# Love is a Many-Person'd Thing: Multi-Protagonist Tales of Contemporary Desire

María del Mar Azcona Montoliu
Universidad de Zaragoza
maazcona@unizar.es

Film critics (and many spectators) often regard romantic comedy as one of the most formulaic and conservative of film genres. Its rigid and predictable narrative structure is routinely dismissed together with its defence of traditional gender roles, heterosexuality and patriarchal values. However, as is usually the case, a closer look at the individual texts tells a different story. This article explores the formal, ideological and cultural consequences of the increasingly frequent combination of the multi-protagonist genre and romantic comedies in contemporary cinema. As will be argued, through the use of the conventions of these two genres, multi-protagonist romantic comedies manage to offer a portrayal of contemporary intimate and affective matters which, contrary to romantic comedy's 'same old story', is filled with discordant voices, discourses and practices. This constitutes a very apt reflection of the turmoil of voices and the confusion surrounding intimate matters in contemporary societies. Within Film Studies, this generic combination suggests the urgent need to redefine romantic comedy in broader, more flexible terms.

Keywords: romantic comedy; multi-protagonist film; love; sex; intimacy; Giddens

Predecibles y conservadoras. He aquí los dos adjetivos más usados para describir las comedias románticas. Por una parte se critica la estructura narrativa de un género que, aparentemente, es incapaz de ofrecer alternativas a la fórmula chico-encuentra-chica, chico-pierde-chica, chico-recupera-chica. Por otro lado, dicha estructura va supuestamente acompañada de una defensa a ultranza de las relaciones heterosexuales y los roles de género tradicionales. Sin embargo, estas generalizaciones no hacen justicia a un género que, tal y como se explora en este artículo, esconde mucha más variación de la que puede parecer a simple vista. Las comedias románticas corales, surgidas de la combinación de las convenciones de la comedia romántica con el cine coral, ofrecen una representación de las relaciones amorosas y sexuales en la sociedad contemporánea mucho más plural, variada y en ocasiones contradictoria de lo que se suele esperar de un marco genérico en apariencia tan rígido. La visión de las relaciones íntimas que ofrecen estas películas no sólo constituye un reflejo muy apropiado de la proliferación de voces y discursos que rodean las relaciones amorosas y sexuales en la sociedad contemporánea, sino que también apunta la necesidad urgente de redefinir el género de una forma más acorde con la diversidad que se encuentra en los textos.

Palabras clave: comedia romántica; cine coral; amor; sexo; relaciones afectivas; Giddens

"Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds" (1986: ll. 2-3), wrote Shakespeare almost five hundred years ago. This famous defence of the



©Universitat de Barcelona

apparently immutable nature of love could easily be applied to the film genre that has traditionally dealt with the celebration of love: the romantic comedy. Once and again, this genre is described in both popular and academic criticism as one of the most formulaic and conservative of film genres. Its rigid and predictable narrative structure is routinely dismissed, together with its defence of traditional gender roles, heterosexuality and patriarchal values. Though the existence of 'traditions' or 'tendencies' within the genre is undeniable—screwball comedies, sex comedies, nervous romances, new romances and deception narratives among others—it is usually claimed that, by privileging the immutable nature of romantic love, the genre has adapted to changing historical circumstances without allowing any essential changes either in its basic form or in its ideological premises. In one of his latest articles on the genre, for instance, Frank Krutnik claims that though "conceptualisations of love may be continually in flux—along with the broader configurations of romance, sexuality, gender identity and marriage—[…] the genre routinely celebrates it as an immutable, almost mystical force that guides two individuals who are 'made for each other' into one another's arms" (2002: 138). According to this view, no matter how contradictory and diverse contemporary utterances on love and sex may be, romantic comedy always manages to shape not only a coherent perspective out of them but usually from the same perspective.

