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Exploring the Romantic Comedy: From the 90s to today

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
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by

Abigail Sherlock

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Exploring the Romantic Comedy: From the '90s to today

The genre of the romantic comedy has been around for as long as humans have been telling stories. Love, a uniquely human experience, is something we don't fully understand, which can make for great storytelling fodder. The first popular romantic comedies were Shakespearian comedies, built around the idea of two people meeting and quickly running into a roadblock (or a number of roadblocks) that keeps them apart. This main idea, of following the story of two character's relationship, has been a staple of storytelling for centuries. We have seen these tropes in Shakespeare, in novels from the likes of Jane Austen (which some of the most popular romantic comedy films are based off of), in musical theater, and in musicals and romantic films of early cinema. These themes of love, soulmates, and finding a life companion have been seen for decades throughout time (Siede 2018). In this paper, I will explore three different films from the more recent eras of the genre: *When Harry Met Sally*, *Bridget Jones' Diary*, and *The Big Sick*. Each of these films represent a different decade, and we will be able to analyze the cultural impact of these films and how they have influenced the genre over a span of thirty years. By the end of this research, I will be able to discern where the genre is going and what will be coming in the future of the genre.

Why do we love romantic comedies? Morris suggests that since romantic comedies are “the only genre committed to letting relatively ordinary people - no capes, no spaceships, no infinite sequels - figure out how to deal meaningfully with another human being” (Morris 2019) they are much more pervasive. Romantic comedies are simple, they are easy. These movies, so often standalones, are infinitely rewatchable, and can bring feelings of comfort. Romantic

comedies are about human connection - who we are, who we love, and how we relate to one another despite it all.

On a personal level, I enjoy romantic comedies not just for the reasons listed above, but for many more, deeper reasons. First, these films have always been a female space in the male-dominated film industry. Often the women portrayed in romantic comedies are successful, independent women, which served as an example to me as a young child watching these films. Even as a child, I could relate to these women on some level - they weren't superheroes, they weren't princesses, they were people, just like me. Romantic comedies are the films that are closest to my real life experiences as well. They are digestible, fun, and easy to watch. Additionally, they serve as a point of social bonding for women - I can't count the number of times I've seen *Princess Diaries 2* at various sleepovers. Finally, I am writing this paper as a student who would love to eventually make romantic comedies in my professional life. Doing this research will allow me to dive deeper into the genre that I love so dearly.

The first film I'll be exploring is absolutely essential in the romantic comedy space, and may be the most well-known romantic comedy of all time. *When Harry Met Sally* is a legendary, iconic film following the transformation of two friends into a romantic relationship and asking the question: Can men and women ever really just be friends?

When Harry Met Sally was released in 1989, when romantic comedy was an established genre. The film was written by Nora Ephron, an established journalist, essayist, and novelist. Her first novel, *Heartburn*, based off of her marriage to acclaimed journalist Carl Bernstein, was turned into a film starring Meryl Streep and Jack Nicholson, but Ephron had no creative control in the film adaptation. However, the film *Silkwood*, also directed by Mike Nichols and again

starring Streep and Nicholson, was written by Ephron, marking her first feature screenplay. Once Ephron had merged into the film space, she wrote the first film in the “New York Trilogy” - *When Harry Met Sally*. These three “New York” films (*When Harry Met Sally*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *You’ve Got Mail*), each starring Meg Ryan, set the tone for romantic comedies in the 1990’s. *When Harry Met Sally* kicked off this modern era of romantic comedies. (Carlson 2018). Ephron expert and LMU professor Kristin Doidge describes Nora Ephron as a believer in love and marriage, but also in being an independent woman, which thus creates the archetypal romantic comedy protagonist (Doidge 2019).

Thematically, *When Harry Met Sally* is classically romantic. The end goal of the relationship is a long-term marriage. Throughout the film, we can tell that both Harry (Billy Crystal) and Sally (Meg Ryan) want love, they want a life partner. This is signified by stories of elderly couples sharing how they met and the focus of the women on needing to be in relationships constantly.

When Harry Met Sally “concludes with Harry and Sally speaking to the camera on the couch from the same perspective as the six elderly couples. The repetition of this visual motif implies that Harry and Sally will have a long, successful marriage like the elderly couples” (Grindon 2011: 167).

