

## Speaking through the flesh Affective encounters, gazes and desire in Harlequin romances

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### **Abstract**

*In the wake of the affective turn, emotion and embodiment have emerged as key terms in cultural studies in order to acknowledge the affective dimension of media texts (Gibbs, 2002; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). Drawing from the cross-disciplinary field of affect theory, the article examines the writing of desire in Harlequin romances through the delineation of gendered encounters. Against the backdrop of earlier feminist critiques of romance fiction, it argues that Harlequin's intense focus on corporeal sensations and gazes encompasses a looking relationship that differs significantly from the visual mediation of gender and desire in mainstream culture. With its use of an extended literary transvestism, a double narrator perspective, and the appropriation of a female gaze, Harlequin offers readers an affective imaginary space in which the significance of the gendered body is re-made, re-versed, and where the male body is stripped of its unique position.*

### **Keywords**

*affect theory, romance narratives, gendered desire, gazes*

## Introduction

This is the hero that women have chosen for themselves. The traits invented for him have been invented by women cherishing the chains of their bondage.

(Germaine Greer, 1971, cited in Modleski, 1988, p.38)

As a devoted reader in my early teens of the Swedish romance magazine *The Novel of My Life*, I grew up with a vivid image of a “tall dark stranger with an intense, searching gaze” or someone with an “amused look in his steel grey eyes”. I share this experience with millions of women. Romance fiction is one of the most popular genres written and read by women throughout the world. By 2012, romance novels in the US were a 1.5 billion dollar industry that made up nearly seventeen percent of fiction sales.<sup>1</sup> One of the most successful companies of romance fiction is the Canadian firm Harlequin Enterprises. Since its inception in 1949, Harlequin has sold approximately 6.28 billion books and continuously publishes more than 100 titles a month in 34 languages, reaching 110 international markets on six continents.<sup>2</sup> Early on, Harlequin marketed, distributed and produced books for an already identified audience of women between the ages of 25 and 45 on the basis of brand-name identification alone (Radway, 1987). Like many mass-market paperback companies, Harlequin relied on a repetitive formula of girl-meets-boy that could be produced at high speed with individual authors having little importance.<sup>3</sup>

Harlequin has often been said to represent the core of mass-produced romance fiction created for and by women. In the rather extensive attention paid to women’s consumption of romance fiction in the 1980s (see, for example, Cohn, 1988; Rabine, 1985; Ebert, 1988; Snitow 1979/1995), the genre was generally considered to manipulate readers both by maintaining the unequal balance of power between the sexes and eroticizing it; or as Ebert put it:

The most powerful texts for reproducing gender distinctions are romance narratives, which are crucial sites for the operation of patriarchal ideologies (1988, p.21).

Others, however, approached the subject from a different and, at the time, novel perspective. Departing from the insight of the narrative’s sociocultural significance for women, Radway (1987) and Modleski (1988) maintained that the genre addressed real problems in the lives of their readers, problems that related both to emotional conflicts within traditional gender relations and to notions of women’s sexual desires. In accordance with this, Radway concluded that, while a new active and more insistent female sexuality had emerged in Harlequins narratives in the Eighties, sexual activity was still only possible *after* a prior emotional attachment (1987, p.16). While Radway was concerned with the (liberating) act of reading itself, Modleski analysed the narrative’s dependence on confusion and contradiction and its reliance on solving the enigma of masculinity. As the “mystery of masculine motives” rested at the heart of Harlequin romances, male neglect and contempt was a recurrent theme, and an important function of the formula was the reverse translation of men’s detached behaviour as actual manifestations of love (1988, p.39f). There was also,

claimed Modleski, a great deal of satisfaction to be derived from what might be interpreted as the narrative's *female revenge fantasy* of bringing men to their knees as they surrender to their need for the heroine (see also Cohn, 1988). By making masculine hostility bearable or, rather, by re-writing it as expressions of love, the depths of women's discontent with the female condition were dealt with or, at least, addressed.

Even though Modleski's and Radway's ground-breaking work contributed to new ways of 'reading-against-the-grain', they both maintained in accordance with the feminist critique at the time that, in the end, romance fiction promoted a submissive version of femininity. Despite the presence of this subversive theme, the purpose of these narratives was to neutralize women's dissatisfaction with heterosexual relationships in general and patriarchal marriage in particular.

Locating popular texts within a sociocultural context remains important in media and cultural studies. Yet, some important changes have emerged in the field as well as in the narratives themselves. Within cultural studies, there has been a move toward questions of affect, embodiment and neuro-culture in which the body and emotional dimensions of media texts are the focus of attention (Richardson, 2010; Gibbs, 2002; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). The move towards 'thinking through the body' also entails new ways of interpreting different narratives. The emotionality of texts, or affective mediation, concerns the way words enact and produce feelings and how they attach certain emotions with certain bodies. In this way, affect can be theorized as performative, as 'doing' things both to the body experiencing it and the body being attributed with emotional or affective value (as *being* distasteful, shameful, desirable; cf. Ahmed, 2004). Therefore, affect is understood as an experience of intensity that shapes the relations between different bodies within cultural discourses and practices.

These perspectives are highly relevant when re-visiting Harlequin romances in the 2000s. Despite the focus on corporeal sensations within these female genres, affective aspects of romance narratives have been somewhat neglected.<sup>4</sup> Harlequin romances often present desire as a highly carnal, visceral force, locating the body as the main site for affect and the gaze at the forefront of the narrative. In this article, I shall examine how this emphasis on fleshy sensations shapes gender relations. As Waskul (2003) notes, discussions of bodily display need to be attentive to varied dynamics of the relationship between bodies and the situational context in which they are located. In Harlequin novels, one of these situational contexts comprises a double perspective in which readers are presented with two narrators, the female *and* the male.<sup>5</sup> Whereas this form of *literary transvestism* often refers to male writers who choose, so to speak, to dress in a female voice, it is extended in Harlequin novels to include two voices, two bodies, thus enabling the reader to experiencing desire from a dual position.<sup>6</sup>

By analysing affective encounters, i.e., how bodies are sensed, interpreted and respond to one another, I want to show how Harlequin can be understood as offering readers a disruptive imaginary space in which the significance of the gendered body is re-made, re-

versed and made meaningful in ways that differ significantly from the visual mediation of gender and desire. The textual depictions of carnal sensations encompass a specific female spectator position, a way of looking at masculine bodies, which still remains something of an exemption in our image-based culture in which the overexposure of the female body and the implication of a dominating masculine spectator position are firmly rooted. The gendering of this visual system is especially evident when the male body is on display. Although popular culture has offered women the possibility of viewing and enjoying men and their bodies, a desiring female spectator position still carries problematic implications. As pointed out by Bordo (1999), the visual eroticization of the male body threatens its supreme status, linking masculinity to a feminized position of being-looked-at. In Harlequin's textual narratives, by contrast, female desire is openly articulated and realized through an intense gazing at men. While visibility concerns questions of looking relationships (who can look at whom and in what way), it also involves the sense-making of subject formation, that is, not only to see but also to 'know' the other (Hirdman 2007). The use of a double narrator perspective along with an appropriation of the gaze renders masculinity seen, sensed and known. Hence, I approach these texts not only by departing from the influential and, in many ways, eloquent analyses that have comprised feminist readings of Harlequin in recent decades but also from theories concerning the troublesome position of the female spectator.

The study derives from a content analysis of a random sample of forty Harlequin novels published in Swedish mostly between 2002 and 2010. From these, the examples have been limited to ten novels since the plots are noticeably homogeneous. A grounded theory approach has been used inductively to define the 'eye of the text' and its relation to affective embodiment: How do characters look at each other, how are gazes interpreted, and how do they shape gender relations? Although a character's gaze has a crucial function for the description of personality traits and emotions in literature in general, this – what Bal (1996) refers to as 'the eye of the text' – is centred in Harlequin romances on interpreting and describing bodily reactions, one's own as well as those detected in the other. It is through the reading of the body, of facial expressions and gestures and what they convey regarding 'true' feelings, 'true' states of mind that the narrative unfolds before the reader. The gaze is in accordance with this, used both as a methodological and an analytical tool.

