

HOLLYWOOD ROMANTIC COMEDY OF THE FIFTIES, A CRITICAL STUDY OF A FILM GENRE

Manuela Ruiz

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Adapted from her doctoral thesis, this monograph by Manuela Ruiz is a valuable addition to the literature on the often-neglected and critically-deplored genre, romantic comedy. By concentrating her attention on films produced across a narrow, specific period of time in Hollywood, the 1950s, Ruiz also successfully helps to contest the notion that the decade's cultural products and the decade itself reflected some kind of monolithic conservatism and will to conformity.

Ruiz sets herself the task of reading her chosen corpus of texts within their historical contexts, and this provides one of the book's chief pleasures: discovering the meticulously compiled archive of contemporary material which supports the historicised readings of the films. In creating her historical backdrop, Ruiz has dug deep into the roots of American popular culture; she displays her finds elegantly and intelligently, relating the films analysed to changing discourses around three dominant strands of context: notions of success, in terms of both business and personal identity; concerns about suburbanisation and the effect of domesticity on both female and male subjects; and the rise of consumerism in that decade of plenitude.

Having these few core themes provides a useful structure to the investigation that follows, which otherwise might risk going off in too many different directions; by reflecting dominant issues of the period under study, it also testifies to the coherence of questions that were being asked in public life in the Fifties, even if the

films then show a variety of answers. Personal versus career success, home life, and consumerism, all combined with sex and the battles of the sexes, prove to be the recurrent topical anxieties and desires being dealt with, defused, or resolved through the film texts examined.

In fleshing out these core concerns, Ruiz draws on a wide range of printed material, borrowing from sources high-, low- and middle-brow, and in doing so presents the reader not only with the obvious publishing hits of the period like the second “Kinsey Report” (1953) and *Playboy*, but also more ephemeral items which nonetheless tapped into the *zeitgeist* just as did those better known artefacts. A 1958 *Handbook for Dating* is considered alongside data presented in the *American Sociological Review*; *Woman’s Home Companion* and *Mademoiselle* provide findings, and lifestyle magazines *Harper’s* and *LIFE* become sources, no less than finance weekly *Fortune* and the literary *Saturday Review*. In preparing this smorgasbord of references, I was reminded of Miriam Hansen’s prescription for historical recovery, laid out in her exploration of narrative and silent cinema, *Babel and Babylon* (1994). Hansen explains her methods in the prelude to her chapters investigating the stardom of Rudolph Valentino; although Ruiz does not cite the book, her own echoes Hansen’s attempt to provide as detailed a context as possible:

reconstructing a possible horizon of reception for Valentino involves juggling different levels of material and bringing them to bear upon each other in a kind of methodological both/and of textual analysis and historiographic speculation. This means [...] tracing [...] the public discourse surrounding Valentino - reviews, interviews, studio publicity, articles in fan magazines and the general press, popular biographies —sources that at once document, manipulate and constitute his reception (Hansen 1994: 253).

Hansen’s notion of the “horizon of reception”, which acknowledges it can never fully recover the backdrop of any past text but strives nevertheless to capture as many of the sources of that backdrop as possible, can be seen employed in Ruiz’s attempt to compile the “public discourse” around her three key themes, although it is interesting that the fan magazine, which might perhaps be expected to provide valuable insights into the ways the stars of her chosen films were employed to characterise topical debates, is one major source that is never employed. Nonetheless, many of her topical finds are fascinating in themselves (who would have guessed *How To Woo, Win And Keep Your Man* would be the title of an actual handbook rather than an alternative title for *How To Marry A Millionaire*...) and together build up a convincing picture of a society simultaneously obsessed with and terrified of changes in sexual mores, family structures, business patterns and gender roles.

Although following Hansen’s lead in returning her objects of study to their contemporaneous socio-historical milieu, Ruiz substitutes for Hansen’s focus on

