



“Billions in Debt and Still Surviving”: Curing the Female Shopper in *Confessions of a Shopaholic*

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Abstract

This paper analyses P.J. Hogan’s *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2009) in three sections. In the first section, it studies how the film maps shopping as an illness that needs to be cured onto the body of its female heroine. It does so, as is argued here, by portraying her as a patient suffering from Compulsive Buying Disorder (CBD). In the second part, it traces how *Confessions* necessitates the cure of the female shopper, given its background of the Great Recession and how this holds generic significance for the romantic comedy. The paper then concludes by charting the heroine’s cure in group therapy as predicated upon the principle of the Foucauldian confession and how this then resolves the narrative as, what Diane Negra calls, one of “adjusted ambitions.”

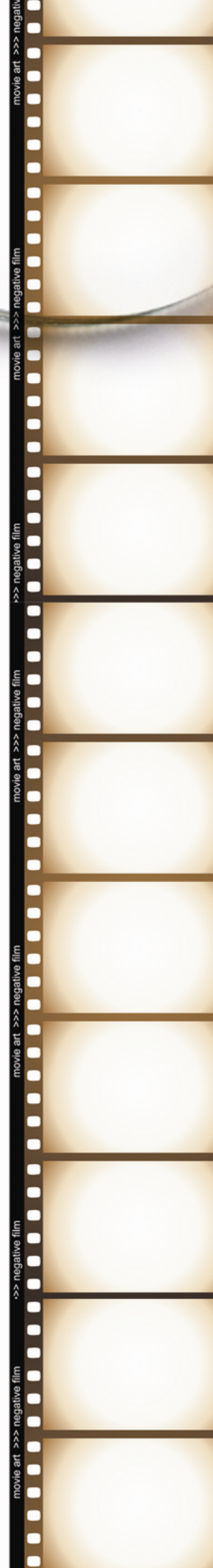
Keywords: Confessions of a Shopaholic; Romantic Comedy; Compulsive Buying Disorder; Great Recession; Confession; Foucault



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“Billions in Debt and Still Surviving”: Curing the Female Shopper in *Confessions of a Shopaholic*

Meghna Sapui

Introduction

The adult Rebecca Bloomwood, in the very beginning of *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2009), muses about how a store is more consequential to her happiness than a man: “You see, a man will never love you or treat you as well as a store.” While her best friend, Suze, is happily dating someone, Rebecca is not even concerned with a dating life or her lack thereof. Stores are enough for her — they make her feel even better than the “warm butter sliding down hot toast” feeling that a man provokes. They awaken in her a “lust” — a man who does not fit in one’s life can be easily exchanged for a “gorgeous cashmere sweater” — and most importantly, “a store always smells good.” This is then a heroine who has completely divested herself of any sexual desires directed towards the male sex and instead redirected the same desires towards buying luxury items — be it a \$120 scarf, cashmere coats, Pucci boots, handbags, or even gloves — and is perfectly content with this state of being. The problem of such a heroine, however, owes itself to the fact that this Rebecca Bloomwood is an American woman conspicuously buying luxury items at a time when the country is trying its very best to overcome a recession that the then-president had attributed to “a culture of irresponsibility.”¹

The ending of this film was reshot keeping in mind the timing of its release (February 13, 2009), which placed it firmly in the middle of America's efforts to recover its economy from the Great Recession. Based on Sophie Kinsella's Shopaholic series — *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic* (2000), published as *Confession of a Shopaholic* in 2011 in the U.S., and *Shopaholic Abroad* (2001), also published as *Shopaholic Takes Manhattan — Confessions of a Shopaholic* makes the English heroine of the book into an American one. In Kinsella's series, Rebecca is an English woman in London, who until the very end, continues to shop (albeit less than before). The American heroine of the film, however, is completely cured of her pernicious habits in the end. This reworking of the ending becomes significant when one considers that this was a film about material consumption at a time when such consumption had fallen out of popular favor. This film maps an addiction to shopping onto the heroine's body as an illness which it then cures, given the particular background of the Great Recession. In order to make this argument, I will first analyze how *Confessions* treats shopping as an illness that keeps the heroine from fully realizing her essential feminine desires. I will then show how the heroine is cured and how this cure takes the form of a Foucauldian confession. This confession serves to resolve the narrative by framing it as one of "adjusted ambitions."²

