

Contemporary Western Love Narratives and Women in TV Series: A Case Study

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Abstract: This paper documents continuities and shifts in love stories unfolding in contemporary North-American TV series. We present results from a 2015-2017 case study on the Quebec TV series *La Galère* (2007-2013), showcasing four women in their forties as they deal with love relationships and intimate life. Based on the analysis of the four protagonists' love narratives and of the specific challenges they face when dealing with love, we discuss the features of love as they emerge from the narratives and the temporality of love that structures them. While the scholarly literature generally posits two coexisting, yet concurring love semantics (traditional or romantic vs. modern or partnership), our analysis of the love narratives in *La Galère* highlights a conception of love integrating tradition with modern reflexivity, idealization with scepticism, romanticism with pragmatism. As to the temporality of love, our research found a similar synergy between traditional and modern motives, which structures a temporal unfolding mixing circularity and linearity. These multiple references are mobilized by the main characters of the TV series to manage conflicting ambitions and to perform relationship work with *regard* to relational patterns that still entail a heavier workload and higher costs for women.

Keywords: love, gender, intimacy, TV series, semantics.



Introduction: narratives, love, and social change

Previous research has documented the transformation of love ideals and narratives in the late 20th century and towards the beginning of the 21st (Cancian 1987; Swidler 2001; Illouz 2012). The aim of the paper is to document observable continuities and shifts in love stories that unfold in contemporary TV series. More specifically, we discuss the features of love as they emerge from these narratives, and the temporality of love that the narratives structure. Our focus will be on the embodiment of love by main female characters, following accounts of love ideals being represented as gender specific in contemporary cultural productions (Evans 2003; Jackson 1993; Morin 2012). Feminist scholarship and social movements – among which we can count the recent #metoo movement – have demonstrated that love, sex and intimacy present specific challenges for women. These challenges are connected to power imbalance, unequal work division, and cultural biases. Contemporary TV series (from the 1990s on) have integrated the outcomes of this social reflexivity into the love stories that they are telling (Morin 2017, 2014b, 2012; Lavigne *et al.* 2013). Following theoretical and methodological accounts from Plummer (1995), Luhmann (1993, 1982) and Reinhardt-Becker (2015, 2005), we consider love narratives as both responses and contributions to social transformations, which can both go beyond the intimate sphere and also affect it. Thus, our analysis is situated on the level of love semantics (Luhmann 1982), yet involves a discussion of the connection between semantic change and social change. Narratives convey norms by drawing on a repertoire of available stories and by integrating new motives which elaborate questions and problems relevant to contemporary societies. Plummer (1995) has shown how shifts in sexual stories (e.g. rape stories, coming-out stories) are related to individual and collective ways to deal with challenges generated by social transformations. Our goal is to contribute to a similar sociological analysis of love stories as models for individual and social coping with the consequences of structural continuity and change in norms and in the way they apply to different categories of people (women, same-sex couples, etc.).

The paper presents data and analyses from a case study of the Quebec TV series *La Galère* (2007-2013). After summarizing love stories revolving around the four female protagonists, we discuss, on the one hand, the features of love emerging from these narratives, and, on the other, the temporality of love that these stories construct, and that further qualifies love's features. We will examine these semantic elements by connecting them to continuities and transformations of

contemporary Western societies in areas such as gender identities and arrangements, intimate bonds, and power relationships. While scholarly literature generally posits two coexisting, yet competing love semantics (traditional or romantic vs. modern or partnership), our analysis of the love narratives in *La Galère* highlights a conception of love integrating tradition with modern reflexivity, idealization with scepticism, and romanticism with pragmatism.

Context, research questions, theory

There is a long tradition of social sciences and humanities research on love semantics and narratives for which the main goal is to identify love paradigms across modern Western history. Generally speaking, scholarship on contemporary love paradigms distinguishes two main competing semantics: romantic love and partnership. Romantic love semantics characterizes love as an overwhelming passion (Jackson 1993) directed toward an individual (Leupold 1983), entailing a merger of individualities (Friedman 1998), resulting in an exclusive, long-term relationship which conflates feelings, sexuality and conjugality (Lenz 2005) – traditionally, marriage – and exceeds in importance every other project or relationship of the partners (Tyrell 1987). Since romantic love provides the greatest happiness in human life, a life deprived of this kind of love is barely worth living, thus the desire for it is seen as universal (Hahn 2008). Historically, romantic love semantics is associated with an individualization process (Luhmann 1982) revolving around autonomy, validation of the self through intimacy in opposition to the increasing anonymity of the outer world (Reinhardt-Becker 2005), and freedom.

