THE LAST OF THE ROMANTIC COMEDIES:

THE DEATH AND EVENTUAL REBIRTH OF THE GENRE

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The Romantic Comedy has been a staple of the Hollywood movie system since the birth of sound. The allure of the genre is easy to see. Comedy has always appealed to the human yearning for enjoyment and laughter. Romance is one of our deepest and truest desires. And the two go hand-in-hand in a way that truly connects with the audience’s own real experiences of love and relationships. Traditionally, the romantic comedy is synonymous with the ideas of “true love,” “destiny,” and “happily ever after.” Of course, like all genres, the traits upon which the romantic comedy was founded have gone through various cycles and revisions. As society and culture go through shifts, so does the art that reflects it. With motion pictures being one of the most dominant art forms of the last one hundred years, naturally it most closely mirrors the changes of the world it exists in.

Romantic Comedies have experienced incredible highs and some dark lows. Currently, the romantic comedy is in something of a low. While some prominent recent work in the genre has proven quite popular and critically applauded, it is all part of a current cycle in which the romantic comedy is trying to figure out it’s place in our present cynical world. The genre has seen periods such as this before, and it has always seen a return to glory. The last such cycle of glory came in the late 80s and extended into the very beginning of the new millennium. During this time, romantic comedies saw themselves at the forefront of our culture. They were displaying optimism, fun, and innovation that the genre had not seen in quite some time. But like all cycles of romantic comedies, it came to a halt when a new reality dismissed this representation of love and happiness.
For my thesis film, I decided to create a romantic comedy in the vein of those from the late 80s and the 90s. Through my research of the history of the genre, I concluded that this was the last golden era of the genre. With my film, I wanted to make a case for how the genre can once again thrive in the future. Thus, I needed to go back to where the genre really last left off. So for the purposes of this paper, we will go over the entire history of romantic comedies, but we will take a specifically closer look at those that came within the window of 1986-2011.

To understand how this golden era of romantic comedies came to be, we must look back at the genesis of the genre itself. In his exploration of the genre, *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, professor Leger Grindon of Middlebury College splits the history of romantic comedies into nine separate cycles and clusters. The use of the terms “cycle” and “cluster” here is important, as it differentiates both the cyclical nature of certain trends in the genre throughout its history as well as the more independent or irrelevant clusters. He classifies these cycles and clusters as the “Transition to Sound Cluster” (1930-33), “The Screwball Cycle” (1934-42), “The World War II Cluster” (1942-46), “The Post-War Cluster” (1947-53), “The Comedies of Seduction Cycle” (1953-1966), “The Transition Through the Counter-Culture Cluster” (1967-76), “The Nervous Romance Cycle” (1977-87), “The Reaffirmation of Romance Cycle” (1986-1996), and “The Grotesque and Ambivalent Cycle” (1997-Present). It should be noted that Grindon’s work was published in 2011, and it should also be noted that there are some small overlaps in cycles and clusters, as one must realize that eras in film naturally have very undefined and trickled endings. For the
purposes of this examination, we will recognize the first seven clusters and cycles as defined by Grindon and the works he references. Starting with 1987, however, we will illustrate a different categorization of the genre, as this is the titular era, of which we will go into in the most depth. While Grindon has some salient observations of this time, he has a few misunderstandings and some glaring omissions of certain social impacts.

The true start of the romantic comedy came with the introduction of sound. While comedy had been a prominent part of the silent era, there were almost no comedies whose true center, story and thematically, was a romance. The first cycle of romantic comedies came between 1930-1933. It was a rocky start for the genre, however. Coming off the physical nature and freedom of camera movement reaching incredible highs during the end of the silent era, there was an uncomfortable shift to films where the dialogue was such a large component of the film. Actors were also used to giving dialogue in a theater setting, where the need to project their voices created an acting style that didn’t translate well into a film with sound. On top of this, a growing Hollywood Production Code was making it hard for suggestive dialogue to make its way on screen.

In 1934, the genre hit a breakthrough with the release of Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night*. The film was a phenomenon with audiences and critics alike, taking home Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress, and Best Screenplay. But not only did the film legitimize the genre, it gave it a blueprint to grow on. In true Hollywood fashion, enormous success needs to be
recreated. The film business can be so unpredictable, so when the studio heads see a movie see as much success as *It Happened One Night*, it is bound to be imitated endlessly.

This first true fruitful cycle for the genre would be known as the “screwball era.” Nationwide, optimism was spreading. After the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing depression, things were finally looking up with the election of FDR and his implementation of the “New Deal.” Unlike the first batch of romantic comedies at the beginning of the decade, these screwball romantic comedies acknowledged the economic distress of the 30s and often used it for the backdrop of the stories. Treating these real life problems with a light comedic touch helped lessen the tension around such troubles and gave the sense that they will be overcome. In fact, the contrast of social classes was also often central to the romance in the film. As Grindon observes, in these films “though the commoner held our sympathy and the wealthy excited our suspicion, the screwball comedy engineered the reconciliation of class tension through the romance” (32). They were almost implying the necessity of class cooperation in order for the country to return to glory.

