

# Introduction

## LOVE ACTUALLY: ROMANTIC COMEDY SINCE THE AUGHTS

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“The romantic comedy is dead.” Or so pronounced critic Amy Nicholson in a 2014 article in *L.A. Weekly*, after noting that in the previous year not one romcom appeared among the top 100 films at the U.S. box office.<sup>1</sup> The numbers for 2013, as tallied by the revenue-tracking website Box Office Mojo, largely confirm Nicholson’s pronouncement; the only film among the top 100 that clearly belongs to the romcom category is Spike Jonze’s *Her*, which just snuck in at one-hundredth place. A half-decade later, *Entertainment Weekly* devoted its entire 2019 Valentine’s Day issue to celebrating bygone Hollywood romcoms, nostalgia being another sure sign that the genre has stalled. And yet, as Nicholson goes on to concede, romcom refuses to *actually* die; as relatively inexpensive films aimed primarily at adults—and women to boot—romcoms serve as reliably if not massively profitable counterprogramming to the animated family fare and superhero franchises that dominate the postmillennial multiplex and, since Nicholson’s writing, romcoms have gone on to become a staple of Netflix’s streaming platform. As Tamar Jeffers McDonald, author of this book’s foreword, persuasively claims in surveying the genre’s history from the 1930s–40s screwball era to the “Neo-Traditionalism” that took hold in the late 1980s and remained ensconced in 2007, when her study concludes, romantic comedy may well be Hollywood’s most consistently popular genre.<sup>2</sup> And bona fide blockbusters do occasionally emerge; *Trainwreck* topped the \$100 million mark in 2015, and as recently as 2018 *Crazy Rich Asians* cracked the all-time top ten for

romantic comedy at the U.S. box office, with Box Office Mojo reporting \$238.5 million in estimated worldwide grosses. These top-performing titles are telling, both for being, perhaps, the (two) exceptions that prove the rule that romcoms don't possess superhero earning power, and for bearing vivid markers of the neotraditionalist turn that Jeffers McDonald notes, which in its obsessive drive to reassure itself (and us) of "the possibility of lasting love in contemporary society . . . betray[s] its own lack of faith in such an outcome."<sup>3</sup> As appealing as audiences found both films, it's a tough call which requires a greater suspension of disbelief: the fantasy wish fulfillment of *Crazy Rich Asians*'s Singaporean restaging of *Cinderella*, or Amy Schumer's transformation from the titular trainwreck who heckles Laker Girls ("You're going to lose us the vote!") into an eager-to-please girlfriend who abandons her "monogamy is unrealistic" motto and teams with those same cheerleaders to win over the staid suitor proffering those very shackles of monogamy. Even recent romcoms that claim to take a knowing stance succumb to these neotraditional impulses, with *Slant*'s critic noting of *Isn't It Romantic* (2019)—in which a concussed Rebel Wilson awakens to find her "life's become a [bleep] romantic comedy" (a PG-13 rated one at that)—that it "evolves into the very thing it set out to parody."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the 2019 documentary *Romantic Comedy*, billed as a self-examination of creator Elizabeth Sankey's own long-term love affair with the genre, advertises itself with a trailer featuring nostalgia-inducing iconic movie moments worthy of a romcom flashback montage.

Apart from those high-earning outliers of the last decade, the modest box office performance of romcoms reveals less about contemporary romantic comedy and more about the current entertainment industry's production, distribution, and exhibition models. With movie studios preoccupied with churning out superhero sequels, family-friendly animation, and horror reboots, the peak TV era of proliferating niche programming and "quality television" has given romcom a much-needed makeover, with television's key attribute, seriality, providing an invaluable resource for explorations that go beyond "happily ever after." So too have internet-based producers and distributors (from behemoths Amazon, Facebook, and Netflix to independent web series creators) taken up the slack, administering our romcom fix via the small screen, through digital delivery systems and streaming platforms. Contemporary romcoms are as, or possibly more, likely to have their initial release online rather than theatrically, with what we might call

“post-theatrical romcom”—works that bypass theatrical release, whether they be film, TV, or web series—having propagated to the point that cultural critic Lisa Bonos proclaimed in 2018 that Netflix’s glut of original romcom content had left her in a “rom-coma.”<sup>5</sup> Whether romcom has benefited or suffered from these developments is debatable, but romcom is assuredly more diverse, in all senses of the term, than ever. Ultimately Nicholson’s investigation concludes that, in fact, romcom isn’t dead—it’s different. It’s indie, it’s queer, it features (if still too rarely) lead characters of color or (as in the case of 2017’s *The Big Sick*) interracial couplings, it diverts focus from the romantic couple to platonic buddies (as in the bromance and the momcom), and it’s now as often as not about *uncoupling*.