### **Vision and power: The female gaze**

Vision has long been regarded as a key element in constructing and symbolizing gender relations and patriarchal structures of power. From Laura Mulvey's famous account of the male gaze and the overall masculine spectator and John Berger's claim that women are objects of vision to theories of women-as-image, power has also been understood to reside in one of the most intimate of all representations: vision (cf. Mulvey, 1975; Berger, 1972; Pollock, 2003). The notion of the male gaze illustrated how women were presented

as desirable focal points in a culture comprised of patriarchal structures of desire. Perhaps, the strongest criticism against Mulvey has been the exclusion of the female gaze, as her reasoning seems to imply (see, for example, Doane, 2003; Church-Gibson & Gibson, 1993). However, the viewer's gaze is not to be equated with that of a real person but, rather, with the position given by pictorial compositions and previously constructed patterns of desire. It was, as Mulvey (1990) herself explained in response to the criticism, the *masculinization of spectatorship* that she wanted to draw attention to, a position that entails a voyeuristic distant gaze that captivates the female body. For women, Mulvey argues, this masculinization demands a trans-sex identification "that very easily becomes second Nature" (1990, p.143). Extending the argument, Doane (2003) claims that the female spectator is left with two options, the masochism of over-identification with the female character or the masculinization of identifying with the male character's controlling gaze. As a result, women are by necessity caught in an oscillation between a feminine and a masculine position. In other words, the metaphor of the transvestite stems from this motion between already defined spectator positions framed within psychoanalytical theories of sexual binaries linked to voyeurism, fetishism, narcissism and distance.

While I do not disagree with the notion of persistent patriarchal structures of seeing, looking relations are not just outcomes of excessive masochism or the narcissistic logic of the male gaze. The oscillation between a feminine and a masculine position, which constitutes Harlequin's narrative transvestism, transcends these fixed gender identification binaries, allowing the reader to experience both a female and a male *subject* position. Hence, alternative looking relationships are found within these female narratives as they describe in detail how women and men look at each other, which meanings are implicit in different types of gazes and, above all, which visceral, affective reactions the sight of the other incites.

### **Affect, romance writing and interpretations of body language**

The writing of desire differs in many aspects from its visual form since readers can, so to speak, enter the bodies of passion and sense them from within as well as 'see' them as they are described through the eyes of other characters. Textual passion has, in this sense, the ability to communicate more carnal interpretations of others than images might allow for. The language of passion rests on both universal and sociocultural comprehensions of emotional expressions and inner (affective) sensations. Within poems and romance fiction, there is a long tradition of manifesting desire and passionate relationships by means of nonverbal signs. A character's mental state is often presented via descriptions of her or his bodily reactions. This way of conveying complex feelings to the reader locates the interpretation of body signals and affective states at the centre of romance narratives.

Extending the concept of perception and embodiment to linguistic studies, Gibbs (2005) shows how sensitivity is linked to bodily actions both as a physical experience of the reader and within the text itself. Language, in other words, is not just a cognitive medium

but also an affective and, hence, corporeal one. In the longstanding division between feeling and affect, feelings are usually defined as *personal* cognitive states of mind and affect as more direct preconscious *physiological intensities*. However, studies within neurobiology as well as within psychology and cognitive theories have shown that the human affect system is the fundament on which cognition and feelings rest. Affects are what drives us; without them, feelings do not 'feel' since they would be without intensity, and decision-making would become problematic (Tomkins, 1962-1992; Panksepp & Biven, 2012; Damasio, 1994). Affects are universal and innate; they are, so to speak, there before we are, and they derive from interactions, actual or imaginary, with other bodies, text, images and sounds. While their physiological capacity defines them, affect dissolves into experiences and memories and becomes part of our personal history, of how we feel and cognitively interpret different sensations. The definition of affect as pre-subjective sensations flowing through subjects as opposed to emotions, which are considered property of the subject (Shouse, 2005), has also been refuted within feminist studies, which view affect as bound by history and by the experiential landscape of female subjectivity (Brennan, 2004; Ahmed, 2004; Koivunen, 2010). The affective dimension is that which sustains the connection between ideas, values and objects, and it plays an important role in determining the relationship between bodies. In other words, affects always have cultural weight. They circulate and gain force through the very intensity of their attachment to different bodies, depending on past impressions and understandings of how to read and make sense of bodies.

