

The Rules of Attraction (2002), a milieu of 'top-pocket relationships' and narcissism?

[Warning: contains sexually explicit material]

Bauman's term 'top-pocket relationship' seems to really sum up the narcissistic form of relationships that I feel is apparent in today's society. I wanted to examine the 2002 film *The Rules of Attraction* to illustrate Bauman's ideas. Narcissism seems to go hand in hand with how the self-indulgent 'top-pocket relationship' works. Therefore, this is also a notion that I wish to look for in my chosen media text.

I shall be discussing the main characters, looking at their own experiences of relationships, sex and their narcissistic personalities. The plot of the film spins a yarn about the pain of unrequited love that it is at times darkly funny and at other times depressingly tragic. It is safe to say there are not any movies out there quite like this one, there are drugs in the dorms, suicide in the bathtub and sex is cheaper than free.

Let me briefly introduce the main characters. Sean Bateman – the younger brother of *American Psycho* Patrick. He can cope with young lust, but not love. In his own words, "I'm a vampire, an emotional vampire. I feed off of other people's real emotions". Through the film, Sean receives purple love letters off a mystery admirer, tries to kill himself, masturbates, participates in casual one nighter sex, drinks huge amounts of alcohol and takes many drugs. We shall look deeper into Sean's physiology later on.

Lauren Hynde - She spends her spare time studying pictures of the effects of STDs in an effort to keep her hormones under control and not resort to casual sex with someone she does not love and who does not love her. At the beginning of the film she is a virgin, but not for long. A rape at a party takes this from her. Through the film we see Lauren give oral sex to her lecturer, she discovers the girl who committed suicide in the bathtub and has an on going infatuation with Victor.

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Victor Johnson – We only see this character briefly and mainly through a fast montage of clips in a travel diary style, depicting his trip to Europe on his gap year. We shall discuss his activities on this trip later.

Lara Holleran – Lauren's room mate at college. She is the typical blonde slag and is the polar opposite of Lauren. She wanders around the boys' dorm, in just her underwear, drinking Jack Daniels from the bottle. We then see her disappear into a room, containing the whole football team. Lauren's voiceover informs us that she had sex with every one of them that night. But "*She's now married to a Senator and has four kids.*"

The last protagonist is Paul Denton. He is bisexual and does not hide the fact. He tries to convince Sean and another random guy to have sex with him, but this fails. He seems confused within himself and craves sexual thrills with men, yet this does not willingly become available to him.

There are a few other areas of sexual relations that I wish to include here. The act of masturbation, the use of pornography, Bauman's ideas on 'liquid love', rape and Waller's ideas on 'rating and dating'. All of these occur in the film and give a proficient description of how the youth conduct their sexual and erotic lives today.

It is possible to consider *The Rules of Attraction* to be an anti-romantic comedy. The Hollywood convention is that, whenever a boy meets a girl, love will follow as quickly as the clichés allow. In real life, sex and romance are less perfect. In not giving in to the love conquers all mentality, Roger Avary's film uncovers an important truth about male/female relationships – that attraction is not always mutual and even when it is, happily-ever-after is frequently not the result.

All the protagonists in this movie are in love (or lust, if we are honest), but none of them finds their feelings reciprocated to the same degree. Avary finds a visual style that matches the emotional fragmentation. When they are not with the sex they love, they love the sex they are with. Instant gratification is the name of the game in *The Rules Of Attraction*, for all its sex and drug-addled characters.

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This is where Bauman's ideas of the 'top-pocket relationship' fit in. *'A successful top-pocket relationship is sweet and short lived,' (Bauman, 2003, p.21).* This is not strictly true in the film, as we see the characters frivolous relations resulting in some rather disastrous consequences. In the heat of the moment these relations are short lived for sure, but sweet? Not always the case.

"Top-pocket relationship' is instantaneity and disposability incarnate.' (Bauman, 2003, p.21). As soon as the other in the relationship ceases to be useful, then they are simply thrown away like a used tissue. *'.....the less you invest in the relationship, the less insecure you'd feel when exposed to the fluctuations of your future emotions.' (Bauman, 2003, p.21).* It is based on the quick fix. There are no plans of marriage or a forever style bond between the two participants.

This is for the here and now. In this world, people get bored quickly. Just how a girl would buy a new pair of shoes when she feels she has worn her others far to many times, usually only the once, she would go and buy another pair. This is how relationships are treated now, but men – not shoes.

'Sexual delight is arguably the topmost of pleasurable sensations; indeed, a pattern by which all other pleasures tend to be measured and of which they are, by common consent, but pale reflections at best, inferior or counterfeit imitations at worst.' (Bauman, 1998, p24).

This style of relationship ritual is fully self-indulgent. People look out for themselves and the other peoples' emotions do not matter, in fact, no of the persons involved should be experiencing emotions other than sexual pleasure. *'Any chance not taken here and now is a chance missed; not taking it is thus unforgivable and cannot be easily excused, let alone vindicated' (Bauman, 2000, p. 163).* So how did we get to this rather worrying situation? To gather this, let us go back to a time where *solid love* existed and marriage came as standard.