As far as other defining characteristics of the romantic comedies of this time, this would prove to be one of the most influential cycles for the genre. Hollywood was starting to gain a mastery of sound, and the thus the sophistication of dialogue was starting. What this meant for the visual language of these movies was that it was far more unassuming. The camera would favor wider shots, letting for a more natural conversation between characters while exploring the space between them and how that
affected their relationship. As Sarah Kozloff concludes in her study *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, “the prominence of ‘talk’ in screwball comedies leads to an understated, but by no means inartistic, visual style” (170).

In conclusion, the screwball era truly sets up what would go on to define the romantic comedy in the traditional sense. They possessed a light comedic touch, combining physical humor with that of a more sophisticated verbal wit. In this way, they were able to recognize the real life struggles of the audience while casting them in a light that liberated the viewer to see their own problems in a laughable and manageable manner. Visually, they preferred wider shots that would encompass both the leading woman and the leading man. While this could be dismissed as a more inarticulate method, it actually proves to not only be a more organic display of the screwball dialogue, but the play with space between characters helps emphasize their power and the course of their relationship.

On December 7th 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The war the U.S. was trying to stay out of had come to our land, and we were prompted to join in the fight. This ushered in what Grindon refers to as the “World War II Cluster.” As previously discussed, the use of the term cluster here is intended to highlight how this certain batch of romantic comedies, while important in understanding the history of the genre, is more of an anomaly in terms of its traits and tendencies. Hollywood was eager to work in unison with the government on creating content to promote nationalism, and the romantic comedy proved tricky in this end. We also covered how some of these cycles or clusters overlap, and this was an example of that. The first few
romantic comedies of this wartime had been planned and shot prior to our joining the war, so they had screwball sensibilities and no acknowledgment of our country’s new reality. These films proved insignificant and thus displayed the death of such romantic comedies and the need for something new.

The concept of the romantic comedy, however, ran contrary to what was happening. The genre was about men and women coming together, yet most men were shipping off to fight. A major solution to this was the “home front romance.” These films portrayed the courtship ending with the man going off to fight with his newfound love to motivate him. It worked as more plausible ending while also creating more support for the war efforts amongst audiences. As James Harvey observes in his paper *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood: From Lubitsch to Sturges*, the films were becoming “[a kind of recruiting poster], with the heroine inciting the hero not to romance but to enlistment” (413).

Another trend emerged that proved detrimental for the growth of the genre. During the war, women were encouraged to step up into many of the roles performed by men while the men were off fighting. The “Rosie the Riveter” effect, it began to change women’s attitudes towards their roles in society. However, romantic comedies started promoting sentiments that were contrary to this. In the context of the films, this newfound career ambition for women was seen as an obstacle between both their femininity and their pursuit of love. This message served as a retreat from the idea of balance between the man and the woman found in screwball comedies. This step back in social equality in favor of wartime support proved detrimental to the genre, as
Thomas Schatz points out that “while Hollywood’s output of screen comedies continued during the war, the overall quality (and critical accolades) fell sharply after 1942” (230).

Following the war was another group of romantic comedies referred to by Grindon as a “cluster.” While there were some substantial films from this period (1947-53), there were no patterns or prominent commonalities that were pervasive or helped shape the future of the genre. During the war, many of the seasoned romantic comedy directors stepped away from the genre, either opting for what they considered a more appropriate genre or even enlisting in the war themselves. After the war ended, however, many of them continued their romantic comedy pursuits. A number of romantic comedies were made in the vein of the screwball era, but the audiences weren’t reacting the same way. Hollywood wasn’t selling as many tickets, and the red scare was spreading fear and suspicion in the filmmaking community. This coupled with the trauma of the war still fresh in the nation’s mind and the rising cold war tensions, everything seemed to be undermining the optimistic spirit associated with romantic comedies. What would result was an uneasy period of screwball-esque romantic comedies that, as Grindon says, were “haunted by separation, loss, and death” (43). So while this cluster proves to be something of a throwaway, it is important in understanding how the screwball comedies came to a total end. It is also imperative to understanding the very real and heavy impact national crisis can have on the film industry.
1953 would usher in “The Comedies of Seduction Cycle,” which would prove to be a turning point for the romantic comedy and its greatest time of prosperity and growth since the Screwball Era. 1953 saw the emergence of Marilyn Monroe in three different romantic comedies, introducing one of the most prominent figures the genre would ever see. Cold War tensions were lowering, Eisenhower was taking office with support from both political parties, and the country was once again united and optimistic. A new study published by Alfred Kinsey entitled Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female opened eyes on the double standard of sexual behavior expected from women as opposed to men. Otto Preminger released *The Moon is Blue* without Code approval. And with Monroe’s sexuality becoming a major influence on the nation, censorship in Hollywood started to wane.