Starting in the early 19th century, love marriage (based on the lover's free choice) competes with strategic marriage (based on economic, social, symbolic concerns) and love gradually becomes the only legitimate ground for marriage in Western societies. Partnership love semantics revolves around a rational, practical, realistic conception of love (Reinhardt-Becker 2005, 2015), not necessarily sexually exclusive, resulting in a relationship based on negotiation, problem solving and relationship work (Lenz 2005), within which individuals preserve their autonomy and personal space (Leupold 1983), and which only lasts as long as the partners consider it to be satisfying and supportive of their self-fulfillment (Giddens 1992). Romantic love semantics and partnership semantics are regarded as opposed (Leupold 1983; Reinhardt-Becker 2015), yet coexisting in contemporary representations, discourses, and practices (Boudon 2017; Duncan

2015; Gross 2005; Swidler 2001; Van Hoof 2013) and even *integrated* into a new love semantics merging traditional references with modern reflexivity (Piazzesi *et al.* 2018; Carter & Duncan 2018).

Scholarship has also highlighted how these two love semantics historically had and still have a specific gender-related impact. Women are generally regarded as more vulnerable and differently engaged within love relationships, thus investing and risking more than men in the attempt of maintaining the relationship, but also when it ends (Belleau & Lobet 2017). Since the 19th century, advice literature has identified women as responsible for intimate relationship work, for ensuring harmony and well-being in the family, and for avoiding marital conflicts (Mahlmann 1991). This tendency is confirmed by recent studies on contemporary self-help books, with the addition of a neoliberal, managerial twist (Jonas 2007), which is fostered by the therapeutic turn of the partnership semantics (Giddens 1992), and encourages women to “manage” the couple, and perform communicational and emotional work, etc. Empirical research shows persisting inequalities in the way material / domestic as well as emotional work is divided within heterosexual love relationships, with women statistically taking on the bigger share (Duncombe & Marsden 1993; Gabb & Fink 2015; Goldberg 2013). It is on this terrain that feminist scholars have criticized the persisting romantic allure of contemporary love ideals for being delusional, unrealistic or misleading, particularly for women (Jackson 1993; Evans 2003, 2004; Illouz 2012). In her analysis of relationship advice books published between 1981 and 2000 and directed to a female readership, Hazleden (2004) has found evidence of this same pessimistic, even pathologizing stance towards love.

Thus, social discourse and cultural productions appear to have integrated hints and reflections documented by these critiques and empirical findings. Analyses of the late 20th century to early 21st century TV series illustrate how the “female-centered drama” (Lotz 2006) has become a genre in serial audiovisual production, as its narratives focus on women’s struggles with their love life, its challenges, pleasures, disappointments, and conciliation with professional and personal ambitions. Consistent with feminist analyses of gender imbalance in private and public life, these narratives clearly articulate love’s challenges as gendered, portraying different outcomes for men and women pursuing romantic love in a late modern society. Morin observes that female characters in 1995-2005 American TV series (*Ally McBeal*, *Gilmore Girls*, etc.) experiment with a variety of

relational patterns (romantic, passionate, pure¹), which foster different versions of the self, different self-projections (2012, p. 164). Because they “want it all”, and because love is precarious and requires work, these women mobilize strategical and professional skills in their private lives in order to pursue their dream, conciliating love and career, conjugal life and personal independence. However, after 2005, TV series (*The Good Wife*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Cougar Town*, *Nurse Jackie*, *The New Adventures of Old Christine* etc.) tend to present women in their forties who have already been married or in a long-term relationship, have children *and* a career – thus have already complied with social expectations linked to the heterosexual norm (Morin 2017, p. 219). Managing private and public sphere is no longer an issue as it was in the 1995-2005 TV series, when building a couple could have easily meant giving up one’s freedom and emancipation. Having been disappointed by love once (or more), these more mature women look for love outside of the nuclear family, aim at building a “pure relationship” and remain skeptical towards romance and passionate love (Morin 2017, p. 219). Thus, according to Morin, female characters in the late 2000s balance their life ambitions thanks to a more realistic vision of love (involving “the politics” of love, that is to say a conception of the political implications of love for the emancipation of women) and a “pure” relational pattern for intimate life. As a conclusion, Morin states: “The resolution of the happiness crisis lies in a little revolution: instead of seeking the absolute, find the wise (for reflexive) mix” (2012, p. 169, our translation).

In this paper, we discuss whether this still is an accurate description of women’s love narratives in late 2010s TV series. Did this “little revolution” provide for a new form of happiness and balance in women’s lives as they are narrated by contemporary TV series? How is love defined by these cultural productions, and how are its definitions connected to women’s identities? Our discussion will focus on two entangled aspects of love narratives: love’s features and love’s temporality. Identifying the features attributed to love by contemporary love narratives in TV series is meant as a contribution to the above mentioned scholarly endeavor to describe contemporary Western love semantics. Regarding love’s temporality, there are two main theoretical reasons compelling the discussion. Firstly, at least from the Romanticism on, love is situated within stories (Giddens

¹ The reference is to Giddens’ “pure relationship” (1992), a relationship emancipated from traditional norms – especially concerning monogamy and gender inequalities –, hinged on individual autonomy, satisfaction, self-fulfillment and pleasure, resting on communication and mutual disclosure between the partners, and in which sexual pleasure is at the very core.