### Beyond Creating the Couple

This last development threatens traditional and contemporary notions of romantic comedy as lighthearted narratives about couple formation. These new-ish traits and tones—for romcom’s diversification dates back to the 1970s, as will be discussed below—make it increasingly challenging to define the parameters of a genre that has always been hard to isolate, given the ubiquity of romantic story lines in (especially Hollywood) narrative cinema. This trend toward genre hybridity and rebranding, “creating films with greater depth and breadth of setting, storyline, and character,” while retaining the all-important element of romantic affirmation/wish fulfillment, is noted by Ashley Elaine York as a key factor driving the success of the contemporary “women’s blockbuster,” with releases such as *Mamma Mia!* (2008) and *Bridesmaids* (2011) finding enormous success with a “bigendered, worldwide audience.”<sup>6</sup> Elżbieta Ostrowska (drawing on the foundational work of Betty Kaklamanidou, one of this volume’s contributors) connects the generic and textual inclusiveness of contemporary romantic comedies to the neoliberal logic of both their and their creators’ emphasis on the accumulation of wealth, concluding that “the genre has become an aesthetic nomad wandering from one generic convention to another, hoping to accumulate ideological and aesthetic capital in order to secure a maximised financial return.”<sup>7</sup> This high concept, global-marketed model issuing from studio boardrooms might be said, then, both to have saved the romcom and diluted its brand by blurring its generic parameters. Meanwhile, romcom’s valence and viewership have been revived through its dissemination

via Netflix algorithms and in the online/fan discourse devoted to cataloging its tropes (the “manic pixie dream girl”; the grand gesture; the airport confrontation), repurposing its motifs as memes (Feminist Ryan Gosling; *The Graduate*-inspired “Hello Darkness My Old Friend”), and exposing its normalization of such questionable behavior as that diagnosed by a sociological study as “persistent pursuit” and satirized by the *Onion* under the headline “Romantic-Comedy Behavior Gets Real-Life Man Arrested.”<sup>8</sup>

The tensions and transformations always involved in the construction and dissemination of genre concepts have cemented genre theorists’ conviction that it is unproductive to police any given genre’s boundaries, even as demarcations remain legible, of practical use, and in need of parsing.<sup>9</sup> Heeding critic Adrian Martin’s recommendation regarding contemporary romantic comedy (“We need to chase the genre’s self-definition in flight, as it happens”) this collection delineates a grouping of texts bound together by a shared idiom, recurrent tropes, and industrial-cultural positioning, while recognizing that such groupings are subject to change and must be productively stretched to encompass modified and hybridized strains.<sup>10</sup> In another foundational work by one of our contributors, John Alberti joins cultural critics such as Hanna Rosin and Laura Kipnis in noting the contemporary crisis surrounding masculinity and argues that it “opens up new imaginative possibilities for the idea and ideal of The Couple, but the expanded possibilities equally mean the radical destabilization of existing genres of both narrative and gender.”<sup>11</sup> The “anxious romance”—Alberti’s nomenclature for a significant emergent romcom subgenre symptomatic of this (post-9/11, postrecession, perhaps even postpatriarchal) crisis of masculinity—is one of several such designations that our contributors devise in appraising the brave new world of post-2000s romcom. In a ten-year span that has seen Hollywood studios’ hegemony toppled by Amazon and Netflix, moviegoing ceding the way to streaming and (at current writing) hobbling back from hiatus due to COVID-19, and the progressive policies of Barack Obama’s two-term presidency torn asunder by rollbacks in civil and reproductive rights, environmental and immigration crises, and resurgent white supremacy (to name but a few), it is no surprise that romcom has experienced considerable whiplash as its industrial and ideological chakras realign in response.

This collection encompasses, therefore, narratives that deviate from romcom formula (by centering on same-sex couplings both platonic and romantic, for example, or by combining in roughly equal measure comedy

and melodrama) and that adapt Hollywood-centric romcom's cinematic conventions and national-industrial positionalities to fit serialized, cross-platform formats and indie and non-U.S./transnational production contexts. Such an approach reflects transmedia and transnational practices within not only romcom production and consumption but throughout the screen media industries, *and*, moreover, within the field of media studies. Beyond an openness to generic indeterminacy and affirmation of romcom renewal and dispersal, what further unites this collection is its contemporaneity, with each chapter presenting case studies from the last decade. This period-specific approach follows the model of such classic studies of romantic comedy as Stanley Cavell's exploration of the 1930s–40s “comedy of remarriage” cycle in *Pursuits of Happiness* (1984) onward and follows the precepts articulated by Celestino Deleyto, who posits that romantic comedy comprises “not so much, or at least not only, tales of the consolidation of a heterosexual couple as series of narrative events representing assorted forms of desire within particular historical contexts.”<sup>12</sup> The recognition, increasingly prevalent within romcom studies, that the genre's teleological drive has been overemphasized at the expense of its negotiation—over the course of what Deleyto terms the film's narrative “middle”—of “interpersonal affective and erotic relationships” comedically treated and culturally inscribed, additionally supports our historically defined scope and aligns with our locally informed yet globally attuned perspectives.<sup>13</sup>