Solid love was about performing roles, but when these roles disperse, narcissism developed in its place. Since the 18th century, there has been a process of a collapse of masks of civility. These enable men and women to participate in public life

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without revealing their private lives. Masks have collapsed – therefore participation in public life now focuses on personal secrets. The implication is that deep meaning can only come from our selves and our most intimate relationships. The external world becomes a mirror that reflects our deep feelings and intimacies – any other aspects of external world become irrelevant. This is the basis of contemporary narcissism.

'In the absence of long-term security, "instant gratification" looks like a reasonable strategy. Whatever life may offer, let it be offered...right away' (Bauman, 2000, p 162). The characters in *The Rules of Attraction* may be narcissist, yet they need to be drug and alcohol fuelled to cope with the structure of relationships and sex liaisons.

Paul wants to try and sleep with Sean, knowing him as well as he obviously does, Paul tells Sean he has pot in his room. This seems to be Paul's last resort in the film to get Sean back to his room and on his own in private, so he can make his move. Once they are in Paul's room getting high on joints, we see two versions of what could have happened, in split screen format.

The first version of events is that Sean acknowledges Paul's sexual advances and they have gay sex. The other possible out come is that Paul sits and watches Sean, he masturbates while doing this, but not to Sean's knowledge as he is passed out from the weed. It is left up to the viewer to decide which was the 'true' event. Paul seeks the thrill of Sean's body; he is not after a serious long-term relationship here.

Sean is also uninterested in long lasting relations. We see him at a party and hear the following voiceover. *"A great numb feeling washes over me as I let go of the past and look forward to the future. Pretend to be a vampire. I don't really need to pretend, because it's who I am, an emotional vampire. I've just come to expect it. Vampires are real. That I was born this way. That I feed off of other people's real emotions. Search for this night's prey. Who will it be?"* He scours the room for this night's sexual victim. He spots a thin, blonde. In Sean's words *"She has dick sucking lips, she'll do."* He approaches her. They exchange few words before going back to his room.

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Kelly: *"You look familiar. Have we met?"*

Sean Bateman: (voice-over) I think I fucked her somewhere toward the beginning of term. The "Wet Wednesday" party.

Sean Bateman: *"No."*

His advances have worked, as usual; they go back to his room.

Lauren seems to crave romantic love with Victor. However, when she describes him to the audience she focuses on his physical appearance rather than his internal qualities that could make him a favourable candidate for a more long lasting relationship. It is lust confused as love and anyway, he is sleeping with her roommate Lara.

Victor is the character with the most evident experience in top pocket relations of the self-indulgent variety. During the montage of clips from his trip to Europe we learn of many sexual encounters he has all over the continent. In Camden, London he get involved with a girl, in his words *"I pulled her clothes off, sucked her toes, then we fucked."*

In Amsterdam, he cruised the red light district, visited a sex show and a sex museum. He picks up another girl and he *"cums between her tits."* In Paris, he hooks up with a Romanian model, in his words *"She sucked my cock."* In Dublin, he pulls a girl in a club. In Switzerland he has a threesome. In Rome he meets two underage girls, *"They fuck each other as I jack off onto them".*

Back to London, he meets an *"upper crusted Cambridge chick. She lets me jack off all over her as long as I don't get any cum on her Paul Smith jacket."* His last words on the montage sequence are *"I no longer feel I know who I am and I feel like a ghost of a total stranger."* He sought sexual thrill all over Europe, yet still he feels empty and lost.

So let us look deeper at the character traits of the narcissist. These were developed by Sennett (1977). The narcissist has a fear of closure; they do not value the external world. If the narcissist achieves a life goal, for example, the perfect partner, this goal becomes external and therefore without value. The narcissist therefore does not

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strive to achieve goals, but participates in the chase and terminates it pre-completion.

The narcissist is also filled with a sense of blankness. *'Nothing is real if I cannot feel it, but I can feel nothing'* (Sennett, 1977, p. 335). Nothing is good enough for the narcissist due to nothing being able to fill him or her with intense, deep and intimate feelings. Sennett sees a process of the collapse of public life and therefore the attention turns to the personal as a source of meaning. Lasch (1979) takes Sennett's ideas further as he believes that the personal has also collapsed.

Lasch explains the result here. *'Determined to manipulate the emotions of others while protecting themselves against emotional injury, both sexes cultivate a protective shallowness, a cynical detachment they do not altogether feel but which soon become habitual...At the same time, people demand from personal relations the richness and intensity of a religious experience'* (Lasch, 1979, p. 194).

This *cynical detachment* is seen in its most exaggerated form when Lauren gets raped in the film. *'...a large amount of male sexual violence now stems from insecurity and inadequacy rather than from a seamless continuation of patriarchal dominance.'* (Giddens, 1993, p.122). A film student that Lauren has been chatting to at a party takes her to his room; she passes out from overindulging in alcohol. *"I was so drunk, I ended up losing my virginity"*.