1992) that unfold in time through events and actions, thus making love a historical² phenomenon. Secondly, and as a consequence, the development of modern love narratives revolves around the constitution of a specific temporality of love (Luhmann 1982). In the 16th century, the instability of love was accounted for by referring to the finitude of beauty or to the natural deterioration of mundane things. As of the 17th century, however, instability problems start being connected to love's temporal cycle, where love's fulfillment accelerates love's deterioration. Thus, obstacles to love must be cherished, as they extend the stage of idealization and defer the end of love (Luhmann 1982, p. 89). The centrality of temporality increases the reflexive turn of love semantics: every action or communication can now be interpreted against the background of the structured unfolding of love – either retrospectively or through anticipation. The same piece of information has a different meaning at the beginning or towards the end of a love relationship: the process of love determines how information must be interpreted (Luhmann 1982, p. 117) and which expectations are appropriate. Thus, the link between love's features and love's temporality is deeply embedded in Western love semantics.

Methodology

Our data come from a 2015-2017 case study of the Quebec French TV series *La Galère* (2007-2013), which can be classified as a “female-centered drama” (Lotz 2006). Our research is anchored in a perspective inspired by scholarship on contemporary sexual and love scripts in North-American TV series (Lavigne 2009 ; Lavigne *et al.*, 2013 ; Markle 2008; Piazzesi *et al.* 2018); therefore, it does not take into account reception or material production of the TV series.

La Galère's four main characters are women in their late thirties, early forties: Claude, Isabelle, Mimi and Stéphanie. The story begins when the four women, who have been friends for years, decide to move in together, with their seven children. Claude and Isabelle are still in a long-term love relationship, while Mimi and Stéphanie are single and seek – in different ways – the love of their lives. All four characters' romantic expectations have been repeatedly crushed, either by the day-to-day unfolding of routines, inequalities, frustrations, or by men's inability to commit to a long-term relationship. The six seasons (62 episodes) of the series narrate the four protagonists'

² In the sense of the “historicity” of emotional dispositions developed by Oksenberg Rorty (1986).

love and intimate lives. This specific focus, in addition to the high reflexivity shown by the characters, makes the series particularly suited to provide data on contemporary love semantics and its correlation with gender difference.

We have opted for a purposive sample and selected scenes presenting conversations or actions of at least one of the four women on relevant themes (love feelings, sexuality, marriage or relationship, domestic life). The sample consisted of 41 out of 62 episodes (67%). Between 4,5 and 19 minutes per episode have been coded (a total of 1230 minutes). The coding grid was built both inductively and deductively (Kim *et al.* 2007), by selecting relevant themes from available literature and by identifying semantic elements in the TV series. We also have compiled each main character's intimate biography across love relationships, sexuality, marriage, divorce, or maternity, on chronological timelines, which highlight within- and between-differences among the intimate biographies of the characters. These reconstructed biographies provide contextual elements crucial for understanding narratives of love conveyed in the TV series, and thus constitute frameworks for analyzing coded themes. Narratives include a chronology of events structured in a logical way, which allows analysts to infer causality between different elements, as well as evaluations from characters giving particular meanings to those events (Glover, 2003). As such, narratives prove to be ideal units of analysis for the purpose of highlighting certain represented features of love, like its temporality or women's reflexivity, as well as identifying shifts in the semantics of love beyond what is strictly visually or discursively represented. Narrative analysis also allows us to observe the articulation of diverse, sometimes competing, normative references and the way they make sense in a character's biographical trajectory. For the purpose of this paper, we have extracted and analyzed data regarding the main characters' views on love and the ways they are embedded in the narratives of their intimate biography. The analysis focuses on convergence and difference between conceptions of love; on love's connection to the specific challenges faced by each main character in their intimate life; and on the synergy between these two aspects in the unfolding of the narrative. We will start by summarizing the four love narratives and, for each one, highlight specific challenges in the main character's dealing with love. We will then analyze and discuss the different conceptions of love and the different conceptions of love's temporality that organize the narratives.

