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"WHAT'S YOUR DREAM?": *PRETTY WOMAN* AND PEDAGOGY

Toni Perrine

Films are difficult to explain because they are easy to understand.

Christian Metz
Film Language

A sense of unity is more important to us than an absolutely rigorous logic, and a sense of unity with our own past seems of particular importance. We want our lives and thoughts to make sense, to add up; yet vexing but inescapable contradictions penetrate the very heart of this devoutly wished-for unity like marbling through stone.

Bill Nichols
Ideology and the Image

Winter, 1991. Working through the difficult concepts of film theory, still not sure whether I had convinced many in the class that thinking about film as something more than entertainment was even worth the effort. One frequently encountered complaint concerned the number of "classic" films that comprised the majority of texts for the course (i.e., Old—Black and White! Foreign—subtitled! Or musicals—just plain corny!). In order to give the students a greater voice in determining the learning agenda, I decided to allow the class to choose a film to study in the context of ideological theory for the remaining weeks of the semester. Much to my chagrin, *Pretty Woman* (1990) won by a landslide. I had not even seen the film at that point, but its reputation preceded it. Julia Roberts as an "innocent prostitute with a heart of gold." Richard Gere as a "heartless corporate raider." Cinderella story. Ugh! I suggested that my choice, the 1939 version of *Wuthering Heights*, was a far superior film (wasn't it?) but I was quickly overruled. I supposed *Pretty Woman* was better than *Top Gun*, which had been the closest competitor, and so I reluctantly agreed.

Pretty Woman won the People's Choice Award for best film in 1990, and female viewers were primarily responsible for its popularity. One male student said his girlfriend had seen it at least ten times and watched it to cheer herself up when she felt sad. All but two people in the class had seen the film, and many had seen it multiple times. Almost everyone who had seen *Pretty Woman* liked it; the majority considered it good entertainment and a few called it their favorite film ever. In addition, *Pretty Woman* received positive reviews from respected film critics like Stanley Kauffmann and David Ansen. Although some others were less generous, calling the film predictable, boring and unrealistic, most critics considered it relatively

harmless Hollywood assembly-line entertainment. It sparked none of the controversy associated with other recent popular films like *Basic Instinct*, *Fatal Attraction* or *Silence of the Lambs*.

I watched *Pretty Woman* at home the following weekend and was completely appalled. It was even worse than I had expected. I failed entirely to see the appeal of the film. My previous suspicion that I was totally out of touch with the mainstream in terms of taste was confirmed. How could millions of people, especially women, enjoy this film? It seemed to me that *Pretty Woman* degraded women in the most obvious ways, from its depiction of the main characters as cute prostitutes to its portrayal of most other female characters (sales clerks and high society women) as snooty bitches who treat other women badly. How could viewers not see through its shallow pretense of romance? How could they not be outraged by its sexist core?

The problem for me was clear: how could I use a film that I not only didn't like because of its inherent sexism, but which was not particularly exceptional in terms of its narrative or formal qualities. It eventually dawned on me that I was resisting *Pretty Woman* in ways that were not all that different from how some students resisted my choice of exemplary films. In fact, it was precisely because it is so typical and so popular that *Pretty Woman* turned out to be an excellent choice to demonstrate how mainstream Hollywood films reinforce, but also show fissures in, the dominant ideology. The film ultimately served to challenge the viewing assumptions of both students and teacher.

The first problem I encounter in teaching film studies is a certain felt resistance to film as a legitimate area of study. This resistance comes both from students who expect an easy course and are dismayed when they don't get it and from colleagues in more established disciplines. Once, a colleague came to my office, looked at my shelf of videotapes and jokingly asked if he could "borrow a lecture." Showing films, like having students meet in groups, is something that lazy teachers do. In addition, because they are so "easy," anyone can teach about film, which is often assumed to be a matter of a certain knowledge of film trivia: directors, stars, genres. Film studies and other programs in visual communication attempt to provide a critical context, a means of interpreting and understanding the visual information that is increasingly central to contemporary culture. Students say to me, "I never knew there was so much to it," by which they mean, I believe, that they never seriously considered the impact these images have on them, or their own active role in making sense of what they see, or the tremendous variety of interpretations possible with any given shot, or all of the formal elements—like lighting and camera angle and editing—that allow for those various interpretations. Certainly, many teachers use movies as an effective pedagogical tool in other contexts, but rigorous study of film (and other visual media) as film is crucial to a fuller understanding of how moving images, in combination with sound and text, work on us in a culture that is increasingly dominated by them.

