Introduction

Spanning numerous developments in the conceptualisation of intimate relations in U. S. culture – pertaining to marriage, gender, sexuality, etc. – the romantic comedy has proved itself both a resilient and flexible Hollywood genre. This module aims to provide you with a nuanced understanding of some of the narrative conventions, styles, themes, and historical developments of this most enduring of popular forms. Amongst other things, we will be exploring ways the genre has navigated longstanding features of the social and ideological category of ‘the romantic couple’, as well as its ability to incorporate changes in cultural discourses surrounding that category. While the romantic comedy is frequently decried as merely formulaic escapism (or worse), this module hopes to foster a critical appreciation of the genre both in terms of the complexity of its conventions and its indefatigable capacity for continual reinvention.
Course leader: James MacDowell

Location:
All sessions in room A0.26

Timetable:

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<tr>
<th>Mondays</th>
<th>3.00 – 3.30 approx</th>
<th>Lecture</th>
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<td>3.30 – 5.30 approx</td>
<td>Screening</td>
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<td>Tuesdays</td>
<td>10.00 – 12.00</td>
<td>Seminar</td>
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Assessment:
You have a choice of assessment routes on this module: either one 5,000 word essay, or one two-hour exam question. The essay deadline is Tuesday 23rd April (Week 1, Autumn). Essay questions to follow.

Paris When it Sizzles (1964)
WEEK 1  Romantic Conventions: Social, Fictional, Generic
Film: *Much Ado About Nothing* (Kenneth Branagh, 1993)

Before we begin to address the Hollywood romantic comedy, this week will introduce and explore some of the historical, social and generic contexts of romantic love and its depiction by looking at (a cinematic adaptation of) a much older foundational romantic comedy text: Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*.

**Required reading:**

**Recommended reading:**
WEEK 2  Screwball Comedy
   Film: Bringing up Baby (Howard Hawks, 1938)

‘Screwball comedy’ – a style of high-energy comic romance usually said to have begun with Frank Capra’s It Happened One Night (1934) – is one of the key sub-genres of the romantic comedy. Hawks’ seminal Bringing Up Baby will be examined this week to instigate a conversation about the potential flexibility of our genre’s conventions and gender representations.

Required reading:


Suggested viewing
 Ball of Fire (1941), Holiday (1938), It Happened One Night (1934), Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (1936), Mr. And Mrs. Smith (1941), My Favorite Wife (1940), My Man Godfrey (1936), Platinum Blonde (1931), Sherlock Jr. (1924), The Thin Man (1934), That Uncertain Feeling (1941), Twentieth Century (1934)

Recommended reading:
WEEK 3  The Comedy of Remarriage
Film: *The Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges, 1941)

The philosopher Stanley Cavell coined the term ‘comedy of remarriage’ to refer to a particular kind of 30s/40s romantic comedy in which a central couple either separate, divorce, or in some other fashion are required to rethink the meaning and determinants of marriage and romantic love in a profound fashion. Can romantic comedy be philosophical?

**Required reading:**

**Suggested viewing:**

**Recommended reading:**
WEEK 4  The ‘Nervous’ Romance
Film: A New Leaf (Elaine May, 1971)

The 60s and 70s saw a radical rethinking of gender relations in the United States, due in large part to the rise of second-wave feminism. During the 70s in particular there emerged a cycle in Hollywood romantic comedy that has been given the name ‘Nervous Romance’ – films that tackled the shifting status of romance and marriage during this period in which such concepts were undergoing thorough interrogation; but to what extent might romantic comedy be said to *always* be somewhat ‘nervous’?

**Required reading**

**Suggested viewing**

**Recommended reading**
WEEK 5  ‘New’ Romance (1): Postmodernism and Post-feminism
Film: The Holiday (Nancy Meyers, 2006)

The romantic comedy saw a major resurgence in popularity and profitability from the late 80s onwards. Key to this was what has been dubbed the ‘New Romance’ – a cycle of films that appeared to stage self-conscious reaffirmations of ‘traditional’ romantic discourses, and which has been associated by critics with particular post-feminist and postmodern strains in culture.

Required Reading

Suggested viewing

Recommended Reading
WEEK 7 ‘New’ Romance (2): Whatever Works?
Film: My Best Friend’s Wedding (P. J. Hogan, 1998)

This week asks what other possibilities may have arisen in mainstream romantic comedy following the ‘New Romance’ resurgence, focusing on different permutations for the representation of romantic relationships, and indeed different forms of personal relationships altogether.

**Required reading:**

**Suggested viewing:**

**Recommended reading:**
WEEK 8 ‘Indiewood’ Romance (1): ‘Alternative’ Forms
Film: Before Sunrise (Richard Linklater, 1995)

From the late 1980s onwards there has been an increasing blurring of the boundaries between ‘independent’ and ‘Hollywood’ cinema, and this sector has offered numerous variations on the romantic comedy; this week we examine some of those variations, as well as their continuity with familiar generic conventions.

Required reading:

Suggested viewing:

Recommended reading:
Another thing made increasingly possible by the ‘Indiewood’ sector (combined with innumerable other changes in U.S. society and culture) is a greater possibility for romantic comedy focused on LGBTQ+ relationships, as well as on alternative understandings of ‘the couple’; this week we ask what might be changed by, and what might remain the same despite, such expansions of focus for the genre.

**Required reading:**

**Suggested viewing:**

**Recommended reading:**
- Bryant, Wayne M. ‘Shortbus’, *Journal of Bisexuality*, 9:2, 187 - 190
WEEK 10  Student choice:

Her (2013) or Appropriate Behaviour (2014) or…


SOME GENERAL RECOMMENDED READING:


