

### **THE SECRET LIFE OF ROMANTIC COMEDY**

Celestino Deleyto

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Romantic comedy is a genre traditionally neglected by critics: generally considered to be predictable, trivial and lowbrow, it has been systematically devalued and frequently deemed as undeserving of critical analysis. Because of this, the amount of critical work on romantic comedy is considerably smaller in comparison with other, “more serious” film genres. In addition to this, it is also remarkably repetitive, as most monographs limit themselves to offering well-trodden theories and chronologies of the genre, focusing always on “canonical” films. Another common “modality” of romantic comedy literature is the edited compilation of articles on the topic. These volumes are usually interesting as far as individual texts are concerned, but they do not generally offer global insights about the genre. For these reasons, Celestino Deleyto’s *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy* (2009) is a particularly valuable contribution to the literature on the genre and a much-needed update on dominant theories. Deleyto’s approach is innovative for two reasons: firstly, unlike most publications about romantic comedy, it provides an original, fully-fledged theory about this genre; and secondly, it deals with films never analysed before from the point of view of romantic comedy.

The book is formally divided into four chapters, but it actually consists of two parts: the first quarter is devoted to the exposition of the author’s theory on romantic comedy, while the remainder of the book puts into practice this theory through the textual analysis of a number of films. Both parts are equally interesting, but I

will be mainly commenting on the former, since the general insights Deleyto's theory provides about the genre seems to me the most significant contribution to the field. *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy* opens with a highly interesting introductory chapter in which the author expounds a more general theory on film genre, taking issue with the dominant notion of genre as "belonging". With the exceptions of Rick Altman (1999) and James Naremore (1998), most film studies scholars have traditionally regarded genres as fixed categories in which individual texts are neatly "piled up". Deleyto contradicts this notion, replacing the idea of "belonging" with that of "participation". His theory is based on chaos theory and Jacques Derrida's critique of generic purity (1980), which argues that "a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (Derrida, qtd in Deleyto 2009: 10). This notion, together with Altman's ideas about generic cartography lead Deleyto to conclude that films do not *belong* to genres but are not fully independent from them either because they are necessarily generic, always participating in them in one way or another (12). Consequently, Deleyto concludes that "[g]eneric analysis should, therefore, concern itself less with issues of belonging and generic purity (or impurity) and more with the actual workings of generic elements in films" (13). Hence the assumption that genre mixing is the rule rather than the exception in film genres and hence it is that an intrinsic part of its evolution is used by the author as a springboard for the formulation of his theory on romantic comedy, developed in the next chapter.

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The main novelty of Deleyto's theory lies in its approach, which departs radically from previous conceptualisations of the genre. This approach basically takes issue with the common assumptions that humour is not an essential part of romantic comedy and that this genre generally upholds a conservative ideology. Deleyto, on the contrary, grounds his theory on the fundamental role played by comedy and on the notion that romantic comedy as a genre does not have a specific ideology.

Regarding the importance of humour, the author points out how comedy has traditionally been divided into two kinds: comedian comedy and romantic comedy. These two "types" have usually been regarded as incompatible by critics, as the former is supposed to be about the generation of laughter, while the latter is generally seen as more concerned with a narrative whose ultimate preoccupation is the happy ending. Deleyto calls into question this division, arguing that humour is an integral part of narrativity: jokes are frequently dependent on the narrative and, more importantly, the plot is crucially affected by the comic moments. Both elements are thus inextricably linked, which reinforces the author's general view of film genres not as fixed categories but as shifting entities.

Deleyto's theory is also based on the idea that romantic comedy does not uphold a specific ideological discourse as a whole. He thus shifts the emphasis from ideology to thematic specialisation, arguing that the genre simply deals with the topics of "love and romance, intimacy and friendship, sexual choice and orientation" (18), without offering a unified ideological positioning on them. In his view, the importance traditionally allotted to the happy ending has not only obscured the relevance of humour and the middle section of the narrative: it has also provided the genre with an apparent ideological homogeneity by providing what critics generally assume to be a conservative conclusion. For Deleyto, on the contrary, romantic comedy is not so much about the happy ending, but about the emotional and sexual vicissitudes the characters undergo during the central section of the narrative. It is in this part that contemporary discourses about love, sex and marriage are articulated, not in the (frequently conventional) conclusion.