Shopping as Compulsive Buying Disorder

Directed by P.J. Hogan, famous for *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *Confessions* stars Isla Fisher, fresh off her role as a deceptive heroine who becomes too easily attached in *Wedding Crashers* (2005), and Hugh Dancy, the dreamy fairytale prince with a British accent from *Ella Enchanted* (2004). Rebecca Bloomwood, played by Fisher, is the daughter of middle-class bargain-hunters, who shop only at thrift stores and almost obsessively save money. As a result of being denied luxury goods for most of her life, Rebecca, as an adult, takes it upon herself to instead obsessively buy luxury goods. But she does this on credit. Because of her habits of excessive consumption, she is now \$16, 586. 72 deep in debt, and is being pursued by a debt collector, Derek Smeath. In order to evade him, she has devised elaborate lies, and even has a list of them, to make sure that she can remember which ones she has already used. Despite such repercussions, her spending habits continue. For instance, while lying through her teeth to dodge Derek Smeath, she is still willing to go to Macy's to buy her best friend a present for helping her evade Smeath.

Confessions portrays Rebecca as a character suffering from Compulsive Buying Disorder (CBD). CBD is classified in the DSM-III-R as "an impulse control disorder not otherwise specified."³ Donald W. Black identifies four distinct phases of CBD: anticipation, preparation, shopping, and spending.⁴ Rebecca enacts all four of these stages in her numerous shopping trips.

For instance, immediately after she returns from Miami, and enters her apartment through the fire escape in order to dodge Derek Smeath, she tells Suze about her invitation to the Print Association Charity Ball. Her excitement here stems not from the prestigious invitation itself but from her anticipation of a shopping trip in order to dress for the event.

Rebecca then prepares for her shopping trip by not using any of the credit cards that she uses otherwise, but the one that she keeps in her freezer and that she then goes to extreme lengths to access. She breaks (with a stiletto) and melts (with a hair dryer) the block of ice to get the credit card out. This plays out to the background score of Amy Winehouse's "Rehab," a song about the singer's struggle with alcohol and drugs and her refusal to go to rehab despite the insistence of her family and friends. This film uses as its background score popular contemporary songs. These songs provide clear insights into Rebecca's psyche in these specific moments. For instance, her ringtone is Gwen Stefani's "Rich Girl" where Stefani sings of what it would be like if she had all the money in the world and Rebecca obviously cannot get enough credit to buy everything she sets her eyes on. Here then, the use of Winehouse's most iconic song (it won three Grammys in 2008 and was Winehouse's only song to make it into the top 10 in U.S. charts) about her struggle with alcohol and substance abuse, foregrounds Rebecca as a

character also battling an addiction that she needs to rehabilitate herself from, but refuses to do so.



Figure 1: Rebecca uses all means available to her to defreeze her "emergency" credit card to buy the perfect back for her gala outfit.

In the third stage of shopping, the person suffering from CBD feels intensely excited, and this “can even lead to a sexual feeling.”⁵ The film begins with a shot of Rebecca as a child looking at the “magical world” from outside the shop windows or looking up to women swiping their credit cards to make purchases. This child then transforms into an adult strolling down the streets of New York City. The viewer is positioned to look at Rebecca from inside the store window as she walks by them, and whom men alighting from these stores look at while her gaze is trained on the store windows. The camera shows the man openly assessing her. It then assumes her perspective to show her gaze, seemingly directed towards the man, only to come to a stop, at the very last second, on the store window behind him. From the very beginning then, Rebecca is someone for whom the desire for shopping has replaced the primacy of sexual desires. For her

men are secondary to luxury goods: “if a man doesn’t fit, you can exchange him seven days later for a gorgeous cashmere sweater.”



Figure 2: Rebecca Bloomwood looks at store windows while men look at her. She tells the audience: "You know that thing when you see someone cute and he smiles and your heart kind of goes like warm butter sliding down hot toast? Well, that's what it's like when I see a store"

A “sense of let down, or disappointment with oneself”⁶ characterizes the fourth phase, which is when the act is completed with a purchase. After Rebecca fights another woman for the Pucci boots, the camera cuts to her sitting in her apartment surrounded by her purchases but otherwise dejected and sad. The song playing in the background is Natasha Bedingfield’s “Again.” The singer here sings despondently of a struggle for love which has left her bruised, but which she will repeat if need be for it led her to her love in the first place. As the background score is an insight to Rebecca’s character, as it clearly is in the film’s use of popular songs (as

discussed above), Bedingfield's "Again" is reflective of the CBD cycle that makes Rebecca sad and disappointed in herself, but that she cannot help but perpetuate.

Black reports that 80-95% of those suffering from CBD are women, however, he acknowledges that this finding may be "artifactual," meaning that they may not be truly reflective of the actual situation. This is because while women more readily acknowledge that they enjoy shopping, men are more reticent and prefer referring to their habit as "collecting" instead.⁷ In *Confessions*, while Rebecca enjoys shopping — "you need to savor shopping"— Luke, on the other hand, despite his familiarity with clothing brands, detests it — "you need to strike with precision and get out." Thus, the film presents two very different perspectives on shopping: shopping as an experience that should be savored and enjoyed and contrarily, shopping as an experience that is almost a chore and needs to be taken with "two Advils." While the first is how women like Rebecca shop, the latter is the efficient shopping of professional men like Luke, who only shop when they absolutely need to. This film categorically codes shopping, as superfluous consumption, as a feminine activity, excluding men, or at least white professional men. The two men in the Shopaholic Anonymous group are men of color — Ryuichi, who is obsessed with Italian leather shoes, is of Asian descent, and the former NBA player preoccupied with watches is not just African-American but is rather revealingly named D. Freak. Thus the only men who participate in this feminine activity are men who are racially different. The film

then makes a subtle connection between two disparate modes of shopping — one that requires curing and the other that does not — and indicts not just women but also racially different men in the former, while reserving the latter for white men.



Figure 3: While Rebecca (and men of color in *Confessions*) savor shopping, white heterosexual men, like Luke, loathe shopping and can only stand it with "two Advils." Shopping here is thus gendered and racialized.

This feminine mode of shopping leads to collateral problems. In Rebecca's case this takes the shape of compulsive lying — she lies on her CV, to her best friend, to her boss/boyfriend about the debt collector, and even has a list of lies to tell her debt collector. This further complicates her situation by making her a compulsive buyer as well as a compulsive liar. Black notes that CBD is often treated through "bibliotherapy" or self-help books, even CD-ROMS and through group therapy, fashioned after Alcoholics Anonymous.⁸ The film has Rebecca try both

of these methods. While the first is unsuccessful, the second, modeled on the theme of confession, succeeds (as I will discuss later). *Confessions* thus effectively portrays Rebecca as someone suffering from CBD, in showing her as a shopaholic.

Confessions as a Romantic Comedy and the Great Recession

Throughout the film, Rebecca spends large amounts of money, even though she works as a columnist at *Gardening Today*, a magazine which itself declares bankruptcy and folds. Her next job, at *Successful Savings* too cannot be as high-paying as her lifestyle might lead one to believe, because the magazine is itself on the brink of bankruptcy and Luke has been hired to keep it afloat. One obvious question then is: where does Rebecca get the money that she spends? The answer to this is of course that she does not possess this money, she simply buys on credit, thus accruing large amounts of credit card debts. April Lane Benson, Helen Dittmar, and Rita Wolfshon attribute this rise in compulsive shopping to, among other factors, the changing attitude toward debt:

In an age when everything moves fast...gratification, too, gravitates toward the instantaneous. Furthering the mentality are today's vastly increased opportunities for credit, and infrastructure that makes it easy to spend money one does not have. Thus, financial constraint ceases to be a barrier to immediate gratification. With lending standards dramatically loosened, consumers have been led to make purchases and financial commitments they cannot afford, whether they have understood this reality or have been in denial about it.⁹

This changing attitude towards debt was what then-president Barack Obama referred to as the “culture of irresponsibility”¹⁰ and sought to remedy in the process of bringing the economy out of the Great Recession. Such unreal expectations of consumers climaxed in the mortgage crisis of 2007-2008 which led to the Recession. Homeowners, intending to pay their mortgage later, were essentially trapped between the rising rates of their adjustable-rate mortgages and their insufficient personal incomes.¹¹ Benson, Dittmar, and Wolfsohn note that another arena where unrealistic credit expectations played out and one which affected a greater number of people was credit cards:

In 2005, 2006, 2007, an all-time high average of nearly six billion credit card offers went out to to America’s three hundred million people — *more than twenty offers per year* to every man, woman, and child! By no means coincidentally, these are the only years, except for 1932 and 1933, in the belly of the Great Depression, when the collective American populace had a negative personal saving rate...the average credit-card-holding family carries a debt of more than \$8000, an interest rate often in the teens or higher.¹²

Thus, Congress passed the Credit Card Accountability Responsibility and Disclosure Act in May 2009. One of the provisions of this act was to eliminate excessive marketing to young people¹³, the demographic most likely to default on their credit, either because of a clear lack of understanding of the complex credit terms or because of the “culture of irresponsibility”¹⁴ that they were a part of:

