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Vicky Cristina Barcelona (2008) and the politics of female friendship

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“Women are meant to be loved, not to be understood”

Oscar Wilde (1891)

The American cinematic landscape is littered with female friendships. These friendships take multiple forms, and serve multiple purposes, but most manifest as shallow, derivative and, at worst, toxic; relationships that are harmful not only to the characters involved in them, but to our broader, ‘real-world’ perceptions and expectations of female friendship. Onscreen, women’s friendships are fraught with competition and mistrust, and can be reformulated in moments to accommodate the arrival of a male lead. The scarcity of authentic and diverse representations of these friendships in cinema has been identified in the work of Hollinger (1998), Schreiber (2014) and others, who have sought to understand how and why representations of women and their friendships have failed to evolve and respond to the demonstrable shifts in social and cultural understandings of gender. This chapter hopes to further the discourse surrounding filming female friendship through a close consideration of postfeminist filmmaking contexts.

The female friendship film, Hollinger suggests, is ‘more accurately described as a recently developed subgenre of the woman’s film’ (1998:2). The ‘woman’s film’ has its origins in the 1940s, and according to Hollinger has three defining characteristics: it is a film made directly for a female audience, with a narrative that revolves around the actions and emotions of a female protagonist *and* which deals with issues of particular interest to women (ibid). The woman’s film, then, reconfigures our expectations of and enhances our identification with the female subject; as Gamman and Marshment might suggest, these films ‘[make] feminist meanings part of our pleasure’ (1989:2). As the decades wore on, we saw the subject of the woman’s film become increasingly autonomous, and with that autonomy came the opportunity to cultivate her friendships with other

women. Whilst acknowledging that both the definition and the discourse of the woman's film relies heavily on a reductive and essentialist view of womanhood and those who experience it, the framework which Hollinger employs in understanding the genre has some interesting implications regarding the situation (and the limitation) of the female friendship film within contemporary American cinema.

By defining female friendship narratives within the broader parameters of the woman's film, Hollinger implies that the intended or dominant audience demographic for the female friendship film is women. This may seem like an obvious conclusion to draw, but this chapter contends that the female friendship film does not operate within (or belong to) any one genre or audience. Rather, female friendships are a narrative mainstay of contemporary cinema, and the female friendship film traverses, and occasionally transcends, conventional genre categorisation. In a contemporary context, the female friendship is central to horror, action, mumblecore, romantic comedy, science fiction and more. However, in recognising the prolific nature of the female friendship film(s), it becomes apparent that audience is not, perhaps, the primary concern. To address the root of the pernicious mythology that has been curated around women's friendships in American cinema, it is important to look inwards to the film text and its creator. The film and director under discussion here exemplify a broader trend within cinematic discourse, whereby the filming of female friendships is informed predominantly by patriarchal ideals of domestic womanhood, and a persistent investment in women as the source or site of conflict.

Woody Allen's 2008 release *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (VCB) is a film ostensibly concerned with female friendship. VCB revolves around the travels and misadventures of two American women, making a break from their suffocating home lives to travel and explore Europe together. Arriving in Barcelona, the two friends jump into a taxi, and a narration begins. The narrator provides a brief precis for both Vicky (played by Rebecca Hall) and Cristina (Scarlett Johansson), alluding to a long friendship built on a co-dependency and low-level conflict. Whilst the narrator insists that the

pair are similar in most ways, the women are presented as each other's opposite in one fundamental and insurmountable way – through their vastly different approaches to, and expectations of, 'love':

“The two best friends had been close since college, and shared the same tastes and opinions on most matters, yet when it came to the subject of love, it would be hard to find two more dissimilar viewpoints.”