The development of the genre over the last decade offers unassailable evidence, we believe, that romcom is alive and well—and, in some quadrants, better than ever, on account of the generic revisions, representational inclusions, and critical reorientations it has undergone. As our chapters cumulatively aim to demonstrate, the genre's key attribute since the 2000s may be the impulse to couple romcom and realism. Unlike the illusory wish fulfillment of neotraditional romantic comedies such as the one referenced in the title of this volume's introduction, the works singled out by our contributors reflect the genre's recent reactivation as a means for regarding love, sex, and relationships in all their actuality—even at further risk of rendering romcom difficult to disambiguate. Thinking back to Amy Nicholson's mystery of the murdered romcom, maybe the culprit is romcom itself, insofar as the more complex and anti-illusory romcom becomes—the more it reflects the realities of coupling and relationships—the less likely it is to be called romcom. As noted in a 2017 *Glamour* article titled “Why Is It So Wrong to

Love Romantic Comedy?,” romcom’s stigmatization perpetuates its generic illegibility, as “the warped logic applied to romantic comedies goes so far as to strip the genre label from anything the critics decide is good . . . dramas about love are allowed to have quality—just don’t call them romcoms.”<sup>14</sup> Whether because the creators and promotional campaigns for these diverse new works showing up on screens big and small are understandably reluctant to brand them explicitly as romcoms, given the derision heaped on the genre and its fans; or because the feminist-minded critics and scholars operating in romcom studies have so often opted (justifiably) to critique neotraditional romcom, regrettably the most innovative, idiosyncratic, and inclusive (and thus most interesting) works of romantic comedy, however creatively and expansively defined, have not yet received serious, sustained analysis of the type this collection aims to perform.<sup>15</sup> Collectively, my co-contributors and I seek to reorient romcom scholarship by confronting the actual contours of what constitutes romcom since the 2000s, as the genre has been reshaped in response to two pervasive forces: the “digital era” of screen media production, distribution, and exhibition; and the reconfiguration of social relations and practices linked to romance as a result of neoliberalism, globalization, civil rights legislation (e.g. marriage equality), social media, and other cultural factors that characterize what we will call, and consider below, the “post-romantic age.”

The question may well arise whether “romantic comedy” is any longer a viable generic designation, given the dissents and divergences from classic genre forms my contributors and I trace in the works we study. The term “romantic comedy” retains its relevance, and appeal, for a number of reasons. Given that romantic comedy is typically stigmatized in both popular and critical discourse, in terms that link the low value placed on the form to its feminization—its orientation toward and consumption by female audiences—retaining that label is precisely a protest against the pejorative attitude toward women-oriented media that has long prevailed in the genre’s reception. The label continues to play an important role in industrial and promotional contexts; witness the huge output of boy-meets-girl narratives that Netflix has bought up and pumped out in recent years and proudly labels in their database taxonomy “Romantic Comedies.” Even as contemporary radical romcoms torque, tweak, and overturn the classic patterns, they nevertheless pay homage and foreground their connection to the works that preceded them, and whose power and interest they acknowledge precisely

through their efforts at subversion. These historical and allusive linkages make an argument for transformation, rather than rupture. Indeed, a number of contributors to this volume see the romcoms of the “post-romantic age” less as rejecting the legacy of earlier eras than as extending and bringing to the fore tendencies already implicit in pre-existing romcom; revisionist works thus encourage us to read classic romcoms with greater sensitivity and alertness to their ambivalence about and questioning of the regime of heteronormative coupling and happy endings.

### “The same old story of a boy and a girl in love . . .”

Before examining how things have changed, it bears assessing the ways romcom has remained the same—neotraditional, in the parlance of previous romcom scholarship—even as it has migrated into “post-theatrical” industrial and “post-romantic” cultural contexts. As Billie Holiday’s lyrics attest, the romance narrative has proven remarkably resistant to modernizing influences while simultaneously accommodating the need of any genre to adapt in response to changing times and flagging formulas; the observation that genres follow cyclical rather than linear paths of (re)development points to romcom’s projected lifespan as perennial rather than moribund. Yet reading romcom its last rites is nothing new; as Jeffers McDonald observes in the foreword, Brian Henderson’s 1978 article “Romantic Comedy Today: *Semi-Tough* or Impossible?” notably—and, it turns out, wrongly—predicted that traditional romcom’s dependence on sexual innocence and its delay of coupled consummation spelled its doom in the era of the sexual revolution.<sup>16</sup> Henderson’s rather narrow definition of romantic comedy failed to anticipate the possibility of narratives of queer desire, which would increasingly be seen in the decades that followed his essay, or the neotraditional romcoms that sidelined questions of sex as they sought a return to earlier genre conventions; at the extreme, as in Nora Ephron’s *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and *You’ve Got Mail* (1998), extraordinarily contrived situations ensure that couple formation precedes sexual contact (in *Sleepless*, couple formation precedes *physical* contact). Perhaps we might see these neotraditional narratives as the cinematic equivalent of the born-again virgin movement that gained momentum among evangelical Christians in the 90s, in which Christian youth who had “slipped” were able to regain their status as virgins, and thus their marriageability, by rigorously abstaining