Data: narrating love stories

Stéphanie

Stéphanie is single, has three children with three different fathers, and she initiates the house sharing project with her three friends (Claude, Mimi and Isabelle). In fact, she strongly believes that love and passion cannot survive cohabitation and routine. She is in love with Marc, (fictional) Quebec Premier, they have some sexual encounters but, for political reasons, he does not wish to commit to a relationship. Stéphanie believes that loving each other is not enough, she wants to be Marc's official partner. After numerous deceptions caused by Marc, Stéphanie meets Romain, who is willing to engage in a serious relationship. Stéphanie hesitates. Marc, jealous, comes forward and states his willingness to be with her, but the relationship ends rapidly – again for reasons connected to Marc's political status. Devastated, Stéphanie goes back to Romain. Her feelings for him are not as strong as her love for Marc, but Romain, unlike Marc, is available. At first, she wants to keep the relationship more casual, but Romain refuses to have sex with her as long as she does not commit to their relationship. She finally accepts to do so, but they quickly find out that their plans for the future do not match: Romain wants to live with Stéphanie and have children, while she does not wish to leave the house she shares with her friends. When she becomes pregnant with Romain's child, she pleads for a "living apart together" arrangement, but Romain refuses and threatens to leave her if she does not get an abortion. She complies, but leaves him. She starts having stronger feelings for Michel, her ex-partner and father of her oldest child. Meanwhile, Marc tries to convince Stéphanie to return to him. After hesitating for a while, she accepts to marry Marc, under the condition that she will not move in with him. The day of the wedding, she has sex with Michel and confesses to Marc who immediately forgives her, having mistreated her for years. Stéphanie finds out later that she is pregnant. At the end of the TV series, she still lives with her friends and does not know who the biological father of the baby is.

Stéphanie faces specific challenges: be happy in her love life without sacrificing her dreams and desires, and also be faithful to herself without giving up her dream of finding love; learn to love in a more "orderly", traditional way, as it is expected by some men (Romain, Marc), and at the same time resist traditional prescriptions (embodied by her mother), such as marrying an older, richer man to have a comfortable life. She ends up marrying the rich breadwinner with high social

status and embracing a traditional marriage based on romantic love, but she insists on a non-traditional living arrangement (*living apart together*).

Isabelle

Isabelle is married to Jacques, a Quebec Cabinet Minister³, and is a stay-at-home mother of two. Despite her law degree, she is the sole provider of childcare and domestic work, with no help or recognition from her husband, whom she supports in his political ambitions. She is deeply frustrated by the situation. Passion is over, sex is boring, and displays of affection are rare and shallow. When Stéphanie and the other friends make plans to move in together, she refuses to join them: she feels responsible for Jacques. When she discovers Jacques' infidelity, she changes her mind and leaves him. She resumes working as a lawyer and tries to gain autonomy and financial independence. As they start seeing each other again, Jacques finds out that he is not their son's biological father and breaks up with Isabelle. She explains that she was raped by a colleague of his, and they get back together. Isabelle agrees to return home on the condition that she will be relieved of at least 50% of the burden of domestic work, but the plan collapses when she finds out that Jacques has a lover. She serves him divorce papers and decides to run for office in his district to spite him. Later, they start dating again and still have feelings for each other. Isabelle demands the reciprocity in sexual pleasure that she never had before and, for the first time, has orgasms during sexual intercourse with Jacques. Later, she learns that she has early Alzheimer's and breaks up with Jacques, realizing that she will not be happy with him in the short time she has left. She meets Eric, a man who does not match her taste and who is very different from her, but they initiate a relationship. As a couple they are more egalitarian (including financially) and this leaves her more room for self-fulfillment, yet there is little talk of love, sex and living together. Isabelle and Eric have a good time together until he learns that she is in possession of illegal medications for her condition and takes them away from her. She breaks up with him, then they make up and he decides to go on a trip to "find himself". Isabelle does not join him and she waits for his return. At the end of the last season of the show, they have a baby and are together, but her illness is progressing and she has trouble remembering who he is.

³ Jacques' character does not resemble any current Quebec politicians.

Isabelle faces the following specific challenges: to flourish, be autonomous and self-fulfilled within a love relationship; to balance love with equal access to resources and opportunities; to learn to take her place, make demands, and be more assertive in a relationship with a man.