This happy ending creates a strong vision of the themes of the film. Another strong Ephron theme is the idea of soulmates. Harry and Sally are MFEO - made for each other (Carlson 2018: 3). Initially, Harry and Sally didn’t end up together. However, Reiner, who had gone through a divorce, met his future wife on the set and was inspired to change the ending (2018: 169). This idea of soulmates is a theme in the “New York” trilogy - there is one person

out there to complete the other person, whether you know it or not. “Even in the 1990s when the relations between the sexes have been more than ever undermined by mutual suspicion, fears of commitment and the equivocal effects of serial monogamy, the irrational instinct that propels men and women towards one another to form loving couples remains the pivotal subject of romantic comedy” (Evans 1998: 191) claims Peter Williams Evans in *Terms of Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and 1990s*. We are all innately drawn to each other. This is exemplified in the double date scene of the film, where Sally is supposed to be on a date with Harry’s best friend Jesse, and Harry is supposed to be on a date with Sally’s best friend, Marie. However, when Marie unknowingly quotes one of Jesse’s New Yorker articles, everyone at the table, along with the audience, realizes that Jesse and Marie are MFEO. Every character in Ephron’s films has a soulmate, the person they are destined to be with - and the magic comes from watching two people realize this about one another.

When Harry Met Sally also has another very important theme attached to it - the main question of the film: Can men and women really be friends? This idea may seem to be heteronormative and outdated today, and is a good example of how we have seen the genre evolve in the last 30 years. *When Harry Met Sally* answers this question with a no - Harry and Sally try to be friends for 90 minutes but ultimately realize they need to be together. It is the friendship that creates the love, argues Dixon in *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays*. “They become friends along the way and that is offered as one way to insure the longevity of “true” love. They each have close friends of the same sex in whom they confide, and through these conversations we glimpse their internal emotional struggle with letting themselves trust the other

person and the process of falling in love.” (Dixon 2000: 234) Harry and Sally have a strong foundation built, and that’s why the audience wants to ultimately see them end up together.

The idea that Harry and Sally start as friends and end up as lovers is probably the most relatable and grounded romantic comedy theme. In Ephron’s other work - *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You’ve Got Mail*, the tropes are much different - in the former the couple are star-crossed strangers, in the latter, they are enemies. *When Harry Met Sally* takes a much more grounded approach, which is why it is so pervasive to this day. Falling in love with a friend is much more common than meeting a stranger at the Empire State Building, or falling in love with your sworn enemy.

Production wise, the dialogue of this film is what makes it stand out so much. The film is beautifully shot, but what takes the film to another level is the dialogue that Ephron is most famous for. It is witty and concise, and exemplifies how most people wished they talked. Additionally, Ephron placed herself within the film by shaping Sally around herself and casting the role perfectly with Meg Ryan, creating an iconic female character. Ephron has said “Though I had a great experience with Rob Reiner on *When Harry Met Sally*, it was a big shock to him that the movie was as much Sally’s as Harry’s. Harry had more jokes but he was a less complex character. I knew this when I wrote it but he (Reiner) didn’t know it, so when Meg began to work in the movie they were all stunned since she kept stealing scenes. But those scenes were all there in the script ready to be stolen by the right actress” (Evans 192). Meg was there to take the script and really make it her own, using the brilliant Ephron dialogue. Harry and Sally are not only rooted for by the audience because they are soulmates, but because they are idealised versions of men and women. Harry is funny and honest but sensitive, Sally is crazy, but not too

crazy. The film also uses the passage of time - Harry and Sally fall in love over the course of 12 long years. The audience is able to see the characters grow and change and mature into the full versions of themselves. We see Harry as much different at the beginning of the film, a choice from director Rob Reiner: "I wanted to make him a little bit rougher around the edges to start," (Canfield 2019). Later in the film, Harry remarks that Sally has matured and grown softer. These choices all add up to a film that most people can relate to and is why *When Harry Met Sally* has stood out the way that it has over the years.

