

The Big romance or Something Wild?: romantic comedy today

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- 1 Brian Henderson, 'Romantic comedy today: semi-tough or impossible?', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 4 (1978), pp. 11–23.
- 2 Mike Bygrave, 'Farewell Rambo, hello Romeo', *The Guardian*, 6 June 1991, p. 30.
- 3 One might mention here, though, the fact that 'big-budget, action-adventure films' have hardly been 'replaced': *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves* and *Terminator II* are breaking box-office records as I write.
- 4 Recent publications on romantic comedy include Bruce Babington and William Peter Evans, *Affair to Remember: The Hollywood Comedy of the Sexes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989); Duane Byrge and Robert Milton Miller (eds), *The Screwball Comedy Films: A History and Filmography 1934–1952* (London: St James Press, 1991); James Harvey, *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood from Lubitsch to Sturges* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987); David R. Shumway, 'Screwball comedies: constructing romance and mystifying marriage', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 30, no. 4 (1991), pp. 7–23; and Ted Sennett, *Lunatics and Lovers* (New York: Limelight, 1985).
- 5 Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 132–73; and Frank Krutnik, 'The faint aroma of performing seals: the "nervous romance" and the comedy of the sexes', *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 26 (1990), pp. 57–72.

Writing in 1978, Brian Henderson declared 'Romantic comedy today' to be 'semi-tough or impossible'.¹ Mike Bygrave, writing recently in *The Guardian* newspaper, reports that 'following the phenomenal success of *Ghost*, *Pretty Woman* and *Green Card*: Hollywood 'has resumed its affair with romantic comedy', and that romantic comedies are set in the early nineties to replace the 'big-budget, action-adventure films' that dominated the eighties.² Both Henderson and Bygrave tend in fact to overstate their respective cases, for reasons I shall examine in a moment.³ Both, though, raise interesting questions about a genre which is currently receiving a good deal of theoretical and critical attention, and whose current phase as reported by Bygrave I wish to look at in some detail.⁴ Beginning with Henderson and Bygrave (and drawing, explicitly and otherwise, on a number of ideas about romantic comedy and its various cycles put forward by Frank Krutnik),⁵ I shall then focus on some of the formal and structural – as well as ideological – characteristics of romantic comedy before focusing finally on the current cycle and some of its films.

For Brian Henderson, the 'impossibility' of romantic comedy in the seventies was the consequence of two sets of factors, one of them hinging on matters of representation and censorship, the other on attitudes to 'the self' and to heterosexual romance. Romantic comedy is founded, for Henderson, on what he calls 'the sexual question', a question that must remain unstated if the genre is to survive. He refers to *Semi-Tough* (1972) to argue his point:

At one point in *Semi-Tough* the heroine says to the hero, 'How

6 Henderson, 'Romantic comedy today', p. 21.

come we never fucked?' It is arguable that romantic comedy depends upon the suppression of this question and that with its surfacing romantic comedy becomes impossible.⁶

He then goes on to elaborate:

7 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

one can see the entire spectrum of romantic comedy as so many variations on this unuttered question. In comedies of old love, the unspoken question is 'Why did we stop fucking?' In comedies of new love, it is 'Why don't we fuck now?'⁷

However,

8 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Although romantic comedy is about fucking and its absence, this can never be said or referred to directly. This is perhaps the fascination of romantic comedy. It implies a process of perpetual displacement, of euphemism and indirection at all levels, a latticework of dissembling and hiding laid over what is constantly present but denied, unspoken, unshown.⁸

9 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Romantic comedy is thus as much a consequence of language and representation – of the ways in which the question is posed – as it is of the question itself. But in the wake of changes in Hollywood's – and America's – modes and methods of censorship in the late 1960s, the question can, now, be literally stated. 'On this ground alone,' Henderson concludes, 'it may be that romantic comedy is not an art that can flourish in this period.'⁹

There are other grounds, too, which Henderson mentions briefly earlier on in his article, grounds having to do with changes in conceptions of the relationship between romance and personal fulfilment, and the emergence of a 'new' – more narcissistic – 'self':

10 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Romantic comedy posited men and women willing to meet on a common ground and to engage all their faculties and capacities in sexual dialectic. . . . What we begin to see now in films is a withdrawal of men and women from this ground (or of it from them). Or we see – in effect the same thing – false presences in the sexual dialectic or divided ones (one realizes at the end that one did not want to play the game at all) or commitments for trivial stakes only. It seems that when the new self pulls itself together, it is away from the ground of full sexual dialectic.¹⁰

11 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Once again, 'to argue this is to argue the death of romantic comedy'.¹¹

Ironically, as Frank Krutnik has pointed out, Henderson was writing this precisely at the moment at which a new cycle of romantic comedies began to emerge. Adopting Woody Allen's byline for *Annie Hall* (1977), Krutnik has dubbed the films in this cycle – which include *The Goodbye Girl* (1977), *Starting Over* (1979), *Manhattan* (1979), *Modern Romance* (1981), *Happy Endings*

12 Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, pp. 171–2; and Krutnik, 'The faint aroma of performing seals', pp. 62–70.