Claude

As the story starts, Claude is in a long-term relationship with Antoine, they live together, are not married and have two children. The division of domestic work is extremely unfair, with Claude taking care of everything and paying all the bills while Antoine is writing his PhD dissertation. Passion and sexual desire have died, and Claude seizes what she considers to be an opportunity to revive them in her life with Antoine: she moves in with her friends, as Stéphanie has suggested. Claude and Antoine are still a couple, but she has three extramarital affairs and gives Antoine a sexually transmitted infection. As she gets in a serious fight with Mimi and needs a new place to stay, Claude confesses her infidelity and begs Antoine to allow her to move back in with him, but he leaves her. Claude starts seeing Barry, a millionaire whom she dates for his money, and then François, whom she meets while he is dating her friend Mimi. Both relationships are casual and lack in long-term perspectives, but the one with François becomes more stable as Claude fears solitude. While dismissing sexual exclusivity as a principle, Claude is overly jealous and controlling towards François. As routine starts settling in, Claude's sexual desire for François diminishes, and she breaks up the relationship. Claude and Antoine reconcile when their teenage daughter goes through a rough patch. They decide to reunite, get engaged and, after some time, get married. Meanwhile, Antoine has bought a small farmhouse in the countryside and wants the family to live there. Claude, who reluctantly moves in, hates it. Willing to leave and ready to divorce, she changes her mind when she finds out how rich Antoine has become after inheriting from his father. All along the TV series narrative, Claude's sexual desire and passionate feelings towards men appear to be fundamentally triggered by wealth, ostentatious spending, and luxury. Claude tries a number of deceptive techniques, including pretending to be pregnant, in order to deter Antoine from leaving her for their attractive neighbor. Upon finding she is not really pregnant, Antoine breaks up with Claude. Over time, they gradually find out they are still in love, and they have sex on several occasions. Claude wants to get back together, but Antoine will only date her when she becomes as rich as he is, in order for him to be sure that she is in it for love and

not for money. Claude gets pregnant with Antoine's child and is resentful. After struggling for a while, she decides to keep the baby, who is born at the end of the last season, while Claude still lives with her friends. She and Antoine have come to the conclusion that their relationship can only work outside of any institutional commitment.

Claude's challenges concern keeping passion and sexuality alive within a steady, long-term relationship; channeling desires that find neither place nor satisfaction within marriage; in order to keep her partner, adapting to living conditions that do not suit her, thus adjusting her material desires for comfort and luxury while pursuing her feelings and ambitions regarding conjugal life.

Mimi

Mimi is single and looking for the love of her life. Tired of living alone, she enthusiastically agrees to move in with her friends. In the first season of the TV series, she meets a series of men with whom she has sex on the first date, but none of them is interested in a committed relationship. Mimi is constantly disappointed. Sex is a source of great pleasure for her, and she usually acts on her desire and drives, but her enthusiastic sexuality is considered by her friends as a big obstacle to her desire for a steady, serious relationship. She falls in love with François on their first encounter, but he has sex with her friend Claude while they are still dating. Mimi then meets Julien, and this time she follows her friends' advice and puts off sex for a while. She falls in love with him and, for love, endures frustrations and even agrees to participate in his criminal activities. After a while, however, she discovers that he is leading a double life, is married and has children. While trying to get over the disappointment, Mimi meets a priest, Dominique, with whom she has sex. Mimi gets pregnant, and the pregnancy revives her hope to form a family. Living together with the father of her child, a plan that she had given up for a long time, suddenly becomes an option. Dominique, however, hesitates in making the decision to leave the Church and live with her. Finally, he decides to move in with her, but their cohabitation soon becomes unbearable for both. Just as in Claude's case, living together fatally endangers the conjugal project; but for Mimi this happens on the ground of gender inequalities in the division of domestic and relational work. Their relationship ends. Mimi meets David, a single dad who is indoctrinated by a cult, and their relationship has a short life: he practices some form of chastity, and Mimi's understanding of a love relationships entails sexual intimacy. At the end of the last season, François comes back into

Mimi's life, they start a long-distance relationship (he lives in London) and she gets pregnant, while still living with her friends. Mimi's dream of forming a family is fulfilled, although with a non-traditional arrangement.

Mimi faces several challenges in her intimate life: finding "real" love, which involves exclusive mutual commitment and family, thus combining all dimensions of an intimate relationship; learning to distance herself from her sexual drives and her desperate need for love and postponing their satisfaction; finding a balance between satisfaction of her desires and self-preservation.

Love's features

In the interwoven narratives of these four intimate trajectories, love's features appear to be grouped around three main semantic clusters, which we identify through three general statements about love that the TV series endorses throughout its six seasons:

A) *Love is tantamount to passion and dies within marriage and routine.* This conception of love comes across as the leading thesis of the whole TV series, but emerges more directly from Claude and Isabelle's story. While the four women agree on this conception of love, Stéphanie embodies an agentic, entrepreneurial variation of it: *love is in great (or better) shape when there are obstacles, hindrances, and troubles* – which one has to provide. Consequently, love demands from women two distinct attitudes: patience and endurance to withstand the difficulties of love; and entrepreneurship and work to keep it alive. When the four women talk about moving in together, they have a discussion about marriage as being the tomb of erotic love, and what can be done (e.g. live apart) to revive the passion. Sexual arousal is constantly put down by the boredom that routine brings, and efforts have to be made by women to "spice things up" within their relationships. However, looking for sexual gratification outside of the established relationship represents a punishable transgression as monogamy still constitutes the normative ideal, and a rule to abide by.