It is an indisputable fact that one of the most significant contributors to our economic downturn was an unraveling of major financial institutions and the lack of adequate regulatory structures to prevent abuse and excess. A culture of irresponsibility took root from Wall Street to Washington to Main Street. And a regulatory regime basically crafted in the wake of a 20th century economic crisis – the Great Depression – was overwhelmed by the speed, scope, and sophistication of a 21st century global economy.¹⁵

That romantic comedies have always been a response, if not a reflection, to the economic conditions of their contemporaneous times becomes clear in Carole Mortimer’s analysis of the screwball comedy (romantic comedy’s generic precedent) and the social background of the Great Depression. At a time when the miserable economic condition of the country was proving to be a test for “the very foundations of society,”¹⁶ the screwball comedy, with its “energy, fun and playfulness,”¹⁷ offered a chaotic world which would nonetheless be transformed into one of hope and happiness for the protagonists in the end. Mortimer then sees the role of the screwball comedy in the mid-1930s as offering “*an exhilarating sense of escapism* and, ultimately, optimism, as the audience remain comfortable in the knowledge that out of the chaos there will be a happy ending.”¹⁸ [my italics]

Since *Confessions* is a romantic comedy, a genre popularly seen as frivolous entertainment, it was marketed as a provider of this "sense of escapism."¹⁹ Thus in an interview in the week leading up to the film’s release, its producer, Jerry Bruckheimer, opined that the

release of a film with a materialistic heroine obsessed with consuming luxury goods would hardly be ill-timed. His opinion was based on the observation that contemporary audiences were “gravitating toward *more comedies and things that make people feel good*...[M]ost people don’t go to the movies to see dark and depressing, especially now. Which bodes well for *Shopaholic*...”²⁰ [my italics]. It was thus effectively disguised as a film with no interest in the economic meltdown, but rather as a “siren call” for an “an exhilarating sense of escapism”²¹ from “dark and depressing”²² times.

Confessions is a romantic comedy with a heroine “struggling to ‘have it all’.”²³ It corrects and restores her to the traditional gender role in a family structure headed by the hero. Isla Fisher is known for playing roles that portray unintelligent, scatterbrained women who are funny in their clumsiness and always attractive to men around them (*Wedding Crashers*, *Confessions*, *The Bachelorette*). She plays Rebecca and brings all of the attributes of her character in the *Wedding Crashers*, her most well-known film up till then, and amplifies them in the materialistic and self-serving heroine. The film seems to ask that if heads of banks and financial institutions were confounded by what President Obama referred to as “the sophistication of a 21st century global economy,”²⁴ then how can this ditzy, clumsy, woman lacking any self-control whatsoever be expected to understand it? Thus, even though she accrues huge credit card debts through her

superfluous shopping, she is shown as a helpless victim of credit card companies and their debt collection policies, thus the hyperbolic, shark-like, portrayal of her debt collector. Derek Smeath is portrayed with shark-like attributes, in his singular focus on getting Rebecca for her debt. He is even shown doodling sharks while trying to track her down on the phone. To avoid him, Rebecca tells everyone at her workplace that he is her ex-boyfriend who has resorted to stalking her since the end of their relationship. Derek Smeath is, however, only doing his job — trying to collect the debt that Rebecca owes his company and has not paid back in over a year. In doing this job, the film shows Smeath as a predator preying on our naive, child-like heroine. The malice directed towards him, like Malvolio's treatment in *Twelfth Night*, is in excess of his purported offense.



Figure 4: Derek Smeath's predator-like portrayal is further emphasized when he is shown doodling a column of sharks as he tracks down Rebecca on the phone.

This victimization makes sense when one considers the “global economy”²⁵ as the originator of what Arjun Appadurai refers to as the “fetishism of the consumer.”²⁶ Appadurai outlines how the consumer has been transformed through global commodity flows, particularly through the advertising accompanying them) into “a sign”²⁷: both in the sense of a Baudrillardian simulacrum and also as a mask of social agency that conceals the real seat of agency, which is not the consumer but the producer and the forces of production. Thus the “consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact she is at best a chooser.”²⁸ Romantic comedies routinely portray women who live in a “fantasy bubble,”²⁹ obsessed only with shopping and fashion. This delusion that through shopping for fashion products, they are exercising their agency is remedied by such films (*Sex and the City*, *Pretty Woman*, *Enchanted*) either through marriage or through the incorporation of the heroine in a heterosexual relationship. *Confessions* seeks to cure Rebecca by replacing her desire to shop with the desire for a man (Luke): inverting the very equation which, in the beginning, defines her for the rest of the film.