(1983) and *Broadcast News* (1987), in addition to *Annie Hall* itself – 'nervous romances'.¹² Even more ironically, many of these nervous romances contained instances of 'sexually explicit' representation and points at which 'the sexual question' (or sexual questions) were openly stated, while at the same time their ideological specificity lay precisely in an engagement with the issues of 'commitment' and 'the sexual dialectic' in the era of 'the new self'. Indeed it could be argued that the (ideological) dislocation of fucking from 'commitment', and the (ideological) dislocation of both these things from marriage, formed both the precondition and problematic of nervous romances. Be that as it may, these films (together with those in the current cycle) demonstrate that the question at stake in romantic comedy is not just sexual (or not just a matter of fucking), however stated. It is rather one of coupledness, compatibility and, precisely, romance; and hence of the (changing and often contradictory) social conditions, institutions, discourses and practices that define and underpin them. The problems with Henderson's argument, it seems to me, stem on the one hand from an identification of romantic comedy as such with one of its cycles – the 'screwball' films of the thirties and forties. (He thus ignores not just later cycles like the fifties and sixties sex comedies, but earlier cycles too, like the sex comedies of the late teens and twenties, and the 'genteel' romances that both preceded them and overlapped with them.)¹³ On the other hand, they stem from an idealization of the specific and particular constellation of conditions, institutions, discourses and practices that enabled their production, and the specific and particular version of 'the sexual dialectic' that they produced.

Like Henderson, Mike Bygrave uses the screwball cycle and the social and cultural conditions of the thirties and forties as an exclusive point of reference. However, unlike Henderson, he also mentions (albeit in somewhat simplistic terms) a major factor effecting changes in those conditions and in the films made under them – the advent of post-sixties feminism (along with 'the new self', a primary determinant of the 'nervousness' of the nervous romance – and often a butt of its jokes, gags and narrative logic¹⁴):

If society has changed since the thirties, so have relations between the sexes. Nowadays, the idea of romantic partners revealing their true selves is no longer . . . well, so romantic. Many people worry that the 'true self' of a member of the opposite sex is more likely to be the problem than the solution. Women worry that men's 'true selves' are 'feminist' in some emasculating sense. Both sexes fear the other may be concealing as much hatred as love for its opposite.¹⁵

Bygrave goes on to quote director Ivan Reitman, who mentions two

13 On all these cycles see Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, pp. 166–73. The 'genteel' romances of the teens and twenties have been hardly discussed at all, though the earliest approximation to the use of the term 'romantic comedy' with which I am familiar occurs in a trade review of a film called *The Girl and the Judge*, which I have not seen, but which seems precisely to be a 'genteel' romance. (The review is in *The Moving Picture World*, vol. 1, no. 33 (1907), p. 526. The film is described as 'a romantic story with a strong comedy element running through it'.)

14 See Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, pp. 171–2 and Krutnik, 'The faint aroma of performing seals', pp. 62–70.

15 Bygrave, 'Farewell Rambo, hello Romeo', p. 30.

other factors, the advent of Aids, and the lack of 'rules' in modern romantic relationships:

'I think the problem Hollywood has with romance is a reflection of the problems people are having in real life. What are the rules of a relationship today? There are no rules. And how do you get as far as a relationship anyway in the age of Aids? How do you even meet the other person? There's a whole industry of video dating and phone services and personal ads that has sprung up in our society because the old ways don't work any more, or don't work for many people.'¹⁶

In the light of these comments – and of the difficulties and uncertainties registered by the nervous romance – the emergence of a new cycle of romantic comedies, which I shall simply term 'new romances', can perhaps be interpreted as an assertion, within and against these factors and conditions, of the values (if not the 'rules') of 'traditional' heterosexual romance. These values are, as we shall see, often markedly – and knowingly – 'old-fashioned', and as such help mark a reaction to the nervous romance itself.¹⁷

In making his point about changes in 'relations between the sexes', and the effect these changes have had on romantic comedy, Bygrave uses the example of what he calls the 'meet cute':

Hollywood's traditional way of getting two strangers together so they could fall in love was the 'meet cute'. 'Meets cute' were numerous, inventive variations on an old idea – man accidentally bumps into female stranger on the street, knocks over her groceries, helps pick them up, and so on.

Ever since the rise of feminism in the sixties, such encounters have been reinterpreted. A boss asks out his secretary. A cop dates a woman he has given a parking ticket. A man spots a stranger and follows her home, or anywhere else for that matter. All are likely to be seen as examples of sexual harassment instead of romantic encounters. The antagonism is all too obvious in the current American slang for a romantic proposition: 'Hitting on [someone]'.¹⁸

The example Bygrave uses to illustrate the concept of the 'meet cute' – knocking over someone's groceries in the street – is in fact rather misleading in implying that the qualities of 'everyday ordinariness' characteristic of this particular kind of meeting are characteristic of the way couples meet in romantic comedy in general. Such meetings tend to vary significantly in manner, in style (and in ideological implication) from cycle to cycle. In screwball films, for instance, there is always something *extraordinary* (something unusual, eccentric – something screwball) either about