Vicky is characterised as a level-headed realist, settled with a fiancé who “understands the beauty of commitment”. She plans to marry him later in the summer. She has come to Barcelona to complete her postgraduate research in Catalan identity – when later asked she is not sure what she will ‘do with’ the degree. Cristina, by contrast, is creative and wildly romantic. As is repeated many times throughout the film, Cristina is restless; she does not know what she wants from a romantic relationship (she has just broken up with “another” boyfriend), only what she does not want. Feeling directionless after the end of her latest creative endeavour, the results of which she hated, she accompanies Vicky to Barcelona in search of new opportunities. In the taxi from the airport, the two women sit at some distance from each other, and rarely share the same frame. Instead, Allen films them in individual close-up, then combines their two images in a split screen shot which confirms the women's oppositional relationship. Even more heavy-handed is the costuming: Vicky wears black, Cristina wears white. Aside from the very opening scene where we see the Vicky and Cristina exchange inaudible words at the airport, the two do not speak to nor look at each other until they reach their destination, and even then their conversation is mediated through the questions of their host couple.

Whilst their supposedly vast difference in outlook might have signalled a complimentary and supportive friendship, it is framed here as a sign of incompatibility, necessitating judgement, competition and eventually contempt between Vicky and Cristina. Despite all the common ground that the two allegedly share, the importance placed on their oppositional understandings of love suggest that, for both, love is the factor of primary importance within their lives. Each woman serves

to remind the other of what they lack in love; for Vicky, Cristina symbolises freedom and spontaneity, whilst Cristina perceives stability and certainty in Vicky. This lack leads to both women feeling incomplete and unworthy in the company of the other. Vicky chastises Cristina for being immature and naïve, whilst Cristina judges Vicky for not wanting more out of life than a comfortable relationship. The dramatic tension of the entire film therefore rests upon the inevitable failure of this central, years old friendship, all because the two women cannot agree on the notion of love.

Vicky Cristina Barcelona borrows superficially from the style and language of the women's film; its superficial interests in the actions and emotions of the central protagonists could be framed as 'of interest' to an assumed female audience. However, the film wrests the control of the narrative away from both women creators and women protagonists, which is the defining tenet of the contemporary women's film. In disposing with all but the aesthetics of the women's film, *VCB* dismisses the most progressive elements of that very narrative, removing 'meaningful social relationships', undermining 'sympathetic heroines' and leaving the film completely unable to 'challenge male dominance'. (Hollinger, 1998: 3). To further understand how *VCB* works to objectify and undermine women and their friendships, one must begin with the film's narration, voiced by Christopher Evan Welch. As with many of Allen's films, *VCB*'s defining characteristic is the inclusion of an omnipresent narrator; it is he who introduces the audience to both Vicky and Cristina, he who characterises their friendship as unstable, and it is he who provides an interior monologue for both women throughout the film. Perhaps it goes without saying that privileging a male narrator with the task of developing and explaining the actions and emotions of female characters reveals, at best, a profound inability to understand women as capable of articulating their own identities and expressing their own feelings. Far more sinister, however, is the possibility that the presence of Welch's narrator serves to mould Vicky and Cristina into characters that comply with a male fantasy of female friendship – one in which women can only relate to one another (and their audience) through a male mediator. In taking away their ability to express for themselves, Allen also removes

any possible challenge these two women, and their friendship, might represent to a patriarchal status quo; not only deviating from the contemporary women's film, but working actively against it.

Female friendship, its existence and its representation, can destabilise narrative norms which dictate that only men have the ability to grant women true fulfilment. In cinema, a healthy, stable and enduring relationship between women ridicules persistent mythologies surrounding women's dependence on and deference towards men, by rendering men secondary, if not wholly unnecessary to, the development of narrative, character and context within a film. Female friendship threatens to displace men as the centre of the narrative universe. As Cobb observes, this threat is recognised and often contained through the introduction of a romantic relationship, which sees the friendship superseded, the needs of the woman now fulfilled by a man (rendering her former friendship unnecessary): "female friendship is always seen as a threat to the patriarchy, and the structure of film plots and the insistent heterosexuality of Hollywood requires that the threat be contained. Usually marriage is the answer, because most female friendship films are set when women are single and fairly young' (Cobb in Clarke, 2019). *VCB's* early narration, unusually, provides this narrative resolution from the outset. Vicky is already engaged, and the relationship between her and Cristina only exists within the limited parameters of their trip to Barcelona. Despite the years of friendship briefly acknowledged in the opening sequence, we are provided only a glimpse of their relationship, during the final months of Vicky's life as an unmarried woman.