Rebecca, however, is not just cured and restored, she is first punished and alienated for her shopping addiction. Thus, everything that she values in her life — her friendship with Suze, her relationship with Luke, her job — is taken away from her in one fell swoop. Not only this,

but she is thoroughly humiliated on national television in front of the whole nation. The aftermath of the Recession and the resultant bailouts of large-scale investment companies, banks, and other financial institutions was the resulting phenomenon of “luxury shame.”³⁰ In the wake of Congressional hearings of CEOs of these institutions, that revealed exorbitant lifestyles and unimaginable profligacy, frugality and contrition became the trend. Thus conspicuous consumption of luxury items was now passé, and fashionistas were remodeling themselves as “recessionistas.”³¹ Despite such circumstances, here is a brand-obsessed heroine shopping not just conspicuously, but also proudly. She thinks it is a part of her identity, thus the first time the adult Rebecca is shown, the voiceover introduces her to the audience as:

Rebecca Bloomwood.
Occupation: Journalist.
Jacket: Visa. Dress: AMEX.
Belt: MasterCard.
It's vintage. And I got one percent cash back.
Bag: Gucci! And worth every penny.

Spending money on big brand luxury products defines her as much, if not more than, her own name and occupation. As Diane Negra has observed, the normalization of luxury expectations was a part of a trend dubbed “New Consumerism.”³² This placed emphasis on how “the growing importance of media representations skewed toward the wealthy [had] significantly re-crafted the mainstream horizon of expectations.”³³ Negra also argues that such economic and

lifestyle trends reflected a new dynamic in which the top 20 percent of income earners were seen as “cultural icons”³⁴ with their lifestyles “looked to by those with far less income as increasingly necessary and worth having.”³⁵ Thus the purchases of the super-rich were more significant than they appeared, for they would then influence the purchases of the middle and lower-income groups, thus exhibiting what economists refer to as the “demonstration effect.” A middle-class journalist, working for magazines which are themselves on the brink of bankruptcy, Rebecca forms her fashion opinions and choices from such magazines as *Alette*, which is itself modeled on *Vogue* or *Cosmopolitan*. And it is because she refuses to display contrition, and instead continues to shop under the effect of the “luxury fever”³⁶ even in a time of “luxury shame”³⁷ and austerity, that she is punished and then remedied.

Cure through Confession

Based on the first two books of Kinsella’s *Shopaholic* series, the film version, however, renames itself *Confessions of a Shopaholic*. This renaming is significant for it strategically includes the term “confessions” and this film does center around a confession: Rebecca’s confession that she is a shopaholic. Her initial refusal to call herself a shopaholic — “I like shopping...Is there anything so wrong with that?...stores are put there to enjoy...the experience

is enjoyable” — leads her through many trials and tribulations in her professional as well as her personal life till she breaks down and confesses that she is indeed a shopaholic. It is this confession which paves the path towards her reformation. While everyone around her is convinced that she is a shopaholic in need of dire help, Rebecca is oblivious to this apparent truth. She is, on the other hand, convinced that her love for stores is no different, albeit more rewarding, than most women’s love for their male partners. This leads her to believe that she is simply enjoying herself and doing what makes her feel happy and content. That this may not be the “truth”³⁸ is simply beyond her grasp.

The narrative revolves around bringing her to terms with the truth. And herein lies the significance of its confession. Michel Foucault has argued that truth is not, by nature, free or servile but that its very production is “thoroughly imbued with relations of power.”³⁹ He sees the truthful confession as inscribed at “the heart of the procedures of individualization by power.”⁴⁰ These statements about truth and power are made in the context of their relation with sex, whereby Foucault sees sex and truth as closely related in the cultural (Christian and otherwise) practice of confession. This relationship between the confession and sex holds true here because in this case the desire for sex has been effectively replaced by the desire to shop: stores are always better than men, producing a “lust” that men cannot. Because Rebecca can only be cured

when she acknowledges the truth about herself — that she is a shopaholic — in the Shopaholics Anonymous group, her cure is closely related to making her confess.

