

The Ever Changing Face of The Romantic Comedy by Alexander Haydn Jones

[AUTHORS NOTE: The following is an examination of the genre conventions of the romance genre. Specific focus on the narrative as well as if the conventions can be broken. Everything that follows is my own opinion or hat I have researched.] – (Title Card)

P.S. I like Rom-coms, sue me. (Thanks Mum & Dad) – (Title Card)

We all know how this starts. It starts with boy. Our hero who then a meets girl (Insert Clip of the Naked Gun) Well Not quite. It starts with two characters (Insert Clip of 'It Happened One Night') (Capra, It Happened One Night, 1934) who meet and seem the total opposite (Insert clip of 'Romancing the Stone') (Zemeckis, 1984). A series of events occur to keep them apart (Insert clip of 'The Big Sick') (Showalter, 2017) however fate can't deny it's self any longer (Insert clip of 'Pretty Woman') (Marshall, Pretty Woman , 1990) and they live happily ever after. Even way back in 1931 Charlie Chaplin's 'City Lights' (Chaplin, 1931) (Insert clip) shows after hard work and determination you can win the girl.

As time as passed it has gone from boy meets to girl (Singin in the Rain) to boy meets boy (Insert clip of 'Weekend) to girl meets girl (Insert clip of 'Blue is the Warmest Colour') to girl meets a large fish? (Insert clip of Shape of Water) or a girl meets.... Duck? We are getting ahead of ourselves though. We have to first work out the formula to making a romantic film and why it works?

This is The ever changing face of the romantic comedy.

From the early 1930's all the way to the late 60's. The same tired formula has been used. From 'Bringing up baby' (Hawks, 1938) to 'The Philadelphia Story' (Cukor, 1940) to 'From here to Eternity' (Zinnemann, 1953) to 'An affair to remember' (McCarey, 1957) to 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' (Edwards, 1961). It is clear that the ideal of romantic comedies is that love triumphs all. It has a beginning and an end.

That being said in 1967 'The Graduate' (Nichols, The Graduate , 1967) came out and it would seem like any other romantic comedy. Dustin Hoffman a recent college graduate starts an affair with an older woman (Insert clip of meeting with Mrs. Robinson) where in time he falls in love with her daughter (Insert Bedroom Clip). Just your average run of the mill romantic comedy. You would be wrong. (Insert Final Scene on Bus) I want to bring attention to the films final moments. It is an ambiguous and ominous ending. Their happiness and confidence slowly slips away and it soon dawns on them the reality of their situation. The narrative is the same however we are treated to something different. This is the first sign that the happy ending, may not be a happily ever after. So the question is, is cinema about escaping reality rather than a truthful reflection of reality?

Then in 1977, something significant changed. A film came along. This film was called 'Annie Hall' (Allen, 1977). The narrative structure of all these romance films that we have discussed have been linear however Annie Hall did something different. Can you change the structure of a romance film? Annie Hall was about a break up. Immediately the fourth wall has been broken, it is not a perfect outlook on love. (Insert Clip of Breaking Fourth Wall) It is more

complex that just a boy meets girl scenario. It is a reality for which the audience is shown that these two characters are not meant to be together. The Non-Linear structure is further to indulge in the fantasy and reality of what is the perfect romantic relationship. But why do we need a more complex look at relationships?

Woody Allen, regardless of what you think he had been inspired by filmmakers such as Ingrid Bergman and Fellini with their films '8 ½' (Fellini, 1963) and 'Persona' (Bergman, 1966). Films such as 'Jules and Jim' (Truffaut, 1962) from the French new wave showed a darker and more fantasy driven style to creating romance movies. It is clear to see that the western culture pushed romance movies however without films like this we wouldn't have maybe some of the classics we have come to know and love. So when it comes to 'Annie Hall', what is Allen trying to say. Well it's to make a true statement on human relationships. As that's what it is about. Connection. Human connection. The fantasy we are presented with the narrator is to examine why his relationship did not work. It's not all smooth sailing. Sadly, Diane Keaton's role as the titular Annie Hall, despite being a strong character still falls victim to the male gaze.

To take a quick pause, I want to discuss non linear narrative specifically in the film 'True Romance' (Scott, 1993). It maybe questioned whether this is romantic let alone a romantic comedy however the writer Quentin Tarantino discusses his reasoning. Why is a non linear structure more interesting to an audience? What does it bring to the story?

(True Romance Clip of Quentin Tarantino Commentary)

So within The romantic comedy genre it had grow stale; it had become overused. Yes, there were expectations however they were few and far between. Spike Lee's debut feature 'She's got to have it' (Lee S. , 1986) featured a non linear narrative and a film that focused on an African American experience which hadn't been seen like this before however this was a rare film. So when we take When Harry met Sally (Reiner, When Harry Met Sally , 1986) released in the same year, Norah Ephron the writer of this film (Insert clip of her talking). Manages to break the convention of the mainstream, romantic comedy and make something completely fresh.

