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## **Emotional investments: Contemporary Polish romantic comedy and neoliberalism**

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A young man rushes through a busy airport to catch a ready-to-depart plane. Once he gets in, he pretends to be a flight assistant and approaches a young woman who is sitting next to her little son. The boy instantly recognizes the man and cheerfully smiles at him. The man kneels down and proposes to the woman who is visibly shocked and remains speechless for a while. Instead of her, her son excitedly says “yes” to the marriage proposal. All of the passengers applaud and cheer to the couple and the boy. This scene ends Krzysztof Lang’s romantic comedy *Śniadanie do łóżka* (*Breakfast Served in Bed*, 2010). Admittedly, the scene offers a generic happy ending that brings a positive resolution of heterosexual romance, however, it also differs from its classical variant. First and foremost, instead of taking place in a secluded getaway place or the private space of home, the proposal ceremony occurs on a plane which is a public space *per se*, or a non-place, as Marc Augé<sup>1</sup> would put it. Second, the proposal ceremony does not feature only the two lovers, as the woman’s son is also actively involved in it (one could say that it is he who decides for his mother). In addition, there are other passengers who take on the role of spectators watching the scene. All in all, in Lang’s film, the cherished moment of proposing is no longer an intimate experience but a public event, or a spectacle, for that matter. Moreover, the proposal in *Breakfast Served*

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<sup>1</sup> M. Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, transl. J. Howe, London-New York 1995.

*in Bed* does not include the prospect of having a family as it is already there. Thus, the proposal itself becomes a family event. Arguably, in recent Polish romantic comedies, familial bonds seem to invade the territory of romance to an unprecedented extent. These changes in emotional politics signal an evolution of the genre that may be attributed to various socio-economic and cultural factors. In this article, I will argue that neoliberalism, along with its attendant economic and social ideas, is of special significance in changing the romantic comedy's politics of emotion and consequently its narrative and formal strategies.

Neoliberal adjustments of romantic comedy<sup>2</sup> occurred first in Hollywood films produced during the 1990s and then they were subsequently implemented within other national cinemas. Polish romantic comedies exemplify the generic evolution in many ways. First, the 2007 *Testosteron* (*Testosterone*, dir. Tomasz Konecki and Andrzej Saramonowicz) initiated the Polish variant of “bromance”, examining the masculine perspective on romance.<sup>3</sup> One year later, Tomasz Konecki made *Lejdis*, a “female” counterpart of the “bromance”,<sup>4</sup> visibly influenced by the popular American TV series *Sex and the City* (1998–2004).<sup>5</sup> The most significant “adjustment” of Polish romantic comedy inspired by its Hollywood counterpart is employing conventions typical of family movies. In this article, I will analyze two examples of Polish (family) romantic comedies, *Nigdy w życiu* (*Never Again in My Life*, dir. Ryszard Zatorski, 2004) and *Listy do M.* (*Letters to Santa*, dir. Mitja Okorn, 2011). Both films were, so to speak, pioneers — Zatorski's film was the first significant box-office success of Polish modern romantic comedy,<sup>6</sup> whereas *Letters to Santa* was the first vernacular holiday movie. Moreover, both films were followed up by sequels. In this article, I will examine how these two films employ both the generic conventions of romantic comedy and family film to demonstrate how Polish contemporary cinema participates in the

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed examination of neoliberal romantic comedy in Hollywood cinema see: E. Ostrowska, “Corporations of feelings: Romantic comedy in the age of neoliberalism”, [in:] *Contemporary Cinema and Neoliberal Ideology*, eds. E. Mazierska, L. Kristensen, London 2017.