16 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

17 The new cycle seems to have emerged not in the early nineties, as Bygrave claims, but in the mid eighties, at a point at which the nervous romance, as the dominant form of romantic comedy, was already on the wane. 1987 seems to be the key year, with the release of *Blind Date*, *Roxanne*, *Who's That Girl?*, *Moonstruck* and *Overboard*. These films were preceded by *Splash!* (1984), *Romancing the Stone* (1984), *The Sure Thing* (1985), *Murphy's Romance* (1985), *Something Wild* (1986) and *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986). They were followed by *Working Girl* (1988), *Big* (1988), *Bull Durham* (1988), *Switching Channels* (1988), *My Stepmother is an Alien* (1988) and *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), as well as the films mentioned by Bygrave.

18 Bygrave, 'Farewell Rambo, hello Romeo', p. 30.

the meeting itself or the situation in which it occurs. (One might cite here the meetings in *It Happened One Night* [1934] or *My Man Godfrey* [1936] or *Bringing Up Baby* [1938].) ‘Ordinariness’ and ‘typicality’ are much more characteristic of the meetings in nervous romances, while a preference for the extraordinary (once again) is one of the hallmarks of new romances. Dating, and propositions by men (in particular by men in power), meanwhile, are actually rather uncommon – especially as a way of beginning the romance – outside nervous romances and fifties and sixties sex comedies (perhaps because of their ‘ordinariness’, perhaps because of the inequalities of power they expose in a genre committed – however disingenuously at times – to an ideal of ‘equal partnership’).

These qualifications aside, the comments Bygrave makes about the ‘meet cute’ are, I think, interesting ones, not least because they help specify one of the points at which the ideological components of romantic comedy intersect with its formal and structural ones. Having touched on the former to some extent, it is to the latter I want now to turn.

Forms, structures and conventions

It is, of course, difficult fully to separate the formal and structural elements of a film or a group of films from ideological ones, not least because, in context, formal and structural elements tend always to perform ideological functions, or to be accorded ideological traits. Take the example of the ‘meet cute’. It is clear that a meeting of some kind between the members of an eventual couple is a structural necessity in any romantic comedy (with the exception, of course, of those romantic comedies that focus on ‘old love’ – though even here the couple, if separated, have to be brought back into physical proximity one with another. Interestingly, there are very few comedies of old love among the current cycle). However, and in addition to the points raised by Bygrave, ideology is always at stake both in the mode and context of the meeting, and, amongst other things, in the gender, age, class, race and sexual orientation of the members of the couple. (Thus, just as there exist, to my knowledge, no romantic comedies made in Hollywood in which the couple meet under parental supervision, or as a consequence of the custom of arranged marriages, so there exist no romantic comedies in which the members of the couple are lesbian or gay or Asian or black, and only one – *Minnie and Maskowitz* (1971) – in which the couple are markedly ‘old’.)

On the other hand, though, there are recurrent features of romantic comedy which seem at first sight to perform purely ideological functions, but which turn out also to perform formal or structural ones. Take the example of what might be called ‘the

wrong partner'. In his discussion of screwball films, Brian Henderson writes as follows:

In *The Awful Truth* and *His Girl Friday*, the Ralph Bellamy character is exemplar and exaggeration of conventional morality – both a character norm, against which to contrast the eccentricities of the leads, and a social norm, against which the film directs its satire. . . . In both films mentioned, the heroines plan to marry Bellamy at one point, which indicates that they waver between . . . two moralities.¹⁹

The presence of a Bellamy-type character – a would-be suitor or a possible but unsuitable partner for one or other of the members of the couple – is very common in romantic comedy. Other instances include Miss Swallow (Virginia Walker) in *Bringing Up Baby*, Joe Lilac (Dana Andrews) in *Ball of Fire* (1941), the Baron (Walter Slezak) in *Once Upon a Honeymoon* (1942), Isabel (Anne Francis) in *Susan Slept Here* (1954), Beasley (John Astin) in *That Touch of Mink* (1962), and, arguably at least, Mary Wilke (Diane Keaton) and even Jill (Meryl Streep) in *Manhattan*. (Examples from the new romances include Ray [Ray Liotta] in *Something Wild*, David [John Larroquette] in *Blind Date*, Johnny Camereri [Danny Aiello] in *Moonstruck*, Grant Clayton III [Edward Herrmann] in *Overboard*, Chris [Rick Rossovich] in *Roxanne* and Phil [George Edelman] in *Green Card* [1990].) It is clear that these characters in fact by no means always exemplify 'conventional morality', even in the screwball films. (Sometimes they exemplify the opposite: Joe Lilac, for instance, is a gangster.) However, it is true to say that they provide points of comparison with, and contrast to, one or other of the members of the couple, and that they often represent, in addition, an aspect of the personality or motivation or aspiration of that member that stands in the way of couple's formation and that thus has to be cast aside. (Joe Lilac represents the 'uncivilized' dangers and brutality, as well as the vigour, of the heroine's milieu in *Ball of Fire*, while Beasley in *That Touch of Mink* exemplifies, unalloyed, the 'typically male' lust – and attitude to women and marriage – underlying Cary Grant's proposition to Doris Day of a weekend trip – out of wedlock – to Bermuda.) Thus it is also true to say that these characters embody key ideological attitudes and perform key ideological functions.