Critically, *When Harry Met Sally* was a success. Critics enjoyed Ryan's and Crystal's chemistry: "what makes it special, apart from the Ephron screenplay, is the chemistry between Crystal and Ryan. She is an open-faced, bright-eyed blond; he's a gentle, skinny man with a lot of smart one-liners. What they both have (to repeat) is warmth" (Ebert 1989) Critics also loved "Ephron's witty, epigrammatic dialogue" (The Hollywood Reporter). In fact, Ephron won a BAFTA for best original screenplay. At the box office, the film made \$92.8 million with an opening weekend at \$8.8 million - exceeding the film's \$16 million dollar budget. Interestingly, *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You've Got Mail* both made over \$200 million dollars at the box office, which may be attributed to many things - perhaps Ephron's bigger name or Tom Hanks' stardom. With the cast, the dialogue, and the direction, *When Harry Met Sally* was a critical and box office success. Today, it is still quite well received. On Letterboxd, it holds an average rating of 3.9/5 stars. On IMDb there is a 7.6/10 rating, (IMDb) and on Rotten Tomatoes, there is a 90% approval rating.

Jumping ahead 12 years, we come to our next film: *Bridget Jones' Diary*. This film, made in 2001, was focused on an independent, liberated woman rather than a woman looking

solely for a husband and life partner. This film was based on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and followed the popular pattern of the era of modernizing a classic story - for example, films like *Clueless* (1995) took from Austen and *She's the Man* (2009) took from Shakespeare (Siede). Updating these stories gives these films a timeless, immortal narrative and a connection to these stories that can sometimes feel hard to access and connect with, especially for younger and adolescent audiences.

Thematically, this film is vastly different than *When Harry Met Sally* and focuses more on sex rather than romance. To be sure, there is romance, but a large portion of the film is more focused on physical attraction and sex as a basis for a relationship versus compatibility. While Bridget thinks she loves Hugh Grant's character, Daniel, but really it is a more sexually compatible relationship. This film focuses on a sexually liberated female lead - Bridget (Renée Zellweger) loves having sex, and she isn't afraid to talk about it. In *Romantic Comedy*, Claire Mortimer defines Bridget as "a sensual being who enjoys and initiates sex, defining herself through bodily pleasures and excess rather than cerebral," (Mortimer 2010: 140). Characters like Bridget paved the way for women to be more open about sex. Bridget's character also opened the door for the trope of the lonely female - in the film, Bridget describes herself as a "spinster and lunatic" and has a deep fear of being alone forever. This character is an archetype that we see in films especially throughout the turn of the millennium. According to Betty Kaklamnidou, "the films of the cycle...focus on and organize their narratives around the female need for professional fulfilment and achievement and the romantic male object that 'gets in the way'" (Kaklamindou 2015: 166). These films feature career focused women who are too crazy to land a man and have a stable adult relationship. This film also portrays characters moving from hating

one another to eventually loving one another - which Jane Austen was a master of. This plays on the fantastical, over the top aspect of the film once more, rather than the more grounded world of *When Harry Met Sally*. Instead of the affection that Harry and Sally have for one another, Bridget and Darcy hate each other, and it's only through the 90 minute runtime we eventually see them fall for one another.

Another big change we see when it comes to the early 2000's is an emphasis on comedy. *When Harry Met Sally* is comedic, but *Bridget Jones' Diary* employs a new level of comedy. In the 2000 paper *The End of Romance: The Demystification of Love in the Postmodern Age*, James Dowd and Nicole R. Pallotta argue that "Today, the only viable form that the conventional, contemporary romantic film can take is the comedy." (Dowd 2000: 563) While divorce rates are rising and women are focused more on their career in the early 2000s, romantic comedies get a little bit sillier and less serious. This, like *When Harry Met Sally*, is a reflection of the times - in 2001, marriage was not the ultimate focus, but there was an emphasis on physical chemistry as well as emotional chemistry.

This is the only film I'll be diving into that was directed by a female. As a result of this direction, *Bridget Jones' Diary* is completely from the point of view of a woman. Directed by Sharon Maguire, we see the entire film through Bridget's eyes. We see how she sees the men in her life and understand how she is perceived by them. Writes Caroline Siede "Like most rom-coms, *Bridget Jones* isn't aiming for realism...but it *is* clearly aiming to add some relatability to the rom-com fantasy. In particular, director Sharon Maguire has a keen eye for capturing the ridiculous amount of effort it takes for women to appear "effortlessly" glamorous," (Siede). The film is handled with a certain silliness, but that silliness is relatable to a lot of

straight women. “The great thing about Bridget is that she is a terribly honest character who wears her heart on her sleeve. She lives in a real world (unlike her American counterparts in *Sex and the City*) and struggles through as best she can,” (The Hollywood Reporter). Bridget is over the top, yes, but real and relatable all the more because of it. She represents a caricature of how many women feel - she’s a complicated woman, and many women have complicated feelings about themselves.