<sup>3</sup> The best known Hollywood “bromances” are: *Wedding Crashers* (dir. David Dobkin, 2005), *Superbad* (dir. Gregg Mottola, 2007), *I Love You Man* (dir. John Hamburg, 2009), *The Hangover* (dir. Todd Phillips, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> In Hollywood cinema, it is represented by a group of films often identified as “female blockbusters”, for example *Mamma Mia!* (dir. Phillida Lloyd, 2008), *The Devil Wears Prada* (dir. David Frankel, 2006) and *Sex and the City* (dir. Michael Partick King, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, in her analysis of *Testosterone* and *Lejdis*, Martyna Olszowska only briefly mentions the similarity with Hollywood production, focusing instead on the problem of authorship in Polish popular cinema; see: M. Olszowska, “Autor! Autor! O problemie autorstwa w polskim kinie popularnym na przykładzie filmów *Lejdis* and *Testosteron* Tomasza Koneckiego oraz Andrzeja Saramonowicza”, [in:] *Polskie kino popularne*, eds. P. Zwierzchowski, D. Mazur, Bydgoszcz 2011, pp. 261–273.

<sup>6</sup> In her 2011 article Grażyna Stachówna informs that *Never Again in My Life* had 1.65 million viewers; see, G. Stachówna, “Sny o miłości i urodzie życia, czyli polskie filmowe komedie romantyczne”, [in:] *Polskie kino popularne*, p. 95.

production of neoliberal subjectivities. On the one hand, it could be argued that the generic hybridity of Polish romantic comedy is facilitated by the central position of family in Polish socio-cultural discourse, whereas on the other hand, the employment of “family movie” conventions serves the purpose of enlarging the target audience and, thus, maximizing the financial return. Ultimately, in what will follow I will discuss how *Never Again in My Life* and *Letters to Santa* respond on a textual and extratextual level to neoliberal shifts in economy and social life, especially financialization, and the transforming of everything into a market asset.

## Neoliberal romance

In her book on neoliberalism, Wendy Brown identifies it as “a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and construes the human itself exclusively as *homo oeconomicus*”.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, as she further explains, “*subjects* [...] are configured by the market metrics of our time as self-investing human capital” which involves the regulation of every sphere of life, including “dating, mating, creative, and leisure practices in value-enhancing ways”.<sup>8</sup> Contemporary popular cinema’s entanglement in neoliberal logic and economy is twofold. On the one hand, film production is regulated by the principles of neoliberal economy<sup>9</sup>; on the other hand, the films’ narratives and visual rhetoric reproduce and reinforce (or occasionally contest) these same principles.<sup>10</sup> Polish film production is still partially subsidized by the state via the Polish Film Institute and popular cinema projects can also be occasionally co-financed, which often becomes an object of fierce criticism.<sup>11</sup> Whether subsidized by the state institution or not, domestic romantic comedies circulate neoliberal rationales, and also address the fears and uncertainties experienced by their viewers living in a free-market world. Arguably, these films can be seen as textual negotiations between global neoliberal principles that have been penetrating and changing Polish reality since 1989 and traditional national discourse, especially in how these two formations conceptualize love and family. Specifically, vernacular romantic comedy follows its Hollywood counterpart in responding to changing socio-cultural realities and the consequent

<sup>7</sup> W. Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, New York 2015, p. 177.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> C. Mortimer, *Romantic Comedy*, London-New York 2010, p.1.

<sup>10</sup> Critical analyses of Polish romantic comedies recognize their entanglement in the economic realities of neoliberalism, however it concerns mostly the most obvious components of diegetic world such as luxurious *mise-en-scène* and product placement. See: G. Stachówna, op. cit., pp. 94–107; E. Urbaniec, “Product placement w kinie popularnym”, [in:] *Polskie kino popularne*, pp. 201–217; K. Szczuka, “Logo na lejdi”, *Polityka* 2008, no. 8, pp. 62–64.

