, the films do not represent all experiences. They use white, cisgender actresses with 'curvy' but not radically large bodies, and so ignore alternative figures. *Dumplin'* in particular alienates audiences by changing characters from the novel that it adapts. Certain people are made significantly slimmer, and one character loses their "giant" "crooked" teeth (Murphy 203). This means that teenagers who identified with these characters when reading the novel are going to have questions about why their body size or facial characteristics cannot be shown on a screen.

Feminism and Cultural Critique

Amanda Hess, in a *New York Times* article about *I Feel Pretty*, stresses that the film puts pressure on individuals to gain confidence rather than challenging the culture that keeps women striving to attain a particular ideal. Indeed, none of the films come very close to critiquing this patriarchal system, as evident from the plot points highlighted in orange.

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