This new social attitude made way for the “sex comedy,” in which a more overt seduction is used in place of courtship. Preminger’s *The Moon is Blue* proved to set the pattern for the films of this cycle. Our male lead is now trying to seduce a woman for sex. The woman is now using this sexual power as a way into the securities of marriage. Instead of courtship, there is a battle that eventually leads to the discovery of love. It is a much more cynical attitude towards lover, yet it is able to create more comedy and incorporate a shifting social attitude towards sex. This new seduction plot would prove to be a mainstay within the genre.

Then came the next era. John F. Kennedy was assassinated, the Beatles rose to fame, a counter-culture was rising, and the contraceptive pill was becoming the norm. Attitudes towards sex were relaxing, and the idea of marriage was starting to become
questioned. From 1969-71, the film industry experienced a recession. All of the formulas for box office success were no longer working, including those for the romantic comedy. There were political struggles again rising from the Vietnam War, social crusades from women and African Americans were starting to become pervasive, and in 1968 Virginia Masters and William Johnson published *Human Sexual Response*. Masters and Johnsons’ study helped people more fully understand the entire spectrum of human sexuality. According to Tamar Jeffers McDonald, “changing sexual attitudes towards sex were responsible for this shift in romantic comedy’s terrain” (60).

The shift Jeffers McDonald is referring to was actually bigger than just romantic comedies. Hollywood itself was making a shift. The Hollywood Production Code was dead, and a younger audience with a more liberal social mindset was driving ticket sales. This is what led to what Grindon refers to as “The Transition Through the Counter-Culture Cluster.” It is important to note that Grindon not only refers to this as a cluster, but also a transition. This is because while this period lacks consistency, it proves to be an important time of transition for the genre. Not knowing exactly how to react to this new social attitude towards sex, Hollywood tried several different films that challenged conventions of the romantic comedy. They played with taboo relationships, group sex, and used unusual portions of a relationship’s timeline to skewer traditions. These films proved relatively successful, but there was still no solid pattern to suggest how the genre would function in this new society.
Then came the next cycle, the “Nervous Romance Cycle.” There is really one film that defines this era, and that is Woody Allen’s seminal 1977 picture *Annie Hall*. *Annie Hall* was a pivotal film in the genre, in that it mockingly re-examined what we expect from a romantic comedy. In the words of Frank Krutnik, *Annie Hall* “offers many of the scenes conventionally found in a romantic comedy, but dissembles the structures that traditionally organize their meaning.” Further, the movie portrays “the difficulty of sustaining attachments in a post-1960s’ world in which traditional conceptions of heterosexual intimacy have lost their authority” (20). Essentially, *Annie Hall* took all of the commonly known pieces of the genre and dissembled them through the psyche of the nervous urban male. This trend of romantic comedies questioning the traditions of long term relationships that Allen began would last all the way through the late 80s.

It is imperative to understand what *Annie Hall* and the ensuing nervous romance cycle did for the romantic comedy genre. In basic terms, it took the romantic vehicle, ripped it apart, and left the pieces in one big jumbled pile. For an entire decade, it was unclear if the more traditional romantic comedy would ever see the light of day again. This, however, all came to a halt in the late 80s. In 1989, Rob Reiner would release the Film *When Harry Met Sally*, and again the genre experienced a pivotal moment. If *Annie Hall* had left the scraps of the romantic comedy for dead, Reiner and company had just picked them up and asked the question “how can we rebuild this?” The film is very much akin to *Annie Hall* in that it’s main characters try to navigate the confused modern day field of heterosexual relationships. But as
Krutnik observes, the difference in the films comes from that Alvy, the protagonist of *Annie Hall*, possesses an “impossible desire for ‘authenticity,’” which causes for a more realistic and melancholic ending. *When Harry Met Sally*, on the other hand, displays a “knowing embrace of the artifice of convention,” which allows for the more traditional happy ending (27). Indeed, the conclusion reached by the end of the film by the characters is that while the notion of marriage might not make a whole lot of sense, it is a far better option than the alternative.

With this new and thoughtful re-emergence of the convention of “happily-ever-after” as the end goal of the romantic comedy, the genre once again started to thrive. Grindon refers to this new cycle as “The Reaffirmation of Romance Cycle.” Grindon, however, categorizes this period as 1986-1996. As this cycle is the titular era of this very paper, I will be amending Grindon’s definition and its exact period. While he has the general overview correct, as it is a period that flourished on the renewed love for the traditional romance, I believe there is a little more to it and that it lasted a bit longer. For this argument, we will still refer to this cycle as “The Reaffirmation of Romance Cycle,” but we will look at it as the period of 1989-2001.

As shown through our examination of the genre’s history, the state of affairs throughout the country has a major effect on what Hollywood is turning out in the genre. During times of war or social unrest, there was really no stability or place for the traditional romantic comedy. During the presidency of FDR and the momentum brought on by the new deal, the country went through a great period of unity and optimism. This allowed for the screwball era to come into fruition, as the mood of the
nation was in line with this type of entertainment. But during the political struggles of the Vietnam War, the genre itself struggled to find identity and an audience. So it was no coincidence that the late 80s and the 1990s came to be a fertile ground for these more fun and conventional Hollywood romantic comedies. There was political stability and general national optimism, which has historically proven to be the perfect concoction to produce romantic comedies of a more traditional nature.