Bridget Jones’ Diary was produced by the company Working Title, which is known for the successful British romantic comedies like *Notting Hill* and *4 Weddings and a Funeral* that all tend to follow a specific format. “Bridget Jones’ s Diary displays many of the signature traits of the Working Title romcom, including the idealised representation of London and England for an American audience, an American star, the offbeat, quirky British humour, Hugh Grant, and the mark of Richard Curtis on the screenplay,” (Mortimer 132). Not only was Working Title tapping into a market and creating a niche, it also helped create a Anglophilic version of London, where every woman wanted to go and find their Hugh Grant or Colin Firth. Additionally, Working Title helped at the box office, giving the audience a sure-fire formula they knew would deliver. Audiences could come to the theater and know exactly what sort of film they would be seeing.

Additionally, *Bridget Jones* brought Renée Zellweger into a new world of stardom, introducing her to the world and earning her an Oscar nomination. (Siede) She was able to play the role in a charming but cynical manner, creating a character who audiences and women everywhere could relate to. Another major note about the production comes from the male leads - Colin Firth and Hugh Grant - two of the most famous romantic leads in the genre. In *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, Hugh Grant plays Bridget’s seductive boss - who turns out to be a serial cheater.

Colin Firth plays Mr. Darcy, the childhood friend of Bridget who she resents at first but comes to love. As the movie moves along, the audience consistently feels torn between the two as Bridget does - you don't know who to trust, but you do know that Bridget will end up with one of them. In one of the most famous scenes of the film, the two men fight over Bridget to the tune of "It's Raining Men," tapping into a fantasy that any straight woman can relate to - two attractive British men fighting for the affection of one woman. Hugh Grant was already a Working Title star, so it was easy for the company to tap into that pre-existing talent. "By 2001, audiences were used to seeing Hugh Grant play the bumbling but endearing romantic lead in movies like *Four Weddings And A Funeral* (1994) and *Notting Hill* (1999), so it was fun to see him subvert that shtick—one people were arguably already tired of—by playing a sleazy antagonist for once," (Siede). On the other hand, Colin Firth plays the attractive but awkward Darcy, who is lovable due to his awkwardness - "[*Bridget Jones' Diary*]'s romantic hero isn't the dashing knight who sweeps you off your feet; he's slightly awkward, and he likes you warts and all." (Siede). Colin Firth and Hugh Grant were already household names by this time, and they were a marketing draw to the film.

Critically, this film did very well. William Thomas wrote for *Empire* "this is nevertheless one of the most funny romances for some time. With Grant, Firth and Zellweger on form, this will be the next big Brit hit." The film was nominated for a number of awards - Renée Zellweger was nominated for an Academy Award and BAFTA, the screenplay was nominated for a BAFTA and the film itself was a BAFTA and Golden Globe nominee. The film was a successful, fun, and heartfelt film that caught the eyes of critics, and delivered a new star out of it. Zellweger then went on to star in *Chicago* as well as a plethora of other films. At the box office level, the

film did exceptionally well, making over \$280 million dollars with a budget of around \$25 million. Today, people still feel positively about the film. On Letterboxd, the film has an average rating of 3.3 stars out of 5, and the reviews rave about the fight scene with actors Hugh Grant and Colin Firth. On IMDb, there is a rating of 6.7/10 and an 81% approval on Rotten Tomatoes.

