

A Review of

ROMANTIC COMEDY: BOY MEETS GIRL, MEETS GENRE

Tamar Jeffers-McDonald, (London and New York: Wallflower, 2007)

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Romantic comedy is one of the most popular genres in film and more pervasive than it may at first seem, routinely found in films belonging to apparently disparate genres. However, given its popularity and endurance through time, it is surprising that romantic comedy has been routinely devalued by audiences and critics alike. The assumption of cultural lowliness that has traditionally accompanied the genre has led most to treat romance and romantic comedy as a guilty pleasure for the public, an “unworthy” object of analysis for academics who generally belittled it either by omission (the amount of critical work published on this genre is significantly smaller than on other, more “serious” ones) or simply through plain derision, regarding it as simplistic, predictable and hopelessly associated with a conservative view of love and marriage. Fortunately, some scholars, like Tamar Jeffers-McDonald, have steered away from this dominant trend and made efforts to reflect on this genre in order to show that there is more to romantic comedy than might first appear.

Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre (2007) belongs to the “Shortcuts” series, a collection of introductory texts to film studies. In the spirit of this collection, McDonald’s book is clearly written, and articulates complex concepts in simple and entertaining ways. It accomplishes two goals at once: it offers a clear overview of romantic comedy for those unfamiliar with the genre, while providing valuable insights for the knowledgeable reader. For this reason, even though the book is mainly addressed to a lay or beginner audience, it is an insightful and interesting read for seasoned researchers studying romantic comedy.

Romantic Comedy is a well-organised, concise overview of the evolution of romantic comedy, from the 1930s to present. During the evolution of the genre, Jeffers-McDonald discusses the relationship between different cycles of sub-genres and their historical context, emphasising the connection between the genre’s development and contextual changes in American society over the decades. Each chapter focuses on a cycle or sub-genre, analysing its main characteristics and presenting a practical case study in which viewers and academics might better understand references and meaning in period films.

The first chapter, “Romantic comedy and genre” is an interesting reflection on the wider concept of genre which functions as an introduction to the particular case of romantic comedy and the cycles or sub-genres it encompasses. In this chapter, Jeffers-McDonald explains what she understands by romantic comedy, namely, “a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion” (9). She also discusses the general attributes that define the genre as a whole, such as iconography, narrative patterns and ideology. After this introduction, the book proceeds to analyse the various sub-genres of romantic comedy.

The second chapter deals with screwball comedy, a cycle born in the 1930s when movies provided a necessary escape from the hardships of everyday life brought about by economic depression. Screwball comedy captured the mood of the time, portraying the economic crisis realistically but offering a glimpse

of hope through characters that ultimately triumph against adversity. Thematically, this sub-genre is characterised by the recurrence of reverse class snobbery, role-play, and the inversion or subversion of the characters' normality. It also features an overlapping style of delivery, well-written scripts and an amusing blend of sophistication and slapstick. Movies like *It Happened One Night* (1934), *20th Century* (1934) or *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) were successful because they provided relief in the face of hardship. The motif of inversion, for instance, offered hope that things could change. However, such playful self-indulgence came to be seen as frivolous when the U.S. became involved in the Second World War. The coming of war meant the demise of screwball comedy, suddenly deemed inappropriate for a world which had turned much more serious.

Jeffers-McDonald third chapter deals with the sex comedy, a sub-genre born in 1953 as a consequence of the combination of three key events: the publication of Alfred Kinsey's report on *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female*, which revealed to the world that women were actually sexual beings; the publication of the magazine *Playboy*, which introduced the figure of the urbane purchasing bachelor; and the weakening of the Production Code, which allowed for a much freer treatment of sex on screen. The sex comedy cycle includes most romantic comedies released between 1954 and the mid-1960s, and had in Doris Day and Rock Hudson its most popular screen couple, with films like *Pillow Talk* (1959) or *Lover Come Back* (1961). This type of comedy is characterised by the recurrence of disguise and masquerade, a humorous inversion of the "natural order" and the establishment of a hierarchy of knowledge in which the man—who frequently masquerades as someone else—knows more than the innocent woman, but the viewer knows more than both of them. The sex comedy sub-genre came to an end in the mid-1960s, when the advent of the contraceptive pill rendered it outdated.