*When Harry Met Sally* had audiences rediscovering their affection for affection, if you will. This fact would be outstandingly proven one year later with the release of Gary Marshall’s smash hit *Pretty Woman*. The film became the highest-grossing romantic comedy of all time, and it still remains the most tickets sold for any romantic comedy in history. Not only did this cement the rebirth of the genre, but it also helped shape this era of romantic comedies in a few other ways. Firstly, it was the first film to introduce the country to Julia Roberts as a movie star. The film shot her into superstardom, and it started her on her path to being a cornerstone of the cycle. Secondly, the film showed an even more overt embrace of the artifice of the genre. While the relationship between the two leads is a slow burn that is carefully structured, it all leads up to an audaciously conventional conclusion. This leads to the third point, which is the play on convention. As Krutnik points out, the film “gratifies the Cinderella fantasy while simultaneously underlining its status as a worn out myth” (30). Indeed, Robert’s character speaks to Richard Gere’s about a childhood fantasy she had about being a princess locked away in tower being rescued by a knight on a white horse. At the end of the movie, Gere comes to her apartment (which she has
been financially trapped in) riding in a white limousine. This modern and
acknowledging play on convention would prove to be quite prominent in this era.

The next major entry of this cycle would come from Nora Ephron three years
later with her film *Sleepless in Seattle*. The film also proved to be a giant hit, bringing
Meg Ryan back into the genre she helped re-launch with *When Harry Met Sally*. The
film would show to have the same major characteristics of *Pretty Woman*. It was a
romantic comedy driven by a faith in true love and a story leading to a happy ending.
It was also very knowingly conventional, and even quite innovative. A hallmark of
*When Harry Met Sally* was its soundtrack. It was filled with the music of Frank
Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, and Bing Crosby among others. These classic songs evoke
memories of a bygone time, one much more grounded in the ideas of traditional
heterosexual romance and true love. Reiner used this as part of his method to remind
audiences of what was so great about this way of thinking about love in cinema.

*Sleepless in Seattle* uses this, along with the meta method of *Pretty Woman* to create
an even fuller nostalgic effect. While *Sleepless in Seattle* employs an incredibly
similar musical strategy as *When Harry Met Sally*, *Sleepless* also sees its characters
openly discuss romantic films of the past. Meg Ryan’s character is constantly referring
to the ending of *An Affair to Remember*, directly linking her character and the film at
large to this nostalgic and idealized perspective on love. However, it does so while
also separating itself from the more artificial world of *An Affair to Remember*. Simply
by acknowledging the film, and discussing the romance of it, we as an audience feel
that the movie we are currently watching exists in a more real world much closer to our own.

This method is crucial to the success of the “Reaffirmation of Romance” films, as it is what helps audiences accept them despite what might be considered a dated or naïve view of love. These films are able to have their cake and eat it too, so to speak. That is, they are able to evoke the same feelings and attitude of the olden days of the romantic comedy while still keeping their distance and existing in a modern context that we can connect and relate to.

Another way in which these “Reaffirmation of Romance” films successfully operate are able to separate themselves is how they innovatively play on convention. While Pretty Woman follows the most basic of the romantic comedy structures, Sleepless in Seattle brings something entirely new to the table. Typically, the two romantic leads will meet early on in the film. Then, differences and obstacles will keep them apart. Then, after it seems like they will never be together, they overcome all differences and obstacles and reunite to live happily ever after. In Sleepless, the two leads don’t even really meet until the last scene of the movie. This structure was unprecedented, and the result was a romantic comedy that although leads to the already assumed happy ending, provides a new path that creates a new sense of excitement for the audience and a climax that proved to be a one-of-a-kind moment in cinematic history.

The next film that proved crucially innovative for the era was 1994’s Mike Newell film Four Weddings and a Funeral. Even up to this time, as far as
conventional romantic comedies went, the end of the film would either come in the form of the wedding of the two romantic leads, or at least the implication of marriage. *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, however, challenges this notion head on. Nearing the conclusion of the film, Hugh Grant’s character actually finds himself at the altar about to be married. He realizes, though, that he does not truly love who he is about to marry. In fact, he realizes that he really loves Andie MacDowell’s character. At this point, Grant approaches MacDowell with the proposal:

“Do you think, after we’ve dried off, after we’ve spent lots more time together, you might agree to not marry me? And do you think not being married to me might maybe be something you’d consider doing for the rest of your life?”

To this offer, MacDowell responds with “I do,” further mocking the convention of marriage, especially as a means to a happy ending. This is quite important not just in the examination and questioning of marriage as both an institution and a narrative convention of the genre, but in the conventions of the genre. Now, the ending does not have to be marriage or the implication of such.