The final film that we will be exploring is *The Big Sick*, directed by Judd Apatow. This film came out in 2017, and was written by husband/wife duo Kumail Nanjiani and Emily V. Gordon. This film was one of only a few successful box office rom-coms in several years, the other being *Trainwreck*, also directed by Judd Apatow. This film was based on a true story, the story of Nanjiani and Gordon's relationship, in which Gordon got very sick and ended up slipping into a coma. However, the film was updated to still be relevant today, taking place in 2017 instead of the 2000s when the story actually occurred. Instead of making this a "period piece" it was updated to be modern and relevant, refreshing the romantic comedy genre. The fact that it was written by the real-life couple breathes a new life into the project as well - According to writer Emily V. Gordon: "I very much got to dig in and interview my family...Kumail and I had endless conversations about what that time was actually like and little tiny moments, and a lot of those made it into the movie." (Cornish 2017) Although the film was obviously changed to work for Hollywood, the heart of the characters and the story gave the script its skeleton. The genre always needs new life, and creating a large scale production based on a true story creates a hook to draw people into the theaters and experience an intimate, touching story. This film also uses Bollywood stars to garner an international audience - the father, played by Anupam Kher, is an acclaimed star in India and was able to create international hype for the film. Not only does

this add diversity, but it creates an air of positive international affairs and gives the film the ability to have a life overseas.

The *Big Sick* was produced by Judd Apatow, the leader of rom coms in the 2010s. He has produced and directed a number of successful romantic comedies such as *Trainwreck*, *Bridesmaids*, and *This is 40*. Apatow, with years of experience under his belt, brings the combination of over the top silliness with relatability. Critic Justin Chang noted that “Judd Apatow is one of the producers, and you can sense his influence in the movie's emotional density as well as its precision-tooled stream of laughs and tears,” (Chang 2017) hitting the perfect note between drama, romance, and comedy. Apatow also has the power of the name with him - like Ephron, he is a household name, and draws audiences to the box office with his name attached to the project. Apatow is creating a space for the romantic comedy for men and women alike - pushing the genre away from the idea of a “chick-flick”. Another thing to note is that this film was acquired by Amazon Studios - which gave it a larger reach. Now, the film is available on Amazon Prime - which is essential in the push for creating content specifically for these sites.

The biggest shift from the 2000s to the 2010s in the genre was from the romantic comedy to a more romantic dramedy. From the over-the-top schtick of the 2000's, the genre has shifted into more realistic, nuanced portrayal of love. These movies have largely become independent, rather than studio films, and now the “obstacles in indie rom-coms, on the other hand, are more often internal, that is, related to the characters' mental lives,” (Oria 2018: 153). These films being produced on a smaller scale, now have more nuanced issues being represented. The “emotional density” (Chang) that Apatow uses is the key to romantic comedies of the 2010s. There are more real, human issues that are featured in these stories. This is easy to see in *The Big*

Sick, where the characters are working through family issues and health issues - all very real experiences that most people can relate to on some level.

Thematically, this film hits on themes relevant to the 2010s. This film features an interracial couple - Nanjiani is Pakistani, and a large portion of the conflict comes from his family wanting Kumail to have an arranged marriage while he loves Emily, a white woman. While this is definitely a 2017 issue, there was backlash to this film from the Pakistani community - women felt as though they were represented in a 1 dimensional light in the film. Another theme of the film is illness and dealing with an ill loved one - focusing on the relationships that are built out of having a loved one in crisis and how we as humans react to crisis. Zach Shonfield describes the film as “the unremitting terror of being a parent, which unfolds as Kumail navigates Emily's mysterious health crisis with her terrified parents, played by Ray Romano and Holly Hunter, a feisty scene-stealer. There is comic gold in the cultural disconnect between Kumail and Emily's congenial, if politically incorrect, father,” (Shonfield). This film is about romance, illness, culture, and family all in one. Yes, this film hits all of the romantic comedy boxes, but it exceeds those expectations and crafts a more intricate story about relationships outside of the romantic space.

It is important to note that there was some backlash on how Nanjiani represented his culture. Critics felt that Nanjiani represented Pakistani women in a one-dimensional light, and cast a stigma over his family members who did agree to an arranged marriage. Hadley Freeman wrote for the Guardian: “What is less reasonable is the way all the Pakistani women his parents introduced him to are portrayed as pitiable, interchangeable and wholly conventional, even when they have lived in the US longer than Kumail, who was born in Pakistan.” (Freeman). Nanjiani

nor Gordon commented on the backlash. It is important to mention these issues in an increasingly sensitive time, and note that as diversity increases, cultural sensitivity must increase as well.