The next level of resistance concerns the type of films studied. Though relatively new, cinema studies does have a well established group of privileged texts which are commonly considered essential viewing for all students. This group includes films

that are valued for their formal qualities, like Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, or for their narrative complexity, like Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, or for the way they express the richness of human experience, like DeSica's *Bicycle Thieves*, and especially for some combination of the above. I feel that it is important to introduce students to the significant films of the "canon," so I will continue to expose my students to those black and white, foreign and corny classics (most of them produced and directed by dead white males!). Many students are affected by such films in ways they didn't expect and frequently thank me for opening up a new world for them. Those moments make me strong in my vocation, strong enough to resist despair when the occasional student evaluation baldly states that the films viewed in class were not "relevant," or were even "boring." Letting students choose a film that resonated for them, one that is contemporary and relevant or at least entertaining (why we derive such pleasure from watching movies is in itself a fascinating area of study), may encourage them to become engaged in a meaningful way in the admittedly difficult task of critical analysis. In fact, a popular commercial film like *Pretty Woman* can provide more insights into the culture in which it was produced and the audience that consumes it than the individualized work of a self-absorbed film artist.

Before we watched or discussed *Pretty Woman*, I asked my students to write down whether they had liked it and why, and what they felt the film was about. Only three people in the class had not liked *Pretty Woman*: one called it farfetched and trivial; one cited the mediocre acting; and one person wrote that it demeaned women of all social classes. I read aloud to the class the following comments culled from their mostly positive responses:

- cute story with powerful man and beautiful woman: my two favorite characters....love story that involves a rich, powerful man rescuing a woman from the depths of society.
- lower class individual who breaks class lines and moves up to upper class: hope for rest of us.
- modern day *Pygmalion*, taking a whore and turning her into a cultured woman—a story that appeals to people because they like to see that people can better themselves and that money can make people happy.
- a call girl makes a rich businessman realize there is more to life than making money.
- the film did discount women and thus it discounted men....dealt with the inequalities of the social structure. Vivian had to sell herself to obtain Edward. Edward did not give up anything to obtain Vivian.

These comments revealed a certain, albeit confused, sensitivity to issues of class and gender and provided a starting point for our ideological analysis of *Pretty Woman*. Before this juncture, we had already struggled with defining "ideology" and tried to enumerate elements of the American dominant ideology (individual initiative, the work ethic, heterosexual monogamy, etc.). We read and discussed general theoretical articles about how cinema conveys ideological messages in terms of form

and content, and the different ways those messages may be read by audiences. We were more or less ready to apply the theory to a particular film.

We then watched *Pretty Woman* in ten to fifteen minute sections and talked about what we had seen and heard in that segment, an approach that we had already used several times through the semester. Students often find this exercise frustrating because it disrupts the narrative flow of the film; they are forced to disengage, which, as with other sensual activities, affects the pleasure of the experience. Most narrative films have natural breaks often signalled by a fade to black or other visual transition. We tried to identify these sequences or syntagmas to lessen the disruptive effect while still achieving a degree of distancing necessary for more objective viewing.