<sup>11</sup> M. Adamczak, *Obok ekranu. Perspektywa badań produkcyjnych a społeczne istnienie filmu*, Poznań 2015, p. 70; see also: M. Adamczak, “Filmowe realizacje grupy ITI jako przykład imitacji reguł ‘globalnego Hollywood’”, [in:] *Polskie kino popularne*, pp. 218–231.

redefinition of familial relationship,<sup>12</sup> but, simultaneously, it is still a conservative genre, which respects “society’s structures and dominant ideologies, offering resolution that reinforces tradition and conformity”.<sup>13</sup>

In her book *Genre, Gender and the Effects of Neoliberalism*, Betty Kaklamanidou examines how Hollywood romantic comedy had responded to neoliberalism during the first decade of the new millennium. Specifically, she discusses how the genre supports and/or subverts dominant neoliberal ideologies of love, relationships, marriage, friendship and all the attendant socio-cultural institutions.<sup>14</sup> According to the author, these films, which she describes as “important ideological artefacts”, negotiate gender roles, express post-9/11 fears, and detect changes in the economic and political climate.<sup>15</sup> For instance, Kaklamanidou discusses how the generic convention of a “happy ending” is concerned in recent romcoms with both emotional and economic stability, or how successful independent women undergo a positive transformation through (late) motherhood, whether this occurs within or without the ideologically “safe” framework of heterosexual romance.<sup>16</sup> These changes have transpired to Polish romantic comedies as well, although in a more moderate fashion. Thusly, for most female protagonists of vernacular romcoms, “happy ending” means both emotional and economic security.

*Never Again in My Life* is one of the first, and most successful for that matter, Polish romantic comedies that exemplify the generic changes identified by Kaklamanidou. The film begins when Judyta, the protagonist, learns that her husband is leaving her and their 16-year-old daughter, Tosia, for a younger woman who is expecting his child. Thus, in an instant, Judyta loses all of her emotional and financial stability provided by the family institution. To make this theme of the crisis of traditional family structure even more pronounced, the narrative parallels her divorce with her parents’ decision to separate as well. In Zatorski’s film, sacred bonds of marriage prove to be rather weak and relatively easy to be torn apart.

Predictably, after a brief moment of despair, Judyta decides to take control of things and begins to build a new life for herself as well as for her daughter. Importantly, she does not try to “re-build” or to “reclaim” her previous life, in that she does not make any effort to convince her husband to change his decision. She also refuses to live with Tosia in a small studio she is entitled to after the matrimonial property division. Instead, she decides to radically change her life and she takes the risk to buy a piece of land in the countryside to build a small house of her dreams there. Judyta’s response to her radically changing life situation transforms her into a perfect neoliberal subject. When she faces a crisis, caused by her hus-

<sup>12</sup> C. Mortimer, op. cit., p.18.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>14</sup> B. Kaklamanidou, *Genre, Gender and the Effects of Neoliberalism: The New Millennium Hollywood Rom Com.*, London-New York 2013, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 152–153.

band's decision to leave her for another woman, she proves to be perfectly capable of finding a solution for it. In other words, she manages the crisis in a timely and efficient fashion. She follows, although not deliberately, the general economic rule of neoliberalism that "crisis is in the first instance generative for capitalism. Implosions offer opportunities for accumulation and expansion. [...] The crisis may create opportunities for managerialism, but it also creates possibilities for movements".<sup>17</sup>

Arguably, for the protagonist of *Never Again in My Life* the situation of marital crisis generates new possibilities in many ways. First, she transforms herself from a housewife into an economic subject that makes strategic decisions concerning investment into a land purchase and using it for building a property. As the narrative development demonstrates, it was the right investment. Ultimately, she owns a beautiful house whose market value certainly exceeds the invested capital. Her decision to move out of the town signifies her upward economic mobility and readiness to expand her economic domain. Judyta's financial standing at the end of the film seems to perfectly confirm Marx's claim that land is the "original source of all wealth".<sup>18</sup> Most importantly, her economic prosperity is followed up by emotional "wealth", as she eventually meets "Mr. Right" who proves to be capable of fulfilling her expectations for a romantic partner. Symptomatically, she meets him via a professional network, which establishes another link between emotional and professional life, yet another important characteristic of neoliberalism. All in all, Judyta parallels the female protagonists of Hollywood millennial rom-coms, as described by Kaklamanidou, in that she achieves both emotional and economic stability.