This conception of love is superficially consistent with a pre-romantic ideal (Luhmann 1982), according to which love's fulfillment coincides with its decline (de Rougemont 1954). But there is more to it: this old fatalism merges with the post-romantic, realistic assessment of the collapse

of the romantic ideal of an eternal love fostering ongoing mutual sexual interest and framed within a monogamous and life-long marriage (Kipnis 2004). Both the 1920s “objective love” semantics (Reinhardt-Becker 2005) and the 1970s-1990s partnership semantics (Leupold 1983) are considered by sociological literature as reactions to the romantic merge. The “objective love” blueprint pleads for a realistic, non-monogamous love relationship focused on pleasure and companionship, while the partnership blueprint loosens the monogamous norm and responds to the flaws of the romantic ideal by focusing on personal autonomy, problem-solving, communication, and mutual disclosure (Giddens 1992). Generally speaking, this modern paradigm is represented in cultural productions and social discourse as demanding a lot of work, rationality, and matter-of-factness, especially from women. In her comparative study of the daily construction of love in couples from Switzerland and Quebec, Henchoz (2014) also found that Quebec partners are particularly inclined to highlight and talk about the hard work that a love relationship entails, especially when it seeks equality. Surprisingly enough, though, the TV series appears to reject the solutions offered by the partnership model and to plead instead for a return to classical recipes: living apart, enticing desire through distance and scarcity, breaking intimacy and daily familiarity, as well as ongoing disclosure. Such a relationship program still entails a lot of planning, organizing, negotiating, and relationship work, which is carried out by women and upon which the male characters merely react. This conception of love, thus, is still consistent with the romantic ideology of the gendered division of relationship work: women are the more competent partners, better equipped to deal with the challenges of being in a heterosexual relationship. Advice books spanning from the 19th century (Mahlmann 1991) to the late 20th century (Jonas 2007; Scholz 2014) have promoted this idea of women as intimate entrepreneurs, an idea which appears to thrive throughout love paradigm shifts, and to correspond to broadly popular post-feminist conceptions of women’s empowerment (Spar 2013; Fraser 2009).

The TV series’ post-romantic realism, however, has instead a genuine feminist twist. If love dies within marriage, this is partly due to persistent inequalities in the division of work and in the price the partners have to pay to build a traditional, long-term love relationship. Thus, how could putting additional, entrepreneurial responsibilities on the shoulders of women help fixing the problem? This feminist stance connects features of love grouped under A to those grouped under B.

B) *Love is a high-risk endeavor, especially for women, who nevertheless fall for it over and over again.* Mimi and Stéphanie are the main representatives of this conception of love, but Isabelle and Claude also experience love as entailing heavy, almost unbearable consequences. For Mimi and Stéphanie, love hurts as they repeatedly fail at finding requited love and, when they find it, building a stable relationship on it. Mimi is perceived by her friends as being constantly “ripped off” by men who take advantage of her sexual availability to use her and then discard her. Similarly, Stephanie resents feeling like Marc’s mistress, being good enough for him as a sexual partner, but not as a conjugal partner. Thus, even instant sexual pleasure is often later followed by frustration for being instrumentalized by men. Isabelle and Claude’s love relationships are a source of frustration, disappointment, and lack of recognition. When they decide to move out of their homes, they still love their husbands, but can no longer bear the inequalities, indifference, and disengagement.

This idea of love is consistent with pre-romantic and romantic semantics of love as an overwhelming, dangerous force, which could cause the lovers (and especially women) to lose control of themselves (Luhmann 1982) and endanger their integrity. According to Hazleden, such a gender specific pessimism is still reflected by recent advice books (2004). As noted above, feminist critique of the romantic love ideal also raises the question of the “cost” of love for women in terms of independence, autonomy, personal projects, and dignity (Jackson 1993; Evans 2003). However, the classic romantic solution entailing the active conversion of passionate love into conjugal love, as championed by Rousseau (Pulcini 1998), is no longer an appropriate solution: if classic romantic narratives ended either happily, with a marriage, or unhappily, with separation or death (Kaufmann 2007), contemporary, female-centered narratives focus on what happens to relationships and women *after* getting married or settling down. In other words, they focus on the cost and the consequences of conjugal love, as the end product of romantic involvement. Even more remarkably, the partnership ideal, the pure relationship (Giddens 1992), and the “objective love” (Reinhardt-Becker 2005) semantics do not appear as viable solutions either. This finding contradicts Morin’s observation of a reconciliation of personal and intimate ambitions for women in their forties in US contemporary TV series (Morin 2017, 2012). The four protagonists of *La Galère* still seek the thrill of romantic, passionate love, which appears to be the feeling and the experience that make the whole endeavor worthwhile. If they are not actively looking for the thrill (like Mimi and Stéphanie are), they are nevertheless exposed to the possibility of *falling* in love