Rebecca's acknowledgment of who she is — a shopaholic — is an "avowal"⁴¹ that had hitherto eluded her. It forms her character's anagnorisis, which will inevitably lead to a reversal of her fortunes. Following this recognition, everything will change for the better. This confession is, however, not spontaneous. It is only after she is humiliated on national television and loses not only the man she has fallen in love with, but also her best friend, and her job, and is forced to leave New York City to go to her parents' suburban home, that her sense of morality is restored. She rushes to her Shopaholics Anonymous meeting and confesses "I am Rebecca Bloomwood



Figure 5: A Shopaholics Anonymous group meeting

and I'm a shopaholic." Foucault writes that sex "was a privileged theme of confession."⁴² He

sees the need to conceal sex as another aspect of confessing to it. The truth (confessed to in the confession) was simply the medium through which sex could manifest. Here, because shopping has replaced sex in Rebecca's life, so long as she refuses to conceal her desire to shop, she cannot confess to being a shopaholic. It is only after she understands the need to stop shopping, the need to conceal her desire for the buying of luxury goods, that she can then confess to it. It is in this way, by making the space of the Shopaholics Anonymous group into the space of confession of one's shopaholic tendencies, that the group then also promotes the need to conceal these tendencies outside this space. The group thus performs the same function for shopaholic tendencies as the confession does for sexual desires.

Rebecca does not confess spontaneously. She has to first go through suffering to realize the truth about herself. This suffering leads her to her parents' home. Here she is presented with a vision of her potential future if she continues to refuse to acknowledge the truth. Thus, immediately before this confession, Rebecca turns down her dream job from Alette Naylor because of a "really annoying feeling in the pit of [her] stomach." This job offer is made to her in her parents' home. Rebecca's parents, following her spectacular downfall, serve as a safe retreat. But they also signify, as they have throughout this film, a lifestyle that she absolutely abhors and that her own lifestyle is a conscious reaction to. Her attitude towards consumer goods is a reaction against what she refers to as "mom prices" that got one "brown things that lasted

forever,” and is a result of her drive to buy things with “magic cards” that got one “shiny, sparkly things that lasted three weeks” for “real prices.” It is thus ironical that the heroine, whose entire life has been a reaction against the kind of thrift practiced by her suburban parents, finds her moral bearing and comes to terms with herself under the same circumstances which had shaped her into being a compulsive shopper of luxury goods.

Locating the heroine’s coming to terms with the truth in her parents’ suburban home is crucial. Diane Negra refers to this trope in cinematic romances and chick-flicks of finding one’s putative individuality through a retreat to one’s hometown — of “coming back to oneself in a process of coming home”⁴³ — as “retreatism,”⁴⁴ a narrative trope that works to effectively remove women from the public sphere. The retreatist plot showcases the rewards of an adult woman’s return to a hometown space and decision to downshift her career. It features the protagonist’s revelation that professional work is unrewarding or even impossible and stages the discovery that the professional life is a “bad bargain.”⁴⁵ Negra also outlines the frequent use of the plot device of the middle-aged “bad”⁴⁶ female professional whose interests are antithetical to the heroine’s, and notices how such roles are often played by well-known and accomplished actresses (Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada*, Sigourney Weaver in *Working Girl*, Sandra Bullock in *The Proposal*, Vanessa Williams in *Ugly Betty*, Tilda Swinton in *Trainwreck*, to name

a few). Two recurrent plot devices identified here to enact this narrative are: the discovery that the professional sphere of work is meaningless, shallow, venal, and in many cases “wrongly”⁴⁷ feminized and aberrant; and the abandonment of a job that was fundamentally menial and service-class rank to be glorified through romance and family. In *Confessions*, Rebecca, who had hitherto longed to work for Alette Naylor (played by Kristin Scott Thomas) and her famous fashion magazine, sees what Alette truly stands for within the bounds of her parents’ home. The film thus portrays Alette as the self-serving, fashion-conscious, dominant professional woman, in sharp contrast to Rebecca’s mother (played by Joan Cusack), the other-directed, pie-serving, domestic, maternal woman. And it is here that the plot finally reveals Alette to her: when Rebecca tells Alette that Louboutins are not affordable fashion, she replies, “[F]ear not...we print the prices very small...after all, what are credit cards for?” Alette, and by extension Rebecca’s ambition to work for her, is thus “meaningless, shallow, venal.”⁴⁸ Alette Naylor then represents to Rebecca a fearful vision of her own middle-aged future. This future is credit-card

happy, fashionable, and at her professional peak, but in the framework of the retreatist romance, that glorifies domestic, family-oriented notions of femininity, is a failure.

