'THEY LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER': ENDING CONTEMPORARY ROMANTIC COMEDY

CELESTINO DELEYTO ALCALÁ
UNIVERSIDAD DE ZARAGOZA

Narrative endings, whether in film or fiction, have often been perceived to embody the ideological stance of the text. For example, in a recent study of endings in the cinema, Richard Neupert argues that "all the signifying systems in a closed text lead up to the point where they conclude their own development in order to help close all the patterns of signification into an efficiently condensed ending" (1995: 56) and the objective of such a move is "the binding-in of an active, unified spectator" (1995: 53). As can be seen from these quotations, Neupert's analysis bears strong marks of the Lacanian/Althusserian paradigm of film theory which, although nowadays contested from many quarters, continues to exert a strong influence on accounts of film genre. In this paradigm, the ideology of a film consists in either reinforcing the *status quo* or subverting it. Narrative elements and formal strategies, in turn, become either conservative or progressive, with fixed meanings attached to them. Consequently, certain privileged texts are "saved" by the critic when the visual or narrative techniques they use are perceived as subversive. In her critique of this theoretical trend, Barbara Klinger has also referred to the issue of closure: in ideological accounts, "the progressive film must escape the compromising forces inherent in the conventional procedure of closure," it must "refuse" closure (1984: 38). In such films as Sirkian melodramas, this refusal is carried out through excess and irony, terms which are often applied as redeeming features to many other apparently-conven-

Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies 19 (1998): 39-55.

tional-but-deep-down-subversive filmic texts. The arbitrariness of the subjective perception by the critic of what is or is not progressive, the inflexibility of the binary logic imposed on all texts (whether subersive or not) and its lack of attention to historical change also make this paradigm excessively reductive when applied to romantic comedy endings, which again are often too readily taken to enclose in themselves the text's ideology. Since most romantic comedies end in some sort of "happy ending" and this is almost universally taken to support the status quo in terms of intimate relationships, those films which appear to the critic to "problematise" the convention are considered transgressive whereas the rest are all grouped under such labels as "reactionary," "conservative" or upholders of patriarchal institutions. Frank Krutnik, on the other hand, views generic forms "as a functional interface between the cinematic institution, audiences, and the wider realm of culture" (1990: 57). In line with this approach, I would like, in this essay, to propose an ideological analysis of the ending in contemporary romantic comedy which does not restrict itself to deciding whether or not it subverts the classical convention, but, rather, one that explores the individual texts' incorporation of cultural transformations within their structure and, more specifically, how the strategies of containment and closure negotiate new attitudes in the realm of romantic and sexual relationships.

This is not to deny the resilience and ongoing good health of the traditional "happy ending." As Neale and Krutnik (among others) argue, one of the most outstanding characteristics of the genre is its powerful tendency to hold cultural transformations in place (1990: 171) and this is particularly obvious in the ideological uses of the convention of the ending. The intense focus of romantic comedy on gender relationships and the "war of the sexes" means that its endings are almost universally placed within the context of a stable union of the heterosexual romantic couple. Yet recent developments brought about by the influence of postmodernist art in Hollywood—its playful attitude and flaunted self-consciousness about narrative and generic conventions—and by changed attitudes towards gender, sexuality and marriage in society have put the narrative structure of the genre under considerable pressure. Steven Seidman has argued that important changes in US American intimate conventions have taken place in the course of the twentieth century. The dominant spiritual ideal of love of the Victorian period was replaced, in the first decades of our century, by a concept of "true love" that combined sexual fulfilment and idealised solidarity. This sexualisation of love obviously affected discourses of romantic love even in cases, such as screwball comedy, in which the sexual drive was not represented in direct fashion but

in more metaphoric or displaced ways. More recently, however, sex has become more and more separated from the sphere of love and romance and acquired a certain prestige as a medium of pleasure and self-expression, even though, to a very large extent, it still remains closely linked with the emotional and moral resonances of love (Seidman 1991: 4-5 and *passim*). These conflictive meanings of sex as part of the ethos of romantic love and sex as a medium of pleasure in itself and as carrier of individual identity, and, further, the relation of both meanings to an institution such as marriage that has been in crisis since the beginning of the century, have gradually found their way, in manners that are more or less direct or displaced, into the structure of contemporary romantic comedies. As Steve Neale has argued referring to the cycle of nervous romances at the end of the seventies, these comedies reflect "the dislocation of fucking from 'commitment' and the (ideological) dislocation of both these things from marriage" (1992: 286).