We are presented Harry and Sally. They meet, take a dislike to one another. Then to never see each other again. Then meet five years later on a plane, still don't get on. Five years later, after heavy break ups they meet again and become friends. There are no big subplots, nothing massive is keeping them apart. Sally unlike most women in these sort of films, does not a man to fulfil her. She has a career and as does Harry. We are just presented two characters and through the comparison of time are shown a more mature and interesting story through simply allowing them to spend time apart. The conversation drives the plot; they first raise a topic. Second, debate a topic in turn revealing more about their characters. We are never shown the full story. The conversation drives the story.

As John Truby states that for an advanced storytelling method that "It goes from dialogue about what the characters are doing to who the characters really are" (Truby, 2007) which Norah Ephron does however if we look at Sleepless in Seattle (Ephron, 1993) the opposite occurs.

Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks are kept apart for the entire movie. They fall into the romantic comedy trope of forces keeping them apart. We are shown our hero; he has lost his wife. It sets the tone that our hero has to start a journey. His son out of desperation seeks help for his father, in a chance of fate Ryan listens and realised that she has never felt love like this. We are then sent on a series of events of nearly Crossing paths, to a case of mistaken identity. To eventually meeting on top of the empire state building, holding hands and walking off into the distance like her favourite film. The genre conventions that had been undone in Harry Met Sally were not present in this.

If we fast forward in time in the romance genre, not much has changed dramatically. There was a progression on a small scale of sexuality within romantic comedies. With Ang Lee's 'The Wedding Banquet' (Lee A. , The Wedding Banquet , 1993) we were treated to a romantic comedy with a same sex couple, it may have fallen into same romantic comedy troupes however it changed an audience's perspective however if we compare it to 'Four Weddings and a funeral' (Newell, 1994) with the couple portrayed by John Hannah and Simon Callow were used a dramatic plot device rather than a comedic one. In this time, an emerging filmmaker called Kevin Smith released a film called 'Chasing Amy' (Smith, 1997). Simple story. Boys meets Girl. Boy likes girl. Girl is not interested in him. He pursues her to find out she is not interested in him. At all

There was exception to this. 'Eternal Sunshine of the spotless mind' (Gondry, 2004). This is a non linear narrative approach about love and loss. This was not like before; it did something bold. It created a sub genre. The element of science fiction used to elevate the world of the fantasy and reality.

Eternal Sunshine unlike many of the films that have become before it. It has a more optimistic View on Love. It's a world in which we are shown the breakdown of a relationship. The Non linear approach can be used to show the structure that the relationship is worth the heartache or used as a personal learning curve. A new narrative opens up for which these two characters desire a second slate to start again. Above all other films it is a far more optimistic view.

The film challenges conventions. Specifically, it is challenging genre conventions of the female character. The character of Kate Winslet is the first true character that stands on her own two feet. She is not perfect. She has flaws. (Insert Clip of 'I'm a fucked up girl') This idea is called the manic pixie dream girl. Natalie Portman in 'Garden State' (Braff, Garden State , 2004) is a prime example of this character, she plays this idea to Zach Braff's 'Andrew Largeman'. Greta Gerwig in 'Frances Ha' (Baumbach, 2011) plays on this idea. Breaking down the wall of the manic pixie dream girl to what she truly is. A human. This idea comes from the very start with Katherine Hepburn to Diane Keaton which we discussed early however Kate Winslet breaks this illusion.

In 500 days of summer (Webb, 2009), two examples were presented in a non linear structure with a manic pixie dream girl however this time it breaks the conventions once again. Post modern statement that this isn't a love story. The narrator is not the lead

character; it is an outside look at the breakdown of the relationship. If we are to break it down, the lead character is not the hero.

Tom Hanson, idealises this girl. The trope of the manic pixie dream girl is deconstructed over the course of the film. Tom's idea of love comes from a misreading of 'The Graduate'. The non linear structure allows for the reality and fantasy to clash. Shown specifically through scenes repeated in the same way 'When Harry met Sally'. The dance sequence (Insert Clip) to his spark comparison to what he loves and hates (Insert Clip). Then to the opening and closing scene. Two different interpretations of the exact same scene with a different outlook through the simple use of non linear narrative. Juxtaposition between moments shows that summer is a person not an ideal, she undergoes shifting moods. She's real.

So where does that leave us? The non linear structure narrative has been utilized in years to come. All showing various aspects of relationships utilizing this very feature. In recent years the genre has come far in terms of what the films are about however Narratively speaking the romance genre, still has a fundamental structure. It can and has been broken. It has progressed from where it first began with its subject matter however the truth is the romance genre is ever changing on the surface but beneath it's still the same.

As Robert McKee states that within the genre conventions that the writer must not only "fulfil audience anticipation but must lead their expectations to fresh, unexpected moments" (McKee, 1997)

From Someone to hold a boom box outside your window with a killer Peter Gabriel song (Say Anything) (Crowe, Say Anything , 1989), to share a kiss in the rain (Breakfast at Tiffany's) (Edwards, 1961). No not that one (Insert clip of Spiderman kiss (Raimi, Spider-man , 2002), To love someone more than you love yourself to share a connection with someone you can't have with anyone else (Insert last clip of Carol) (Haynes, 2015). It's about human connection in its simplest form, doesn't everyone want to connect with someone? I know I do.

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