However, it is also true to say that their presence, while frequent, is optional. Thus there are no wrong partners as such in films like *My Man Godfrey*, *When You're in Love* (1937), *The Joy of Living* (1938), *Comrade X* (1940), *The Goodbye Girl* and *Modern Romance*. Here the wrong partner's functions are performed by families and family members, by a career, by past experiences, or else simply by an excessive attachment to certain 'incorrect' values and opinions. In other films there are other kinds of variation. In *It*

Happened One Night there are two wrong partners, Shapely (Roscoe Karns) and King Westley (Jameson Thomas). In *Pillow Talk* (1959) and *Lover Come Back* (1961), the wrong partner is the male protagonist as he thinks and behaves at the beginning of the narrative; in each case he pretends to woo – then actually falls in love with – the heroine in the guise of someone else; he becomes the *right* partner by becoming a combination, so to speak, of the best aspects and attributes of these two very different identities. Woody Allen in *Annie Hall* is first the right partner, then the wrong one for Annie herself. And so on. It is therefore equally true to say that the wrong partner is a *device*, that there is an irreducible *formal*, as well as ideological, component or aspect to his or her presence or absence.

Moreover, if this device performs ideological functions, it also performs formal and structural ones. The wrong partner is nearly always a source – and a butt – of jokes, gags and humour, of local comic effects. And whether as a rival for the hero or heroine, or as an embodiment, in ways mentioned earlier, of something blocking their formation as a couple, the wrong partner serves to complicate, and thus prolong, the narrative, thereby adding to its quota of suspense and helping to delay its resolution. (A similar function, of course, is performed by one of the genre's commonest – and thus most characteristic – devices: the initial hostility of the members of the couple one to another).

Perhaps the best term for elements like the wrong partner and the 'meet cute' – elements which contain both ideological and formal ingredients, and which perform both ideological and formal functions – is the traditional term, 'convention'. At any rate, in romantic comedy other such elements include the presence of 'eccentric' traits in either or both of the members of the couple, passages of 'play' (of 'having fun'), and, although the connotations of the term are heavier than I'd like, an emphasis on the 'learning process' aspects of the narrative.

Eccentricities, 'playful' deviations from sociocultural norms of behaviour, speech, action and dress, are, of course, fundamental to all forms of comedy, constituting, as they do, a major source of – and form of motivation for – comic effects.²⁰ In the field of romantic comedy, eccentricity has perhaps been associated most with the screwball cycle. However, eccentricity as such is by no means confined to the screwball cycle, for some of the roles and functions it performs are not just common to other cycles, but fundamental to the genre as a whole:

Heterosexual love may be a 'many splendored thing', but it is also a game with quite precise though not immutable sets of rules or conventions. Courtship, seduction, adultery and marriage are all highly codified and regulated activities, subject to individual

²⁰ See Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, pp. 86–94.

inflection but never open totally to individual control. Being so fundamental to the perpetuation of 'culture', heterosexual intimacy poses a specific paradox which is integral to the way romantic comedy operates; namely, 'affairs of the heart' are so personal and so individual and yet at the same time so readily familiar and so conventional.²¹

²¹ Krutnik, 'The faint aroma of performing seals', p. 57.

Eccentricity serves in general to highlight and explore – in comic terms – these tensions between the individual and the typical, the personal and the institutional, the deviant, the conformist and the conventional, that so pervade the field of love and heterosexual relationships. And it serves, in particular, nearly always to bestow signs of uniqueness and individuality – of 'specialness' – both on the couple and its members, and on their romance.

Of course, individual films and cycles of films vary the ways, the means and the extent to which eccentricity performs these functions. In general, the screwball films 'championed the exploits of eccentric individuals who deliberately set themselves against the rigidity of convention when engaged in the field of love',²² though there were always limits (the institution of marriage as such was never openly challenged, even if a number of its proprieties and practices were), and there were always exceptions.²³ The sex comedies of the fifties and sixties, on the other hand, tended to pit the 'normal' and 'typical' but anti-institutional and therefore, in a sense, anti-conventional, playboy ambitions of the male (ambitions incompatible with stable coupledness, let alone marriage) against the equally 'normal' and 'typical' but much more pro-institutional and therefore socially conventional ambitions of the female (who always wanted marriage and a family). Given this particular combination of factors and elements, the place of eccentricity within the sex comedies was always more problematic, and the making special of the couple and its members always more difficult. Specialness tended to derive from an exaggeration (or idealization) of the traits of physical attractiveness and the trappings of material success and 'playboyishness' in the man, and the traits of determination, self-esteem and 'smartness' (in every sense of the word) in the woman. A great deal of reliance was placed, in addition, on the star status of those – like Doris Day, Cary Grant and Rock Hudson – who played the couple's members. Eccentricity, on the other hand, tended to spring not from the personalities of the members of the couple, but from the unusual actions and reactions required by the contrivances of what were always highly farcical plots. As a personality trait, eccentricity tended in fact to locate itself much more securely, and hence much more permanently, within the behaviour, thoughts and actions of figures peripheral to the couple, like the wrong partner, and the hero's sidekick or friend. The latter, often played by Tony Randall, was a sex comedy staple, and may even have been a sex

²² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²³ See Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, pp. 54–6.

comedy invention. What *was* new, certainly, was the extent to which, with the figure of the sidekick, eccentricity became a hallmark not of ebullient non-conformity but of mordant neurosis. (Frequently undergoing analysis, the sidekick became the site of all that was suppressed in the figure of the hero – insecurity, failure, sexual uncertainty, a lack of control, an inability to cope with the demands and pressures of modern life, and so on.) Later on, in the nervous romance (and in the guise of Albert Brooks or Woody Allen) neurotic eccentricity moves to the centre of the stage. The sidekick, as it were, becomes the hero (and often, in the guise of Diane Keaton or Marsha Mason, the heroine too).

In the screwball films, an additional function of eccentricity (in its ebullient mode) was often to help invest the activities of the couple – and hence their relationship overall – with the qualities of play. Actions, tasks and problems, even difficulties, arguments and expressions of mutual hostility, therefore became, simply, fun, something the couple themselves always came to recognize, if only in retrospect. Playing together, having fun together, are key elements in the ethos of romance to which romantic comedy as a whole – and not just the screwball films – seems to be dedicated. In consequence, in even the most nervous of nervous romances, in even the most battle-scarred of sex comedies, there occur passages and sequences – however brief – in which the couple have fun: juggling with a lobster in *Annie Hall*, visiting galleries, parks and museums in *Manhattan*, touring Nassau on the way to the hotel in *That Touch of Mink*. Significantly, it is relatively common for some or all of the fun to stem from playing – or from having to play – at being a married couple, for here the correlations between fun, play and compatibility are brought to the fore. This device has been most recently – and extensively – used, of course, in *Green Card*. But it has also been used – sometimes centrally, sometimes in passing – in *It Happened One Night*, *If You Could Only Cook* (1935), *It's a Wonderful World* (1939) and, with twists and variations, in *Lucky Partners* (1940) and *Overboard*.

Sometimes of course (and this is particularly common in the screwball films), the couple – or one or other of its members – only perceive the fun they have had in retrospect (the classic instance is *Bringing Up Baby*). The spectator, though, is enabled and encouraged throughout to perceive the couple's activities as fun (at least in part because they constitute a source of many of the films' comic moments – hence much of the *spectator's* fun. It is principally on the basis of the pleasure derived from this fun that the spectator is led to wish for the couple's formation). These discrepancies in perception contribute to the overall matrix of discrepant instances, layers and structures of knowledge that all narratives involve. In the case of romantic comedy, though, this contribution is crucial. For central to romantic comedy is a learning process, a process in which

the members of the couple come to know themselves as they come to know one another, and in which, in doing so, they come to develop and acknowledge compatibility and mutual love. In a nervous romance like *Annie Hall*, compatibility and love might be temporary, and there might be an additional element to the learning process, one in which the members of the couple – and in this case especially the male – have to recognize that the relationship is now at an end. Nevertheless, compatibility and mutual love always develop, and the learning process in which they are embedded always takes place. A film like *Teacher's Pet* (1957), in which the couple meet when one of its members attends an evening class taught by the other, and in which there occurs a great deal of discussion about the relative merits of formal education and learning by experience, serves to literalize, and thus to foreground, this process.

The modes, methods and contexts of the learning process, and the types of plot to which it is attached, vary considerably. Action-adventure plots of one kind or another, or plots with action-adventure ingredients – as in *Comrade X*, *It's a Wonderful World*, *Ball of Fire*, *Once Upon a Honeymoon*, and *Romancing the Stone* – are relatively common, these ingredients frequently serving to 'masculinize' the hero, or to articulate 'masculine' values. Much more common, though, are plots involving disguise, deception, and adopted or mistaken identity. In addition to those examples already mentioned, one might cite *The Richest Girl in the World* (1934), *My Man Godfrey*, *Merrily We Live* (1938), *Teacher's Pet*, *A New Kind of Love* (1963) and a number of the new romances, among them *Overboard*, *Something Wild*, *Roxanne*, *Working Girl*, *My Stepmother is an Alien* and *Big*. Nearly always, of course, the revelation of a character's true identity coincides with or precipitates the acknowledgement of a 'true self' (or true selves), of true feelings, and of true compatibility and love.