Unlike *When Harry Met Sally*, which focused on friends to lovers, and *Bridget Jones' Diary*, which focuses on enemies to lovers, *The Big Sick* focuses on Kumail winning Emily back. When Emily falls ill, she and Kumail are not together. Emily had just found out that Kumail's family didn't know about her and was trying to set Kumail up with a Pakistani girl. Emily's family knows about their break-up, and Kumail spends a large portion of the film waiting for Emily to get out of the coma and convincing her family that he is worthy of her (which of course, he manages to do, and everyone lives happily ever after). Again, while this family is a "rom-com" at the beginning and at the end, the story is about family and culture, larger, more nuanced facets of love. Kristin Doidge spoke to the changing representations of love in the genre, with families and familial love perhaps coming to light as becoming the new romantic comedy topic. These family themes update the film and puts it in a more relevant cultural context.

A difference between this film and the others we have discussed is that this film is that this film is from the male point of view. This film is very much from the point of view of Kumail, as Emily is in a coma for much of the film. While this is by far not the only romantic comedy film from the male perspective, these films can often fall prey to the "male gaze." *The Big Sick* is thankfully not one of these films - while Emily is desired by Kumail and he attempts to win her heart over the course of the film, she is represented with agency and desires of her own. She is complex and again, much of the story she is seen through the lens of her family,

giving her backstory. As she was written by her real-life counterpart, it is easy to see Emily as a fully fleshed out character. This modern romantic comedy is able to flesh out both characters in a more nuanced manner. Additionally, the placement of the male at the center of the story, particularly a man of color, diversifies the story and attracts a larger audience to see the film. This film is very much of the 21st century, representing a modern version of romance.

Critically, this movie was a success. The New York Times said “In “The Big Sick,” Mr. Nanjiani and Ms. Gordon vault over [the romantic comedy genre] hurdle with openness and delight, revitalizing an often moribund subgenre with a true story of love, death and the everyday comedy of being a 21st-century American.” (Dargis 2017) Critics praised the writing for being notable, smart and funny, but distinctly honest, earning Nanjiani and Gordon an Oscar nomination for Best Original Screenplay as well as a nomination at the Independent Spirit Awards. At the box office, the movie garnered \$56.4 million dollars with a \$5 million dollar budget and was one of the highest grossing independent films of 2017. This film did make the least of the three films discussed in this paper - which is most likely a symptom of the genre moving downhill. However, as it was one of the highest grossing independent films of 2017, it gives a hope to more well-made, nuanced romantic comedies. The popular opinion of this film is generally well received, with an average rating of 3.8 stars out of 5 on letterboxd.com. It holds a score of 7.6 on IMDb and a 98% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes. Overall, this film was well-received.

Although the romantic comedy genre is much different than it was in the 1990s, it is still around and kicking today. With such a high demand for blockbuster films like Marvel and Disney, it is easy to see this quieter, sleepier films get lost at the box office. However, with the

rise of streaming platforms, these films can now have a new home. Films like *Last Christmas*, the *Crazy Rich Asians Franchise* and *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* are revitalizing the genre. With the addition of streaming platforms and the pushed diversity of these films (and removing the idea that these films are just for women) there is a new space. In my interview with producer Jeremy Latcham, he emphasized the importance of using these streaming services to attract the widest possible audience and targeting people who may prefer to stay at home and watch something uniquely special. According to him, Hollywood has become too formulaic, too predictable, and films with honest and real heart can bring a sense of new life into the industry. Romantic comedies may not be the only way, but they are one particular way for this change to be made. (Latcham 2019). Diversity in both the cultural sense and in the sexual orientation space gives a lot of room for growth and fresh stories. There is a huge opportunity for unique, diverse voices to create fun, engaging romantic comedies that will revitalize the space.

These three films each exemplify a different time in the romantic comedy space, and we can see how the genre has changed and adapted to society over time. While the genre is changing, there is an excellent space for new types of stories starring characters of color and of different genders and sexualities. These stories will be the once at the box office next, and are the important stories that we need to tell.

Biographical Statement: Abigail Sherlock is a film lover originally from Vermont, USA, currently residing in California, earning her B.A. in Film and Television Production.

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