and suffering for it: even though Claude pretends to be immune to love and the pain it entails, in fact she is not. This takes us to love features grouped under C. Before discussing this last semantic cluster, it is worth noting that the highlighted difference between love semantics observed by Morin in USA TV series and love semantics in *La Galère* also entails different narrative strategies. American TV series analyzed by Morin mostly present romantic love as “a thing of the past” through flashbacks – as if “revoking” its right to be part of the present narrative (Morin 2014a, p. 450). *La Galère*, on the contrary, repeatedly incorporates romantic love within the present narrative of each of the four main characters’ personal life.

C) *Love is worth fighting for, until it is the perfect love.*

Love still is idealized as an exciting, worthwhile experience, as a source of happiness and gratification – as the greatest pleasure in human life. The four characters in *La Galère* want their love relationships to match the idealized pattern of romantic convergence of passionate love, marriage (or stabilized relationship) and ongoing sexual gratification. Feelings of love heighten women’s sexual experiences, and vice-versa. They clearly have a standard in mind, which they employ to assess present and prospective love relationships. Consequently, they work hard to match reality and ideal – availing themselves as much of stratagems as of communication and therapeutic tools. At the same time, as we have discussed above, the four women reflect on the cost that such an idealized love entails for them and for their ambitions. Hope and idealization coexist with more detached attitudes spanning from realism to skepticism and even pessimism. Thus, there is no contradiction between features in semantic cluster B and features in semantic cluster C, rather a tension stemming from the persistence of traditional values and the parallel development of a (feminist) social reflexivity recommending caution and awareness to women. Furthermore, this tension is at the very core of female-centered TV series narratives, which call attention on the process leading female protagonists to wise up with regard to the implications of traditional love ideals (Morin 2017). As it happens in *Sex and the City*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Girls* and other female-centered dramas, *La Galère* showcases the increasing complexity of women’s reflexivity, which is additionally fostered by sharing and mutual support within the close circle of friends. Thus, in contemporary TV series, female friendship appears to be a main component of women’s learning about intimacy, relationships, and men.

A further implication of love features in this cluster is the idea that there can be *only one right* partner, namely the man one passionately loves – an attitude that is specifically embodied by Stéphanie. To her, there can be no second best: only Marc is worth being with, because he is her one true love. On the other hand, since the coveted relationship does not take off, Stéphanie has intimate relationships with other men – and so does Claude. Although monogamy seems to prevail at the end of the sixth and final season, loving someone does not imply sexual and intimate exclusivity – as it would have according to the romantic ideal. Thus, traditional romantic expectations coexist with a realistic, pragmatic attitude and with women’s affirmation of their sexuality.

Love’s temporality

The temporality of love emerging from the TV series’ love narratives appears to match classic, stereotypical features of love. As the 16th-18th century traditional passionate love semantics posits (Luhmann 1982), love has a universal, almost inescapable, timely structure which goes from desire to fulfillment, and from fulfillment to end. This classic conception is superficially reflected by love features in A and B: women have a pessimistic attitude towards love’s unfolding over time – they anticipate chagrin and frustration as a necessary outcome of falling in love. At the same time, there is hope that work and action can extend love’s natural life through different strategies (delay, scarcity, obstacles, ambiguity, etc.).

A closer look, however, reveals a late modern complexification of this classic fatalistic stance. A more recent, genuinely romantic vision of love’s unfolding in time entails a temporal split between two stages of love (Jackson 1993; Pulcini 1998): the first stage is love as overwhelming passion and self-loss, marking the beginning of an amorous relationship; the second stage is one in which the initial “folly” turns into a mature, wiser form of love, capable of stabilization and grounding authentic, durable intimacy (thus, marriage). Romantic inscription of love within marriage, i.e. within a stability-oriented relationship, encourages this new interpretation of the ephemeral character of passionate love, and de-dramatizes its instability by circumscribing it to a limited phase of the lovers’ interaction. The second, longer stage of a steadier mutual sentimental disposition allows for stabilized expectations and long-term planning. As Pulcini (1998) has shown, Rousseau’s novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse* already pleaded for the cultivation of conjugal love

as the only form of love in which one can preserve oneself, whereas passionate love implies self-loss and self-destruction. The late modern, therapeutically twisted version of this semantics stresses the mature stage as “healthy” and regards the first stage as “pathological”. As Giddens’ work on the transformations of intimacy shows (1992), the therapeutic language is far from being metaphorical: as the focus of personal “investments” gradually shifts from “love” back to the self, love relationships are increasingly expected to provide support and a safe space for self-fulfillment. In addition, self-fulfillment is an endeavor which involves multiple areas of individual life (work, friendships, hobbies, etc.). “Good” love is love that is steady, balanced, wise, solid, and does not threaten personal stability and personal networks.