This retreatist framework then presents Rebecca with two potential alternatives for her future, one of which she actively aspires for. She has already had a taste of it — of potentially becoming like Alette Naylor — and been punished for it. Of the nature of confessions, Foucault writes: “When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is



Figure 6: Alette Naylor, the career woman, is contrasted with Jane Bloomwood, the ideal mother, wife, and host. Whereas Jane bakes a pie to serve her guests, Alette insists on eating only a "tiny, tiny, tiny" portion of it.

wrung from a person by violence or threat; it is driven from its hiding place in the soul, or extracted from the body.”⁴⁹ The vision of her potential future vis-à-vis Alette Naylor then holds for Rebecca that “threat”⁵⁰ which wrings the truth out of her. It is only after she is thus threatened that she overcomes the “constraint,”⁵¹ that “violence of a power,”⁵² which weighs the truth down, and this truth can “finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation.”⁵³

This apparent “liberation”⁵⁴ in the space of such retreatist frameworks often gives way to what Negra identifies as narratives of “adjusted ambition.”⁵⁵ These narratives work to discredit the meaning and value of work in the heroine’s life or at least to insist that it be made secondary to romance. Negra also discusses the tendency of such narratives to identify the ideological problems in contemporary culture and to then detour them by deploying truisms about essential female desires/needs:

For instance, films like *Life or Something Like It*, *You’ve Got Mail* and *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days* incorporate a critique of unbridled capitalist aggression but shift that critique onto women who must rediscover their essential roles [my italics] as other-focused, nurturing, etc. In all three of those films, a resolution is achieved when the female character downsizes her ambition, leaves her job, and/or finds a more private mode of working.⁵⁶

This is true also for the resolution of *Confessions*, where Rebecca’s narrative is one of “adjusted ambition,”⁵⁷ whereby her moment of recognition that allows her to confess the apparent truth about herself — that she is a shopaholic — is followed by a drastic change in her prior life goals. She has stopped shopping, and auctioned off all of her prior purchases to pay off her debt. She now borrows clothes from Suze, has a steady relationship with Luke, is learning Finnish, but is working for Luke’s new magazine, which is presumably not a fashion magazine.

Not only has the heroine then been cured of her shopping addiction but has through this cure been able to realize her essential female desires: to have a rewarding relationship with not a credit card but a man. By using the theme of the confession, the film thus resolves with Rebecca's "adjusted ambition,"⁵⁸ restoring her "miswanting,"⁵⁹ that is her misplaced professional and personal wants, to the correct sphere of a romantic heterosexual relationship. It thus produces, what Foucault calls "[wo]men's subjections: their constitution as subjects in both senses of the word."⁶⁰ Rebecca is thus (re)constituted as the ideal romcom heroine who has strayed into the territory of the careerist woman and returned to the domain idealized for women, that of the heterosexual partnership, "her real destiny," to which her existence as a self-sufficient woman with her own disposable income is superfluous.

The female shopaholic embodies the young, gullible, credit card happy youth, using their lending power irresponsibly. When Rebecca's debt is outed on national television and she leaves *Successful Savings*, Luke tells Edgar West: "Rebecca Bloomwood let me down, but the Girl in the Green Scarf never did." While they are the same person, Rebecca Bloomwood is the irresponsible shopaholic, yet to come to terms with her shopping addiction. Rebecca's alter ego, The Girl in the Green Scarf (green being the color of money), on the other hand, not only clearly understands how to save money, but also gives others advice on savings and explains it even to

the shopaholic, like her real self, using shopping metaphors. Luke here has dissociated Rebecca into two distinct personalities, it was after all his idea that she assume a pseudonym, and refuses to associate one with the other. Rebecca Bloomwood, the shopper, unable to manage her own debt thus is selectively obliterated by “the girl in the green scarf,” Luke’s *nom de plume* for her professional persona. It is this latter persona that the narrative, by uniting her with Luke, completely transforms her into.

It must be noted that had Rebecca not been obsessed with shopping the way she was, she could never have written articles comparing store card APRs to buying 95% acrylic cashmere coats or drawn the analogy of how different women purchase different shoes to explain the principles of security investment. To stop her from shopping, or curing her of her shopaholic tendencies, as the film effectively does by mapping it as her CBD, would thus remove the primary source of knowledge that she draws from to write. The fact that Rebecca can use her experiences and thus see through them testifies to the fact that this is not a scatterbrained, irresponsible individual. At best, she is misguided. Thus, the very flaw that she must be cured of is what makes her professionally successful. Curing this flaw is to then effectively reduce the scope for her to succeed professionally. The confession, however, that she is a shopaholic is necessary to give the audience, as Bruckheimer says in his interview, “closure,” keeping in mind the timing of the film’s release. In the same interview, while Bruckheimer admits that the ending

was reshot, he refuses to say what exactly was changed, except that a coda was added to the ending.⁶¹ In the book version of *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, the heroine realizes her faults and scales down her shopping tendencies, but she does not simply quit as the American heroine of the film does.

