

Madly in Love: Erotomania in the Movies

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Can love, like beauty, be in the eye of the beholder? This seems to be the case in the delusional disorder termed erotomania, also called de Clérambault's syndrome, after the French psychiatrist who described five such case studies in 1921. The disorder typically affects women of childbearing age who are sexually inexperienced and have not had meaningful romantic relationships. The object of desire is an older man of higher social status, frequently a physician or politician. There may be very little contact between the two, but often there is some first chance encounter, to which much significance is ascribed by the erotomaniac. Benign actions by the love object are misinterpreted as declarations of affection. Overt denials are explained away. Often the love object already is in a relationship, but this is not a deterrent.

The French film, *He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not* (*À la folie...pas du tout*) is a terrific portrayal of this disorder. This story of a young female art student's obsessive love for a cardiologist is told in a very clever way: the first half of the film is told through the girl's eyes; the second half from the doctor's. Angelique (Audrey Tautou) has told all her friends of her discreet relationship with the married doctor (Samuel LeBihan). She sends him flowers and love notes, paints his portrait for his birthday, and has a key made for him to the upscale home where she is housesitting. Angelique learns that Loic's wife is pregnant; her friends caution that he will never leave a pregnant wife, but she persists. Luck seems to go Angelique's way, though, as Loic's wife miscarries and their marriage appears to be in trouble. She plans to go to Italy with Loic, but unexpectedly he is arrested for assaulting one of his patients. Good fortune comes her way again, as the doctor's accuser dies of a heart attack that night; however, the doctor is arrested for her murder. Angelique, watching Loic's arrest, sees his estranged wife appear at his side, serving as his lawyer. Angelique hears Loic declare his love for his wife. She cannot handle this rejection and attempts suicide.

At the start of the film, Angelique appears to be a bright, cheerful, energetic, innocent young woman with a promising future as an artist. She is well-liked by her friends and has a medical student friend who loves her. As time progresses, as it appears that Loic is never going to leave his wife, Angelique's demeanor changes. She is irresponsible, irritable, and outright aggressive. All her focus is on maintaining her relationship with Loic: "No one will take Loic away from me. No one."

Although the true story in the film is now known to you, there still is much to be enjoyed and some remaining surprises. Overall, this is an accurate portrayal of the classic de Clérambault depiction of erotomania, or, as he termed it, *psychose passionelle*.

What is the etiology of erotomania? From a neuroanatomic perspective, it has been suggested that erotomania develops following lesions of the limbic system, with the intractability of the delusion being associated with frontal lobe dysfunction (Fujii, Ahmed, & Takeshita, 1999). Indeed, erotomaniac delusions can also accompany schizophrenia and dementia. Additionally, there are case reports of erotomania being caused by cerebrovascular accidents and brain trauma.

Martin Brüne (2003), in contrast, considers erotomania from an evolutionary perspective. He has reviewed hundreds of case reports and found some interesting consistencies. Most commonly afflicted are single young women whose love objects are older men of higher socio-economic status. When the erotomaniac is male, the love object is a young, attractive woman. Both of these patterns are consistent with a sociobiological need for perpetuation of the species. Women are searching for a stable provider for their children; men seek sexually healthy women of child-bearing age. Brüne suggests that erotomania is an exaggeration of this ingrained tendency.

The movie *Enduring Love* (2004) also involves erotomania, but additionally introduces the element of sociobiology. Joe (Daniel Craig), an author and college professor, is enjoying a picnic with his girlfriend, Claire (Samantha Morton), in the beautiful English countryside. Suddenly, a hot air balloon appears, bouncing along the

ground with a young boy in the basket and his grandfather attempting to hold onto the balloon's tether rope. Seeing the pending disaster, Joe runs to help, as do several other men. They almost control the balloon, but a strong gust of wind lifts it up into the air, with all the men hanging on. As the balloon rises, the men begin to let go, falling safely to the field below. Only one man is left hanging onto the tether rope; he eventually falls to his death. Joe is bothered by intrusive thoughts of this event. Could they have prevented the man's death if no one let go? Who let go first? His girlfriend accurately suggests that he is experiencing post-traumatic stress.

There is another stress in Joe's life, however; Jed (Rhys Ifans), another balloon-hanger, begins stalking him. At first Joe is confused, politely avoiding Jed's contact. Jed persists, however, and it becomes apparent that Jed is in love with Joe. He follows him everywhere, watches his home from a nearby playground. Joe's obsession with the balloon experience, his increasing anxiety related to Jed's behavior, and his growing cynicism about "love" leads to a deterioration in his relationship with Claire. Ironically, Joe lectures on the nature of love from an evolutionary perspective.

"When we say we're in love, what does it mean? Could it be that this complex, dazzling, transformative feeling, is just an illusion? ...A trick played on us by nature just to make us [procreate]. We imagine that love is meaningful, but could it in fact be meaningless?"

We see examples of sociobiological theory throughout the film – younger women with older, higher social status men; men becoming attracted to young, sexually healthy women; the belief that men "show off" in front of desirable women; and, the idea that pure altruistic behavior can have a sociobiological explanation. As Joe explains to a student, "Perhaps all sorts of complex human behavior serves the same purpose. Perhaps moral behavior is another one. Fairness, kindness, self-sacrifice."

Joe has no problem explaining most behaviors around him in sociobiological terms. That is, until Jed appeared. How can Jed's love for Joe be explained as an evolutionary mechanism? Joe considers that there can be "aberrations" in nature – why some incompatible people marry, why do people fall out of love? He eventually is able to explain Jed's behavior, too.

It was Jed's citing of Joe's "secret signals" with the curtains that prompted an internet search, leading to various cases of erotomania. Joe excitedly discovers one of the cases reported by de Clérambault: a French woman believed that George V, King of England, was in love with her (Berrios & Kennedy, 2002). Ah, now he has an explanation. This realization, along with a rekindling of the meaning of love, is healing for Joe. But can he repair his life? Will Jed ever go away? The film will answer one of these questions for you.

In sum, watch *He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not* to see the classic presentation of erotomania. Then watch *Enduring Love* to see a variation on that theme. Both are taut, engaging, intelligent story-telling – films you can't help but love.

References:

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