For some, the narration of *VCB* is simply a hallmark of auteur Allen's filmmaking style. For Bailey, 'the presence of narrators distances the audience from the characters, their mediating presences making them seem to be operating under not-completely-benign surveillance... Allen's films have seldom featured fully rounded characters, primarily because his understanding of human personality is largely minimalist and postmodern' (2016: 329). Whilst admirers of Allen might wish to dismiss concerns about *VCB's* narration by citing the 'postmodern' nature of his filmmaking, the narrator's account of female friendship is not at all minimalist. Rather, he constructs depth of

character in troubling ways, framing both Vicky and Cristina as directionless and dissatisfied, their relationship with one another unable to provide comfort or resolution. The film thereby creates an environment within which we, as the audience, know more about these two women than they know about each other. Their relationship seems hollow and ineffectual as a result. Moreover, deferring the assignment of women's identity to a male narrator is not 'minimalist', either. It results in a harmfully and prejudicially underdeveloped caricature of both Vicky and Cristina, and the friendship between them. Indeed, by the time the women are given the opportunity to speak for themselves, to each other and the audience, at any length, we have already hit the moment of disequilibrium within the narrative – the arrival of local artist and lothario, Juan Antonio (Javier Bardem). His proposition that Vicky and Cristina join him for a weekend of wine and sex provokes one of the few prolonged exchanges between the two, and it demonstrates the differing world views of the pair:

Vicky: I hope you're joking about going...

Cristina: My god, this guy is so interesting.

Vicky: Interesting? Are you kidding? What's so interesting? He wants to get us both into bed. But he'll settle for either, and in this case you.

Cristina: Vicky, I'm a big girl, if I want to sleep with him I will, if not I won't.

Vicky: Cristina, he's a total stranger, this is impulsive even for you. And, if I heard right, he was violent with his wife.

Cristina: Well at least he isn't one of those factory-made zombies, y'know. I mean, this would be a great way to get to know him...

Aside from Cristina's deeply troubling characterisation of Juan Antonio's rumoured violence as exciting (again, a notion inspired by male fantasy), this exchange is one of the very few moments within the film where Vicky and Cristina speak to one another without a third-party present. As well as being the first instance of unmediated interaction between the two, it is also the last before Juan Antonio forcibly separates the pair's narrative journeys. As the women debate what to do about Juan Antonio's offer, the position of each woman within the relationship becomes clear. Vicky's incredulous response to the proposal shows her stepping into a maternal role, chastising Cristina for her recklessness, occupying a position of moral superiority within the exchange. Cristina, on the other hand, is clearly frustrated by Vicky's rigid moral code, and her response includes a thinly-veiled criticism of Vicky's chosen partner, the straightlaced, financially successful Doug. Cristina, however, seems quick to persuade Vicky to accept Juan Antonio's offer. Vicky continues to express a desire to 'mind' and manage Cristina's behaviour throughout the weekend, in part it seems to justify her presence as a 'chaperone', sustaining her pretence of disinterest in Juan Antonio. In a later scene, Vicky berates Juan Antonio for making Cristina unwell (an overindulgence of wine and food the night before has left her bed-ridden with an ulcer). Once again inhabiting a maternal role, Vicky speaks with disdain about Cristina's idealism, claiming it leaves her vulnerable to the whims of men like Juan Antonio: '[s]he's a mental adolescent, and being romantic, she has a death wish. So, for a brief moment of passion, she completely abandons all responsibilities'. Citing Cristina's perceived emotional immaturity and ill-informed expectations of romance, Vicky manages to absolve Cristina of any ill consequence of her own actions, whilst also managing to credit Juan Antonio with complete control over Cristina's emotional and physical wellbeing.