Passion, though, is not relinquished in contemporary love narratives. As the love stories in *La Galère* highlight, the fundamental moment of passion and mutual desire is idealized by the main characters, who attempt to preserve its overwhelming power or to cyclically reactivate it in order to revive the “thrill”. Love’s temporality in the TV series, thus, is linear as well as circular. Furthermore, the protagonists of *La Galère* reject the linear unfolding of love relationships in an additional way: by choosing a “living apart together” arrangement, they produce cyclical interruption of the linear path of ongoing self-disclosure, intimacy and routine. Where cohabitation ensures continuity and stabilization over time, non-cohabitation ensures tolerability as well as increased equality. Not only are love relationships no longer expected to provide stable support in everyday life (a function now performed by relationships of friendship and solidarity among women): their daily unfolding is regarded as intolerable, as it kills passion and desire and as it wears women out through asymmetrical commitment and workload. Thus, the link between love’s temporal unfolding and committed work on the intimate bond is shifted: relationship work no longer aims at ensuring steadiness and durability through uninterrupted dedication, rather it is aimed at *enduring the bond* by reactivating passionate mutual interest, sabotaging routinization, and defusing power inequalities.

Conclusion

We have analyzed and discussed contemporary love ideals developed by cultural productions, more specifically by a Quebec female-centered TV series. We looked at features of love, at their continuity and change with regard to traditional semantics, and at their inscription into love’s

temporal structure. With respect to the TV series *La Galère*, our findings illustrate how different, potentially contradictory conceptions of love are integrated and combined in the same narratives, as the characters draw on multiple sources of meaning and on multiple norms to face complex challenges. These challenges are connected to women's new positions in Western societies, to the new identities that they attempt to embody and realize, as well as to social reflexivity surrounding old and new structural inequalities. In this respect, feminist demands and awareness play a major role in these transformations, as women bear conflicting ambitions, expectations, and injunctions coming from society at large (Carter & Duncan 2018). Thus, the main characters of *La Galère* avail themselves of a combination of traditional and non-traditional references to make sense of love, of its unfolding over time, and of what a woman can do to ensure her happiness and the success of a long-term intimate commitment. Traditional references are used by the protagonists of *La Galère* to maximize pleasure, elicit intimacy and emotional closeness. They are also used to minimize uncertainty, to maintain hope in times of disillusionment, and to bestow "order" on their lives and intimate networks – also through recourse to old-fashioned gender role attributions. Non-traditional mindframes, references, and meanings are applied to decision-making when there is an unaffordable risk of self-loss, but also to make room for the traditional kind of passionate erotic love that the four women are looking for. Such an integration (Piazzesi *et al.* 2018) of conflicting love semantics provides a narrative framework that is clearly incompatible with Morin's analysis of women's intimate 'careers' and strategies in recent USA TV series (2017, 2012). Our observations concur with Morin's, but only up to a point. Romantic, passionate love certainly is demystified, rationalized, mocked, fatally shaken by the denunciation of the unfairness of the patriarchal order (Morin 2017, p. 265). However, passionate love still embodies the coveted ideal; it still attracts as an endeavor worth fighting for and investing in; and it still conveys the hope of happiness. Further, according to Morin, women in contemporary TV series protect themselves against self-loss entailed by passionate love, and such stance is deeply embedded in the feminist awareness of gender inequalities and injustices connected to heterosexual love's unfolding (Morin 2017, p. 239). Yet our data shows that those women do not entirely relinquish traditional gendered roles, in which they find reassurance of their competence as women as well as handy shortcuts to get what they want from men (sex, affection, presence, material advantages – see Lavoie Mongrain and Piazzesi 2018). Finally, Morin states that women in contemporary TV series tend to disconnect love and sexuality, and link sexuality to pleasure without commitment (Morin 2017, p. 266).

However, according to our data, monogamy still is the general norm, commitment still rhymes with fidelity, and extramarital sex is stigmatized as moral failure, that must be concealed from the official partner (Piazzesi *et al.* 2018). The female characters in *La Galère* have not made peace with the failure of traditional patterns and roles. More specifically, they are clearly unwilling to give up the romantic love ideal, despite its obvious flaws and its rather unbearable consequences, as well as the kind of “world” that goes with it. If these women experiment with “thinner” relationships (e.g. excluding cohabitation), such relationships are certainly not traditionally romantic, but they are not “pure” (as meant by Giddens, 1992) either. Rather, they combine advantages from both romantic and partnership semantics, while attempting to mitigate the risks and the negative consequences of both through mutual compensation.

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