Whether we are engaged in face-to-face interactions or experiencing fictional representations, affects are *what we read when we read the body of others*. Affective sensations have the capacity to give one away, to reveal more than verbal communication, the way hands tremble as signs of nervousness, the way faces blush in embarrassment or excitement and so forth. Interpreting human emotions and intentions through embodied nonverbal manifestations is also an innately-driven and experientially-developed human practice. There is, argues Richardson (2010), a close affinity between psychophysiological descriptions in language for passion and neuro-cultural understandings of human interactions since every state of the passionate mind is presented as corresponding to specific unmistakable bodily expressions.

Yet, the practice of reading the bodies of others and interpreting their facial and body language as signs of their state of mind is constantly filled with possible misreadings and misinterpretations. This double perspective of the mind/body duality is fundamental and inescapable, and it informs our social life as well as cultural representations (cf. Zunshine 2010). In this regard, narratives have the capacity to offer us an emotional transparency rarely experienced in our everyday lives. By providing information of characters' intentions, motives and experiences, they give us as readers/listeners/viewers access to other minds as well as to their emotional expressions. The pleasure derived from reading bodies in narratives is, thus, largely a titillating experience of knowing more than is usually the case in face-to-face interactions. The mind/body duality is a persistent literary and representational

tradition – particularly, in romance fiction – in which spontaneous, involuntary visceral reactions or affective states are understood as revealing a character's true emotions.

## Encountering passion

The endless reading and interpretation of the emotional expressions of characters is what drives Harlequin's narratives. Its traditional formula of confusion and contradiction has, as stated, been said to underline the narratives, whether it concerns female independence versus dependency or love versus passion. While these contradictions are often reinforced by external problems (such as an unexpected pregnancy) they revolve mainly around the fundamental distrust they both experience regarding the true feelings and intentions of others. The male character, while successful in his profession and financially well off, has past experiences and disappointments with relationships, making him doubt or fear women. Likewise, the female protagonist enjoys a professional career although she seldom belongs to the same socioeconomic group as the male. Her past relationships have been unsatisfactory, and she also regards romantic emotions as threatening. Their initial reaction to one another is primarily physiological: breathing quickens, electrical shocks pulse through bodies, blood roars in ears, faces become flushed, and body parts become moist or stiffen. These physical changes are triggered not by words but by the sight of bodies or specific body parts:

Nick followed Dale's eyes through the crowd to a woman who stood alone, a woman who made all the blood in his veins rush downwards in his body (*Living for the Moment*, p. 33).

She tried to concentrate on something else, but her gaze focused on his one nipple and she felt the blood rise to her cheeks (*The Favorite of the Marquis*, p. 26)

Their first sexual encounter occurs early on, and they are afterwards convinced of the other's lack of interest and fully determined not to desire intimacy except on a physical level. Desire and love are explicitly distinguished as two different phenomena, the former physiological and the latter as the merging of body and mind into one feeling. Up until the end of the story, this gap between what the body wants and what the mind is afraid of is investigated. Although bodies sometimes make themselves violently heard, they do not speak plainly. Both characters repeatedly fail to interpret facial expressions or bodily signals from the other. They also fail to understand their own visceral reactions:

How could he awaken such conflicting feelings in her? (*Only The Stars Are Watching*, p. 38)

Heat was rising up in him. He hated the fact that she caused these feelings. (*One Night, One Life*, p. 77)

He had almost grown used to the flutter of panic he felt every time he looked at her... (*The Protector*, p. 168)

## Extended narrative transvestism

As stated, Harlequin's formula consists of a dual perspective. This is generally uncommon in romance fiction in which a single female narrator often dominates, as in the successful chick-lit genre.<sup>7</sup> In Harlequin romances, however, the male is visible, audible and spelled-out. The reader is able to partake in men's thoughts, feelings and reactions to the same extent as the female narrator. Through this extended point of view, the description of the body of the other as well as the sensations it incites can be obtained in both characters simultaneously:

- As he got up, she turned around to look at him. Their bodies touched and he felt a jolt of lust. What the hell was this?
- She couldn't take her eyes of him. She had never reacted in this physical way to a man before. (*The Protector*, p. 36, 42)
  
- Damian's eyes took in her whole being. She beamed of sexuality [...].
- One look was all that it took for her to know his type. Damian had the appearance that could drive women mad. (*The Bride Said Never!*, pp. 11, 15)

Here, the literary transvestism is realized in a sort of cinematic 'shot-reverse-shot' technique. The reader can follow, first, one viewpoint and, then, the other's viewpoint during the same episode. By switching between narrators in one scene, the corporeal experience is expanded, heightening readers' emotional insight and understanding of the interaction since they are concurrently able to 'see' and 'sense' both the characters and their reactions to one another.

## Telling looks

Desire is described as a visceral, uncontrollable affective state that is not always detectable by the other; yet, that is interpreted primarily by the way characters look at one another. For the female character, the male character's eyes and how they look establish his personality, his physical reaction to her presence, and her way of making sense of him.

A manly fragrance filled her nostrils; she raised her eyes and gazed into the darkest, most penetrating eyes she had ever seen. It took just one second for her to realize [...] that those dark, almost black, velvet eyes were surrounded by tanned skin, blonde hair and a firm jawline that she'd recognize anywhere again. (*Living for the Moment*, p. 38)

So she looked up at the man's face and met his gaze. [...] His eyes burned like molten gold and his dark lashes underlined the power of his masculine features. (*Only the Stars Are Watching*, p. 16)

The gaze is, first and foremost, portrayed as the most genuine form of emotional communication, which is only able to exist beyond the verbal. Since the gaze is taken as a sign divulging emotional authenticity, it is usually presented as contrasting to, or extending meanings of verbal statements.

He could pretend that he hated her as much he liked, but he was certainly not unaffected by her. The glow in his eyes gave her more control than she ever could have hoped for. (*One Night, One Life*, p. 77).

But the message coming from his mouth did not match the one in his eyes. (*Hold Onto the Magic*, p. 182).

Since the eyes are the main focal point for their constant reading of each other's state of mind, it sometimes leads to an almost forensic psychophysiological interpretation – particularly, on the part of the male character:

She slowly opened her eyes. In them he could read desire mixed with ... panic. He couldn't help but notice how her breasts began to heave faster, at the same time as her pupils widened. So, was she truly affected by the attraction between them? (*Hold Onto the Magic*, p. 195)

Nick waited for Jane's reaction. There it came, a look of relief in her grey eyes. When she put her hand on his, he could breathe again. (*Living for the Moment*, p. 42)

"Laurel", he whispered, and raised his eyes to look at her. Her eyes expressed a mixture of confusion and passionate desire, and a violent sense of joy surged through him. (*The Bride Said Never!* p. 99)

The male character's gaze also illustrates different phases in the narrative and in their relationship. His initial gaze is sexual and primal in its descriptions as 'intense', 'glowing' or 'penetrating', signalling his physical desire for her. Following the conflict or distrust between them, the look becomes more equivocal and 'burning', demonstrating an emotional confusion of anger and lust, expressed through his (reluctant) inability to take his eyes off her. The concluding gaze is often the 'pained', 'amused' or 'quizzical' look in which physical desire has begun to include more reflexive feelings of love; and he sees, in an ontological sense, her true, unique self.

As such, the looks ascribed to masculinity entail three narrative functions: evidence of affective reactions to her bodily presence, markers of an emotional authenticity that exceeds the verbal, and illustrations of how he begins to yield to feelings of love. The looks directed *at* men, on the other hand, are more concerned with the female character's physical reaction and arousal.