Juan Antonio's arrival signals the beginning of an existential crisis for both women, but particularly Vicky. Her desire to live a stable and sensible life is thrown into chaos by the magnetic appeal of Juan Antonio and his 'devil may care' lifestyle. Upon their arrival in Barcelona, their host,

Mark, asks smugly what Vicky is planning to do with her degree. Seeing Vicky search vainly for an answer, Mark's wife Judy comments: '[s]he's marrying this wonderful man in the fall, and all of her conflicts will be resolved when he makes her pregnant.' Whilst this comment reveals Judy's bitterness towards the underwhelming reality of her own marriage, it also works to foreshadow and enhance the crushing inevitability of Vicky's romantic endeavours. Whilst Cristina seems to have embraced crisis as a near-constant state, the challenges Barcelona presents to Vicky's certainty of her life's plan is more unexpected and profound. The notion of crisis is central to Allen's filmography, which is understood by many to have paved the way for the 21st century advent of 'mumblecore' cinema, 'a corpus of films that are characterised by extreme stasis, indecision and lassitude... mumblecore deals with situations of protracted liminality in which the everyday or pedestrian figures as, or indeed is, crisis' (Rogers, 2015). Allen's filmmaking is often credited as foundational to the development of the mumblecore film, and *VCB* invests wholly in a mumblecore-inflected narrative. Vicky and Cristina's 'Americanness' in a European setting ensures their liminality, as does their undoubtedly upper-middle class lifestyle. Whilst the two characters may be framed as binary opposites, they have both been drawn to Barcelona as a fear-based response to the stasis that defines their home lives – Cristina's career has stalled, and Vicky's relationship is flatlining. If we are able to read their friendship through a mumblecore lens, the hollow nature of it begins to make more sense. These women are subject to a stasis, an ennui, that either allows for or insists upon their continued investment in a friendship that has ceased to work for either one of them. Each makes effective use of the other to deflect away from their own indecision and liminality, a co-dependency which requires the two women to gravitate back towards each other in the wake of their relationship(s) with Juan Antonio.

This female friendship therefore occupies both the margins and the central role in *VCB*'s narrative. It is the one constant within a chaotic and disorganised narrative, but it is also subjected to persistent minimisation within the narrative. A framing device that, for the majority of the film, finds itself neglected in favour of romantic relationships. This drift from friendship to romantic

entanglement (and back again) is also endemic of mumblecore cinema and its filmmakers, as demonstrated by some of the most prolific mumblecore creators – Lena Dunham, Noah Baumbach, Greta Gerwig. This fluidity itself often leads once more to parallels being drawn between Allen and mumblecore filmmakers, as Martin observes, “[a]ll the former mumblecore affiliates have drifted... to modern forms of romantic comedy – and therefore all of them, whether they like it or not, exist in the long shadow cast by Woody Allen over this genre since at least *Annie Hall* (1977)’ (2018: 19). However, one distinct difference between the mumblecore filmography and Allen’s film is that the former demonstrates an intermittent interest in exploring friendship and its representation (albeit through a predominantly white, male lens). Herein lies one of the many problems inherent to Allen’s work (and the work of many ‘auteurs’), that *VCB* brings to the fore. Allen’s own mythology and self-made brand of androcentrism makes it impossible for the representations of women and their friendships in his film to transcend the harmful and archaic standard set by the filmmaker himself. Therefore, the relationship presented in *VCB* is not an isolated problem – it is both evidence of and incitement to a deeply derogatory framing of relationships between women.

However, some critics have argued that Allen’s representation of female friendship within the film has its strengths. Fuller argues that the backlash the film faced, predominantly from feminist critics, upon its release, is based more within an historical dissatisfaction with Allen’s modes of representation, rather than being a fair assessment of *VCB* as an isolated text. Citing the common criticism of Allen’s writing and casting young women and older men as his romantic leads, Fuller draws attention to the comparatively less-pronounced age gap between Vicky, Cristina and Juan Antonio (which he predicts to be around 16 years). He goes on to make an argument for the value and progression he perceives within the characters of Vicky and Cristina: ‘[g]iven the film’s insouciant, quasi-comic tone, there’s an unexpected power in the three women’s collective ardour that’s been neglected in reviews. Allen’s focus is what women want, or think they want, and it turns out it’s not a Spanish bull - not even one with a paintbrush and a private plane’ before concluding that ‘[l]ike the other young women enthralled by older men in Allen’s films, they are works in