When she comes round, she realises she is being fucked. She is a virgin and it hurt, but the guy does not know this, as she does not know him. She realises it is not the film student she had been chatting to, it is his friend. He is an unattractive ginger guy. The film student is filming the event on his hand held video camera, telling his friend how to fuck Lauren. To add insult to injury, the ginger guy ends up throwing up over Lauren's back as he fucks her. During the rape scene, Lauren does a voiceover about how it would have been so different to lose her virginity to Victor instead. He would have been gentle and slow, she says.

Experiences with a lover have never been so complex to participate in and understand. The ideas of Waller (1937) may be out dated, but none the less have

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something important to say. He discusses the 'rating and dating complex'. The decay of moral structure and solid love has made possible *'the emergence of thrill-seeking and exploitive relationships'* (Waller, 1937, p.728).

Sean and Paul both enjoy a different form of sexual thrill in the film, masturbation. *'Masturbation is no longer the gateway to horrors amongst young people, and is encouraged by books, magazines and papers on every station bookstall, and one of the pleasures incited by the Internet.'* (Weeks, 1986, p.85). We see Sean masturbate to *'Broadband speed internet porn'* and Paul masturbates while watching Sean in his room, when they are both stoned. Foucault (1984) suggests that in masturbation one finds *'the most direct means of appeasing....sexual appetite.'* (p.55).

Sticking with pornography for a second, Sean and Paul watch a lesbian porno video together and in this scene, Paul wears a t-shirt with the slogan 'Masturbation is not a crime'. Indeed, it is not. *'Pornography, rather, is a kind of service by which the needs for pleasure of individual consumers are fulfilled.'* (Rival et al., 1998, p.299).

There are many thrills sought in this film. Waller summarizes what a thrill is in this passage. *'A thrill is merely a physiological simulation and release of tension...Dancing, petting, necking, the automobile, the amusement park, and a whole range of institutions and practices permit or facilitate thrill-seeking behaviour'* (Waller, 1937, p.728)

The male, as Waller suggests, is mainly seeking thrills from the female body (or the male if he were gay). Whereas, the female usually seeks the thrill from being taken for dinner, to the cinema and out clubbing. Using the man's money. However, I think Waller misses the point that the female is also seeking sexual thrill from the male body.

'....college students feel strongly the attractions of sex and the thrills of sex, and the sexes associate with one another in a peculiar relationship known as "dating"' (Waller, 1937, p.729). Since Waller's writing, new terms for such an act have come

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about. The 'fuck buddy' – a friend who you sleep with on occasion, but have no firm commitment to. You are both free to simultaneously be sleeping with other people, that is to say, have multiple 'fuck buddies'.

There are 'open relationships' – you may even be in love with that person, having a sexual relationship, but you are also free to sleep with whomever else you chose, whenever you like. With no guilt or accusations of cheating. 'One night stands' also occur, where you may meet someone you find sexually attractive in a club or bar, go back to his or hers or they come back to yours and sexual relations take place. However, you never intend to see this person again. *'Dating is all about introducing a consumerist to sexual relations.'* (Baggini, 2004, p.78). On occasion, however, this may lead to a fuck buddy or open relationship situation. This is a complex web of modern day 'dating' as Waller chose to call it back when he was writing.

These unwritten sexual relation rules *'...turn(s) individuals into items we size up like sofas.'* (Baggini, 2004, p.78). This may have stemmed from the narcissistic self wanting to look after number one and hopefully prevent complexities with lovers. However, even this love lifestyle is not a bed of roses. People get hurt, miscommunication leads to misunderstanding of what stage in the dating game the pair are at. Liquid love and top-pocket relationships may be fun *in the moment*, but as with everything in life, the actions come with consequences. In a world where we crave perfection, have we set ourselves up for a life of feeling unfulfilled and empty? In the film, Sean tries to kill himself due to messing up a possible 'steady' relationship with Lauren. Sean's mystery purple love letter writer does actually kill herself, after realising there was never going to be any hope of a relationship, even of the casual variety, with Sean.

In the film, the main thrill seeking activity, apart from sexual acts themselves, are parties. They come titled on screen with unusualness. 'A Pre-Saturday Night Party Party' and 'Dressed to get Screwed Party' to name a couple. There is a heavy party culture at colleges, people do not tend to partake in traditional 'dates' as such now, they hook up with people at parties. Usually leading to a one-night stand situation, or a three-way, or maybe even an orgy.

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'Our society has made deep and lasting friendships, love affairs, and marriages increasingly difficult to achieve. As social life becomes more and more warlike and barbaric, personal relations, which ostensibly provide relief from these conditions, take on the character of combat' (Lasch, 1979, p. 30).

The Rules of Attraction is indeed a milieu of top-pocket relations and narcissism.