from sex for an extended period before marriage. What's certain is that, contrary to Henderson's gloomy prognosis, after a period of turbulence in the 70s and 80s generated by the women's movement's critique of romantic myths, romcom came back strong in the 1990s and 2000s, with hits like *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), and *Notting Hill* (1999), and the brand-name recognition built by romcom auteurs Nancy Meyers and the aforementioned Ephron purveying what Michele Schreiber describes as "postfeminist nostalgia": a relapse into an ostensibly outmoded desire for romantic fulfillment as a reassuring escape from the contradictions between feminist ideals and the realities of the labor and mating markets.<sup>17</sup> This neotraditionalism reflects that era's antifeminist backlash, but was also a response to the economic precarity and social insecurity of neoliberal capitalism. Neotraditional romcoms paper over the dawning disillusionment provoked by the recognition that feminism's promise of women's professional and sexual fulfillment was stymied by systemic barriers, persistent inequality, and the impossibility of "having it all."

So, while feminism did not kill the romcom—indeed, romcom became a prominent locus of postfeminist backlash and retreatist discourses—feminism stimulated a renewed interest in self-reflexivity, though one distinct from that of 1970s "radical romantic comedy," as Jeffers McDonald designated that era's genre upheaval.<sup>18</sup> The radical romcoms of the 1970s (1977's *Annie Hall* being the exemplar) married form and content by employing "denarrativizing" devices and distancing effects (direct address, split screen, nonlinear editing) that exposed the impossibility of the romantic illusions they wistfully grieved rather than wishfully embraced.<sup>19</sup> The persistent nostalgic allusions in neotraditional romantic comedies, on the other hand, as Jeffers McDonald notes, "do not seem to be seeking to improve upon their inspirations in terms of increased realism, but merely to evoke them to share any left-over romantic charge they may carry."<sup>20</sup> This ironic disavowal around genre and gender manifests the neotraditional romcom's stubborn attempt to have it both ways: maintaining the fantasy of women's fulfillment through heteronormative coupling (though apparently only nostalgically and playfully) while simultaneously displaying feminist revisionism, or at least an awareness of the wish-fulfilling nature of the fantasy.

To take a recent post-theatrical romcom as an example, the 2018 Netflix original production *Ibiza* appears in its marketing and narrative first act

to subordinate romantic coupling to what Alison Winch names the “girl-friend flick,” playing up the “girl tripping” misadventures that occur when a work trip for Harper (Gillian Jacobs) is hijacked by her party-hearty gal pals Nikki (Vanessa Bayer) and Leah (Phoebe Robinson), who entice her into an MDMA-fueled hedonistic holiday in Spain.<sup>21</sup> Yet the film settles into a fairly conventional “boy meets girl” (or “girl meets boy”) narrative trajectory upon the arrival of Prince Charming—in the person of EDM DJ Leo (played by *Game of Thrones* heartthrob Richard Madden), who singles Harper out of a nightclub crowd and cajoles her into playing hooky on Ibiza. After an idyllic interlude, the film’s final sequence finds Harper back at home (and fired from her job), reporting to her girlfriends about informing Leo that, rather than follow him to his next gig, she plans to focus on getting her new business venture off the ground.

HARPER: Leo asked me to meet him in Tokyo. I said no. I told him he had to come to me.

LEAH: Yasss feminism! [*clinks glasses*] But, you know, you should’ve gone.

NIKKI: The feminism is too much in this situation. Being too feminist is antifeminist.

LEAH: Let’s just stop it at wearing pants.

HARPER: If he wants to see me, he has to come to me. I’m not going to keep flying around the world to see him.

NIKKI: We’ll go to Tokyo with him and then we’ll come back here and *then* we’ll make him come to you.

HARPER: Noooo!

LEAH & NIKKI: YASSS!

Apart from superficial signs of romcom revisionism—making one of the sassy sidekicks a woman of color; having Harper abandon corporate America for (the assurance of even greater success in) creative entrepreneurship—*Ibiza* essentially updates the postfeminist neotraditional romcom *Working Girl* (1988), in which an ambitious yet reassuringly feminine woman achieves professional *and* romantic triumph at the cost of her bitchy, sex-starved boss. Rather than nostalgically reference classic romances like *An Affair to Remember* (1957) and *Casablanca* (1942), as Schreiber notes of neotraditional romcom’s first wave, *Ibiza* uses irony to wink at the audience,



*Ibiza*'s "throuple" (Phoebe Robinson, Gillian Jacobs, and Vanessa Bayer) don't need Prince Charming to have a good time—or do they?

acknowledging our desire for the fantasy ending (Harper whisked into the Tokyo sunset) even as it resists, on feminist grounds, capitulating to that fantasy. This poke at feminism's penchant for raining on romance permits the film *and* viewers to have their wish fulfillment and disavow it too, delivering Prince Charming and the possibility of globe-trotting and work-shirking while reassuring us of its feminist bona fides: a feminist veneer assuages the guilty pleasure of retrograde romcom fantasy. Compare this use of irony to that of the 2004 revisionist romcoms *Before Sunset* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* that Leger Grindon singles out as "taking romantic comedy seriously," in which he finds irony operating as an indication "that the couple accepts the dissonance that may be inevitable in all but the most blessed of human relationships." Whereas a postfeminist romcom like *Ibiza* exhibits ironic self-awareness precisely in order to subdue skepticism regarding romantic fantasy, *Before Sunset* and *Eternal Sunshine* follow 1970s radical romcoms in "portray[ing] our doubts about romance without abandoning a commitment to its fulfillment."<sup>22</sup>