For example, the opening credits sequence of *Pretty Woman*, in which we are introduced to the two main characters and their respective worlds, is clearly delineated from the body of the film both visually and aurally. We first see Edward in an expensive suit at a fancy party where he is the guest of honor. These shots efficiently establish that he is a man of position and power who does not easily express emotion. The aerial shot of the Hollywood hills as Edward leaves the party in his lawyer's Lotus provides the transition to Vivian and her Hollywood Boulevard environment. The first shot of Vivian shows her nearly nude body (the infamous body double, since Julia Roberts refused to do this scene) rolling in bed to expose her legs and scantily covered buttocks. Initially, her face is not shown, nor is she named. She is an anonymous female whose body is offered for our viewing pleasure. The sequence crosscuts between long shots of Edward in the car lost in Hollywood and close-up shots of Vivian dressing for work as a hooker. The opening titles continue over various shots of Hollywood street life. The title sequence ends as the song "Wild One" fades out on the sound track, and the director's name, conventionally the last opening credit, fades from the screen.

From our previous experience of viewing films, we recognize the end of the title sequence in which important story information has already been established and prepare to become more directly involved in the film. The credits have visually reminded us that we are watching a film. Afterwards, as with most conventional Hollywood films, we are encouraged to "suspend disbelief" and become so involved with the action that we no longer notice various filmic devices like editing, except when the filmmaker wants us to. We escape. We get lost in the story. We identify with an engaging character. We get involved emotionally with what we are seeing. Our pleasure is disrupted if this level of engagement is not achieved, and we start looking at our watches. I think it safe to say that *Pretty Woman* successfully engages most audience members in a pleasurable film viewing experience.

The next sequence of *Pretty Woman* shows the first encounter between Edward and Vivian. This example will suffice to demonstrate how I ask the class to look at the film and how they begin to understand that the overall pleasure they derive from the romance, humor and happy ending does not offset the film's pervasive messages about class and gender. In terms of formal elements, I ask the students to pay

careful attention to the way a shot is framed (long shot, medium shot, close-up), its "mise-en-scene" (what is included in each shot in terms of setting, costumes, props, actor position), and especially to what are called point of view shots (the perspective from which we view the action). A point of view shot is very powerful. It visually determines which characters the audience will identify with. The patterns of identification of any film help engage the audience and make watching film a psychologically pleasurable experience. It is significant, then, that we see Vivian almost entirely from Edward's perspective, accomplished visually when a close-up of Edward looking offscreen is followed by a shot of Vivian. This pattern is repeated numerous times throughout the film and is, in fact, its dominant point of view pattern. In this sequence alone, the pattern is repeated several times: first when Vivian approaches the car as Kit encourages her to "work it, baby, work it," and we see Edward's perspective through the car window as Vivian turns her backside to him; then in the hotel lobby when Vivian attracts the gaze not only of Edward but also of a dignified husband and the elevator operator, who stare as she examines an imaginary run in her nonexistent pantyhose. The point of view pattern is continued in the penthouse and culminates in the shots when Edward watches Vivian on the floor watching television. At this point, the power of Edward's gaze is strong enough to distract Vivian from "I Love Lucy!" In her inferior position on the floor, she crawls over to him and proceeds to perform fellatio (not shown, of course, only suggested since the film was produced and released by Touchstone, a Disney subsidiary). When encouraged to do so, students can clearly see the power of the male gaze that establishes subject/object positions in the film. They may begin to recognize the larger implications of these culturally determined positions. Some women students begin to acknowledge the relative perversity of their identification with Vivian. Some are troubled that they ever liked the film in the first place.

The first encounter between Edward and Vivian establishes the mutual exploitation that characterizes their respective professions ("we both screw people for money") and their relationship. We see a series of negotiations in which Vivian haggles for an amount of money that is a pittance to Edward. Initially, she agrees to direct Edward back to Beverly Hills for ten dollars. The dollar amount attached to her services increases as their relationship develops, from ten dollars to three hundred dollars, to three thousand dollars, at which point Vivian is ecstatic and the audience is glad for her. Vivian is happy to be an exploited object, except when people are rude or otherwise treat her badly. She brags to Kit about the money she is making by selling her body but cries to Barney, the hotel manager, when the snobbish sales clerks won't let her make a purchase in their chic store on Rodeo Drive. One of the emotional high points of the film comes when Vivian gets revenge on the clerks by spending "obscene" amounts of money at another store to the tune of Roy Orbison's song "Pretty Woman." Several female students cited this scene, the "shopping montage," as their favorite of the film. The idea that "to shop 'til you drop" is a reasonable antidote to female frustration has found acceptance in our popular culture and seems a particularly telling symptom of women's complicity in maintaining the patriarchal standard.