progress. They testify that Allen's own restless quest for the unobtainable- that obscure object of desire - is inconcludable.' (Fuller, 2008). The argument Fuller seems to be making here is that, in Cristina's eventual rejection of Juan Antonio, and Vicky's forcible repression of her own feelings towards him, there has somehow occurred a moment of empowerment for the two women. Allen is not expecting the women to achieve perfection, for themselves or for the audience, and in this acknowledgement is granting the pair the liberty to continue the search for the 'unobtainable'. This might be a more convincing reading had the film concerned itself, at any point, with the growth and development of the two women outside of the context of a highly eroticised love triangle, controlled almost entirely by an older man. As for referring to the 'collective ardour' of the three central women (this including Juan Antonio's ex-wife, Maria Elena (Penelope Cruz), who we are yet to discuss) – this seems to imply a mutual interest and support between the women which is rarely, if ever, evident in the film. Upon Juan Antonio's arrival, it becomes clear that the friendship between Vicky and Cristina is little more than a foil for comparison of the pair's respective relationships with the men in their lives, leaving the friendship as a mere narrative function or device within a broader exploration of women's relationship with the concept of 'love', and the men that may or may not offer them an experience of it. Finally, to suggest that an antidote to the criticism the film received is Allen's interest in what women think and want? This author agrees that the film expresses interest in this area but would also urge caution in understanding that to mean that Allen's own perspective on women's wants and needs works to the benefit of the women represented, or indeed, that his representation of those wants and needs has even been created with women and their desires in mind. The notion that Allen is exploring his own liminality through Vicky and Cristina's experiences eradicates the two women's subjectivity and notions of selfhood (instead, they become expressions of the male psyche) and, most importantly, this also minimises gender as a key component in how that liminality is constructed and perpetuated. Then again, as McGill powerfully articulates: 'The idea... that meaningful experience transcends gender is perhaps easier to swallow if you are of the

gender that has been in a historical position to present its concerns and priorities as universal' (2018).

Furthermore, the film draws upon a postfeminist understanding of womanhood to communicate a message that could be considered staunchly anti-feminist in nature. Both Vicky and Cristina are the quintessential postfeminist figures – each 'enjoys' the social, intellectual and physical autonomy of a postfeminist age, and they wholeheartedly believe that it is they who set the parameters and boundaries within their own lives. Neither woman labours under the restrictive mores of feminism, characterised in a postfeminist context as 'rigid, serious, anti-sex and romance, difficult and extremist' (Negra, 2009:2). Moreover, both women demonstrate a reliance upon, and security within, American consumer-capitalist mores. Vicky's fiancé Doug is the embodiment of yuppie masculinity, and his financial security and social standing are idealised by her and form the basis of their relationship. Beyond Juan Antonio and his father, we rarely see either Vicky or Cristina engage with anyone outside of the wealthy American ex-pat community to which their hosts belong. Despite Cristina's tangible disdain for Doug, and her experimentation with Juan Antonio and the liberal, anti-consumerist community he represents, she is no more invested in abandoning capitalist structures than Vicky. The pair's final rejection of Juan Antonio, then, serves less as a sign of their individual autonomy and empowerment, and communicates more about their inability to live outside of the commodification and consumerism integral to their American ideals.

These women are also undone by the myriad choices and challenges afforded them in postfeminist culture. The stasis and indecision previously discussed is arguably framed as the result of both women having so many options, and yet no true aim or calling that would necessitate committing to a path or decision. Their relationship with one another becomes a kind of crutch. The women have known each other since college – a time when decisions were yet to be made, definitive answers were yet to be given. Their continued presence in each other's lives seems a reassurance; each is fortified by the awareness that the other is equally as directionless. Their

