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POSTMODERN ROMANCE: REPETITION OF ENCOUNTERS AS A MATER STUDIORUM OF A LOVE CASE

Summary

In this paper I shall negotiate repetition of romantic encounters in following contemporary Hollywood romcoms: High Fidelity, 13 Going On 30, 50 First Dates and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, as well as their narrative temporality and motives of memory and nostalgia. I shall analyze the convergence of their nonlinear narrative structure towards melodrama and film noir through Rick Altman's semantic/syntax model. I shall also negotiate the aforementioned romcoms as modern equivalents of "comedies of a remarriage".

Keywords

romcom (romantic comedy), narrative temporality, memory, nostalgia, semantic and syntax, hybridization, happy end

Introduction

The fantasy or memory of the intense love affair – something like a tape of an old movie reel and which I call the “lover’s reel” – is stored away in the mind. It is replayed at intervals, sometimes involuntarily. It can also be cut, spliced, and edited, all depending on cues to memory and current need. In the end, whether or not mutual love is sustained in external reality, the memory of it is preserved and continues to enrich the lover.

(Person 2006: 106).

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During almost eight decades, romantic comedy (romcom) as genre has gone through a considerable evolution. Stemming from screwball comedy, contemporary romcom has diverged and become largely hybridized especially during the 80s, the 90s and finally during the 2000s, having appropriated narrative conventions and models from other genres, namely *film noir*, (romantic) melodrama, adventure and SF. The very process has been initiated through a significant exploitation of a certain narrative motif, which, in film history and criticism, has been exclusively attributed to *film noir* and war and romantic melodrama, until it became prominent in romantic comedy sub-genres such as *relationship stories*² in the late 70s and 80s. This motif is *memory* and in this paper I shall define it both as a set of cognitive capacity by which we retain information and reconstruct our experiences from the past³ and the very content of this domain. Some of the famous cinematic examples based on some memory aspects (reminiscence, remembrance, recall, retrospection) narrating couple's love life and temptations, doubts, anxiety and fears, are Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1976), F.F. Coppola's *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), Rob Reiner's *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) and Harold Ramis's *Groundhog's Day* (1993). Due to memory process, protagonists reconstruct their experiences from the past, re-evaluate their relationship, revive their moments spent together, reposit their roles and expectations. Thus, the film narrative becomes nonlinear due to considerable use of flashbacks in manipulating narrative temporality. In the last few decades in memory studies, conjoined with the notion of memory, emerged a motif of nostalgia, a longing for returning to the idealized past. Both memory and nostalgia became prominent in the late 90s and 2000s contemporary romcom narratives significantly questioning this very genre conventions. I shall analyze the 2000s romcoms which narrate importance of memory and nostalgic feeling of loss – *High Fidelity* (Stephen Frears, 2000), *13 Going on 30* (Garry Winick, 2004), *50 First Dates* (Peter Segal, 2004) and radically challenging *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michael Gondry, 2004).

2 See David R. Shumway's study on *relationship stories* in Shumway 2003 – those films focus on the quality of couple's relationship itself at the expense of the initial situation that brought them together.