However, Judyta's decision to purchase land does not only follow the neoliberal logic of crisis management and accumulation of capital through investment. For it is also in tune with a nostalgic longing for a pre-modern past of gentry tradition, developed in the conservative strand of Polish national discourse. Arguably, Judyta's countryside house revives the myth of idyllic rural life in the past. Perhaps, some viewers will see it as a modern (neoliberal) variant of a traditional manor house which is further validated by the fact that once Judyta moves in, she finally achieves freedom, a value especially cherished by the Polish gentry.

The happy ending of *Never Again in My Life* negotiates progressive and regressive ideologies to deliver a product that would satisfy various segments of the domestic film audience. On the one hand, when Judyta decides to pursue her lover, she is provided with narrative agency that proves her subjectivity. On the other hand, with the final positive resolution of heterosexual romance, the initial ideological order is restored as the protagonist is partnered with a man again. Thus,

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<sup>17</sup> J. Goodman, J.P. Marshall, "Introduction: Crisis, movement and management in contemporary globalisations", *Globalizations* 3, 2013, p. 344.

<sup>18</sup> K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, transl. S. Moore, E. Aveling, New York 1967, p. 507.

Judyta's life as a single mother and managerial woman is only a temporary break away from the logic of heterosexual patriarchy. Furthermore, at the proverbial last minute, she prevents her lover, Adam, from leaving Poland for South America. Tellingly, she puts a stop to his plan of abandoning (even if only temporarily) his motherland. Although hidden behind a smokescreen of the generic convention of rom-com happy ending, its ideological agenda follows gender politics developed by the national discourse. As prescribed by the rules of vernacular gender politics, Judyta, as a woman, acts as a guardian of male bonds with the motherland. Yet, his prospective move into her house (not his, as codified by patriarchal tradition) also symbolically signifies progressive changes of gender relationships in contemporary Poland.

*Never Again in My Life* validates Kaklamanidou's conclusion that "millennial romantic comedies are filled with contradictions in that there are texts which promote neo-conservative messages regarding marriage, sexual relationships and gender roles, and others, which opt for a more liberal consideration of the above".<sup>19</sup> Admittedly, Zatorski's film along with many others testifies to continuities within the universal genre of romantic comedy in that it simultaneously supports and contests dominant ideologies belonging to a given time, and as such reveals how spheres of private and public life are conditioned by political economy.

## Neoliberal politics of emotions

Kaklamanidou's ideological analysis efficiently demonstrates how romantic comedy, specifically its representations of social rituals or institutions of love and romance, perpetuates and/or contests the principles of neoliberalism, however it does not address the problem of how neoliberalism affects the individual subject in experiencing its emotions. Rachel Greenwald Smith in her book on affective aspects of American literature during the era of neoliberalism provides a useful point of departure for discussing the issue. She corroborates the widely shared understanding of neoliberalism as a general principle governing all spheres of individual and collective lives, including their emotional components. She claims that according to neoliberal logic, emotions are properties of the individual that need management in order to secure a profit from investment. This management of emotions enables the neoliberal subject to create an "emotional portfolio"<sup>20</sup> that facilitates an "emotional return".<sup>21</sup> Smith explains that the neoliberal subject, unlike its liberal counterpart, is not independent but rooted within a "feeling of

<sup>19</sup> B. Kaklamanidou, op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>20</sup> R.G. Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, New York 2015, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

emotional connection”,<sup>22</sup> therefore “neoliberal self-improvement is more often understood to necessitate strategic alliances with others”.<sup>23</sup> Hence, instead of a rebellious protagonist resisting the collective mould, the neoliberal novel features “pairs, families, and ensemble casts characterized by pronounced intimacy”.<sup>24</sup> A similar observation in regard to romantic comedy was made by Celestino Deleyto in 2003:

It is as if the new climate of social and sexual equality, between man and woman had rendered heterosexual desire less vital, as if the perfectly codified conventions that have been valid for so long had lost much of their meaning and become nothing more than picturesque museum pieces — to be admired but not believed. Disenchanted by this state of affairs the genre has started to explore other types of relationship between people and to consider their incorporation into their plots [...]. Friendships between men, between women, or between men and women have started to proliferate in the space of romantic comedy.<sup>25</sup>

Deleyto links the new type of relationship between characters in romantic comedy with emancipatory movements concerned with gender and sexuality which subvert the hegemonic role of individual heterosexual romance,<sup>26</sup> whereas Smith links retreat from individual “emotional contracts” and instead investing into larger social constellations within the logic of neoliberalism.