the star, the wider genre of the romantic comedy. This attempt to use the microcosm of the specifically Fifties' romcom as a method of learning about the macrocosm of the genre itself is interesting but not unproblematic. This forms, in fact, one of the two main issues I have with the book. The other, lesser caveat is the periodisation in operation; while I can see that films of the decade can present a coherent topic for study, and would support the author's idea that 'the Fifties' exceeds the decade's more obvious delimiters, I am not convinced that the thirteen-year spread dealt with here is as homogenous as the frequent back-and-forth motion occasioned by the texts studied suggests. It is fair enough to be employing the thematic schema, but in doing so Ruiz groups together films from across the period without sufficient attention to their altered historical moment, *mingling* rather than *juxtaposing* texts from the beginning, middle and end of her selected time span, so that the section on gendered success stories begins with 1957's *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?*, goes back to 1953's *How To Marry A Millionaire* and then back further to 1950's *Father Of The Bride*. It might have been more useful to trace the developments of topical characters like the bachelor and the career girl, the white collar suburbanite husband and the domesticated housewife *chronologically* across the period as they became increasingly problematised and sexualised. Furthermore, the book makes no mention of the mid-century amelioration of the Hays Code. This omission elides the homogeneity of the decade, making further problematic the book's reading of *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) alongside *Pillow Talk* (1959). The earlier film was predicated on the exclusivity of the male's entitlement to sexual fulfilment which the later one specifically contested. Dealing with them both without due attention to their specific and different contexts obscures their textual differences and the social changes they represent. Nevertheless, the matter of genre remains the larger problem, and in two interesting ways: in its scope and focus, and in its core texts. In her introduction Ruiz states her intention to make the object of her study the genre as a whole and confirms her aim of looking at the three key aspects she says mark out the genre:

the presence of humour and laughter as a specific point of view [...] a narrative structure which articulates portraits of love, desire and sexuality that are historically and culturally specific and a space of fantasy and transformation [...] (2013: 35-36).

Despite this, the study which then follows provides much information and insight about the particular kind of romantic comedy flourishing in the 1950s but not much that can be extrapolated to the wider tenets of the genre. Ruiz is not attempting, then, as did Celestino Deleyto in his *Secret Life Of Romantic Comedy* (2009) to redraw the boundaries of the genre or even, daringly, to suggest that such boundaries can be dispensed with altogether. Rather than let this be a

problem, however, Ruiz should acknowledge her different scope, especially since what she is doing is equally rare. The book's investigation of the peculiar brand of romcom which obtained from the mid- Fifties to early Sixties is one of the very few extended studies on this since Alexander Walker's formative "Last American Massacre", written in the final years of the Sex Comedy's original cycle. Like Walker, Ruiz studies the character archetypes who engage in the repeated skirmishes in the Battle of the Sexes, and should be proud of the way her painstaking "historiographic speculation", to use Hansen's term, provides such a lively backdrop for the works explored. Although severely neglected by theorists, especially when compared to the screwball comedy, the Sex Comedy has arguably been even more influential on the tropes and characters of the romcom as it exists today, with its common hate-at-first-sight couples assuring the viewer, through the intensity of their dislike, that their eventual positive feelings for each other will be similarly passionate.

My final quibble is with the catchment of films grouped under heading of "romantic comedy". Ruiz includes in her study familiar works such as *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* alongside more neglected texts such *Father Of The Bride*, *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* and *The Thrill Of It All*, a move which lumps together an odd assortment of comedies taking paths to humour and resolution that are different than the usual boy-meets-loses-regains-girl template of the classic romantic comedy. Ruiz is generous enough to cite my own book on the topic and does not seem to disagree with my basic definition of the genre as a film which "has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion" (Jeffers McDonald 2007: 9). This is not the template for about half the movies included in Ruiz' study, however. This is not to say that my definition could not be altered, expanded or overturned, but I would like to see some discussion about why, say, *Father Of The Bride* deserves to be defined as a romcom rather than just being included in the looser category of "comedy". Its hero, Stanley Banks (Spencer Tracy) does not seek new love, nor does he have to endure various comic exigencies to regain the lost love of his wife, as do characters in the films famously grouped by Stanley Cavell as "comedies of remarriage" (1981). The romance, which does have its ups and downs, spats and reconciliations, is between Stanley's daughter Kay and her partner, and is thus viewed at one remove by Stanley and the viewer. The comedy certainly does exist, although, as Ruiz skilfully draws out, it is of a rather cynical kind, with Stanley inviting the audience to agree with him that the hoopla and trappings of the upper-middle-class wedding are a waste of money and effort. Why then is the film being analysed alongside other texts which clearly do fit within the romcom grouping?

These latter points do not, however, negate the fact that there is much to enjoy and commend in this book. Working through it, the reader enters into a lively internal debate with the author over definitions, readings, influences, characters and performances, and comes away with assumptions challenged, and above all, with enthusiasm renewed for the films of this period, all too often neglected and here finally given the analysis and the perfectly filled-in backdrop which enables them to shine.

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