3 See John Sutton's elaboration of memory in the light of cognitive sciences, philosophy and psychology in Sutton 2003.

Destabilizing syntax

In his seminal paper *A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre*, negotiating inadequacy of both ritual and ideological approach in genre theory, Rick Altman proposes a combined model of generic analysis – a **semantic/syntactic** approach. Altman finds that “[...] no major genre remains unchanged over the many decades of its existence” suggesting that “[...] either a relatively stable set of semantic givens is developed through syntactic experimentation into a coherent and durable syntax, or an already existing syntax adopts a new set of semantic elements” (Altman 2003:35). Now, let us locate the stages in this semantic/syntactic dynamics in contemporary romcom evolution. Let us first ponder semantic and syntactic elements of romcom genre using Altman’s distinction of semantic elements as genre’s ‘building blocks’ and syntactic elements as structures in which semantic elements are arranged, in other words – syntactic elements represent the narrative structure in which the (semantic) content fits in. Bearing this in mind, **semantic** elements of the romcom include themes such as gender based conflict, romantic encounters, flirting, dating, courtship, infidelity; characters: usually heterosexual (attractive) younger couple (up to late 30s), single, or divorced or divorced-to-be, desiring to meet the ‘other half’ or on the contrary, reluctant in this matter; motives –fortunate accidents, blind dates, missing dates; props: flowers, wedding rings, presents; places: restaurants, cafes, bedrooms, bathrooms, parks; situations: unanswered phone calls, quarrels, breakups, therapy sessions... Those semantic elements are arranged in a following **syntax**: typical narrative strategy of the romcom implies a love encounter set in an unusual context, at first there is a reluctance and unwillingness to commit and there are various obstacles (social, psychological, spatial or temporal) and later on the couple falls in love, admitting the feeling and finally there’s readiness to commit. Those steps, those levels of progressions in encounters of the couple culminate in final union which colors the narrative structure. In contemporary romcoms dealing with protagonists memory (and memories) such **linear syntax** is no longer sustained. Their syntax converges the narrative structure of classical romantic melodrama and *film noir* in which temporality is deconstructed. Prominent use of flashback technique (and not so often of flashforward) as well as voice-over narration tend to destabilize conventional romcom syntax thus hybridizing this genre. And, in addition, the very **semantic** elements are either introduced in lower key (no excess of clichés) or through irony towards those Zuckerwasser clichés as well as self-irony. Let us briefly consider some of the **syntactic** experiments in romcom genre of the 2000s.

50 *First Dates* is a story of a local Hawaiian playboy (starring Adam Sandler), a notorious womanizer who leaves every woman he sleeps with first thing in the morning, but he falls in love with a girl (starring Drew Barrymore) suffering from anterograde amnesia, incapable of creating new memories due to a car accident and a brain damage. Every morning her memory of the former day and all the encounters is being erased, her memory is being reset and male character has to perform various strategies to win her affection again. For him, encounters are repetitive, for her, it's always the first time, and this continuous process is being elaborated 50 times until she finally accepts the fact they've already met and even got married by watching video tape of a wedding ceremony.

In ***High Fidelity*** a handsome 30something man, an alternative music fan (starring John Cusack) has been dumped by his girlfriend who finds him unsuitable for marriage. Protagonist then makes his "top 5" – the most dramatic breakups of his life only to realize that she was the one worth living for. Narration model in ***High Fidelity*** represents *by the book* model of multiple flashbacks – each time protagonist reminisces episodes with former lovers, a new framed narrative opens. At the same time, he is the narrator (using voice-over narration), and the main character, and he speaks to directly to the camera addressing the audience.

In ***13 Going on 30*** a teenage girl who's wish to become attractive 30year old comes true on her 13th birthday (adult heroine performed by Jennifer Garner); here temporal narration is deconstructed using flashforward; then, since the leap in the future doesn't satisfy female protagonists perception of herself, she magically goes back to the (changed) past to reunite with her chubby male friend who adores her, it's a flashback where all the elements for a happy life settle down and with another flashforward heroine gets into the new and happy future, similiar to the narrative strategy in famous SF with romance elements - ***Back to the Future*** trilogy.

In ***Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*** a male protagonist who is an unreliable narrator (starring Jim Carrey) undergoes a futuristic medical procedure, to literally erase all the memories of his ex-girlfriend (starring Kate Winslet) from his mind, regretting in the middle of the process and deciding to save the fond memories and hide them deep inside. And finally after all the failures that their relationship went through, the couple decides to reunite. Christopher Nolan's ***Memento*** aside, ***Eternal Sunshine*** possesses one of the most complicated narrative structures ever, with continuous flashback/flash-

forward interplay. Although aware that labeling *Eternal Sunshine* as romcom genre might be disputable I find this radical narrative much closer to romcom than to drama or romantic melodrama. One is for sure, it belongs to *relationship stories* corpus in Shumway's terminology examining the quality of relationship. Secondly, the story of a couple erasing memories of each other almost simultaneously bears ironic (not melodramatic) potential. Although the tone of the film becomes much darker and melancholic as the memories of the male hero progress and dissolve at the same time, the narrative contains humorous and absurd like situations, especially in his constructed past and memories of his childhood, and those absurd and farcical Freudian episodes constantly create comic relief. Third, female character, Clementine, resembles classic *screwball* heroines – stubborn, witty, odd, proactive, bold and uninhibited, making strong counterpoint to the male character. Hence, the **semantic** remains more or less stable, but what happens to the narrative structures of all the aforementioned films is that they capitalize narrative conventions of genres of melodrama and *film noir* thus undergoing a major **syntax** shift.