A similar attitude is shown towards the genre's equally unchangeable narrative structure: romantic comedy is once and again defined as a "dual-focused narrative structure", it is "a particular type of story centred upon two lovers that is told in a particular manner" (Krutnik 2002: 132). Although more recently some critics have argued in favour of a more flexible approach to the genre's ideology and formal parameters (Deleyto 2009), its reliance on two individuals and the development of a single couple is felt to be so central that William Paul considers that one of the reasons that led to the demise of the genre in the 1970s and early 1980s was a movement from the individual to the social. For him, the comedies structured around the romance between two "glamorous individuals" were replaced by an interest in groups of people, which made romantic comedy, in the traditional view of the genre, impossible (2002: 118). Even if groups of characters are actually not as alien to the romantic comedy realm as Paul implies—as a matter of fact, those Shakespeare's comedies to which the genre is usually traced back are structured around groups of people and end up with more than one couple getting together, as happens, for instance, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer's Night Dream*—he is right to point out the genre's traditional concern with the development, trials and tribulations of two individuals getting together and overcoming all kinds of obstacles to form a unique and usually perfect couple.

However, if we look at some of the romantic comedies that have been released in the last two decades, a strong tendency has emerged within some of these films to forsake its customary interest in the tribulations of a single couple. Instead they explore intimate relationships and love and sex protocols within either a group of people linked to one another through family or friendship ties or an assortment of isolated characters or couples with little connection between them whatsoever. This group includes *Choose Me* (Alan Rudolph, 1984), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (Woody Allen, 1986), *Queens Logic* (Steve Rash, 1991), *Singles* (Cameron Crowe, 1992), *The Brothers McMullen* (Edward



©Universitat de Barcelona

Burns, 1995), *Denise Calls Up* (Hal Sawen, 1995), *Beautiful Girls* (Ted Demme, 1996), *The Real Blonde* (Tom DiCillo, 1997), *The Last Days of Disco* (Whit Stillman, 1998), *Playing by Heart* (Willard Carroll, 1998), *200 Cigarettes* (Risa Bramon García, 1999), *This Year's Love* (David Kane, 1999), *Sidewalks of New York* (Edward Burns, 2001), *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003) and *Friends with Money* (Nicole Holofcener, 2006). These comedies can be seen within the larger frame of the contemporary boom of multi-protagonist movies, a narrative pattern that has challenged the secular dominance of the single-protagonist story. The popularity, flexibility and diversity of this alternative template in recent years suggest that it may have captured some of the preoccupations, anxieties and hopes of our age in a particularly potent manner. In the course of the last twenty-five years or so, multi-protagonist movies have developed a series of characteristics and conventions which, by reappearing from one film to the next, have turned what was originally a narrative structure into a new genre. Although a detailed discussion of the genealogy and nature of these conventions clearly exceeds the scope of this article, a brief list would include the prevalence of contingency, chance and serendipity over cause-effect links between narrative events; the emphasis on the interconnectedness between apparently unrelated places, events and characters; meandering narratives in which nothing much seems to happen, and a general preference for open endings. These and other elements of the multi-narrative genre can be linked to cultural changes in contemporary society not only in the realm of economic, geopolitical and cultural globalization but also in the field of intimate matters and interpersonal relationships. By looking at a selection of examples, this article aims to explore the formal, ideological and cultural results of the increasingly frequent combination of the multi-protagonist genre and romantic comedy.

The ways in which the above-mentioned movies mix the conventions of the two genres are quite varied. In some of them, certain couples or characters may slightly stand out over the rest whereas, in others, the romantic comedy nature of some of the titles may even be called into question. However, all of them use conventions from these two genres by offering a portrayal of the ordinary lives of several characters and their intimate and interpersonal relationships within a more or less pervasive comic climate. Through the combined use of the conventions of the two genres, the films manage to offer a portrayal of contemporary intimate and affective matters that both incorporates some changes in the discourse of romantic love and makes room for other discourses which, though not replacing the romantic love ethic, have started to proliferate alongside it. As a result, the intimate panorama they reveal is one filled with discordant voices, discourses and practices—a very apt reflection of the turmoil of voices representing the confusion surrounding intimate matters in contemporary societies.