friendship fixes them to a place of immaturity and arrested development, which, for Negra, is another defining characteristic of the postfeminist text, one which is 'fundamentally uncomfortable with female adulthood itself, casting all women as girls to some extent' (2009:12). In having no resolute place in their world, no tangible end goal, nor fulfilment within their romantic relationships, both Vicky and Cristina are burdened with the risk of not fulfilling their postfeminist potential. Their naivety, immaturity, and uncertainty in the face of so many possibilities leads to a profound restlessness and dissatisfaction. Standing on the brink of adulthood, they have no stable or substantial way of negotiating selfhood or constructing their own identity. Overwhelmed by choice, Vicky resorts back to the institution of marriage and value of financial security, whilst Cristina becomes a kind of cultural chameleon, whose identity is malleable, forever altering to reflect the priorities and lifestyles of those around her. In so harshly representing the postfeminist state, the film appears to extoll the virtues of a prefeminist age, where parameters were fixed, choices limited. The women have become untethered without the patriarchal structures that would once have attributed their identity to them in a much more forceful manner (the very same structures various feminisms have sought to dismantle). In lieu of a solid identity, the women become, instead, personifications of some nebulous (mis)understanding of 21st century womanhood, from a distinctly anti-feminist perspective.

Whilst on the outside of the central relationship, Maria Elena's presence within the film as agent of chaos must also be addressed. For the first act of the film, Maria Elena is talked about in abstract, hushed tones. She only becomes a corporeal reality within the narrative following a suicide attempt, after which she moves into Juan Antonio's house, where he and Cristina are now living together. True to form, Cristina and Maria Elena are immediately mistrustful of one another, and once more we see a competitive dichotomy established between the two. Maria Elena's inherent creativity and artistry triggers Cristina's insecurities around her supposed lack of talent. Where Maria Elena is resolutely and unapologetically herself, Cristina once again attempts to mould herself to the changing dynamics within the home. Overwhelmed by the mythology that preceded her

arrival, Cristina is cowed and apologetic in Maria Elena's presence. Maria Elena's unpredictability also starkly underlines the sheer predictability of Cristina's own behaviour; despite her attempts to cultivate a spontaneous and counter-cultural lifestyle, it becomes quickly apparent that Cristina is living out a cyclical pattern of rebellion and return. Even Vicky's fiancé Doug seems to understand, and dislike, Cristina's patterns of behaviour when he comments: "I love her because she's your friend, but I've often warned you about her... she's an unhappy person. She can't part with that self-image she has of the 'oh-so-special woman', the artist trying to find herself. I find her contempt for normal values pretentious, it's a boring cliché."

Finally, Maria Elena is characterised through the extremity of her behaviour and the intensity with which she experiences her emotions, drawing into sharp relief the performativity and superficiality of Cristina's own emotional identity. Maria Elena's emotional intensity is viewed as both erotic spectacle and as evidence of a mental illness. Allen resurrects the hysterical woman archetype here, persisting under the fantasy that women are inherently irrational, emotionally unstable and, ultimately, deceitful and dangerous. A trope particularly prevalent in Gothic literature, where Sedgwick finds the 'classic hysteric' (1989, vi), the hysterical woman has come to be widely understood as a manifestation of all deemed unnatural or abnormal about femininity, as constructed by a male medical professional, creator or narrator. However, Showalter finds within the dominant feminist reading of hysteria a failure to address the potentially subversive nature of hysterical articulation, claiming that 'what Freud took as hysterical narrative and tried to reshape in terms of the women's plots of his day may have been the unfamiliar voice of a more spontaneous but coherent and normal female consciousness' (1993:32). In other words, hysteria as we commonly understand it in popular culture may well be evidence of attempts by women to challenge or wholly reject patriarchal linguistic and narrative structures – hysteria is therefore used as a tool to denounce attempts at expression and identification that come from outside of the established male order. Maria Elena's presence within the film is certainly a destabilising force, but a temporary one, and any subversive challenge she might represent is undermined by the film's framing of her

