

#PERSPECTIVE

How popular culture taught me to LOVE

This article examines how the entertainment industry shapes our notions of love. By looking back at his childhood admiration for celebrities, the writer traces an emotional journey ranging from fantasy, admiration, appreciation, to understanding what it truly means to love.

Long before Instagram made celebrities our constant companions, we encountered stars on screens and on pages of entertainment magazines. In the form of advertisements, music videos, and motion pictures, they became part of our lives. Back then, we saw them occasionally, and were not bombarded with a daily dose of social media stunts. Nevertheless, they conquered our hearts.

There is something magical about first love. Something inherently innocent; something inexplicably beautiful. The exact moment I cannot recall, but that inexplicable feeling and the butterflies in the stomach can still be recollected.

At this point, I will unabashedly admit that while my first love was a girl at university, my first crush was none other than Madonna!

We are talking about years before the advent of satellite TV. My gateway to the world of glamour was, like most others, through a VCR. I somehow got hold of a compilation of MTV music videos, and was instantly hooked. The reason was simple: in contrast to Bollywood flicks, Michael's Thriller and Peter Gabriel's Sledgehammer seemed far more fascinating. But nothing felt as fascinating and beautiful as her.

I was especially in love with the music video for 'La Isla Bonita.' I still wonder how a 10-year-old me was taken to a realm of romance and mystery. Spellbound by the imagery, even without understanding what it truly meant, the video went on repeat. As I was hearing it for the umpteenth time, I too started to yearn for the warmth of mythical

San Pedro. The guitar solo played by the unnamed instrumentalist was haunting, and every time Madonna appeared on screen in that red dress, my heart skipped a beat.

Those were slow times. CDs and MP3s were unheard of, and it took a while before I could venture into her entire videography.

My feelings only grew stronger with 'Like a Prayer' and 'Material Girl.' Of course, the raw sensuality of her videos added to the charm, but as love for the diva intensified, slowly and gradually, I was learning to appreciate beauty. And in a way, learning to appreciate music.

Time flew, and some springs later, love — at least it seemed like it — came into my life in a different form. They say, gentlemen prefer blondes, and perhaps we do!

Introduction to Monroe was not accidental but planned. Now in my late teens, I was someone who would binge on cinemas daily, and it was only natural that I felt an urge to review iconic films of the fifties and sixties.

The movies did not disappoint. In her portrayal of Lorelei Lee, for example, Marilyn Monroe is obsessed with fame and fortune but also witty, and completely in control of her charm.

However, while she was convincing in her role, at the back of my mind, in every film, all I could think of was the sadness, the controversy, and how her real life came to an abrupt end. My youthful notions drove me to develop an infatuation of some sort for Monroe, but the man inside became attracted to the woman trapped by that very icon.

In stark contrast to my previous feeling

for Madonna, this time the feeling was no longer about appreciation of beauty alone; it was now about image, struggle, sorrow, and vulnerability.

Obsession for Marilyn soon became a search for the visage behind the mask, as I sought to find Norma Jeane. Blessed with the advent of the internet, I was now exploring real-life stories about the actress. And in that process, a fondness grew for Norma that transcended the attraction for Marilyn.

It is quite natural that human souls will mature with age, and it was also around this time, in my early twenties, that my fascination for global stars began to shift. Slowly, I was learning to separate movies from real life. I was learning to appreciate how Tinseltown can be a reflection of the lives we live and how trivial at times films become in their attempt to portray just that.

It was this shift in worldview that led me to Breakfast at Tiffany's. Unlike my earlier encounters with cinema, I was no longer simply drawn to a face or a moment of glamour. I was drawn to a character I felt compelled to understand.

What I found most fascinating about the films was the duality of the characters. Yes, drawn by the little black dress, I was instantly in love with Holly Golightly, but as opposed to my other infatuations, she was a beauty without the bombshell persona.

She was a socialite, the "party girl" with an impeccable sense of style, yet behind the magnetic charm, beneath the pearls and the black dress, was a girl desperately trying to run away from her past.

To me, her coping mechanisms seemed novel at the time, only to later realise that they are somewhat universal, lurking inside almost all of us.

I realised, perhaps for the first time in my life, how effortlessly glamour and beauty can

be disguised by the human soul. And this brought me to my first real love — the girl in med school.

Thinking back, I can still smell the fragrance of her long flowing hair, the clinking of the glass bangles and the chime of the anklets. I recollect her laughter and the softness of the soul. It was not love at first sight, but one that grew gradually as her inner self appeared before me, outshining her radiant outer beauty.

That unrequited love is a lesson in heartbreak, but one that remains my fondest heartache.

My childhood attractions taught me that love can begin with astonishment. That it survives through appreciation and goes beyond projected images. The transition from infatuation to understanding often gives "crushes" their lasting power. What starts as a simple romance grows into an exercise in how we view people in life, how we see ourselves.

Perhaps all these crushes were mere rehearsals for the real thing. Even today, the women I admired in my childhood and as a young adult return as fragments of the past. They are my constant reminder that love is a continuous process, and that it only grows with time.

I believe this journey into love and heartache is every man's story. Only the protagonists differ, but the experience remains fond and one to cherish.

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Star **LIFE** Style