Smith’s ideas seem to be confirmed by contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies such as *About a Boy* (dir. Chris Weitz, Paul Weitz, 2002), *Love Actually* (dir. Richard Curtis, 2003), *The Holiday* (dir. Nancy Meyers, 2006), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (dir. Joel Zwick, 2002), *The Best Marigold Hotel* (dir. John Madden, 2011), *Mamma Mia!* (dir. Phillida Lloyd, 2008). All these films prominently feature various groups of people surrounding and supporting (or discouraging) individuals in their search for “eternal love”. Arguably, Polish rom-coms also have followed this line of generic development, yet in a more moderate fashion. For example, *Lejdis* extensively features female friendship, yet, unlike its Hollywood counterpart, *Sex and the City*, the Polish film offers a positive resolution of heterosexual romance as the only possible “happy ending”. In addition, one of the female protagonists reconciles with her father and renews familial bonds with him. Tellingly, the Law of the Father proves the most important regulatory force

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>25</sup> C. Deleyto, “Between friends: Love and friendship in contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy”, *Screen* 44, 2003, no. 2, pp. 181–182.

<sup>26</sup> See also: B. Babbington, P.W. Evans, *Affairs to Remember: The Hollywood Comedy of Sexes*, Manchester 1989; C. Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*, Manchester 2009; S. Neale, “The big romance or something wild? Romantic comedy today”, *Screen* 33, 1992, no. 3, pp. 284–299; F. Krutnik, “Conforming passions? Contemporary romantic comedy”, [in:] *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. S. Neale, London 2002, pp. 130–147.

governing the fictional reality of *Lejdis* and many other Polish rom-coms for that matter, whereas the female friendship is relegated to a compensatory and secondary function.

## Marriage of convenience: Romantic comedy and family cinema

In her discussion of millennial women's films, Ashley York claims that this new model of popular cinema

speaks to viewers outside the typical 18–34-year-old heterosexual American women's audience. Such storylines include characters of different ages, sexes, and sexual orientations, thus bringing new fans to both their texts and franchises. [...] Thus, the potential fan base of millennial women's blockbusters has widened to include a bigendered, worldwide audience of older and younger men and women, which is necessary to turn a chick flick into a successful global powerhouse.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike pre-1990 romantic comedies that were aimed at a specific target audience (i.e. middle-aged women), its neoliberal variant addresses a much larger group of potential viewers representing various age, gender and sexual orientation groups. To achieve this aim, contemporary romantic comedy employs two strategies. On the one hand, it borrows from various popular genres and subgenres, with family film being the most important one. On the other hand, the narratives become more inclusive in terms of the age and sexual orientation of the protagonists. Sometimes these two strategies are used simultaneously within one film.

*Letters to Santa*, extensively inspired by *Love Actually*, exemplifies this generic and textual inclusiveness in the most manifest way. Following the *Love Actually* formula, its narrative structure consists of several intertwining plot lines that culminate around Christmas Eve. The film features five couples experiencing uncertainty and confusion regarding their emotional life, yet unlike in *Love Actually*, all of the protagonists are relatively young and they represent the same social strata of middle-class. Another difference between the Polish and the Hollywood film is that the former prominently features the characters of children (there are two boys, one girl, one infant, and one rebellious teenager).<sup>28</sup> In contrast, in Richard Curtis's film there is only one child protagonist, a boy whose mother has recently passed away. However, it is not this traumatic experience that he is preoccupied with, but his affection for a schoolmate. The little guy is in love for the first time and does not know how to articulate it. In *Letters to Santa*, the children are by no means in love, instead they are longing to have a real family