## Soaking up men: Desire and fulfilment

Harlequin's textual gaze model exhibits a female spectator position in which the sight of the male body or specific body parts such as arms, legs and genitals incite raw desire. Women stare at men, unable to move their eyes from their bodies, allowing themselves to be pleasurably aroused by their physical appearance. The gaze position assigned to women (or, rather, the position they assign themselves) is that of the observing and desiring subject:

Morgan drank in the man she had in front of her [...] his movements were lingering, offering her the opportunity to look at him. Finally he was naked, and it was her turn to gasp - her turn to utter a sound of appreciation that sounded rather like an animal's. (*Only the Stars Are Watching*, p. 74)

Reclining back on her elbows, she watched [...] His legs were long and strong, the muscles playing under the bronzed skin and the salty spray from the sea sparkled in the sun-bleached hairs on his forearms. To say nothing of his chest and stomach muscles [...] He was both handsome and smart - definitely an arousing combination. (*Hold Onto the Magic*, p. 211)

Kate rocked back on her heels and stared at his most intimate body part, embedded in dark brown hair. "Oh," she moaned, blood pounding in her ears. (*The Favorite of the Marquis*, p. 49)

In addition to this desiring female gaze, Harlequin romances are also at odds with mainstream depictions of gender and sexuality in the actual lovemaking scenes. In the lengthy and numerous sexual meetings, readers encounter an active female sexuality, a woman who is well aware of her own desire and how to fulfil it:

She took one step closer and put the tie around his neck. Perhaps it was time to think about what she do could with him? Without taking her eyes of him, she unbuttoned his sleeves and pulled his shirt out of his trousers. (*The Protector*, p. 99)

She kissed his nipples and looked down at his stomach before she sat astride his thighs. "Lie still," she said in a hoarse voice she didn't recognize. (*The Boss's Christmas Seduction*, p. 106)

Men's wishes and especially their ability to give women an orgasm typify the sexual discourse in the narrative. She knows what she wants, and he knows how to give it to her or, as one male character declares: "I would be honored to satisfy you!"<sup>8</sup> Time and again, the reader is given detailed descriptions of how men satisfy the female either by hand or by mouth, waiting for her to climax and following her rhythm:

The pressure of Vic's finger was just right; he must have made a mental note of how she liked it [...]. His fingers drove her closer and closer till she ... Her cries of orgasm came from deep within. (*Hold Onto the Magic*, p. 224f)

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He pressed his mouth against hers as she rode the waves of her orgasm. (*The Protector*, p. 139)

He listened with pleasure how she cried out freely, and he held her tightly pressed against his own desperate need as she trembled. (*The Boss's Christmas Seduction*, p. 36)

These sexual scenarios differ significantly from the way sexual acts are portrayed in mainstream pornography with their emphasis on hyper-penetration and on presenting the male body as never losing control even in moments of ecstasy. The problematic relationship between the depiction of the male body and desire, as evident in much hardcore pornography, concerns questions of how to have a sexual urge while controlling it and how to simultaneously have one's body on full display while denying this feminized cultural position. The male body is not marked by desire in the same way as the female body. It does not twitch in uncontrolled orgasmic spasms, and it does not cry out or moan. What constitutes the male body, or masculinity, is not something that can be reduced to the body, or to a desire that threatens to take hold of the body (Hirdman, 2007). In Harlequin romances, however, the male body is not able to maintain its corporeal boundaries; it merges and blends with the female. In sexual encounters, men's desire is described in affective detail and in the same terms as women's such as, for example, trembling, waves of lust, resulting in shaking and loud groans. Men are truly taken over by their bodies, and their self-control often completely disintegrates:

As if from a far distance she heard him let out a roar – as if his world had broken apart. (*Only the Stars Are Watching*, p. 99)

“No!” he wailed, and his whole body began to shake. (*The Favorite of the Marquis*, p. 210)

“What are you doing?” he gasped as her hand caressed his upper body, causing him to tremble with desire. (*Conquered Playboy*, p. 134)

### Conquered masculinity?

The male character's loss of self-control is generally described in more detail than the female's, almost lasciviously. It threatens to render him unable to function rationally, to work and, above all, to resist her.