The next chapter is devoted to the radical romantic comedy, a sub-genre born in the late 1960s which abandons the focus on the final union of the couple in favour of an interrogation of the ideology of romance. Following from the profound social changes of the sixties including the evolution of feminist, black and gay rights movements, a changing social landscape in which divorce rates rocketed, single women living in cities outnumbered men, and the rise of abortion as a publicly-debated issue, the new reality of romantic relationships was faithfully portrayed by the genre through an increase of divorce and break-up comedies devoted to the exploration of single life. The main feature of the radical romantic comedy is its self-consciousness, Jeffers-McDonald argues, connecting the genre to a decade characterised by introspection and self-absorption and best exhibited by films such as *Annie Hall* (1977), *The Goodbye Girl* (1977), or *Starting Over* (1979). As such, this sub-genre of romantic comedy exhibits a conspicuous self-reflexivity in three different areas: self-reflexivity about the romantic relationship, self-reflexivity as a film text, and self-reflexivity as a modern and more realistic form of romantic comedy.

In her final chapter, Jeffers-McDonald reaches the present day with what she calls the neo-traditional romantic comedy. This chapter seems to me the most interesting contribution to current research on this genre: most works tend to focus on the well-established cycles previously mentioned, but the literature on contemporary romantic comedy is comparably scarce. For this reason, Jeffers-McDonald's insights into the present state of the genre are particularly illuminating. Rather than a subgenre, the author argues that the neo-traditional romantic comedy constitutes the dominant form today, and it extends from the late 1980s up to the present day, featuring films like *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *You've Got Mail* (1998), *The Wedding Planner* (2001), *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003) or *Kate and Leopold* (2003). Unlike its predecessors, this new trend of romantic comedy does not seem especially concerned with establishing a

connection with its specific social context. Instead, it prefers to reference popular culture and consumer products rather than political or historical events, which confers the genre a “generalised, undifferentiated feeling” (88). The result is a sense of homogeneity which Jeffers-McDonald interprets as the symptom of a clear need for generic renewal stemming from a strong feeling of anxiety in contemporary romantic comedy. This anxiety, she argues, is rooted in “feelings of the genre’s obsolescence and irrelevance to contemporary life” (91), and can be perceived in its most recurrent elements and topics. These include a backlash against the ideology of the radical film alongside a continued use of its visual features, a mood of imprecise nostalgia, a type of vague self-referentialism and a de-emphasising of sex.

Romantic Comedy closes with a short conclusion that explores the present state of romantic comedy and tries to predict where it might evolve in the future. Specifically, she identifies three main themes which seem to be emerging and infusing new life into the genre: a re-emphasis on the importance of sex; a willingness to parody rather than re-use the tropes of the genre; and the emergence of a new kind of male-centred comedy. The author sees in this new type of romantic comedy, which she labels “homme-com”, “the best opportunity for a departure from the sterility affecting the dominant generic form” (111). This 2007 prediction about the new directions for contemporary romantic comedy seem to have been borne out, as the recent success of male-centred comedies like *Knocked Up* (2007), *Dan in Real Life* (2007), *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008), *Role Models* (2008) or *I Love You, Man* (2009) have breathed new life into the genre. This new kind of romantic comedy, addressed to male spectators, mixes elements from slapstick and gross-out comedy is today the most successful and innovative trend within the romantic comedy genre.

Considering the cultural devaluation romantic comedy has been traditionally submitted to, despite (or maybe because of) its enduring popularity, a serious and well-researched book like this is a welcome contribution to film studies. *Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*’s is concisely written, well-organised and provides solid theoretical argumentation that is consistently backed up by empirical analysis. That said, the only detail that might be argued against is that the films chosen as case studies are often not as “original” or underexplored as the author seems to claim. In her introduction, Jeffers McDonald expresses her will to forego canonical, obvious choices in her case studies in favour of less well-trodden options, but some of the films chosen for close study, like *Pillow Talk* or *Annie Hall*, are not exactly outsiders to a developed sense of the canon. Nevertheless, this does not make the analyses less interesting or insightful. Another strong point of this book lies in its emphasis on the current state of the genre: updated literature on romantic comedy is scarce in comparison with other genres, with most publications analysing past cycles ad nauseam, and devoting little attention to the state of the genre today. Of course, this is a difficult task, since it takes historical distance in order to critically evaluate a period of time. Jeffers McDonald, however, does not only devote a whole chapter to the analysis of contemporary romantic comedy, but also offers insightful ideas about what the future may bring. However, apart from the author’s evident ability to apprehend the present reality of the genre and to foresee what is to come, the book’s greatest virtue lies in its capacity to combine serious academic research with accessibility for a wide readership. Like the genre it concerns itself with, this book is suitable for general audiences.