<sup>27</sup> A.E. York, "From chick flicks to millennial blockbusters: Spinning female-driven narratives into franchises", *The Journal of Popular Culture* 43, 2010, no. 1, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> In her analysis of Polish romantic comedy, Grażyna Stachówna notes the significance of children, see: G. Stachówna, op. cit., p. 101.



they are deprived of. Kostek's mother died some time ago and he is brought up by his father who seems to be "not ready" for a new relation despite his son's pleas. Tosia escapes from the orphanage in hope of finding a real home to spend the Christmas Eve day, which indeed happens. Unlike Tosia, Kacper, a neglected child from a dysfunctional family, is not miraculously "saved" from his miserable life, yet Melchior, an incorrigible womanizer, offers to him as much of warm feelings and company as he can. Finally, there is the rebellious teenager, Majka, who vehemently disrespects traditional values and customs, yet ultimately it transpires that she is longing for "normal" family life she has not experienced for a while.

Admittedly, family occupies the central position in the fictional reality of *Letters to Santa* which is due to the fact that the film is as much a romantic comedy as it is a "Christmas movie" that usually focuses on familial matters. *Love Actually* represents the same generic hybridity, and yet it offers a genuine "affectionate inclusiveness" implying that, for example, friendship can also be a source of emotional fulfilment. In Polish film, to have a friend is certainly not enough, but to have a lover is not enough either. One needs to be part of a family to build up a solid "emotional portfolio" that would secure future revenue. Thus, Kostek eagerly approves his dad's affection for his would-be step-mom, Tosia's presence at the Christmas Eve dinner helps Małgorzata and Wojciech to rejuvenate their relationship, a newly-born baby Kazik is first welcomed by his aunt Małgorzata and only later by his dad, Melchior, and, finally, Majka joyfully observes her parents' reconciliation at Christmas night. For a gay couple, participation in a family Christmas Eve dinner symbolically legitimizes their love and commitment. All these narrative outcomes prove that family is a supreme emotional network and investing in it secures a solid return.

## Conclusion

Although contemporary Polish romantic comedies continue to focus upon (heterosexual) couples, they also frequently feature their protagonists as participating in more extensive networks of affective exchanges. As *Never Again in My Life* and *Letters to Santa* demonstrate, proper management of individual emotions is necessary in order to invest one's human capital with a low risk. Hence, instead of a union of two people leading to the emergence of a nuclear family, neoliberal romance comes into fruition in a corporation-like environment. Whether this involves an extended family or a circle of friends, the romantic couple invests emotionally in the relationship as if thrusting their love into a mutual fund, which does not necessarily promise a skyrocketing gain of capital, however, it does ensure a stable day-to-day return.

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*Lejdis* [Ladies], dir. T. Konecki, Poland 2008.  
*Listy do M.* [Letters to Santa], dir. M. Okorn, Poland 2011.  
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*Mamma Mia!*, dir. P. Lloyd, USA-UK-Germany 2008.  
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## Emotional investments: Contemporary Polish romantic comedy and neoliberalism

### Summary

The author of the article argues that neoliberalism, along with its attendant economic and social ideas, has affected romantic comedy's politics of emotion and consequently its narrative and formal strategies. The article analyzes two recent romantic comedies, *Nigdy w życiu* (*Never Again in My Life*, dir. Ryszard Zatorski, 2004) and *Listy do M.* (*Letters to Santa*, dir. Mitja Okorn, 2011) as exemplifying neoliberal "adjustments" of Polish romantic comedy, specifically employing the conventions typical of family movies. The author claims that generic hybridity of Polish romantic comedy is facilitated by the central position of family in the Polish socio-cultural discourse, whereas simultaneously the use of family-movie conventions serves the purpose of enlarging the target audience and, thus, maximizing the financial return. As *Never Again in My Life* and *Letters to Santa* demonstrate, proper management of individual emotions is necessary in order to invest one's human capital with a low risk. Hence, instead of a union of two people leading to the emergence of a nuclear family, neoliberal romance comes into fruition in a corporation-like environment.