“Boy gets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back”⁴ ad infinitum

Acknowledging the following definition proposed by Tamar Jeffers McDonald: “A romantic comedy is a film which has its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion” (McDonald, 2007:9) let us dwell on the particular adverb – ‘almost’. In this definition, a *quest* for love is much more emphasized than the very *success* of the quest. The conclusion of the romcom narrative is usually a happy one – after continuous ups and downs, all the obstacles and doubts, the couple remains together, not necessarily married, but in the perspective it's been suggested that this union would last – in *High Fidelity* after scrutinizing all his significant relationships, male hero discovers that only the latest was worthwhile so the couple gets back together with a marriage proposal at the end ; in *13 Going On 30* a grown up heroine finally reveals her affection to her male friend who is now about to get married to someone else but who has always loved her. Thus this cathartic moment of revelation activates the magic again so she's 13 again in the changed chronotope where she can choose to marry her friend in the future. In *50 First Dates* couple eventually gets married and the insurance of the union is fre-

4 See Shumway's exhibit of a standard tripartite plot in a romantic narrative in Shumway 2003:157

quent reminder of the love and affection literally recorded. Finally, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* has an open ending – the first scene of the film shows male character after the procedure of erasing memory, the last scene narrates the union of the couple in the Montauk beach, the ultimate nostalgic *topos* – the couple is alone, running forwards into the horizon, in dreamlike atmosphere of snow and light, suggesting an utopian chronotope. In protagonist's reminiscences couple meets again and again with a vague familiar feeling, the feeling that they have already met, they start the romance lying on the frozen lake under the stars, and consequently they break up and meet again realizing not only that their love is predestined but they are also condemned to each other. Continuous reaffirmation becomes protagonists' *modus vivendi*. Couple never gets married, female character only jokes about them getting married, but the narrative emphasizes the importance of the relationship, of the bond itself, so although this ominous erase/rewind/record process might be nightmarish, the final shot suggest potential happy-ending. And this narrative logic surprisingly follows what Kathrina Glitre detects in her study of romantic comedies from 1935-1964: "Far from a straightforward chain of causal events, the structure of narrative comedy tends to be associated with the convolutions of accident, coincidence, repetition, reversal and surprise" (Glitre 2006:15). And, on the other hand, as Stanley Cavell finds in his study dealing with screwball sub-genre named *comedy of remarriage*: „[...] the validity of marriage takes a willingness for repetition, the willingness for remarriage. Only those can genuinely marry who are already married“ (Cavell 1981: 126-127). Thus the repetition signals the instability and the fragility of love affairs and relationships, the marriage in this case stands for every monogamous relationship. This repetition is a *mater studiorum* of a love case, and the aforementioned nonlinear narratives emphasize an urge for an emotional maturation. Happy ending is possible with a mutual agreement on affirmation of couple's absolute, irrevocable and predestined bond.

Memory and nostalgia as substitutes for love

Nostalgia phenomenon, once designating the longing and mourning over the place called "home", now over the irreversible character of time, became a symptom of postmodern time. In her study *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym defines it as:

[...] a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance

relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images — of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface (Boym 2001: xiii-xiv).