The relative contributions to the learning process of the hero and heroine – broadly speaking, which one does most of the teaching and which one most of the learning – and thus the relative weight accorded 'male' and 'female' discourses, values and knowledge varies considerably too, and of course constitutes one of the most obvious sites of the sexual politics at work in any individual film. To some extent, as already mentioned, the genre as a whole is committed to an ideal (or at least to creating an aura) of 'equal partnership'. Thus in most romantic comedies there is a degree to which the learning process is mutual, and to which the members of the couple learn from, and teach, one another. But a genuine balance is rare. Even rarer are films in which the man knows much less, and hence has to learn much more, than the woman. Perhaps surprisingly, it is the sex comedies – and not the screwball films, as has often been claimed – in which the man has regularly to learn,

and change, much more than the woman.²⁴ Even though the woman may from time to time be duped, may from time to time be unable to see through the man's machinations, the man has always eventually to learn the error of his playboy ways and accept the institution of marriage – has always therefore to accede to a relationship with the woman on the woman's basic terms. The reverse, though, is usually the case, as films like *My Man Godfrey*, *Joy of Living*, *Lucky Partners*, *Once Upon a Honeymoon* and *The More the Merrier* (1943), among many others, all testify. *Green Card* is a particularly extreme example. Here the man is 'right' or knows much more about – or is better than the woman at – practically everything – from the issue of ecology and 'ecological correctness' to cooking. *Green Card* is, of course, a new romance (one of the most financially successful, according to Bygrave). Having outlined some of the general characteristics and conventions of romantic comedy, and having highlighted some of the points at which cyclic variation has occurred in the past, it is to the specifics of the new romance that I want now to turn.

The new romance

There are four main features of the new romance that I want here to highlight and discuss. Although separable, they tend, as we shall see, not just to interact with, but also to support and reinforce, one another, thus helping to give the new romance a particular, *systematic* identity.

The first of these features centres on the style, place and function of eccentricity and neurosis. In the new romance, as in the nervous romance, eccentricity tends to remain a hallmark of either or both of the members of the couple. However, in the former, in contrast to the latter, it is either already shorn of any connotations or implications of neurosis, narcissism, 'nervousness' and self-doubt, or, if one of the members of the couple is initially neurotic or nervous, he or she is either gradually or instantly 'cured' by contact with the 'harmless', 'healthy' or 'liberating' eccentricity of the other. In *Splash!*, for instance, the feelings of isolation, dissatisfaction and unhappiness that haunt Allen Bauer (Tom Hanks) disappear when he is (re-)rescued by, and thus (re-)meets, Madison the mermaid (Darryl Hannah), whose eccentricities stem from the (almost literally otherworldly) 'innocence', 'naivete' and 'freshness' with which she perceives and approaches not just Allen but the 'human' world in general. In *Murphy's Romance*, Emma Moriarty (Sally Field) reaches what the film defines as stable and adult maturity – setting up her own business as a rancher, and finally ridding herself of any feelings of attachment to her feckless ex-husband – by coming into contact with the genial – and very mild

– eccentricities of Murphy himself (James Garner). In *Blind Date*, the somewhat nervous and conformist Walter (Bruce Willis) is ‘liberated’ by spending the evening with Nadia (Kim Basinger) (whose eccentricities are wilder but more temporary, being the product of drinking alcohol). And in *Moonstruck*, Ronnie Camereri (Nicolas Cage) is almost instantly cured of his hang-ups about his lost hand (and his lost love) on encountering the striking and eccentric (but ‘healthy’) directness of Loretta Castorini (Cher). He does not, however, lose his – equally striking and equally eccentric – intensity, and this is what serves to rescue Loretta from a potentially dull and disastrous marriage to the film’s wrong partner, Johnny Camereri (Ronnie’s brother).

In *Moonstruck*, it is Johnny who remains neurotic and nervous. (He is throughout the film devoted in an ‘irrational’, ‘immature’ and ‘childlike’ way to his mother). And this is significant. For it is a consistent feature of the new romance that it is the wrong partner, and not the hero or heroine (or sidekick, a figure who seems more or less to have disappeared from the genre at this point) who remains permanently and neurotically eccentric. (Other instances include David in *Blind Date*, Katherine Parker in *Working Girl* and Ray in *Something Wild* – an especially interesting and important instance to which I shall return below.)

Thus neurosis and nervousness are either cured or marginalized, while the eccentricities of members of the couple are either ‘mild’ in form, or markedly whimsical, or, as it were, ‘artificially’ induced (and hence temporary). Not only do these features serve to mark, twice over, a series of departures from the nervous romance, but they are also consonant in a number of important ways with the other main features of the new romance itself.

The second of these features I have already mentioned in passing – a persistent evocation and endorsement of the signs and values of ‘old-fashioned’ romance. Some of the signs (as well as the values they evoke and inscribe) crop up again and again in these films. For example, Joan Wilder (Kathleen Turner) in *Romancing the Stone* writes action–adventure romances in which Jessie, her fantasy hero, is a kind of knight-in-shining-armor figure who always rides to the heroines’ rescue. *Romancing the Stone* itself, of course, then reiterates a version of this fantasy (albeit with comic variations). The idea of the knight in shining armor is verbally evoked, and explicitly re-enacted, in *Pretty Woman* (1990), while only slightly less overt traces of it can be found at the end of *Blind Date*, *Overboard* and *Something Wild*, and at the beginning of *Roxanne*.