The crisis of marriage has frequently been frequently on ever expanding degrees of sexual freedom in our century, particularly after the so-called sexual revolution of the sixties. Sociologists such as Seidman and Anthony Giddens, however, have detached themselves from this notion. Whereas Giddens affirms that the true sexual revolution started decades before and has consisted mainly in increasing degrees of female sexual autonomy and the flourishing of male and female homosexuality (1993: 28), Seidman argues that divorce has more to do with the changing economic and social position of women than with sexual permissiveness (1991: 193). In romantic comedy, as in large sections of our society, marriage continues to be tied to the concept of romantic love, one which, according to Giddens, not only consists in the popular notion of "love at first sight," but also introduces the idea of personal narrative in people's lives. The "first glance" is a gesture which implies the discovery of potentialities in the other for a life together (39-40). This construction of a project for the future on the basis of love, which in literature can be traced back to Shakespeare, continues to constitute the central ideological foundation of romantic comedy, yet in the course of the history of Hollywood cinema, the genre has gradually introduced various different attitudes to love, such as the notions of companionate love and playfulness in screwball comedy (Lent 1995: 320-27, Krutnik 1990: 58), the dissociation between love and sex described by Seidman, which can be said to constitute one of the structuring principles, for example, of Woody Allen's comedies, or the increasing visibility of different gender permutations in comedies from the eighties and nineties. In general, the very concept of romantic love has been conveniently modified with respect to the Victorian and earlier periods, precisely in order to incorporate the ideal of sexual fulfilment

and notions of freedom and self-expression (see Wexman 1993: 8). That is, while still more or less committed to a view of love as heterosexual and permanent and of marriage as its logical conclusion, the genre, throughout its Hollywood history, has constantly explored and attempted to negotiate social changes in the relations between the sexes (or within them). The result has often been contradictory or ideologically confused texts but it is precisely those contradictions that make their role in the history of culture particularly significant. In the remainder of this essay I want to concentrate on five aspects concerning romantic relationships in which the endings of recent examples of the genre show awareness of social developments. This must not be taken as an exhaustive list but rather as an indication of the complex links existing between genre, culture and history. The five aspects are: the lonely/solitary romantic hero/-ine in the films of Woody Allen, uneasiness about the durability of the couple, nostalgia for a more innocent past, the impact of changing gender roles both socially and sexually, and the increasing visibility of different gender permutations in intimate relationships.

LONELY HEROES/SINGLE HEROINES

The death of romantic comedy (Henderson 1980) was announced at the end of the nineteen seventies, what Christopher Lasch poignantly defined as the "me decade" (1979: 237). The "nervous" romances which, according to Krutnik (1990: 62-63), brought about the rebirth of the genre, were characterised by a tension between a nostalgic longing for old-fashioned romance and a resistance to commitment and fear of loss of freedom. Woody Allen was the director of several of these films. The first one of the series, *Annie Hall* (1977), is representative of the moment when it was made in that it starts with the solitary protagonist addressing the spectator and telling us about the end of his romance with the film's namesake and, at the end, returns to the voice-over of the protagonist who is again alone after Annie has left him. Within the specific structure of this film, this ending comes as no surprise for the spectator and, in the context of Allen's whole *oeuvre* to date, it is a relatively usual conclusion. The male hero who is left on his own after the break-up of a romantic (or marriage) relationship reappears as a narrative figure in the denouements of several other of the director's films, as in the "definitive" ending of *Stardust Memories* (1980) or the more pessimistic one of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), a film which, to a great extent, passes as a non-comedy precisely by exploring and often reversing the conventions of the genre. In the bitterly ironic final scene of this film, the Allen character attends a

wedding ceremony when his own marriage has just broken up and he finds out that the woman he is in love with is romantically involved with his worst enemy. Even a more classically constructed film like *Manhattan* (1979) involves a rejection of the male protagonist by a woman he has been involved with, even though the final scene leaves a glimmer of hope that a more durable relationship will crystallise. In these films, therefore, the man's fear of commitment is displaced onto the infidelity of a series of aggressive women who are more or less openly blamed for the end of romantic love. This has led feminist critics like Kathleen Rowe to criticise Allen for his creation of victimised heroes who appropriate traditional features of femininity in order to shore up their male authority (1995: 197). Even an apparently more complex film like *Husbands and Wives* (1992), which ends with a series of fake-documentary interviews with the various characters of the film, suggesting that, in spite of frustrations, renunciations and various types of compromise, life goes on, depicts its two main female characters as the most formidable threats to durable relationships.