extreme behaviour, and the treatment she receives within her relationship with Juan Antonio. It is important not to justify or minimise how much of Maria Elena's characterisation revolves around the fetishization of her fragile mental state, a characterisation which treats her suicidal and violent behaviours as some form of erotic spectacle. She spends much of her screen time tear-stained, wild eyed, in a state of undress, desperately attempting to communicate with Juan Antonio in Spanish, whilst he stubbornly insists she "speak English" so that Cristina can understand her. This insistence upon Maria Elena speaking English in front of Cristina effectively allegorises how attempts at subversive or alternative expression, such as those identified by Showalter, are contained, controlled, and eventually neutralised. Further compounding this notion is Maria Elena's allegation that Juan Antonio stole her artistic style, a claim that is quickly dismissed by him, then never spoken of again. Juan Antonio's art, most likely the result of Maria Elena's labour, brings him celebrity and renown. Meanwhile, Maria Elena's art is superseded by whispered stories of her chaotic, violent behaviour. In many ways, Maria Elena's arc demonstrates, but does not challenge, the process of exploitation and appropriation that Allen himself has repeated in commandeering narratives of female friendship for his own ends. In the end, the challenges Maria Elena represents to the standards and expectations of both Vicky and Cristina are tangible, but fleeting, because at the conclusion of the film, Maria Elena recedes back into the realm of the myth from whence she emerged.

After Maria Elena's arrival, Cristina eventually becomes a facilitator to Maria Elena's relationship with her ex-husband – the brief affair between all three of them allows for Juan Antonio and Maria Elena to co-exist in relative peace, and both enjoy a period of creative productivity. Relations thaw between Maria Elena and Cristina, and the former becomes a kind of mentor, encouraging Cristina's photography, and even becoming the subject of some of her work. Once again, Cristina finds in this relationship a maternal figure, and yet unlike the relationship with Vicky, this one seems, temporarily at least, to nourish and support her in her endeavours. In an interesting development, when Cristina eventually states her intentions to leave the home, it is Maria Elena, not

Juan Antonio, who is truly hurt and upset by the news. Given the narrator's earlier observation that, as an artist, Juan Antonio 'needed always to live with a woman', it is perhaps not surprising that he is so unaffected by Cristina's decision – a woman can be any woman, so as far as Juan Antonio is concerned he is not losing anything (or anyone) he cannot replace. Yet, it seems that Cristina's decision to leave is predominantly based upon her dissatisfaction with Juan Antonio, and his failure to live up to her expectations. Her relationship with Maria Elena is relegated to collateral damage in this regard, resigning both women to further unhappy relationships apart from one another. That neither woman can conceive of a rewarding relationship between the two of them without the involvement of Juan Antonio speaks volumes. Cristina's departure from Maria Elena and return to Vicky might therefore suggest not a rejection of Juan Antonio per se, but rather a rejection or refusal of a healthy relationship between two women. Cristina will go on seeking fulfilment, and this provides an irony that is understated, if not entirely unnoticed, by Allen's script. Without her, the marriage of Juan Antonio and Maria Elena once again falls apart.

Upon learning of the love triangle between Cristina, Juan Antonio and Maria Elena, Vicky admires Cristina's 'courage'. Cristina's faux nonchalance regarding the affair, and in particular her intimacy with Maria Elena, seems to shock the straightlaced Doug. Aware of Doug's scepticism about her lifestyle, and informed by her perception of Doug as a 'factory-made zombie', Cristina weaponises her relationship with both Maria Elena and Juan Antonio against him; using her sexual experiences as an othering device, she seeks to prove that she is not similarly oppressed by the heteronormative structures that dictate Vicky and Doug's relationship. This once again reduces a relationship between two women to the sum reaction of its male beholders. In this case, the treatment of Cristina and Maria Elena's relationship also invests in the deeply harmful characterisation of the same-sex relationship as a temporary phase of experimentation. Once more, we are reminded that there are only two ways in which women can relate to one another within dominant cinematic discourse: through conflict or sex. In the absence of either, the relationship between Maria Elena and Cristina ceases to exist. The use and misuse of this relationship within the

narrative appears deeply exploitative of the two women involved (this exploitation is further compounded when one considers how prominently the love scene between Cruz and Johansson featured in both the publicity for and critical response to the film). Moreover, that the love scene between Maria Elena and Cristina is recounted in conversation as an anecdote, and filmed as a memory, leaves the ownership of that very moment up for negotiation. Is this scene Cristina's memory? Is it the result of Vicky's envious imagination? Or, perhaps more concerning, does the scene belong to Doug who, despite his better judgement, cannot help but visualise the story being told to him? Indeed, given that this scene is the only love scene in the film that does not occur in real time, who is to say that it happened at all?