Roxanne is based on the Cyrano de Bergerac story (itself, of course, a synonym for romance). As such, it highlights the hero’s capacity for ‘poetry’ (here in the form of love letters supposedly written by the film’s wrong partner). ‘Poetry’ or ‘poetic speech’ – a striking use of phrases and words – is another recurrent device, used

either to mark the 'romantic nature' of one or other of the members of the couple, or the 'seriousness' of his or her (usually his) declaration of love. Hence Harris's words to Sara in *L.A. Story* (1990):

Sara: 'And if I were to go?'

Harris: 'All I know is on the day your plane was to leave, if I had the power, I would turn the winds around, I would roll in the fog, I would bring in storms, I would change the polarity of the earth so compasses couldn't work so your plane couldn't take off.'

In *Overboard*, Dean Proffitt (Kurt Russell) tells Annie (Goldie Hawn) the story of Arturo and Katerina as they gaze over the sea late at night, drinking champagne:

Dean: 'the legend is that they reunited at the bottom of the sea, over there, and every time you see the spray go up, it's them.'

Annie: 'Making love.'

Dean: 'For ever and ever.'

Murphy's speech to Emma at the end of *Murphy's Romance* is perhaps a little less conventionally romantic:

'if the fruit hangs on the tree long enough, it gets ripe. I'm durable, I'm steady, and I'm faithful. And I'm in love, for the last time in my life.'

It is, however, equally striking, and along with his vintage car, and the fact that he has not been to the movies 'since the Duke died', it helps mark Murphy himself as old-fashioned. Old-fashioned romance as such, meanwhile, is signified by one of the tunes he plays on the fiddle with an amateur dance band: 'It's Only A Paper Moon', by Billy Rose and E. Y. Harburg. The use of 'standard' songs of this kind is of course most marked in *When Harry Met Sally* (which also uses the device of interpolated interviews with 'old married couples' to punctuate its story and to reiterate old-fashioned romantic values). But in addition, Annie in *Bull Durham* plays Edith Piaf records (as well as quoting Whitman and Blake), Russell Proffitt recounts the legend of Arturo and Katerina with 'I Can't Help Falling in Love With You' playing in the background, and *Moonstruck* not only uses 'That's Amore', sung by Dean Martin, as its title song, it also twice features Vicki Carr's version of 'It Must Be Him'. (*Moonstruck* also features nineteenth-century romantic opera, in the form of *La Bohème* – a device repeated in *Pretty Woman*, where the opera is *La Traviata*.)

In all these films poetic speech and the signs of traditional romance do their work: 'true' – and by implication, lasting – love is finally established. (A mark of this is the number of marriage

proposals in new romances – yet another departure from the nervous romance, and itself, of course, a sign of tradition. Examples can be found in *Murphy's Romance*, *Moonstruck*, *My Stepmother is an Alien* and *When Harry Met Sally*, among others.) At this point, though, many new romances often shed the marks of eccentricity they had mobilized hitherto. New romances have difficulties in sustaining eccentricity. Hence the significance of its mildness or artificiality. It seems that, like the signs and devices that mark them, the forms of coupledness and romance to which these films are ultimately committed are so heavily conventional that the balance between deviance and conformity mentioned earlier is persistently tipped toward the latter and away from the former.

This is the third characteristic of the new romance to which I wish to draw attention. It can perhaps be best exemplified by looking in a little more detail at one particularly revealing instance, *Something Wild*. *Something Wild* begins with an apparently 'wildly' eccentric woman (played by Melanie Daniels) seeming to 'liberate' a highly conventional man (Charlie Briggs, played by Jeff Daniels). She lures him away from the routine of his work in a Manhattan office; she steals alcohol (which they both consume); she offers him mildly 'kinky' sex (even though he claims to be married); and she proposes that they both venture off on the road. It turns out, however, that they are heading for Pennsylvania in order to visit the woman's mother, and from here the film changes tack. The woman changes her appearance. (She is now blonde, not brunette.) She no longer dresses so unconventionally (she wears a white dress). She reveals that her name is not Lulu, but Audrey. And she tells her mother that she and Charlie are married. Charlie reveals to Audrey, meanwhile, that he is not really married after all (his former wife has left him). And they both head off to Audrey's high-school reunion dance. Signs of a highly conventional romance have, then, emerged with a vengeance. And Audrey has been totally stripped, not only of her wild eccentricities, but also of the connotations of instability and danger with which they had been invested. These connotations and qualities, however, do not just disappear. Instead they are transferred to a character called Ray (Ray Liotta), who appears at the dance, claims to be Audrey's husband, reveals that he is out on parole from prison, robs a bank, kidnaps Audrey, and is eventually tracked, then fought, then outwitted – and hence finally recaptured and 'contained', so to speak – by Charlie.