This idea becomes expanded upon in 1997’s P.J. Hogan film *My Best Friend’s Wedding*. As a whole, the film is another extremely innovative take on the genre. The film shrewdly casts Julia Roberts as its lead. With romantic comedies such as *Pretty Woman, I Love Trouble*, and *Something to Talk About* under her belt, Roberts was already a fixture of the “Reaffirmation of Romance” movies. Thus we are initial cued to believe Roberts is set to end up with Dermot Mulroney’s character. However, we slowly realize over the course of the film that Mulroney’s true love is Cameron Diaz’s
character, and that Roberts is actually an obstacle between them. This move of deception creates an interesting dynamic, and it ultimately leads to Roberts not getting the man she has been after. The movie ends with Roberts dancing with her close gay friend at Mulroney and Diaz’s wedding. This move, as Peter William Evans and Celestino Deleyto put it, sees the film “us[ing] all the conventions but with a twist that questions their validity, introducing the concept of friendship as a rival for romantic love in the genre” (9). So where *Four Weddings and a Funeral* questions the institution of marriage as a necessity for a happy ending, *My Best Friend’s Wedding* takes it one step further in questioning any form romantic love as a necessity for a happy ending.

The era would reach its fever pitch with the male lead of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* pairing with the female lead of *My Best Friend’s Wedding* in 1999’s Roger Michell film *Notting Hill*. In the film, Hugh Grant plays an extraordinarily average man from *Notting Hill*, England who lives a mundane life running a small and unsuccessful travel book store. Roberts, on the other hand, plays the biggest star in Hollywood, a role that intentionally hews close to reality for her. A couple of chance encounters bring the two together. But just as things start to heat up, the pressures of Hollywood keep Roberts from Grant, and Grant is left not only missing her, but constantly being surrounded by her and her stardom. In this way, the film becomes another step in innovation for the genre. For nearly a decade, romantic comedies had been acknowledging the bevy of romantic comedies that had come before them and played upon that. But staying a step ahead of the game, *Notting Hill* takes a look at the
very cycle it’s a part of. At this point in time, Roberts was too big to separate from her star image. So instead of playing yet another normal romantic lead in spite of that, she wears it on her sleeve. This makes the convention of the impossible relationship far more improbable, as Grant is literally falling for a movie star, and the obstacles that come with that are far greater. In the juxtaposition of Grant and Roberts, also, the film bridges the gap between those disenchanted with the genre and those who make it. Grant and his friends live hard lives filled with very real problems not often portrayed in romantic comedies of the time. On the flip side, Roberts character leads anything but the expected glamorous life. She works constantly and is always under the scrutiny of the ruthless press. In this portrayal of these two lifestyles, the film breaks down the pre-conceived notions we have about the genre, Hollywood, and love.

The genre would continue to flourish with more lighthearted yet clever entries for the next two years with films such as Runaway Bride, What Women Want, and Bridget Jones’s Diary among others. As we see from the prominent works of the “Reaffirmation of Romance” cycle, there is a definite pattern throughout these films that is quite unique to this point in time. We of course have the certain roster of stars that defined the era such as Julia Roberts, Meg Ryan, Sandra Bullock, Richard Gere, Bill Pullman, and Hugh Grant along with a few others. Certain stars and pairings of stars are a staple of any great romantic comedy era, from Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire during the screwball era to Marilyn Monroe during the comedies of seduction era. Another hallmark was the use of older romantic iconography. Starting with the soundtrack of When Harry Met Sally, romantic comedies of the “Reaffirmation of
Romance” cycle were constantly referencing the hoards of romantic movies and stories that preceded them. This was used both as a way to make viewers nostalgic for a time when romance was supposedly much simpler, and to create an avenue on which the reemergence of more traditional romance could come about.

Innovation was also a cornerstone for this era of films. The conventions of the genre were beyond well worn by the late 80s. Therefore, every romantic comedy had to bring something new to the table. *When Harry Met Sally* uses a genre-unprecedented scope of 12 years to follow the course of the two leads finally declaring the dedication to one another. *Pretty Woman* puts a spin on the idea of a fairy tale by having its leads in slimy modern day professions. *Sleepless in Seattle* withholds the meeting of its two leads until the very end of the movie. *Four Weddings and a Funeral* explores the idea of marriage before ultimately rejecting it. *While You Were Sleeping* sees a switch in the love interest halfway through the film. *My Best Friend’s Wedding* follows a protagonist who is actually an obstacle to the male lead’s true love rather than being his true love. *You’ve Got Mail* makes use of new technology and has the two leads falling in love while simultaneously loathing each other. Clearly, there is a pattern. Audiences were welcoming of romantic comedies, but they had to show viewers something that they had never seen before.