The male fear of women has been theorised from psychoanalytic stances by various feminist critics like Susan Lurie or Barbara Creed, but this theorisation becomes more appropriate to my study when it acquires a historical specificity. Lasch, for example, has argued that the simultaneous demand by women today of sexual satisfaction and tenderness terrifies men in ways that are socially unjust and deeply irrational (1979: 205). The male protagonists of Allen's comedies are illustrations of a crisis of masculinity which is embodied in endings in which the male protagonists' predicaments are complexly related to their fears of female sexuality and the social conquests of women's autonomy.

However, the solitary man who has been rejected by the insatiable, intellectual and neurotic modern woman is not the only possible ending in Allen's comedies. In films like *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), *Another Woman* (1988) or *Alice* (1991), the narratives revolve around central female characters all of whom are oppressed by patriarchal structures in different ways and seek permanent liberation through different forms of escape to fantasy and through a simultaneous process of introspection. In *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, the protagonist, Cecilia (Mia Farrow), escapes to the fantasy of a romantic involvement with the fictional hero of one of her beloved classical Hollywood films, but when the fantasy ends and the fictional character must return to his own world, and the real actor, with whom she is ready to start a new life, also abandons her, she is left on her own, faced again with the drab reality of life with a mysogynist husband. More unambiguously than in the case of the male heroes in the films mentioned above, her grim

prospects for the future are openly blamed on the three men. In *Another Woman*, Marion's (Gena Rowlands) exploration of her own self leads her to come to terms with the role that romantic conventions have played in her life. She learns to acknowledge her failures as a human being but, at the same time, the narrative manages to have her share her guilt with her father and her husband, both of whom are ultimately more to blame for her crisis than Marion herself. At the end of the film, free of a frustrating relationship with her husband and of the romanticised memory of her father, Marion, like Nora, the heroine of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, can be "herself" again and begin a new life. *Another Woman* can be read as a narrative of female empowerment, the story of a woman whose relationship with another woman helps her reject the patriarchal constructions of the self that she had introjected. The conventions of romantic love are part of these patriarchal constructions and her rejection of them sets the film's happy ending off from that of a romantic comedy. A similar situation can be found in *Alice*, a film in which the protagonist's development proves to be incompatible with the conventions of romantic comedy explored by the film. Unlike *Another Woman*, *Alice* remains a comedy but substitutes an ending in which the heroine is both in control of her own life and an active member of her new community, thus replacing the new society symbolised by marriage in romantic comedy by one in which the woman is the only centre. Alice's final rejection of husband and lover is a way to regain her own identity and a comic indictment of the pernicious forms of socialisation of femininity endorsed by the traditional ending of the genre.

Woody Allen's films, therefore, increasingly explore the conventions of romantic comedy and it is this exploration that sometimes makes it difficult to consider the texts as fully belonging to the genre, especially in terms of the link between heterosexual pairing and the happy ending. In this as in other cases, genre becomes less a series of narrative and cultural conventions that are adapted to specific examples than a fluid negotiation between those conventions and the culture at large, a negotiation that turns each genre less into an unchanging structure to which all individual instances must conform than a constantly evolving narrative and cultural framework through which a culture makes sense of a set of ideas and historical determinations. The various pressures on commitment, both internal and external, that Allen's characters undergo in the course of the narrative produce as a result endings which often bode ill for the possibility of a lasting relationship in the heterosexual couple. Since, more often than not, the break-up of existing relationships or the difficulties of establishing new ones are blamed on the female characters, the solitary protagonist that features in so many of Allen's

endings has a different attitude to this condition, depending on his or her gender. The male protagonist will often long for or be nostalgic about the stable relationship whereas the female protagonist's separation from her partner is sometimes presented much more positively as a step towards empowerment and self-identity.