At this juncture, students are able to point out the contradictions in Vivian's position, whereby she depends on Edward and his money to transform her into a socially acceptable person, even though earlier she and Kit had made a point of maintaining their self-determination by resisting a pimp's control ("We say who, we say when, we say how much."). On her own, Vivian is scorned by the elite class she admires on Rodeo Drive. In the company of Edward and his credit cards, she is fawned over and admired and easily achieves economic and social status. Many students considered Vivian's acceptance of Edward's status as her own a harmless form of selling oneself (in fact, what many women aspire to in marriage), even though the film suggests that this form of prostitution is more insidious than the overt kind practiced on Hollywood Boulevard. Other students argued for the double Pygmalion story, whereby Edward turns Vivian into a "lady" with clothes and manners, and Vivian transforms Edward into a decent and loving man, even curing his acrophobia. All agree that much of the humor of the film derives from Vivian's behavior as she attempts to fit into Edward's world. In the scenes where she learns to mimic upper class standards of behavior at a fancy restaurant, the opera and a polo match, Vivian's vulnerability and childlike nature are emphasized, exemplified by the way that Edward constantly chides her for her posture and fidgeting.

The week in which we viewed and "deconstructed" *Pretty Woman* generated some of the most spirited discussions of the semester. Many students, especially young women, defended the film because they had identified with Vivian and considered her a strong character who had at least an equally defining role in the relationship. Some did not feel that we needed to take Hollywood films, or popular culture generally, so seriously (it's "just entertainment" after all). With my prompting perhaps, other students began to argue that the discourse of the film (what it's really about) was not quite so simple or so benign as it had initially appeared. They began to articulate some of the ways in which *Pretty Woman* reflects and reinforces the patriarchal base of our culture. They began to see how the film's comedy, romance and attractive characters distract the audience from its inherent sexism and mask its corrupt materialism, in which human beings are just one more commodity in a brutal marketplace.

For my part, I tried to understand the appeal of *Pretty Woman* as I listened to what the students had to say about it. I made every effort to maintain the level of objectivity necessary for unrestrained discussions. To my horror and fascination, I even found myself laughing along with the students and enjoying the film (somewhat!) in the context of a receptive audience. I began to understand the film's appeal in class terms, a subject about which Hollywood has always been schizophrenic. Hollywood cinema abounds with the rags-to-riches tales that are at the heart of the "American Dream" at the same time that it continually underscores the idea that money corrupts and the rich are not happy. *Pretty Woman* self-reflexively acknowledges its own dream/film status at the beginning and end of the film when a street person shouts "Welcome to Hollywood, what's your dream? Everybody's got a dream." The repetition of these phrases by a person who does not materially share

in the dream ironically foregrounds one important function of "the dream factory": to perpetuate individual and cultural myths at the expense of collective action or social change. *Pretty Woman* overtly positions itself as a fairy tale in which dreams of wealth and privilege are obtainable even as it reflects deep-rooted cultural contradictions about class issues. In the process, the film reduces the audience to a "childlike" state where fairy tales can at least fleetingly come true.

One of the questions we try to address is that of the film's special appeal for women. As a romance, *Pretty Woman* is conventionally considered a "woman's film," just as action-adventure films conventionally appeal to male audiences. This type of categorization is problematic, but in the broadest sense, accurate. Even though most male students enjoyed the film initially, they were much more moderate in their responses and much quicker to criticize its sexism. In its reconstruction of the Cinderella myth, made explicit in the film when Kit calls the only woman to make it out of their social situation "Cinder-fucking-ella," *Pretty Woman* resonates for many women socialized in this culture. The rescue motif may appear to give Vivian agency (the princess rescues the prince right back) but even this motif is undermined by the ending in which the prince carries the princess off on his white steed, in this case, a white limo. We assume the couple will "live happily ever after" in Edward's elite world, because Vivian's self-sufficient position is not sanctioned by the film. The audience is relieved and happy that Vivian is reunited with Edward instead of going off to college on her own.