Aforementioned examples of contemporary romcoms question the stability of *they-lived-happily-ever-after* myth. This myth becomes meta-stable in the postmodern reference system of destabilizing certainty and identity. In the process of reevaluating their relationship, contemporary romcom protagonists usually attribute ideal elements to their past experiences or to the early stages of the very same relationship. “We can never fully come to terms with the past, we can never justly represent it” says author Diane Elam, continuing: “[...] the difference between realism and postmodern romance can be seen in terms of remembering and forgetting: while realism remembers the past so as to forget it, the postmodern romance re-members the past, re-situates its temporality, in order to make the past impossible to forget” (Elam 1992:15). Protagonists aren’t capable of coming to terms with their sentimental past – it resurrects and resurfaces in the moments of emotional crisis. Memory, reminiscence and nostalgia, the return to the much better and fonder past compensate the lack of the explicate happy ending in some of the narratives such as *Eternal Sunshine*. Or, the nostalgic quality of a former relationship or bond forces the protagonist to re-examine it and to start with the same partner anew. Postmodern nostalgia feeling grows stronger with the notion of irreversibility of time⁵. All those examples clearly demonstrate that it’s possible for time to become reversible with the help of the magic called love. Thus, postmodern romance myth maintains itself through ironic eternal repetition of love encounters and elusive protagonists’ identity. From initial longing to return home, romcom resolves this longing with coming back home as coming back to the state of union, to *feel like home* is possible only with the romantic partner. To return home equals to restore the relationship. The very need of restoration shows lack, rupture and insufficiency of the present state.

Subsistence of romcom genre, with all the divergences and hybridization, is evident and following Altman’s advocacy, we can negotiate romcom as a region where the ritual values of the audience (who desires to see the premise of the eternal love come to life) coincide with Hollywood’s ideological val-

5 More on the elaboration of irreversibility of time and the nostalgia problem proposed by Vladimir Jankélévitch and scrutinized in a postmodern frame see Hutchion 1998.

ues (American dream come true). Therefore this genre, although continually questioning and ironizing the possibility of eternal happiness, shall actually remain eternal and imperishable genre.

And let me conclude this paper with a famous quote from a Russian expatriate poet, Joseph Brodsky, advocating analogy of the perhaps most important loci of one's identity: "If there's any substitute for love, it's memory. To memorize, then, is to restore intimacy" (Brodsky 1981).

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POSTMODERNA ROMANSA: REPETICIJA SUSRETA KAO *MATER STUDIORUM* LJUBAVNOG SLUČAJA

Apstrakt

U ovom radu razmatram nelinearne narative savremenih holivudskih romantičnih komedija (skrać. romkom): High Fidelity, Danas 13 sutra 30, 50 prvih poljubaca, kao i radikalni Večni sjaj besprekornog uma, njihovu dekonstrukciju narativne temporalnosti, motive sećanja i nostalgije, a sve u pokušaju da demonstriram da je savremeni romkom postao umnogome hibridizovan.

Hibridizacija ovog žanra dogodila se: 1) konvergencijom njegove nelinearne narativne strukture prema melodrami i žanru film noir čija se osobena struktura sastoji u eksploataciji lajtmotiva sećanja uz upotrebu flešbeka, 2) problematizovanjem same konvencije hepienda (npr. u slučaju Večnog sjaja besprekornog uma, koji poseduje neke od tropa karakterističnih za romkom ali istovremeno i sugestivni otvoren kraj), 3) aproprijacijom žanrovskih modela i uslovnosti fantastike i naučne fantastike (dominantno u ostvarenju Danas 13 sutra 30 kao i u Večnom sjaju besprekornog uma, u kojem se sećanje doslovno briše iz uma protagoniste). Koristeći teorijsku platformu Rika Altmana, pokazujem da je romantična komedija doživela hibridizaciju i divergenciju žanra kroz semantičko-sintaksnu ravan, te se savremeni romkom pozicionira u preseku sintakse („rečeničnog sklopa“) melodrame i film noir-a i semantike (gradivnih jedinica filmske priče) tzv. „otkačene“ komedije, skrubola.

Takođe, razmatram i pomenute romkome kao moderne ekvivalente podžanrova kao što su „komedije ponovnog venčanja“ (vođena sintagmom Stenlija Kavela) i „priče o vezama“ (koje je definisao Robert Šamvej). Konačno, inkorporiram ove romkome u mit o postmodernoj romansi koji održava sam sebe u večnoj i ironičnoj repetitiji ljubavnih susreta izazvanoj kontinuiranim osećajem nostalgije kao žaljenjem za nepovratnošću vremena.

Ključne reči: romkom (romantična komedija), narativna temporalnost, sećanje, nostalgija, semantika i sintaksa, hepiend.