### **In Love, Out of the Closet, and Online**

The last decade's proliferation of web series production, catalyzed by funding mechanisms such as Kickstarter, self-distribution hosting services such as

Vimeo, and self-promotion courtesy of social media platforms, has led to a veritable cottage industry of romcom web series featuring queer and/or people of color protagonists. Many such series use a quasi-detached self-awareness of the genre's conventions to sustain its emotional affects while accommodating the jaded spectatorial sensibilities of a viewing constituency long accustomed to seeing their on-screen surrogates sidelined on romcom's representationally exclusive playing field. It would be misleading, however, to trace an entirely causal relationship between these technological-industrial changes and these recent romcoms' increased attentiveness to the genre's habitual blind spots around its own heteronormativity, whiteness, and Hollywood-centrism; indeed, a key aim of this collection is to redress romcom's persistent reinforcement of culturally normative coupling and its attendant marginalization of sexual and racial minorities. In underscoring the importance of taking romantic comedy seriously, these chapters employ perspectives drawn from feminist, queer, critical race, and postcolonial studies to critique the genre's residual homogeneity and social-sexual conservatism and to focus attention on works created by and focused on LGBTQ+ people and people of color. Just as seriality has proven a rejuvenating force for romcom, the gradual queering and dewhitening of the genre (and its attendant scholarship) has helped to relegitimate and even politicize romcom, even as it becomes incumbent on the genre to navigate assimilationist ideologies, universalizing (and thus dequeering and deracializing) narratives, and debates that instrumentalize (or weaponize) individual works to exaggerated effect and in service to predetermined agendas.

As a case in point, season 1 of *Strangers*, created by Mia Lidofsky and distributed in 2017 through Facebook Watch, features (like *Ibiza*) another professionally striving but romantically distracted twentysomething woman, struggling writer Isobel (Zoë Chao), who plays host to a series of Airbnb guests while navigating the challenges of being newly single and bisexual. *Strangers'* identity-minded but politically muted content bears the imprint of its corporate distributor Facebook and producer Refinery29, the young women-focused but male-owned media company whose mission statement vows to “deliver optimistic and diverse storytelling, experiences, and points of view to our audience of smart, curious, passionate women,”<sup>23</sup> a sensibility that aligns with Lidofsky's ambition, as her coproducer and wife Celia Rowleson-Hall describes it, “to become the Nancy Meyers of gay content.”<sup>24</sup>

In an episode titled “Hot Set” (1.5), after an ill-timed appearance by her ex-boyfriend seems to have sabotaged her blossoming romance with aspiring filmmaker Hailey (Isabelle McNally), Isobel gets another chance when a production crew rents her apartment to make a film about (as a quick glance at the script reveals) “straight white people falling in love.” Drafted into service as the lead actress’s stand-in to run lines with the self-important lead actor, Isobel seizes the moment and veers off script to address Hailey:

ISOBEL: Shouldn’t you be able to love the parts of me that are afraid?

Shouldn’t you be able to love the ugly and difficult parts?

ACTOR: Hey, guys, are there revisions I don’t know about?

ISOBEL: Look, I am just a person like you, struggling to get through each day, and I’m really scared, because I thought I was supposed to be more at this point in my life; I thought I was supposed to know more and understand more about how it all works, maybe have a job that I actually really like, with health insurance. But I don’t. I don’t have any of it. And I’m still really trying to figure out who I am. I do know that I like you. I think you like me too. I think that’s worth something. I think this is worth something. I feel like we owe it to ourselves to give it a chance.

ACTOR: That is so much better than the script!

Whereas *Ibiza* employs irony to evade feminism’s killjoy demands, here irony enables us to appreciate the moment’s sincerity as being “so much better” than “straight” romcom’s hackneyed, heteronormative scripts—the reference to Julia Roberts’s “I’m just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her” speech in *Notting Hill* is unmistakable. Isobel’s public declaration similarly revises Hollywood romcom’s typical obliviousness to real-world struggles, while the scene’s self-reflexivity pulls back the curtain to reveal “the work” of movieland fantasy in another sense, further distancing itself from neotraditional romcom by referencing the professional/financial insecurity of its precariously employed millennial protagonist. If these references to socioeconomic struggle strain against Nancy Meyers-style illusion, that *Strangers* salvages Hollywood romance with a rewrite—one conceived and performed by queer women, though with the watchful straight white cisgender man (or corporate overlords) hovering close at hand—makes visible how neotraditional romcom is alive and well, adapted for (and co-opted



Isobel's (Zoë Chao) neotraditional declaration of love to Hailey (Isabelle McNally) on set in *Strangers*.

by) post-2000s audiences and the advertising revenue-oriented protocols of media platforms that benefit from their consuming, circulating, and commenting on these series. In *Ibiza* and *Strangers*, ironic self-reflexivity addressed to the knowing yet still desiring spectator enables the expression of ambivalence over relinquishing romcom fantasy in favor of a romantic narrative more grounded in the lived realities of the neoliberal order.