Hand in hand with innovation was the revisionist attitude. In a post-*Annie Hall* world, traditional heterosexual relationships were under much more scrutiny in film. *When Harry Met Sally* uses the entire arch of the relationship between Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan to carefully come to the conclusion that a commitment to the
heterosexual relationship can indeed still be the right answer. But as many films would see, this was not always the case. Therefore, the rules of the genre had to be re-written in order for it to adapt and survive, much like it had done for many of the cycles that preceded it. As we saw with films such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, this was often achieved through an ending that didn’t quite fit the mold of what audiences were accustomed to. *Four Weddings* decidedly ends with a promise of no wedding, while *Best Friend’s Wedding* ends with no romance for the protagonist at all. In doing this, these films challenge the idea set forth that marriage must be the happy ending in a traditional Hollywood romantic comedy. While the idea had been around since *Annie Hall*, these were your happier and more conventional romantic comedies. Thus, they were signaling not just a trend, but rather a fundamental shift in society as a whole on how we even view love.

The era would come to a definite halt in 2001. As we’ve observed several times now, the state of the nation plays an integral part in what types of romantic comedies Hollywood puts out. 2001 would prove to be one of the most devastating blows to the genre, as it was one of the most devastating blows to the country. On September 11th 2001, two planes crashed through the Twin Towers, and everything changed. An attack of this magnitude on American soil had not been seen since the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and event that many of those witnessed the 9/11 attack were not even alive to experience. Thus, the reality of the world shifted in society as a whole. When an event like the attacks of 9/11 occur, nothing is ever the same afterwards. This includes art. Thus, film went through a lot of changes and challenges
at the time. As Ken Feil observes, “the challenge 9/11 posed to U.S. national identity intersected with a prevailing sense that patriarchal masculinity had been ‘fracture,’ not only by the terrorist attacks and ensuing wars but also by feminism, the gay-rights movement, and the diminishing socioeconomic authority of patriarchal figures” (143). This meant that the changes brought about at the time all piled on to kill the attitude of society necessary for the romantic comedy. Thus, the romantic comedy died.

In 2003, one of the most prominent names of the “Reaffirmation of Romance” cycle, Richard Curtis, tried to save the genre. Richard Curtis had written the screenplays for such influential works as *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Notting Hill*, and *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. But here for the first time he took on the dual role of writer and director for 2003’s *Love Actually*. The best summary of what this film was comes from Andrew Deyoung’s meditation on the movie. Says Deyoung,

"Here’s a film that looked at the entire geopolitical situation and said, basically, ‘Fuck you. The world doesn’t run on hate, it runs on love. We don’t want more wars. We want more silly rom-coms. In fact, we’re going to pack as many romantic plotlines as we can into a single film.’"

Indeed, *Love Actually* was one of the first romantic comedies to feature several different storylines that intertwine. The method to this, as Deyoung observed, is to combat the pessimism of the world at that point in time with an overwhelming amount of cheer. The opening of the film takes on this idea quite directly. The film starts on a compilation of almost documentary-style footage of people reuniting at the arrival gate of Heathrow Airport. This is accompanied by a voice over from “Reaffirmation of
Romance” cycle star Hugh Grant, talking about how although it seems like the world is filled with hate, he actually sees love everywhere. He even goes on to address the attacks on 9/11 directly.

The point here is almost an attempt on the genre’s part to take back what the post-9/11 fear had to taken from it. The airport used to be a mainstay in the genre, often a point of reconnection of lovers. After 2001, however, it was associated in the social consciousness as a place of fear and tension. Furthermore, there is even a scene towards the end where Liam Neeson’s character takes his stepson Sam to the airport to tell his crush how he feels about her before she flies to America. However, heightened airport security foils their plan. Then, Neeson tells Sam to make a run for it, and thus Sam runs past security, avoiding guards, and ultimately reaching his crush just before she boards her flight. The image of this young boy dodging the airport security is one of defiance. Curtis is trying to convey to audience’s everywhere that just because these terrible things have happened, that doesn’t mean that the happy things we have cherished for so long will be lost on the next generation.

Ultimately, though, Love Actually fails in its attempts to revive the romantic comedy genre in the post-9/11 world. There are a few reasons for this. One is that Hollywood didn’t care about the films sentiments. Studios saw the great box office success of the film, and it interpreted it in terms that they could understand and try to duplicate. In the studio system, executives are always looking at movies that defy expectations to become hits, as they have a new mold to follow. With Love Actually, they saw two aspects of the film that they could recreate: a romantic comedy taking
place during a holiday, and a romantic comedy filled with stars and different storylines. Thus, we have been in a cluster of these films every since. Such films include *Valentine’s Day, New Years Eve, He’s Just Not That into You*, and many others. Thus, the legacy of *Love Actually* was starting a new cluster of romantic comedies in the post-9/11 world, but ones that failed to carry on its true intent.