Deleyto's view of romantic comedy is thus firmly based upon humour and the articulation of a discourse about love, but there is a third feature that shapes his definition of the genre: the construction of a special space outside history, the space of romantic comedy. The presence of a magic space of transformation which shelters the lovers from the dangers that the social space represents is a paramount requisite of romantic comedy. In this erotic utopia, humour is an integral element, not a by-product of our experience of the genre. Likewise, this space of transformation created by the text is ideology-free. This does not mean that individual films cannot endorse specific ideological discourses —particular instances of the genre may choose to align with certain ideological stands— but the magical space that frames romantic comedy is "an empty formal concept, not an ideologically charged one" (36).

In this way, Deleyto provides a revised definition of the genre, which he describes as the intersection of three elements: the articulation of culturally specific discourses on relationships between the sexes, a space of transformation in which this articulation takes place, and a comic perspective which filters the whole narrative. However, this definition does not imply that all the films featuring these characteristics are romantic comedies, because for him, "films as texts are not romantic comedies but, rather, use the conventions of romantic comedy in specific ways" (46). His theory of romantic comedy is an all-encompassing one which regards genres as fluid categories. It is with this idea in mind that the author proceeds to analyse a group of films never considered as part of the genre's canon before. The three remaining chapters of the book are thus devoted to the textual analysis of five films belonging to different historical moments with the aim of exploring how romantic comedy intersects with conventions from other genres in order to produce meaning.

Chapter Two, "Comic negotiations", analyses *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) and *Kiss me, Stupid* (1964), two films which brought to a close two of the most relevant

cycles of Hollywood romantic comedy: the screwball and the sex comedy, respectively. Both films flopped at the box-office and were harshly treated by critics: in the case of the former, due to its “offensive” mixture of realism and romance in a war story dealing with the very thorny (and contemporaneous) topic of the invasion of Poland, and the latter because of its excessively “progressive” view of sexuality and the relationships between the sexes at a time when the genre was not yet ready to incorporate such social changes. In this chapter, Deleyto explores the combination in these films of the conventions of romantic comedy with those from other comic sub-genres, especially satire. The author’s analysis of these two films reinforces his general view that films do not have to be confined to a specific genre, but that they may “belong” to different categories at the same time by virtue of their specific use of generic conventions.

In this analysis, Deleyto shows how romantic comedy frequently becomes “invisible” to critics when mixed with other genres. However, this “phenomenon” is even more acute when combined with more “serious” genres like the thriller or melodrama. The author explores this generic intersection in Chapter Three, “Romantic comedy on the dark side”, in which *Rear Window* (1954) and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) are analysed. In the case of the former, Deleyto takes an innovative approach to the film. Rather than concentrate on the action happening outside, he concentrates on what is going on inside the flat from which the protagonist, Jeff (Cary Grant), peeps into his neighbours’. The focus on his girlfriend’s (Grace Kelly) perspective rather than on Jeff’s reveals the important role played by romantic comedy in the film, which has frequently been overlooked by critics, always subordinated to the suspense plot. Woody Allen’s film also shows a remarkable mixture of the thriller and the romantic comedy conventions. Once again, the author goes off the beaten track in the analysis of the movie by leaving aside its “serious” and philosophical dimension in order to focus on the romantic comedy elements. However, unlike Hitchcock’s film, *Crimes and Misdemeanors* exhibits a much gloomier perspective, since the social and the comic space cannot be reconciled, ultimately remaining isolated from one another. The result is a devastating view of love and sex, which makes the film closer to melodrama and existential tragedy.

Chapter Four, “Contemporary romantic comedy and the discourse of independence”, deals with the latest developments in the genre. The chapter’s main thesis is that, in recent years, romantic comedy has incorporated a great diversity of narrative and ideological approaches to intimate matters, which accounts for the genre’s enduring popularity. Deleyto argues that this variety of perspectives may be attributed “to the growing impact of independent cinema on the mainstream and the subsequent all-but-complete absorption of the former by the latter” (150). In order to exemplify this, he analyses *Before Sunset* (2004), a confessional comedy

which mixes realism with romantic comedy and the discourse of independence discussed in the chapter. The author concludes the book with an invitation to a more flexible view of romantic comedy: one which acknowledges the complexity and richness of a genre consistently disregarded by academia.

Considering romantic comedy's unmatched popularity throughout the decades despite critical opprobrium, together with the scarcity of insightful critical works it produces in comparison with more 'respectable' genres, and the repetitive and generally deterministic nature of the existent ones, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy* is a remarkable contribution to the body of critical literature about the genre on account of its innovative approach and the fully-fledged theory it proposes. What might follow in the wake of Deleyto's book remains to be seen, but it constitutes a valuable first step towards a more open approach to one of the most enduringly popular genres in film history.

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