### Learning to Love (Romcom) Again

Alongside the constant, if exaggerated, reports of its death, romantic comedy is also persistently cast as a (at best) guilty pleasure and (at worst) shameful vice. As a young teen in the early 1990s, I was excited when my favorite female relative, also a film buff, indulged my desire to watch my latest favorite, the recently released *Pretty Woman*; afterward she admitted she enjoyed it but wouldn't want her (then-preadolescent) daughter to see it, concerned that she would take its Cinderella fantasy too much to heart. My own heart sank at hearing her clear-eyed feminist assessment, both because—I would eventually realize—I was stung by having my taste disparaged, however gently, by someone I fiercely admired, and because I feared I had already bought into the movie's message. It was my own feminist consciousness-raising moment where romcom was concerned, and, though I hardly went cold turkey from that day forward, in my eagerness to embrace the perspective of

my own nascent feminism I overcorrected and grew utterly contemptuous of a genre that I increasingly viewed as having a default setting misaligned with progressive gender politics. As critic Todd VanDerWerff, speaking in a recent Vox roundtable devoted to assessing the genre's limits and possibilities, noted of its ideologically high stakes, "A bad rom-com too often isn't just a bad movie; it's also propping up some pretty toxic worldviews."<sup>25</sup>

Yet, many years later, in the wake of a relationship's breakup, I found some semblance of (however masochistic) comfort in watching, and rewatching, romcoms. When I got the chance to teach a film genre course at my graduate institution, I impetuously proposed a class on romantic comedy, thinking that subjecting such films, and the concept of romantic love, to critical scrutiny would open some distance on my still-raw sensibilities. I likely overcorrected there too, having prompted the teaching assistant to ask tentatively, after one of my more stringent lectures, "Do you really think *all* love is socially constructed?" Like my sensibilities, my syllabus has stabilized over the past decade, as I have continued teaching the course at multiple institutions; the impetus for this book emerged from that teaching and is inspired by my class discussions with students through the years. As a genre that is both critically and academically held in low esteem, yet one to which many college- and university-aged viewers hold substantial emotional attachments, romantic comedy manifests with particular intensity the challenge that all teachers of popular culture encounter in encouraging students toward critical examination of texts still widely perceived as "mere entertainment." Precisely because romantic comedy typically cloaks an exclusionary vision of love and relationships inside works that are so viewed and consumed, this collection—like my courses on romcom—aims to model serious scrutiny of the genre through rigorous engagement with both canonical and noncanonical works.

It is a familiar observation that romcom has for decades been stigmatized as a female-oriented genre, both in terms of audiences (the derisive term "chick flick") and of creators; female directors and (especially) writers have been far more numerous in romcom than in most other genres. And yet other women media creators appear to steer clear of the genre for fear that it will taint their artistic sensibilities or imperil their auteur credibility; the esteemed Argentine filmmaker Lucrecia Martel pronounced in 2018, "Romantic comedies are my enemy."<sup>26</sup> This stigmatization is also reflected

in a long tradition of critical and scholarly inattention or dismissal. Robert Warshow's seminal essays of the late 1940s took the gangster and the cowboy ("the Westerner"), men with guns, as the central figures in American cinema, while Alexander Walker's account of the 1950s sex comedy cycle, "The Last American Massacre," written at the cycle's tail end, connects his disdainful account of these films to the female audiences they served.<sup>27</sup> As Lili Loofbourow points out in her 2018 article "The Male Glance," knowing a work is by a woman—or, I would add, is aimed toward a female audience—still tends to encourage problematic habits of response, discouraging us from ascribing to it artistic intentionality and complexity.<sup>28</sup> While understanding the impulse toward critical dismissal that typifies much writing on romantic comedy, it gives away the game too early by offering concessions that work against the kind of open-minded response and appreciation we should bring to the work of women filmmakers and to films oriented toward female audiences. Clearly it is time to think and write about romantic comedy unapologetically, to assume the value and importance of cinema about women, by women, and for women, in the way that the value of cinema made by and about (and largely for) men has long been assumed. This by no means entails an uncritical celebration of romantic comedy, but it does mean taking the genre as seriously as it deserves.