This is the other reason *Love Actually* failed. As we’ve covered several times now, the state of society gives shape to the type of entertainment that becomes prominent at the time. Still to this day, we’ve been in a long lasting trend of films that are darker, grittier, more realistic, and overall more pessimistic. For example, look at the batman films before 2001. Joel Schumacher was making the extremely campy and kid-friendly *Batman Forever* and *Batman and Robin*. After 2001, we get Christopher Nolan’s incredibly dark and more realistic take with *Batman Begins, The Dark Knight*, and *The Dark Knight Rises*. With *Love Actually*, Richard Curtis was trying to use the film to combat the darkness of society with full embrace of the naïve and cheerful world of romantic comedies. The problem is, while one film like this can find success, it can’t change the course of history. Society at the time still wasn’t ready to accept the foolish optimism of traditional romantic comedies. History moves slowly, and we’ve seen from the history of the genre that cycles and clusters typically last a decade. It takes time for the country to get out of turmoil and into a more optimistic mindset. We’re still not even there yet.

But as I have observed, clusters and cycles usually last around a decade or so. Furthermore, down periods for the romantic comedy have always been followed at
some point by an era of flourishing. Thus, we can only assume that the dawn of a new, more successful cycle is imminent. This is what led me to this study, and why I decided to write and direct and romantic comedy for my thesis film. I specifically focused on the “Reaffirmation of Romance” cycle, as I believe it was the last period of greatness for the genre. And going off history, the most important influence on a cycle of success for romantic comedies is usually not the down period that came before it, but the last cycle of greatness. For example, the seduction comedies of 50s were more akin to the screwball comedies of the 30s. The years in-between proved to be steps back for the genre, so it only made sense for the screwball comedies to be the base upon which seduction comedies were built. Like wise, the period of romantic comedies that have followed the “Reaffirmation of Romance” cycle which were inspired by *Love Actually* have proven to be a step back for the genre. Thus, if I am looking to find a future for the genre to grow, I must start with the “Reaffirmation of Romance” films. Granted, in the past decade we have seen successful romantic comedies in the form of the Judd Apatow post-modern cluster, but what I refer to is the more cheerful and conventional romantic comedy that lives in a society during peace time.

What was most important about the “Reaffirmation of Romance” cycle in how it applies to the future of the genre is how it rewrote the rules. That is, instead of simply being unconventional romantic comedies, they decided to change what the conventions meant. As Evans and Deleyto observe, the films certainly don’t do away with the convention of the genre, but rather “the convention itself [was] being
rethought from text to text in order to incorporate social attitudes to love that will continue to make sense in our culture” (9). Indeed, if we are looking ahead to the world of tomorrow, there are many changes in the social attitude towards love that are already here or we can see on the horizon. Social attitudes continue to question marriage, sexuality and gender are being viewed through a more progressive lens as a whole, and gender roles continue to be a subject of controversy. The trick with the more traditional romantic comedy is to somehow incorporate these things while still keeping in tact the conventional, fun, and comforting nature of the genre.

That is what I sought to take on with my film. I wanted to make a film that looks and feels like a spiritual continuation of the “Reaffirmation of Romance” cycle, but with a more progressive idea at the center of it to make it feel at home in today’s world. The angle I decided on was to take on a notion of the genre. We discussed the ending of Four Weddings and a Funeral, and how it did away with the notion that the happy ending needs to be the implication of marriage. To repeat a quote from Evans and Deleyto, the film “uses all the conventions but with a twist that questions their validity, introducing the concept of friendship as a rival for romantic love in the genre” (9). Reading this exact quote is what made the light go on in my head. Where Four Weddings and a Funeral questioned the need for marriage in order to achieve the conventional happy ending, I was going to take it a step further: questioning the need for a relationship at all in order to achieve the conventional happy ending.

There was a great amount of thought and care that had to be put into my method in order to pull this off. It took a number of key decisions to come up with my
direction. The first was laying out a story and perspective that actually points to this new idea of convention. The two films I studied closest for this were indeed *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *My Best Friend’s Wedding*. Both of these films, while they have endings that on an initial viewing might feel surprising (just in that they differed from all similar genre movies), a further inspection will show that the signs implying such an ending are there throughout the film. While we might be somewhat rooting for Julia Roberts to end up with Dermot Mulroney, there are many indications throughout the movie that she is not right for him. This is imperative, as an ending that is going to question a major assumption of romantic comedies has to absolutely feel earned and honest. Otherwise, it doesn’t even work as an ending and thus the entire purpose of its message is moot.

With my film I have two leads, and traditional wisdom of the genre would indicate that this means they will end up together. That is why I begin the film in the past, with the two leads as kids. It is clear in this scene that the male lead, Blake, has an incredible amount of affection for the female lead, Emily. What is also just as clear, though, is that Emily feels strongly in the opposite direction. With this, I establish with the audience that the feeling of love between these two isn’t mutual and so they will never be together. It is also firmly established in this scene that Emily does have a love. That is, the love for designing houses. Thus, in the conventional sense I have actually set up a love interest. The twist is that the love interest is not a person, but a profession. A dream.
We then come to the present, where we find Emily unhappy in a successful but unfulfilling work life. Thus we are still following the conventional love story. In terms of a more traditional romantic comedy, it would be like how Meg Ryan is dating Greg Kinnear in *You’ve Got Mail*. It might seem like a good fit and that her life is together, but she is unfulfilled by the relationship because he is not really who she wants. Then comes the deception element, where a series of fateful coincidences lead Emily and Blake back together, and a storyline for them re-uniting is seemingly laid out. Emily tries to avoid Blake, but can’t seem to do it. This deception, though, ends rather quickly when Emily and Blake have dinner. Early on in the scene, it is revealed that Blake is married, and so he actually has no romantic interest in Emily as she had feared. Once again, the audience is reminded that indeed these two are not meant to be together. The deception narrative, thus, is just another tool to emphasize the artificial idea that someone’s happiness is tied to a relationship.