He had to return to work. Yet he longed for her as an addict longs for the next fix. (*The Boss's Christmas Seduction*, p. 108)

He never could have believed that it would be so hard to survive without Kate, but now he struggled through each day like an opium addict without his pipe (*The Favorite of the Marquis*, p. 263)

The traditional formula found in feminine media cultures in which advice on the emotional labour required in understanding and adjusting to a male point of view is not uncommon (Hirdman, 2008) is here reversed. In Harlequin romances, the feminine character does not have to adjust to masculinity, on the contrary. Men are enveloped by women. They concentrate on pleasing them, constantly interpreting their behaviour, body reactions, changing pupils and the like. They are thrilled by female competence, independence, arousal and sexuality. They are both willing to and able to give women orgasms on their terms, and they learn to recognize and trust their need for the female character. As a scene in one of the novels nicely wraps things up:

'I'm hard, tough, unfeminine. I am ambitious, aggressive and competitive [...].' Naldo lifted a tendril of hair from her face. His eyes burned with passion. 'I love the way you fight for what you want – that you refuse to settle for anything less.' (*Your Lips Say No...*, p. 291)

One could interpret this formula as carrying on the tradition of bringing men to their knees and, as such, part of the revenge fantasy detected by Modleski (1988) and Cohn (1988). Yet, it is no longer through his declaration of love that he acquires a 'feminine' coded relational self and becomes tamed or made equal. With the dual narrator perspective and the affective depiction of masculinity, these features are constitutive of the man Harlequin presents to its reader from page one. His desire, distrust and inner conflict equal or, rather, exceed that of the female character. He is both looked at and sensed from within by the reader, who follows his struggle throughout the pages.

### **Affective gender transgression: Dual sensing**

Harlequin romances celebrate passionate love, which threatens in an almost anarchistic manner to disturb the status quo, overturning everyday routines (Giddens 1992). Nevertheless, the emotional transformations that take place during the course of the narratives, replaces desire and uncertainty with insight and trust. The dilemma caused by the pulsating body and the reasoning mind still needs to be solved, albeit in a reverse manner than in the Eighties. Passion is no longer attained after love; it is a necessity for love to appear on stage in the first place. With the characters growing self-awareness and interpretative skills, the split between their bodies and their minds merges into the feeling of love. On the surface, this female-oriented love fiction transforms the carnal intensities of passion into a more romantic love scenario in which the sublime takes its place beside physical desire.

However, the focus of attention remains on the force and intensity of desire, which is by definition something that stands as an agency for the true self, a self that expresses and reveals itself through involuntary physical reactions: dilated pupils, changes in breathing, moistened body parts and so on. These affective drives of passion are in one sense presented as pre-subjective and, as such, outside the traditional gendered binary. At the same time, affect is bound by history and by the experience of the lived body; and, as such,

it is possible to interpret it along gendered lines. In presenting bodies and their corporeal sensations, gazes and desire in detail, *the male body equals the feminine body*. It shivers, moans, trembles; it gives itself away in a highly affective manner. In this way, Harlequin romances offer a form of subversive affective space. Through the description of desire as a physiologically-compelling, intense carnal force, the body manifests itself as an authenticity marker and as a liberating force for both the female and the male. The long-standing Cartesian binary division between femininity as the corporeal and man as reason is dissolved. What remains is a merging of bodies, dissolved or disrupted by the same affective force.

By turning to the affective dimensions of texts, we can move away from “anorexic theories of identification” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 71) and acknowledge that other processes are embedded in mediated encounters – such as the fleshy experience of being within both a female and a male character. The extended narrative transvestism provide a double experience of entering the two bodies engaged in experiencing one another. This in turn, underscores the ‘trans-sex’ sensation of what happens within each character as they look and are being looked at, as they touch and are being touched. For the female reader, this narrative technique could, indeed, be understood as a carnal experience of being, as Sobchack (2004) puts it, both ‘here’ and ‘there’. By speaking through the flesh, the female reader is (figuratively) the body that evokes passion as well as the body that experiences passion from both a male and female perspective. This blurring between the body outside and *the bodies* inside the text differs significantly from narrative transvestism as a metaphor for the oscillation between already defined and fixed gender positions. These tales of desire in which the speaking of the flesh dominate collapse the traditional gender duality of desire in terms of active and passive, between the one looking and the one being looked at, into a single look of passionate recognition.