Something Wild, then, for all its apparent quirkiness and individuality, eventually manoeuvres its couple, and its heroine in particular, into an 'old-fashioned', 'traditional' and ideologically conventional position. Audrey sheds her wildness; Charlie comes to her rescue. It is he, not she, who outwits Ray; it is she, not he, who adopts more conventional clothing, behaviour and attitudes. This is typical of the new romance, and the fourth and final of its features

that I wish to highlight here. It is a feature perhaps most apparent in *When Peggy Sue Got Married*, a film which seems explicitly both to confront and negotiate, then finally shift away from, the conventions and ideological characteristics of the nervous romance, thus helping to establish, in so doing, the new romance and the position it tends to offer its heroines. At the beginning of the film Peggy Sue (Kathleen Turner) finds herself dissatisfied, unhappy, and on the brink of divorce; at the end, though, having journeyed back to the past prior to her marriage, she finds herself not only reconciled with her husband, but regretting nothing at all. But it is apparent, too, in *Overboard*, in which Annie finds true happiness as an 'ordinary' hardworking housewife (and surrogate mother of three), *My Stepmother is an Alien*, in which Celeste (Kim Basinger) finds true happiness as an ordinary 'human' housewife (and surrogate mother of one), *Bull Durham*, in which a woman who each season sleeps with a baseball player of her choice ends up with a man who not only initially refuses her, but who also challenges her right to choose, and even in *Working Girl*. Here, although Tess McGill (Melanie Griffith) proves her worth as a broker and ends up in an office of her own, she does so only in partnership (both romantic and professional) with a man, Jack Trainer (Harrison Ford). In the process (and in a female version of the Oedipal scenario) she displaces the female boss who not only steals her ideas (and thus blocks her career), but who also is Jack's fiancée.

These then, are the predominant features of the new romance, and this is its dominant ideological tendency; one which, in countering any 'threat' of female independence, and in securing most of its major female characters for traditional female roles, very much echoes the tendencies of the screwball films.²⁵ I would like finally, though, to look briefly at the case of a new romance which, while not undermining these features (or subverting their ideological tendencies), works nevertheless to bring them to the fore, and to highlight in doing so the impossibilities of fantasy upon which romantic comedy in general usually rests. The film I have in mind here is *Big*.

Big is characteristic of the new romance in a number of ways. Its central male character, Josh (Tom Hanks), is highly (and 'healthily') eccentric. His eccentricity, his sense of fun, and the general 'freshness' of his outlook and perceptions help cure the heroine, Susan (Elizabeth Perkins) of her neuroses, her conformist tendencies, and her 'nervousness' in matters of the heart. The romance itself gives rise to 'serious', as well as comic, scenes and moments. And it is cemented when Josh and Susan dance in an 'old-fashioned' way (cheek to cheek), to an 'old-fashioned' Glenn Miller standard ('Moonlight Serenade', played by a dance band in a

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 153-5.

ballroom by the sea). Josh's eccentricities, meanwhile, are as 'extreme' as those displayed by Madison in *Splash!* or by Nadia in *Blind Date*, and, as in these instances, an explicit and markedly 'artificial' form of motivation is provided for them: Josh is not really the young adult male he appears to be to Susan; he is really a twelve-year-old boy whose wish one night at a fairground was to be 'big'.

What is interesting about this particular device is that it serves to literalize – and thus foreground – the elements of infantilism and regression usually only implicit in those representatives of eccentricity and having fun that, as we have seen, are so fundamental, not just to the new romance, but to romantic comedy in general. Usually, of course, these elements help to repress or disavow those aspects of 'adult' difficulty or 'adult' responsibility characteristic of real ('adult') relationships. (This is the specific contribution made by romantic comedy – as opposed to romantic drama – to the articulation of the fantasy of romantic union that they both tend equally to share). Here, however, their literalization brings the potential contradiction between childlike eccentricity and fun, on the one hand, and an adult relationship, on the other, to the fore. For all his feelings of commitment to Susan, and for all the joys and rewards of his relationship with her, Josh is also – still – committed to being a child, and to the joys and rewards of his relationship with Billy (Jared Rushton), his childhood friend. And so is the film. Hence Josh and Susan have finally to part when Josh is able to become a twelve-year-old boy once again.²⁶ His eccentricity and sense of fun are therefore preserved, but only – and precisely – at the expense of the romantic relationship. This does not mean that the fantasy that underlies the relationship is destroyed along with it. It, too, is preserved, but once again only – and precisely – because the relationship itself is cut short. (The way the ending works here is very similar to the way 'unhappy' endings often work in romantic drama.²⁷) What is really telling about this ending, an ending unique in the new romance to date, is that, like the film as a whole, it both draws on and works to expose the contradictions between elements which are not only fundamental to romantic comedy, but which most romantic comedies strive to render compatible one with another. (The cost, in many new romances, is often precisely the kind of ideological manoeuvring pointed to above.) Here, though, these elements, like the members of the couple, have finally to part, because their continued coexistence is rendered – and shown to be – impossible.

²⁶ The fact that Josh is male is, of course, not without significance. It is difficult, but highly instructive, to think of the film with its gender roles reversed.

²⁷ See Steve Neale, 'Melodrama and tears', *Screen*, vol. 27, no. 6 (1986), esp. pp. 20–2.