THE UTOPIAN COUPLE

Kathleen Rowe has argued that romantic comedy "endures in part because it speaks to powerful needs to believe in the utopian possibilities condensed on the image of the couple" (1995: 212). However, whereas utopian possibilities figure more or less prominently in many examples of the genre, the implied attitude of each one of them towards this utopianism may vary, generally, from a certain degree of uneasiness about the happy resolution to a relatively unproblematic final union against all odds. *Something Wild* (Jonathan Demme 1986), for example, ends with an "incredible" transformation of its initially unconventional heroine Lulu (Melanie Griffith) into the submissive woman who, in a final symbolic act, allows her male partner to drive the car into which she invites him as a proof of commitment. This unexpected turn, however, along with the excessive "old-fashioned" nature of the car and the clothes she now wears, forces the spectator to reflect on the artificiality of such an ending and, therefore, to mistrust the convention. The scene's high level of reflexivity is confirmed by the final shot in which the diner's waitress "comes out" of the film and sings the final song addressing the camera directly. The ending of *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall 1989), on the other hand, is anything but unexpected, yet the open reference to the stories of Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, including Richard Gere's "knight-in-shining-armour" rescue of Julia Roberts climbing up her block of flats' fire stairs, marks it as excessive, as if we were being asked not to take the scene totally seriously. Moreover, the action takes place in Hollywood, the dream factory, and the appearance of an anonymous character at the beginning of the film and then, again, after the final rescue, advertising this and other Hollywood stories as fictions addressed to the spectators' fantasies confirms the awareness of the unreality of the couple's final union. The same link between uneasiness and formal or narrative self-consciousness regarding the happy ending can be perceived in films like *Peggy Sue Got Married* (Francis Coppola 1986), *Housesitter* (Frank Oz 1992) or the immensely successful British film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell 1994). The resolution of this film is particularly representative of the uneasiness both towards marriage

and towards its replacement by other structures in the cultural discourse of which Hollywood romantic comedies are also part. In the film's final scene, after Charles (Hugh Grant) humiliates his fiancée at the wedding ceremony by refusing to marry her because he is in love with Carrie (Andie MacDowell), he makes the following proposition to Carrie:

> Do you think, after we've dried off, after we've spent lots more time together, you might agree not to 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 which Carrie, in a repetition of the traditional formula at weddings, replies, "I do." The mechanisms of representation conjured up by the film in this happy ending are no different from those used in the past and the conceit used by Charles practically amounts to a full-blown marriage proposal. But, as the comedy explicitly asserts, this is a proposition that excludes marriage and one, which, in its absurd use of the negative, undercuts the long-term engagement which it apparently enunciates. The film continues this ambivalent attitude to marriage into the final credit sequence with a series of snapshots in which the different characters in the film are all conveniently given a stable partner, including Prince Charles as Fiona (Kristin Scott-Thomas)'s husband. The film, therefore, in a move that brings it close to the other two films discussed above, manages to simultaneously celebrate and detach itself from the institution of marriage, once again striking an uneasy balance between the two irreconcilable opposites.

Many contemporary examples of the genre, therefore, express in their endings a very ambivalent attitude towards the permanent relationship which its traditional structure and the concept itself of romantic love seem to require. This ambivalence is produced by the combination of a deep-seated belief in the feasibility of stable heterosexual relationships, a belief which is, of course, enhanced by the genre's structure, and a certainty, which moves from melancholic to openly pessimistic, that the culture to which the films speak constantly rejects these traditional forms of commitment.