As the personal anecdote recounted at this section's start reveals, my own blind infatuation-turned-tainted love for romcom has subsided into a more sensible recognition that, regardless of how they are commonly perceived, these are complex works that express our own conflicting desires and flawed impulses. To view them as inherently bad objects is to overlook their inherent humanism—how, in conjoining "romance" with "comedy," their creators and audiences imagine an ideal of human connection through love and laughter. As Deleyto regards it, "[Romantic comedy] looks for the underlying humanity in people's behavior and . . . magically transforms hostility into affinity, or perhaps affirms that hostility and affinity are, if properly managed, part of the same positive feeling, part of the fun of being alive."<sup>29</sup> And, as the aforementioned article "Why Is It So Wrong to Love Romantic Comedy?" more cheekily contends, "Watching people try to get their shit together for long enough to have a relationship is truly a tale as old as time. Done right, it can be mightily entertaining, funny, heart-breaking, and even artful."<sup>30</sup> Just as the pain and havoc that it sometimes

causes should not drive us to abandon the possibility of human connection, we have an enduring need for romantic relationships *and* narratives. Or, as that still profoundly resonant romcom *Annie Hall* puts it, “we need the eggs.”

### Keeping (Actual) Love Alive

It has often been observed that the “happily ever after” conclusion of so many romantic comedies enables the genre to avoid addressing the challenges posed by coupled life: long-term monogamy (and the possibility of adultery or sexual dysfunction), child-rearing or fertility challenges, career setbacks, aging and illness, and other vicissitudes of life. While the neotraditional romcoms that flourished in Hollywood in the 1990s and 2000s, from *Pretty Woman* to *The Ugly Truth* (2009), reverted to the genre’s atavistic, idealizing strategies for representing romance, romantic comedy of the past decade has increasingly opted for a sobering appraisal of the labors and letdowns of love and the compromises involved in coupling. This collection focuses on works that explore what happens when the honeymoon is over, that dispense with fairy-tale wish fulfillment to end ambivalently or even unhappily, and that, most radically of all, disengage romantic coupling from happiness and self-actualization. In looking past, and through, the “happily ever after,” the authors of these chapters collectively confront how recent romantic comedy contends with what cultural critic Pamela Haag terms the “post-romantic age,” a contemporary cultural mood of romantic disillusionment and seismically shifting affective and relational bonds. As Haag characterizes this 21st-century paradigm of coupling, “It doesn’t abide by either the romantic or the traditional scripts for marriage that came before it; it dismantles romantic premises and ideals around career, work, lifestyle, childbearing, or sex in marriage, to different effects and with different degrees of mindfulness.” In borrowing Haag’s simple but telling formulation, this collection finds reflected in contemporary romcom a range of culturally pervasive symptoms that simultaneously signal the malady for (mainly) women carried by the romance narrative (“with its notions of chronic dependency and emotional fulfillment”) but also present—as does Haag’s treatise—some potential remedies.<sup>31</sup>

Beyond the foundational studies of classical romantic comedy that underlie the arguments made in the chapters to come, the past two decades have seen the burgeoning of contemporary romantic comedy studies, from

the landmark 1998 collection *Terms of Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and 1990s* to the equally notable anthology *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, coedited by Deborah Jermyn, who provides this collection's closing chapter.<sup>32</sup> I am pleased to have among this volume's contributors some of those books' authors: in addition to Jermyn and Jeffers McDonald, who provides our foreword, John Alberti, Mary Harrod, Betty Kaklamanidou, James MacDowell, and Manuela Ruiz have all authored important monographs on the genre.<sup>33</sup> Knowing just how substantially the chapters to come rely on these and other key works, and having revealed my own debt at a number of points above, rather than obtrusively insert a literature review I leave it to my co-contributors to inform us in context of the ongoing importance and enduring influence of previous scholarship for contemporary understandings of the genre. In addition, the selected bibliography at the book's end serves as more than a relisting of works cited within, having been curated for use as a compendious resource for scholars, teachers, and students of romantic comedy, with the aim of fostering further recognition of and for the genre and its interlocutors.

While my romcom courses and students have more than sustained my faith in the genre's urgency, the precise impetus for this collection developed more recently out of the "Radical Romantic Comedy" special issue of *New Review of Film and Television Studies* (18, no. 1, Winter 2020) that I guest edited. Having received many outstanding proposals in response to my call for papers—far more than a single special issue would accommodate—and noting that most of them focused on romantic comedy of the past decade, I was inspired to spin off a larger grouping of essays focused exclusively on recent trends and transformations, whether radical or more traditional, in the genre. Together the resulting fifteen chapters defy the romcom doom-sayers by attesting to romantic comedy's continuing vitality, in new modes and forms that reimagine and rejuvenate the genre by representing romance in ideologically and artistically innovative ways. Having noted that romcom is perhaps the most consistently popular and profitable of film genres yet critically underappreciated, academically underexamined, and still largely defined within parameters of Hollywood and heteronormativity, this collection conceptualizes romantic comedy *and* romantic coupling more broadly by focusing on those unconventional, updated treatments of romcom tropes and traditions to (re)emerge since the 2000s. These "post-romantic

comedies” resist the genre’s romanticizing tendencies while also defying its perception as escapist entertainment and stigmatization as “chick flicks,” instead disrupting and subverting romcom fantasy and formula in ways that reflect on the realities and complexities of intimacy.