Rebecca's father is of the opinion that "if the American economy can be billions in debt and still survive," then so can she. Even though Bruckheimer says that this line was always on the script, and shooting for the film was over before the Recession hit, its ending was reshot just before its release. Since an interview is not the same as Shopaholics Anonymous, it is not a confession, Bruckheimer's words may then be treated skeptically. Given the timing of the film's release, one must take into account the way it treats shopping, how it portrays the female shopper as a shopaholic suffering from CBD, and its subsequent treatment of this disorder in the confessional space of Shopaholics Anonymous. All of these factors indicate that this film embodies the cure of the Recession-ridden American economy through the CBD-ridden female shopper. In doing so, it restores to both a perfect sense of responsibility and reassurance through the return of the dysfunctional shopaholic to the realm of the functional heteronormative family.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Brian Monotopoli, “Obama On Fixing ‘Culture Of Irresponsibility’” last modified November 30, 2017.
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-on-fixing-culture-of-irresponsibility/>.
- ² Diane Negra, *What A Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 88.
- ³ Donald W. Black, “A review of compulsive buying disorder,” *World Psychiatry* 6, no. 1 (2007): 14. doi:
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1805733/pdf/wpa060014.pdf>.
- ⁴ Ibid., 15.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid., 17.
- ⁹ April Lane Benson, Helga Dittmar, and Rita Wolfsohn, “Compulsive Buying: cultural Contributors and Consequences,” in *Impulse Control Disorders*, ed. Elias Aboujaoude and Lorrin M. Koran (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 24.
- ¹⁰ Brian Monotopoli, “Obama On Fixing ‘Culture Of Irresponsibility’.”
- ¹¹ See: Benson, Dittmar, and Wolfsohn, 24-25.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ “Fact Sheet: Reforms to Protect American Credit Card Holders,” *The White House: President Barack Obama*, last modified November 30, 2017.
<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/fact-sheet-reforms-protect-american-credit-card-holders>.
- ¹⁴ Monotopoli, “Obama On Fixing ‘Culture Of Irresponsibility’.”
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Claire Mortimer, *Romantic Comedy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 11.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Brooks Barnes, “A Man of Action Walks in Someone Else’s Heels” last modified November 30, 2017.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/08/movies/08barn.html>.
- ²¹ Mortimer, *Romantic Comedy*, 11.
- ²² Brooks Barnes, “A Man of Action Walks in Someone Else’s Heels.”

- ²³ Mortimer, *Romantic Comedy*, 30
- ²⁴ Monotopoli, “Obama On Fixing ‘Culture Of Irresponsibility’.”
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 42.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Mortimer, *Romantic Comedy*, 40.
- ³⁰ Johnnie L. Roberts, “The Rich Are Feeling ‘Luxury Shame’” last modified November 30, 2017. <http://www.newsweek.com/rich-are-feeling-luxury-shame-85301>.
- ³¹ Ibid. The article notes this trend in public figures such as Michelle Obama who wore a \$400 J. Crew dress on her appearance on *The Tonight Show*. She was also known to wear such brands as Maria Pinto, Bibhu Mohapatra, and, of course, J. Crew, which had either struggled financially, or as was the case of Mohapatra, filed for bankruptcy. See also: Vanessa Friedman, “What Michelle Obama Wore and Why It Mattered” last modified November 30, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/14/fashion/michelle-obama-first-lady-fashion.html>
- ³² Negra, *What A Girl Wants*, 150.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Roberts, “The Rich Are Feeling ‘Luxury Shame’.”
- ³⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 60.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 59.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 58.
- ⁴² Ibid., 61.
- ⁴³ Negra, *What A Girl Wants*, 7.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 5.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 88.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 75.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 88.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 59.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 60.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 60.

⁵⁵ Negra, *What A Girl Wants*, 88.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 89.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 88.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 96.

⁶⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 60.

⁶¹ Brooks Barnes, “A Man of Action Walks in Someone Else’s Heels.”