## Turning the gaze around

Analysing affective encounters between bodies and the complexity of ‘the eye of the text’ contributes to a broader discussion within feminist media studies about how texts accommodate, re-fashion, and refract gender relations. As Lotz (2001) indicates, in the twenty-first century, confusion and contradictions continue to underpin contemporary understandings of feminism and its representation in popular culture. As hopefully demonstrated, this material allows for a re-reading of desire, the gaze and gender in popular media discourse, testifying to more complex and disruptive meanings.

If dissatisfaction with the female condition (that is, patriarchal marriage according to Modleski and Radway) was used to explain the narrative formula in the Eighties, what can these narratives tell us today? Male contempt and confusing motives have disappeared, as has the ‘problem’ with women’s sexual desire. What stands out is the appropriation of the gaze by female characters (and the reader). The narrative technique increases the female reader’s sense of emotional transparency, a privileged position of knowing and sensing

both characters as they try and, finally, manage to interpret each other. On the other hand, it also renders masculinity visible and 'known'. The male character is no longer an enigma that needs to be solved, as was the case in Harlequin romances up until the Nineties. He is solved, stripped of his position as a 'hole' and as opposite of the feminine.

Women's re-writing or, indeed, re-directing, of the male gaze could be understood as symptomatic for a culture drenched in images of the female body and the dominance of a desiring masculine spectator position. The desiring female gaze fixated on the male body renders him highly visible as a body, both as appearance and as a carnal being. In one sense, this is a reversal of the objectifying gaze that for so long has been directed at the female body; and, as such, it could present a new form of revenge fantasy, a way out of the visual claustrophobic pervasiveness that still surrounds visual gender relationships.

In breaking down a fundamental taboo, of surrendering the male body to a female gaze and presenting the male character as affectively constituted, the "pink ghetto" of romance fiction, as Radway (1987, p.18) put it, seems nowadays to construct a feminine viewing position once thought not to exist at all. Harlequin narratives produce a mix of femininity, desire and power by simultaneously using the familiar formula and making it unfamiliar, by re-writing its gendered implications and by turning the gaze around. In this speaking through the flesh a female desiring gaze is stripping the male body of its unique position albeit, by necessity, in a textual form.

## Notes

- 1 [www.rwa.org](http://www.rwa.org)
- 2 See [www.harlequin.com](http://www.harlequin.com). In 2014, Harlequin Enterprises was bought by the global media company *News Corporation* as a division of HarperCollins Publisher. By the acquisition they wanted to extend their global platform in Europe and Asia. [www.newscorp.com](http://www.newscorp.com)
- 3 Nowadays, however, successful authors are often promoted on their web sites.
- 4 Studies on Harlequin have also declined in recent decades with some (curious) exceptions. In the field of evolutionary psychology, several studies have analysed Harlequin narratives in order to understand women's mate preferences (see, for example, Fischer & Cox 2010).
- 5 While it is hard to state the exactly when this mode of address was introduced, Harlequin romances from 1993 were using this dual perspective.
- 6 In erotic literature, literary transvestism dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century when male writers used a female narrator's point of view. According to Jacob (1996), this allowed for a more permissive sexual imagination since the description of male sexuality and male bodies through a female eye avoided issues of homosexuality.
- 7 For example, best-selling authors Marian Keyes, Jane Moore, Sophie Kinsella and many others.
- 8 *Only the Stars Are Watching*, p.72.

## Harlequin novels

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- Hold Onto the Magic* (Hall kvar magin), Catherine Mann, 2010.  
*One Night, One Life* (En natt, ett liv), Yvonne Lindsay, 2010.  
*The Favorite of the Marquis* (Markisens favorit), Deborah Simmons, 2010.  
*Living for the Moment* (Leva för stunden), Jeanie London, 2002.  
*The Bride Said Never!* (Bruden som sa nej), Sandra Marton, 1997.  
*Only the Stars Are Watching* (Bara stjärnorna ser på), Trish Morey, 2009.  
*Conquered Playboy* (Playboy på fall), Cherry Adair, 2002.  
*The Boss's Christmas Seduction* (Chefens julklapp), Yvonne Lindsay, 2010.  
*Your Lips Say No...* (Dina läppar säger nej...), Jennifer Lewis, 2009.  
*The Protector* (Beskyddaren), Cara Summers, 2009.

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