The scene does conclude, however, in a much more traditional fashion. Emily and Blake get into a fight as Blake strikes a nerve with her, holding a mirror to her and her unhappiness. Emily storms out, and everything seems uncertain. This scene is immediately followed with one in which Emily has something of a moment of clarity and quits her job. In traditional terms, she finally breaks up with her Greg Kinnear. At this point, I throw in one more short deception to humorously drive into the real ending. She grabs lunch with a co-worker, who pours out a back story strikingly akin to that of Tom Hanks in *Sleepless in Seattle* and further professes how he believes they are meant to be together. Emily is able to escape this conversation, and she suddenly
and unexpectedly runs into Blake again. This is where the real ending occurs, as Blake is able to give Emily the business card of his sister, who works at a home design magazine. Thus instead of the implication of a happy relationship with a man, there is the implication of her dream being fulfilled. As should be evident, this still all follows convention, but brings in that innovative element for it to make sense in today’s world. To emphasize this, we get the incredibly clichéd final shot of the movie where Emily walks down the street smiling and the camera cranes up as a cheerful Michelle Branch song plays.

This ending shot is a testament to another important method of the film, which is the look and feel of it. In order to get my intention through, I needed to create a very specific world in which it all clicks and makes sense. Firstly, the soundtrack had to be carefully chosen. The ending Michelle Branch song is the perfect example for what the soundtrack is as a whole. For one thing, almost all of the music is from female singers/bands, driving home this sense of female independence that is crucial to the theme. Another aspect of the music is that it all is literally from 2001 or earlier, or at least in the same spirit of it. This can be compared to how the films of the “Reaffirmation of Romance” cycle used romantic songs of the 30s to evoke that nostalgia for a simpler time for love. The 90s looked backed to the 30s, and I look back to the 90s.

The camera was also crucial to how the film would feel to the viewer. Studying the films of the “Reaffirmation of Romance” cycle, I was able to see the patterns in how certain moments were shot and how scenes cut together visually. I was thus able
to map out a very specific shooting plan for each scene. The result is a very smooth and glossy look that is more akin to a studio film than a student film. This was necessary, as it becomes an immediate indicator to what the film is and how you should watch it. By looking like a cheerful, clean romantic comedy from 2001, it makes you see it as one. Another key decision we made was the camera itself. I chose to film on the Sony F7 camera as opposed to our school’s RED cameras, because I felt that the RED presented too clean and digital an image, which I believed would hinder the nostalgic effect I was trying to create. On top of this, we put diffusion glass in front of the lens for the entire shoot. The ¼ diffusion filter was placed in the matte box in front of the lens, which gave the images a softer and even slightly dated look, both of which lent themselves nicely to what we were trying to achieve.

With my research, I wanted to know how exactly the romantic comedy genre functions in the world. Through examining both the history of the genre and the various approaches to it, I was able to get that idea of why the genre exists and what its place is in society. History has shown us that the genre in a way is a reflection of the country at its most optimistic. When the nation is either flourishing or united in a sense of hope, the genre thrives. There is something hopeful, idealistic, and naïve about the romantic comedy in its truest form. This type of entertainment can only exist when people are in a place where they can accept these things. Right now, our country faces many obstacles. The current presidential campaign has people more divided than ever, terrorist groups continue to threaten our world, racial tensions are still high, and
climate change remains a looming problem. This all makes for a general pessimism prevalent in society, and it effects the media being consumed.

The romantic comedy, thus, has been dead for nearly fifteen years now. Yet, as we’ve seen time and time again, the genre will return to its more traditional form. The United States has seen tense times such as these, but it has also always seen better days. With my thesis film, I strived to look ahead to this time, and suggest that there indeed can and will be a future for the romantic comedy. It will require a revision of the genre’s conventions to encompass our ever progressing society, but this has been done before. It was done in the 50s, it was done in the 80s, it was done in the 90s, and it will be done again. As Evans and Deleyto state, “the genre tends to privilege the eternal, unchanging nature of romantic love and to gloss over those aspects from the surrounding culture which threaten it” (1). Indeed, as observed in the very beginning of this essay, the romantic comedy taps into some of our truest pleasures and desires, and it is this appeal that will see the genre always survive.
Works Cited


This thesis has been approved by

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