THE PAST IS A DESIRABLE COUNTRY

The nostalgia for a more innocent past is, as Neale and others have argued, a central characteristic of the most recent manifestations of the genre (1992: 294-299) and it is given various emphases and specific embodiments in the different films. In *Peggy Sue Got Married*, for example, the female protagonist actually returns to the past, a time of innocence which is represented by the nineteen fifties. The film's comic conflict consists in the clash between the traditional attitudes of the old characters and the modern woman's awareness of and sensibility towards gender issues. Peggy Sue (Kathleen Turner) is constantly torn between her attraction to this time of innocence and her knowledge of the unfairness of traditional gender roles. In *Big* (Penny Marshall 1988), innocence is represented by the child (Tom Hanks) who, on the surface, is magically transformed into an adult but still thinks and behaves like a child. The female protagonist (Elizabeth Perkins) is attracted to him precisely because he is the embodiment of a simplicity and purity which contrasts with the adult hypocrisy and corruption of the corporate world in which she lives. In *Green Card* (Peter Weir 1990), the conflict is produced by the ideological differences between Bronte (Andie MacDowell), a "modern" US American woman, and Georges (Gérard Depardieu), an old-fashioned Frenchman. Europe and, beyond Europe, Africa, represent the simple, preferable past of unrepressed instincts, eating red meat and drinking strong coffee, against the excesses of civilisation embodied in Bronte and her boyfriend's vegetarianism and phoney love of nature. This narrativised nostalgia for the past initiates the traditional psychological and emotional development of the protagonists in the three films but, with the exception of *Peggy Sue*'s rather arbitrary ending, the new situation does not bring about a final union between the romantic partners. The adult woman of *Big* must remain adult when her partner returns to childhood and separation ensues. Bronte and Georges are also finally separated when Georges is deported back to France. The final reconciliation between Peggy Sue and her husband (Nicolas Cage) is based on the rather weak premise that he has also learnt from *her* journey to the past and they can meet again on a common ground, but, clearly, there is little hope that this reunion will be successful. The three women in these films indirectly show the extreme difficulty of romance in their real lives because their objects of desire are placed in "unreachable" innocent spaces: childhood, the past or Europe. Nostalgia for the past, therefore, ultimately prevents romantic union in the present or, at least, it makes it highly unlikely.

In other cases, however, these and other types of distance are not a definitive obstacle and more unproblematic romantic comedies like *Sleepless in Seattle* (Nora Ephron 1993), *Only You* (Norman Jewison 1994) and *French Kiss* (Lawrence Kasdan 1995) share strong happy endings with a more or less believable union with future prospects based on the bridging of long gaps between the protagonists. The three films also share a similar and very traditional structure in which the women (played by Meg Ryan in two cases and Marisa Tomei) are made to shed a relationship in which there is no passion or romance and replace their "wrong partners" by the "special relationship" for which they have been longing all their lives. The characterisation of these women falls fully within the category of nostalgia for the past since there is in them very little awareness of changes in the roles played by women in society or of the consequences of women's gains in social equality. Therefore, the films' combination of nostalgia for old forms of courtship and commitment with characters living in the present is made possible through various types of conscious escape from reality. Rowe argues that recent examples of the genre often resort to external frames of reference, "whether 'magic' and 'signs' or opera and old movies, to make believable its claims for the fantasy of romantic love" (1995: 205). In these three films, the external frames of reference become the permanent world of the protagonists.

WOMEN AT WORK

Women's ambitions of social and sexual equality have been, from the beginning, a central issue and often one of the main obstacles to the happy ending in Hollywood romantic comedy. For Neale and Krutnik, "screwball" comedies often feature women with a certain degree of economic and social independence or, at least, with aspirations of equality. The main impetus of the films tends to be towards the women's renunciation of their status or desire in order to achieve the final union (1990: 154). This type of renunciation, however, becomes increasingly difficult to defend in more recent texts. We have seen that, in such films as *Another Woman* or *Alice*, the women's final success and independence cannot be contained within the structure of the genre. Most other contemporary romantic comedies are also aware of women's changed roles in our world and build narratives which, while often conforming to the traditional conventions, at least point to social changes in this respect. *Moonstruck* (Norman Jewison 1987) is, according to Rowe, a paradigmatic example of a "woman on top" narrative (1995: 204), a film more sympathetic to women's clearer sense of identity than to men's melo-

dramatic crises. The ending witnesses Loretta's (Cher) betrothal to the man of her choice, Johnny (Nicolas Cage), in a familial context which also distinguishes the film from other instances of the genre, particularly through the prominent role played by the figure of the mother (Olympia Dukakis). Other recent romantic comedies also conclude with a relationship which has to take into account other members of the family apart from the two partners, particularly children. *Working Girl* (Mike Nichols 1988), on the other hand, places its protagonist Tess McGill (Melanie Griffith) in a professional context which excludes the family. In fact, the romantic involvement of the protagonist with Jack Trainer (Harrison Ford) becomes little more than an excuse for the film's central concern which is Tess's progression and eventual success in the world of high finance. The film's ending places her in an executive position in her firm while ironising on her social climb by suggesting, through an extreme long shot of the building where she works, how far away from the top she still is. Whereas her original boyfriend (Alec Baldwin) expected her to conform to patterns of traditional femininity, her new partner is last seen getting her lunch ready to take to the office, in an image of domestic happiness which at least superficially defends a new type of relationship based on equality and erases any promise of future stability. These two films are examples of narratives in which the women do not renounce their desires for the sake of the happy resolution. Unlike the situation in the two Allen films referred to above, these desires are still compatible with some sort of romantic involvement but these romantic involvements are clearly in the terms drawn by the women and, in the case of *Working Girl* especially, are not allowed to interfere with her ambitions of social equality. If these two examples can be taken as representative of larger tendencies in the genre, we can conclude that historical changes in gender roles have affected romantic comedies by making them move in two directions: in some cases, women are not only the subjective centre of the story but also the ideological one, with the men often unable to find a fixed position in the present sexual universe; in others, the romantic entanglements must be made compatible with, and, in some cases, subservient to the woman's professional and social ambitions. A world in which the only possibility of happiness for women was provided by the pleasures of home and a romance of subordination to men is slowly but firmly dwindling into oblivion.

