

“Meet Cute” and Impossible Love in the City

The *meet cute* is a device commonly employed in film where the primary leads meet for the first time in a way that is considered adorable, funny, or romantic. A more cynical viewer would claim that the trope merely exists to expedite plot development and to establish the relationship between the two leads as neatly as possible. Nevertheless, we forget that we implicitly accept this contrived occurrence because we have been socialized in an urbanized world where a happenstance meeting between individuals who grow to be romantic partners is not outside the realm of possibility. In sociologist Louis Wirth’s article “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” he asserts that “since Aristotle’s *Politics*, it has been recognized that increasing the number of inhabitants in a settlement beyond a certain limit will affect the relationships between them and the character of the city. Large numbers involve, as has been pointed out, a greater range of individual variation” and that relationships that are built are secondary rather than primary: “the contacts of the city may indeed be face to face, but they are nevertheless impersonal, superficial, transitory, and segmental” (Wirth 10, 12). The meet cute appeals to modern audiences because it assures us that it is possible for us to find love in an urbanized world that only produces secondary, utilitarian contacts between people. The trope is not simply a way for two strangers to discover their inexplicable affinity for each other and to validate the notion of romantic destiny, but it is also a byproduct of the densely populated urban environment in which we increasingly find ourselves in contemporary civilization. In *The Crowd* (1928), *West Side Story*

(1961), and *Modern Times* (1936), the city acts as a third-party facilitator to bring together the main male and female leads but it also threatens to break them apart, to varying degrees of success.

The protagonist of *The Crowd*, John Sims, meets his future wife Mary for the first time when his coworker convinces him to participate in a double date (13:00). The two of them establish a rapport immediately. Their attitudes and antics encapsulate youthful arrogance and a sense of fun with no consequence. When Sims and Mary first alight the bus that will take them on a double date to Coney Island, the director King Vidor positions the camera from Sims' point of view to highlight his juvenile ogling of Mary's legs. Like the ferocious winds of New York City buffeting their bodies, Sims and Mary get swept up in the pleasure of each other's company, but the depth of their compatibility ends there. Vidor sets up their relationship as a result of social pressures from mutual acquaintances that sustain themselves due to their physical attraction to one another. The flirtations develop into something more when Sims notices an advertisement on their bus ride home that says "You furnish the girl, we furnish the home," and after a single meeting, the two of them are married. While Vidor wants the audience to believe that the relationship between Sims and Mary is borne out of sincere attraction for one another, the reality of their circumstances are dictated by the social environment in which they find themselves. Sims, an easily persuadable, optimistic fool with little of his own agency but an excess of self-worth, essentially finds the first readily available woman he meets and declares that she is The One. While she grows up and adjusts to the responsibilities of adulthood, motherhood and married life, Sims continues to be a layabout who overestimates his own capabilities as a husband, father and

employee. By using the advertisement as the catalyst for their marriage, Vidor suggests that the city fabricates and encourages relationships between individuals that are no more sincere than the advertisements themselves, and that the “white picket fence” imagery of American middle class life is equally impossible to actualize. Families do not necessarily need love to sustain them, just complacency and duty, because the results are economically equivalent regardless of whether any real affection exists or not. As long as society in the city contains individuals who fulfill the roles to sustain that society (that is, for wives to bear children and maintain the home while their husbands go out and contribute to the preservation of the capitalist system), love is not necessary and the humans who fulfill those roles are interchangeable and anonymous. The meet cute between Sims and Mary is indicative of larger urban complexes at play -- individual will is not incentivized in the city, nor is true romance.

In contrast, the love between Tony and Maria in *West Side Story* is depicted as inexorable and full of passion. When Tony and Maria first meet on the dance floor (37:40), the lens blurs and then darkens as if to imply that their love at first sight blinds them to all other aspects of the visible world; it is heady and dangerous and all-consuming. The way they meet, across the vast distance of a gymnasium and physically blocked by their respective gang members, speaks to the deeply entrenched racial tensions that exist between the two groups that the two protagonists must overcome. When they finally come face to face and the crowd fades away, the background fades to black and multi-colored lights appear: the love between these two people is celestial and ordained, and the vulgarities of racism and violence are rendered irrelevant. While the relationship between Sims and Maria is regarded as a

convenience, the relationship between Tony and Maria is sincere and forms in spite of the social pressures from their warring communities that are telling them *not* to fall in love. The blinding rush of emotions the main characters experience as a result of their meet cute is the film's first indication of the impending doom in their relationship; the two gangs, already positioned on the bottom rung of society's ladder, will stop at nothing to claim any bit of turf in the city that they believe is rightfully theirs, and the romance between Tony and Maria is seen as a threat and betrayal to the integrity of their communities. The dense population of the city inevitably brings culturally disparate groups into close proximity with one another, and thus effortlessly facilitates their meet cute. Yet the crowdedness of the city leads to a competition for resources and for racial tensions to arise as justification for violence; it is in this environment of prejudice and physical danger where their romance is impossible to sustain itself. In the film, the west side of New York City is portrayed as a microcosm of systemic oppression against juvenile delinquents, the poor, people of color, and women. It is a toxic environment where the relationship between the star-crossed lovers could only end in tragedy. The tender, fleeting experience of their meet cute was an improbable, transcendent phenomenon that was burgeoned by the city but also destroyed because of it.