In her book, *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence*, Colette Dowling suggests that women play a large role in maintaining their submissive cultural roles, because they have been socialized into dependency. This secret fear of freedom causes women to discredit or doubt their own success in the workplace and other contested cultural arenas. They are afraid that social independence and economic success will engender failure in relationships with men and with motherhood. These largely unvoiced fears can lead even the most "liberated" women to contradictory and even detrimental action. In class we discussed the appeal of *Pretty Woman* as a text which reenacts this complex social pattern.

Feminist film critics have theorized that the response of women to mainstream cinema can only be masochistic as a result of the identification patterns created by point of view editing in which the ideal spectator position is the male position. Women experience pleasure in their own objectification except when it is too overt (as in a beer commercial, for example), but it is a passive pleasure that reinforces negative gender stereotypes. Some radical feminist scholars have called for an alternative film style to break down the pleasures of the dominant cinema pattern. Feminist films that do attempt a counter system of cinematic identification usually don't have mainstream distribution and are often only seen by small audiences in noncommercial settings. Most feminist critics conclude that films like *Thelma and Louise* or *A League of Their Own* don't offer women viewers much of an alternative, despite the active heroines, since they end either in death or recuperation into traditional (domestic) female roles. Other feminist theorists try to understand how female audience members may make positive use of their own exploited images through mediation

and resistance. We discussed *Pretty Woman* as a film that might function this way for women. In this context, we note that Vivian skillfully used her personal resources to achieve a "fairy tale" romance and economic security, the two things she most desires.

During these discussions, we all needed to be sensitive to the positions of others. Individuals in the class were no doubt occasionally offended when their opinions were rebuffed by others, but, in general, I believe we avoided polarization. In particular, I tried to be conscious of the authority behind my position as teacher. I wanted the students to be able to see the film's sexism for themselves and not because it was the "officially sanctioned" reading, and I believe most eventually saw the value of this perspective.

At the end of the process of viewing and discussing the film, we were able to summarize the various levels of interpretation, from the most basic to the more complex, in the following ways:

- Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy is reunited with girl and they live happily ever after (the classical Hollywood paradigm).
- Two people from different socioeconomic worlds fall in love and live happily after.
- A rich powerful man rescues a poor young woman from a life of depravity (prostitution and drugs) and the reverse,
- A streetwise but otherwise naive young woman rescues an emotionally damaged older man from a meaningless existence.
- A young woman from a working class family uses her body to break class lines and enter the upper class, thus achieving the "American Dream."
- In the form of an amusing, predictable romantic comedy, societal attitudes about gender, race and class are reproduced and reinforced. The film's popularity attests to its ideological acceptability. Women are objects displayed and used, people of color are servants or pimps, the hypocrisy of the upper class is mildly satirized but ultimately valorized.

Okay, so the last one is mine. The point, however, is that we don't reach a monolithically consistent conclusion, nor is there one to reach. We do become aware of a greater spectrum of interpretations through a better understanding of the unexamined assumptions and underlying messages contained in the film's discourse and relayed by its form. As we work through the film, we try to describe the ways in which the film conforms to, or deviates from, the dominant ideology of our culture. This is, of course, a far too massive task to accomplish in a few weeks, but it definitely stimulates some thinking that can and does carry over to other film viewing situations. Many students tell me they are no longer able to watch films with their previous naive enjoyment but have a far greater understanding of what they see. Ideally, they will apply the critical tools they develop in this course to other media and extend a sensitivity to social constructs like gender and class to their own life experiences.