BETWEEN MEN (AND WOMEN)

As I indicate above, social critics like Giddens and Seidman agree that the two most important changes which have occurred in our century in the field of intimate relationhsips are the increasing degrees of female sexual autonomy and the flourishing of male and female homosexuality. These social changes are the issues which, according to film critics like Babington and Evans (1989: 268,297), Neale and Krutnik (1990: 145,154) and Kathleen Rowe (1995: 45,47), can be seen as the most serious threats to the ideology and structure of romantic comedy in our time. The unchallenged privileging of heterosexuality and the subjugation of women have been the two central ideological tenets of the genre and also the tenets which have come under greatest pressure in contemporary films. Yet, in my view, the effects of this pressure are rather uneven: whereas the problematics of the foregrounding of female desire and the creation of a female space—Rowe's "women on top"—have, as we have seen, apparently become a primary concern of most recent Hollywood romantic comedies, the existence of alternative sexualities has remained significantly underdeveloped. For the final part of my paper I want to turn to a group of films which, in more or less direct ways, incorporate comic representations of homoerotic desire or homosocial threats to normative heterosexuality.

We're No Angels (Neil Jordan, 1989) is not strictly a romantic comedy, like *Pretty Woman, Green Card* or *Sleepless in Seattle*, but, primarily, a parody of an escape-from-jail-cum-religious film, in which, as in other contemporary parody (Linda Hutcheon 1985), the conventions of the original genres are laughed at but never openly criticised or frontally attacked. Most of the comic situations in the film arise primarily not from mistakes of identity related to gender relationships and romantic involvements but from the escaped-prisoners-masquerading-as-intellectual-priests central conceit. However, romantic comedy is present in various ways, especially in the way the narrative solves the problem of the two "good" prisoners' redemption and consequent moral justification of their escape from justice. The film's space, possibly its most attractive feature, is a characteristic feature of comedy: the border town dominated by the weeping madonna which works not only as the traditional door to freedom of classical movies but, primarily, as the liminal space of fantasy in which miracles can happen that will change people's lives. In the film's conclusion, the weeping madonna performs her miracle which includes saving the little girl from drowning and giving her speech back. This, along with the climactic phoney sermon performed by Jim (Sean Penn), gives back to Molly (Demi Moore) some faith in people and recuperates her for society from her hard-as-nails-prostitute role.

But more spectacular miracles are performed at the film's close and these are more centrally related to romantic comedy. On the one hand, Ned (Robert de Niro), the more experienced, more hardened of the two prisoners, jumps into the turbulent waters of the dangerous river even though he cannot swim, his heart softened by the danger in which the little girl finds herself and by his love for her mother. After saving the girl, he, Molly and the girl finally cross the border to Canada and to freedom and form the usual heterosexual family unit, including the child who, as I mentioned above, has also become such an important feature in films such as *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus 1993), *Corrina Corrina* Jessie Nelson 1994), *Nine Months* (Chris Columbus 1995), the British *Jack & Sarah* (Tim Sullivan 1995), and others. This romantic "happy ending," however, destroys the central male couple of the story, which so far had followed the conventions of the "buddy" film. The solution to this narrative problem not only uses the conventions of romantic comedy but plays with and parodies one of the most frequent sources of anxiety in the genre: the presence of homosexual desire. The "buddy" coupling of this and other contemporary films, in which homosocial desire is compatible to the point of paranoia with a strict heterosexual regime is itself a defense mechanism against the threat of homosexuality (see Fuchs 1993), but in this magic world of the liminal town, fantasies (along with blatant implausibilities) are possible and Jim decides to stay in the monastery and take his vows as a priest but not primarily because he now has faith in God but because the monastery has become for him a haven of peace and quiet from the ruthless world outside, and, he, like the Gene Kelly character in *Brigadoon* (Vincente Minnelli 1954), makes up his mind to stay forever in this magic place. Above all, however, Jim stays because the young priest that he has met in the monastery is in love with him. The homosocial couple which, to judge from all the indications from narrative conventions to publicity posters, is clearly the central one in the film is, then, finally dissolved according to the dictates of romantic comedy and two new couples are formed: one heterosexual, one homosexual. This is fully congruent with the explicit ideology of the ending of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, one of apparent sexual tolerance in which the one homosexual couple ends dramatically with the death of one of its members (and his eventual replacement by a new partner) but is otherwise never felt to be incompatible with or dangerous to the predictably predominant heterosexual energy embodied in the central couple and various attendant ones.