Upon abandoning Juan Antonio and Maria Elena, Cristina temporarily flees to France before re-joining Vicky in Barcelona for their journey home. In Cristina's absence, Vicky is almost seduced once more by Juan Antonio, but his pursuit of her is once again cut short, this time by the explosive re-appearance of Maria Elena, armed with a gun. Having wrestled the gun from her, Juan Antonio proceeds to accidentally fire the weapon grazing Vicky's hand with the bullet. Confronted with a tangible, corporeal consequence of her infidelity, Vicky immediately realises that her desire for 'another life' is pure fantasy, one which, when realised, quickly loses its appeal. She may not be happy with Doug, but she at least knows what to expect from that relationship. Having each survived Juan Antonio, the two women eventually leave Barcelona, fully aware of what they do not want from life, yet profoundly dissatisfied with what they already have. The friendship between the two barely merits a mention in the narrator's summative statement, which accompanies a final scene in which Vicky, Cristina and Doug all descend an escalator in the airport. Once again, neither woman speaks nor looks at the other. It would appear that their experiences in Barcelona have led the two women to better understand one another, and yet that is not the narrative resolution that the narrator takes from the story. Could it be that a friendship now so devoid of conflict has ceased to be of interest or of use? As Hollinger suggests, conflicts between women are an immeasurably useful tool for narrative containment, serving to re-establish the dominance of the active male agent: '[b]y

focusing so strongly on conflicts between women, [these narratives] obscure other issues related to women's position in society, relieve men of any responsibility for women's problems, and suggest, instead, that women should grant men primary importance in their lives because they are the only ones upon whom women can rely' (207). Emphasising the resolution of the conflict between them might undermine the androcentric interests of the entire film, whilst also allowing space to identify and challenge the litany of abusive, exploitative and predatory behaviour that has truly defined their summer abroad. Moreover, it stands to reason that Allen might lose interest in female friendship once it ceases to be useful, given that its inclusion was a mere narrative device to begin with. The concluding narration emphasises the lack of progress made by the two women. Cristina is still searching and Vicky is still dissatisfied, and so, in many ways, the film ends precisely as it began.

As this chapter hopes to have demonstrated, *VCB* scraps the female friendship narrative for parts, in service of constructing a male conquest narrative. Juan Antonio's libidinous nature and pursuit of the two friends dictates the initial structure, intermediate fluidity and eventual form of Vicky and Cristina's friendship. As with so much of cinema, classical and contemporary, these women and their friendship cannot exist in isolation but must be framed through romantic endeavours. In this way, Allen's film seems to ridicule both Vicky and Cristina for their romantic notions whilst also insisting upon their investment in them to ensure their compliance within an androcentric narrative. Whilst Vicky and Cristina may walk away from their romantic entanglements with him in the closing scenes, Juan Antonio is still granted ownership over the story of Vicky and Cristina in Barcelona. This corresponds to the age-old cinematic imperative which dictates that men are the active agents in romantic narratives, whilst women remain passive recipients of their advances. Jessica Kiang describes this as the 'mine' impulse; 'I understood the 'mine' impulse through the eyes, lusts, lips and fists of male protagonists whose greedy agency over their actions has never been in question – and whose straightforward entitlement to the gratification of their

unembarrassed carnal instincts has not, until recently, been substantially challenged. The visual language of romantic conquest and ownership is the province of men, after all.' (Newland, ed. 2020:88) The central problem of *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* is best expressed within the narrative itself: in one particular scene, Cristina is seen photographing women from a distance, but is rarely, if ever, seen to communicate with them. Once again, the physical manifestation of womanhood is given precedence over its experiences and relationships. Accidentally or no, in his orchestration of these scenes, Allen allegorises his own blind spot(s), and calls attention to the profoundly hollow nature of his engagement with female friendship. In a film that seems to value the aesthetics of women's relationships far more highly than the substance of them, this is perhaps *Vicky Cristina Barcelona's* most honest scene.