Our timeline aligns with the end of the most recent spate of studio-produced, theatrically released romcom features around 2009—the perceived “death of romcom” that this volume challenges—and so sets out to scrutinize romcom trends of the last decade, as the genre has migrated away from the fantasy factory of Hollywood (and into indie, international, and online realms) and has responded to cultural transformations in affective relationships and intimacy. Taking up where *Falling in Love Again* left off a decade ago, we contemplate (and coin names for) emergent cycles such as the “rom-sitcom” and the “wrong-com,” examine new approaches in genre hybridity and serial narrative, and assess how recent romcom deals with divisive topical issues and changes in sexual mores (including reproductive politics, hookup culture, friends with benefits, and pharmaceutical- and technology-enabled sex). Our explorations focus particularly on ways that romantic comedies reflect and negotiate shifting cultural discourses around gender roles, relations between the sexes and within the same sex, and issues of race, class, ethnicity, religion, age, work, friendship, family, and citizenship. Fairy tales no more, yet far from unremittingly grim, the most sensitively humane and compellingly iconoclastic (and, we predict, most memorably enduring) of these recent romantic comedies demonstrate their commitment to opening eyes alongside hearts. And, whereas much of the scholarship on recent romantic comedy has focused on neotraditional works created within the postclassical Hollywood production system, our collection is grouped around three more recent and now more pervasive trends, each of which reflects a distinctive post-romantic sensibility that crosses screen media platforms and acknowledges the diverse constituencies invested in contemporary romcom production and consumption.

The collection opens on act 1: “What’s New Is Old: Regenerating Romcom.” In defiance of the persistent proclamations about romcom’s demise, these chapters explore ways that romantic comedy has been revived through genre mixing and narrative recalibration, by transgressing media categories and finessing aesthetic techniques, and in welcoming novel voices and stories through more inclusive authorship and representation. Yet, even as these strategies offer romcom renewed life, these chapters consider the ongoing

conflict between regenerative romcom's anti-illusory, demythologizing potential and the persistence both of nostalgia for traditional romance and of gendered and social inequities. As a result, these romcom revisions make moderate rather than radical maneuvers, finding it challenging to condone *or* condemn the compromised values and comforting narratives necessitated in a world in which romcoms, like women, are expected to "have it all."

Act 2, "Love in a Time of Precarity: Romcom Realism," maps romcom's transnational migrations and cross-cultural interactions, assessing how romcom's rules of attraction have been reconfigured in the wake of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, globalization, and gentrification. This section's chapters examine works that deromanticize romcom, rupturing its idyllic yet hermetic world(view) by bringing socioeconomic and geopolitical realities to bear and confronting how romcom's lessons in love are employed for a combination of ideologically progressive and reactionary ends. Undetached from the contemporary climate of struggle and uncertainty and hierarchies of power and privilege, the feature films analyzed within amply indicate how recent romantic comedy proves increasingly willing to exchange its traditional idealism for clearer-eyed realism.

The third and final act, "Reimagining 'Happily Ever After,'" contemplates ways we might restore romcom's hopefulness without falling back on idealized representations and retrograde fantasies. Pointing the way to alternative relationship formations and constructive means of partnering *and* unpartnering, these final ruminations on romance gesture at the way the genre's enduring appeal is transformed through an expansion of its representational borders and emotional logics, offering up reimagined possibilities for a post-romantic age. This section focuses on works that most pointedly turn away from the neotraditional romcom to take back up with the legacy of 1970s radical romcom, which Jeffers McDonald praises for its reckoning with "the possibility of revealing that life continues after the final clinch."<sup>34</sup>

Writing on the heels of a global lockdown following COVID-19's shock to social networks, I perceive the urgency for revitalizing romcom as a defense against cultural and generational pessimism. As Kate Julian, who sounded a call for reinvigorating millennials' faith in committed coupling (and, on connected terrain, in carnal relations) in her 2018 *Atlantic* article "The Sex Recession" puts it, "As American social institutions have withered, having a life partner has become a stronger predictor than ever of well-being."<sup>35</sup> Hardly

confined to the U.S., the disenfranchisement, division, and disintegration that plagues populations within the sphere of neoliberal capitalism will scarcely be resolved by romantic partnering (much less by romantic comedy), but, as film scholar B. Ruby Rich contends, in the landmark 1993 collection *Queer Looks*, “the advantage of romance as a launching pad for political engagement is that it carries built-in optimism, just possibly enough to move ahead in these times of race-hatred and scapegoating.”<sup>36</sup> Clearly, Rich’s words resonate all too powerfully today, encouraging us to reassess the imaginative potential of romantic comedy in a world roiled by racial injustice and human exploitation, entrenched militarism and wealth inequality, escalating radicalism and fascism, environmental emergency and inhumane health care, and now a once-in-a-century pandemic. We might even take our lead from romantic comedy itself, for this eminently adaptable genre has once again sought and found rejuvenation, and the means by which it has done so resides both in the enabling mechanisms of contemporary media technologies and cultures, and in the facts and factors influencing modern love. Far from the solipsism and sanguinity presupposed of a genre perceived to be about soul mates and sunsets, romantic comedy models on an interpersonal scale the reconciliation and collaboration we are in dire need of on the intercultural world stage.

## Notes

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