This spirit of tolerance in which homosocial desire is compatible with and ultimately replaced by both heterosexual and homosexual desire, is different from but exists in the same ideological space as that of other films such as *Much Ado About Nothing* (Kenneth Branagh 1993) and *White Men Can't Jump* (Ron Shelton 1992). Branagh's adaptation of Shakespeare's play intensifies the homosexual potentialities of the characters of the brothers Don Pedro (Denzel Washington) and Don John (Keanu Reeves) and defines the central conflict of the film as one between heterosexual romance and male homosocial bonding. The conflict is resolved fully within the traditional boundaries of the genre and homosocial desire is duly demonised and rejected in favour of a spectacular display of heterosexual energy and a vindication, through love and heterosexuality, of women's equality in view of the cultural backlash of dominant masculinity embodied in the ethos of the "buddy" film. *Much Ado* conflates homosocial and homosexual male desire in order to condemn both as equally formidable enemies of its ideology of egalitarian heterosexuality. Eve Sedgwick (1985) has famously argued that the place of women in patriarchal narratives is always subservient to male-to-male relations, but she is surely not right in the case of most romantic comedies, in which heterosexual desire is generally dominant. Changing patterns of gender relationships in our society have upset the old balance and *Much Ado* shows the awareness on the part of romantic comedy of the threats posed by these patterns to its central regime of desire.

This danger is fully realised in *White Men Can't Jump*, again a hybrid of "buddy" film and romantic comedy whose conclusion is different from the other two. The basic conflict arises from its central protagonist Billy Hoyle (Woody Harrelson)'s inability to mature because of his compulsive passion for basketball. The two pulls in the narrative are represented by his girlfriend Gloria Clemente (Rosie Pérez), who wants him to grow up, get a proper job and have a happy life together, and his basketball friend Sidney Deane (Wesley Snipes). At the end of the film, Gloria decides to leave Billy because he will never change, and at the end the couple who literally walks into the sunset is the one formed by the two men. Unlike the couples in the other two films, however, this couple is, at least on the surface, not based on homoerotic desire but on homosocial bonding. The process is, in a sense, the opposite from that in *We're No Angels* in which the initial male homosocial couple is finally replaced by two new couples based on sexual desire. In *White Men*, one of the two heterosexual couples is finally destroyed while the other one remains backstage in order to foreground the homosocial coupling of the two men.

This departure, however, is more apparent than real. The film does not have a romantic comedy ending, but the actual denouement takes place fully within the world of the genre. Unlike the popular "buddy" films of the 80s and 90s studied by Fuchs and others, heterosexual love is still as important at the end of the film as it is in the other films discussed above. It is true that part of its fascination for contemporary audiences resides in its representation of basketball culture and of interracial tensions and that these are mostly made present through an all-male world of pride in the gang and homosocial exchange, but the narrative is always aware, through the attitude of the two female characters, of the dangers that this all-male world poses to the heterosexual ideology of romantic comedy. At the end, Sidney, who acts as a sort of spiritual guide to Billy, advises him to "listen to the woman," even though he himself has just persuaded him not to listen to her. The implication is that Sidney's friendship will help Billy mature and appreciate the necessity to put heterosexual desire above basketball, a thought that would never occur, for example, to any of the protagonists of the numerous police "buddy" films such as *Seven* (David Fincher 1995), to mention a recent example.