In *Modern Times*, Chaplin subverts the characteristics of the meet cute trope by unromanticizing the relationship between the leads, and also by having the two of them firmly establish a connection only upon meeting a second time. In an interview, Chaplin claimed that "there wouldn't be any 'romance' in the relationship... they would be 'two playmates - partners in crime, comrades, babes in the woods. We beg, borrow or steal for a living. Two joyous spirits living by their wits'" (Mellen 28). The Tramp and the

Gamin ape at domesticized married life, but in actuality they are two oddities who are the “only two live spirits in a world of automatons,” and they remain endearing to audiences because they have a socially maladjusted innocence about them that remains untouched by the soul-crushing realities of modern industrialization (28). The Tramp and the Gamin literally run into each other the first time they meet (37:10), when the Gamin unsuccessfully tries to steal a loaf of bread. They interact as strangers and neither is seeking any gain beyond his or her self-interest, a typical characteristic of urban living: the Gamin wants to deny her crime and avoid going to jail, and the Tramp wants to assume responsibility so he can enjoy prison’s amenities. They later meet again when the two of them are escorted to jail in the police van, and decide to escape together on a whim when the police van crashes after the Gamin attempts to jump off the vehicle. One would assume that the unconventional way they meet befits the unconventional relationship they share in the city, when in fact the relationship they share is the very essence of how two strangers in the city would realistically come together in the first place. This incredible sense of normality of the rapport between the Tramp and the Gamin is offset by the struggles they experience while trying to secure jobs and a place to live in a way that pleases them and that is acceptable by the conventions of the society in which they live. While the way the two characters come together is regarded as natural and ordinary, maintaining any semblance of that type of relationship is considered difficult because it does not fall into any presubscribed notions of how a man and a woman should coexist. In the end, the Tramp and the Gamin must leave society altogether in order to find their own version of happiness.

The Crowd, *West Side Story*, and *Modern Times* all explore the nature of how a man and a woman might be brought together in a city setting and explore all the different aspects of romantic, platonic, and functional love that can arise as a result. While the maintenance of the city is preserved by the duty-fulfilling roles of a man and woman who marry and form a family together, it is less amenable to individuals who form relationships that exist outside of traditional parameters.

Epilogue: A modern examination of this phenomenon can be seen in a recent news article about online dating websites and applications such as eHarmony and Tinder, and how those websites are not exclusively for young people searching for romantic flings. I think online dating has become a natural extension of the process of finding romantic relationships in the city because of the isolating way we live in this day and age, but online dating takes it one step further: instead of the random meetings and meet cutes facilitated by the city, the city has turned people insular and has turned our socialization into highly regimented and self-selective patterns. Since our default contact with other people is secondary rather than primary, it is reasonable that people approach “love” and “romance” with the same deliberation and utility as online shopping. Because city populations are so dense, people only exist in smaller social groups and the likelihood of finding someone you would be willing to commit to a romantic relationship with is small, especially if you hold on to the hope of finding someone better in the vast expanse of the city. Online dating at least provides you a pool of readily available and reachable individuals who have the same goals and interests in mind. It cuts directly to the chase. It is the digital equivalent of the meet cute, since meeting long-term romantic partners through mutual acquaintances (*The*

Crowd) and physically running into each other (*Modern Times*) and participating in the same social activities like dancing (*West Side Story*) are no longer the only viable options considering the relatively large population of potential mates in the urban environment. In the late 2000s, there used to be a stigma regarding online dating: it was only for sad schmucks who couldn't find anyone near them who would be willing to date them, or at least that was how online dating was portrayed by the media. It was for lonely people. This method of dating has entered the mainstream in part because of the realities of the specialized roles we take on in society that limit our contact with people outside of those circles of acquaintances.

To further unromanticize the concept of dating in the modern world, the article primarily focuses on the economic realities of it -- in the end, online dating is a business; while it is a business that enables the possibility of people finding each other and coming together, it is primarily interested in doing so for its own profit. It reminds me of the advertisement in *The Crowd*, and a deeply cynical part of me just kind of shrugs and accepts that the reality of all non-familial human interactions nowadays are just mutually beneficial transactions that last only however long as needed to accomplish the desired task, and that so-called "love" should not be treated as anything different.

References

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Spring 2015

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