The important point about these films is not, therefore, whether the endings are transgressive or not—I hope that my analysis has sufficiently proved the inadequacies of such a theoretical framework—but, rather, that the contemporary tensions between heterosexuality and male homosexuality and homosociality find their way into the narrative structures of romantic comedy. It is, for example, significant that, even though the ending is not the usual one, *White Men* does not constitute any sort of announcement of the end of romance but, rather, attempts to narrativise, within the spirit of tolerance and compromise characteristic of the genre, some of the anxieties about romance related to issues of sexual orientation and social exchange in contemporary US society. Earlier films like *Victor/Victoria* (Blake Edwards 1982) or *Tootsie* (Sydney Pollack 1982), for example, had narrativised similar anxieties through the older convention of mistakes of gender identity at the end of which the "proper" gender and heterosexual orientation of the participants shine through.

Less conventionally, the more recent *Switch* (Blake Edwards 1991) narrates the story of an extremely sexist man who is killed by a group of ex-girlfriends and returns to life in the body of a woman who is desired by both men and women, especially a lesbian woman whom the protagonist (who, initially, still feels "like a man") also desires, and his old "buddy" with whom s/he eventually has a baby. The rather inconclusive ending and the film's apparent acceptance of various possibilities of sexual orientation and

gender identity also make it representative of the adaptation of one of the oldest conventions of the genre to the present sexual and social climate. The interesting point about the ending in this case is, therefore, that it does not foreclose any possibility and that even the most traditional permutations remain unstable and in a state of constant flux. The film's central conceit, for example, makes it possible to conflate, not homosexual and homosocial desire as in *Much Ado*, but homosocial and heterosexual desire in the same couple, and, in general, underlines the performativity of sexual and gender roles (see Butler 1990 and Traub 1991).

To conclude, the examples analysed above prove my initial hypothesis that an ideological study of the endings of romantic comedy shows, beyond simplistic accounts of the either-conservative-or-subversive type, the complex negotiations that take place between historically specific attitudes towards the issues dealt with by the genre and its narrative conventions. My analysis has shown that the convention of the happy ending is, although under considerable pressure, still strong and intelligible enough to incorporate recent hesitations about and various departures from the traditional structure of romance. The five areas of historical change in the field of intimate relationships constitute, among others, the new space of romantic comedy. Even though the traditional structure of the genre remains relatively unchanged, the films analysed in this essay, and many more that have not been mentioned, can only exist and make sense within this new narrative space.

NOTE

Research towards this paper was partly financed by research project no. 245/&49 of the Universidad de Zaragoza.

WORKS CITED

BABINGTON, Bruce, and Peter William EVANS. 1989. *Affairs to Remember: The Hollywood Comedy of the Sexes*. Manchester: Manchester UP.

BUTLER, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

FUCHS, Cynthia J. 1993. "The Buddy Politic." In *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*. Ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. New York: Routledge. 194-210.

GIDDENS, Anthony. 1992. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

HUTCHEON, Linda. 1985. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. London: Methuen.

KLINGER, Barbara. 1994. *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the Films of Douglas Sirk*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.

KRUTNIK, Frank. 1990. "The Faint Aroma of Performing Seals: The 'Nervous' Romance and the Comedy of the Sexes." *The Velvet Light Trap* 26 (Fall 1990): 57-72.

LASCH, Christopher. 1991. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*. 1979. New York: Norton.

LENT, Tina Olsin. 1995. "Romantic Love and Friendship: The Redefinition of Gender Relations in Screwball Comedy." In *Classical Hollywood Comedy*. Ed. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins. New York: Routledge. 314-331.

NEALE, Steve. 1992. "The Big Romance or Something Wild?: Romantic Comedy Today." *Screen* 33.3 (Autumn 1992): 284-299.

NEALE, Steve, and Frank KRUTNIK. 1990. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. London: Routledge.

NEUPERT, Richard. 1995. *The End: Narration and Closure in the Cinema*. Detroit: Wayne State UP.

ROWE, Kathleen. 1995. *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*. Austin: U of Texas P.

SEDGWICK, Eve Kosofsky. 1985. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia UP.

SEIDMAN, Steven. 1991. *Romantic Longings: Love in America, 1830-1980*. New York: Routledge.

TRAUB, Valerie. 1991. "Desire and the Differences it Makes." In *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*. Ed. Valerie Wayne. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf. 81-114.

WEXMAN, Virginia Wright. 1993. Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance. Princeton: Princeton UP.