## A Polyphonic Intimate Panorama

The most obvious consequence of the combination of these two genres with respect to more traditional romantic comedies is that the number of characters and couples on the screen proliferates. Instead of a single privileged couple, what we get is an assortment of relationships which, among other things, allows for the articulation of different points of view on intimate matters and different



©Universitat de Barcelona

types and stages in liaisons. In *The Brothers McMullen*, for instance, younger siblings Patrick (Mike McGlone) and Barry (Edward Burns) endorse diametrically opposed views on love and relationships. While Patrick is a hopeless romantic and dreams of the marriage of true soul-mates, Barry is resolute about his bachelorhood and sees marriage as the road to perdition since it leaves men exposed and vulnerable. Therefore, marriage or any kind of commitment is, for him, something to be avoided at all costs. The eldest brother, Jack (Jack Mulcahy), represents a different option. Already married to somebody he regards as the perfect woman, his marital life is far from a haven of perfect bliss but rather the source of constant anxiety: the mere thought of being a father reminds him too much of the possibility of becoming somebody like his own father—who is continually described as a wife-beating, child-abusing alcoholic. His anxiety about fatherhood leads him to have an affair with Barry's ex-girlfriend, Ann (Elizabeth McKay), a divorced woman who deliberately gets involved with married men since she regards her partners' marital status as the key to the exclusively sexual relationship she is looking for. She embodies a rather under-represented view of marriage. No longer something to be treasured and preserved at all costs—as it is for Jack's wife—nor an obstacle standing in the way of true love—as it was for Mrs. McMullen (Catharine Bolz) until her husband's death—marriage is for her the way of ideally blocking love and other attachments from getting in the way of a relationship based exclusively on recreational sex. Although maybe not as culturally prestigious as the previous ones, Ann's view of intimate matters is shown to be as valid as those of the other women in the film. She is perfectly content with her choice and seeks nothing more. Though she is clearly the initiator of the affair, she is never portrayed as the seductive temptress of an anxiety-ridden man, but, rather, as an independent woman who knows what she wants and is consistent with her life choice.

By distributing the storytelling workload among the three siblings and the different characters and relationships around them, *The Brothers McMullen* manages to convey a variety of points of view and a portrayal of intimate matters which is far from monolithic. While some characters are looking for love and emotional attachments, others constantly flee them or consciously try to block them. As emerges from the film's discourses, characters want and get different things from life and love and, as a consequence, not all relationships need to follow the same rules. A similar diversity is found in *Playing by Heart*. Here the characters are involved in relationships governed by principles as diverse as romantic infatuation, the shadows of a past infidelity, the withdrawal from potential emotional attachments caused by a failed marriage, and an inclination for recreational sex as a way to fight marital apathy. Since each couple is going through a different stage in the relationship process—from the ups and downs of the initial stage through subsequent disillusionment and boredom**,** to the celebration of the 40$^{th}$ wedding anniversary under the cloud of disease and a past love affair—the film offers an overview of some of the potential routes that love, relationships and marriage may take without privileging any of them above the rest.

However, the use of a multi-protagonist narrative pattern is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the representation of a polyphonic intimate panorama. Certain single couple romantic comedies, like *Chasing Amy* (Kevin Smith, 1997) and *Secretary* (Steven Shainberg, 2002), manage to



©Universitat de Barcelona

include divergent voices and alternative intimate discourses**,** while some multi-protagonist romantic comedies may, in spite of their potential for and apparent diversity, end up with a much more homogeneous discourse. This is the case of *Love Actually*. From its very beginning, this film insists on showing the limitations of the tendency to identify the concept of love with just one of its types, romantic love. As the voice-over that opens the film puts it, love, in its many different forms, is everywhere, "often it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy but it's always there: fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, girlfriends, boyfriends, old friends". Though the film's twenty-odd characters and the different relationships that they get involved in would appear to warrant such diversity, most of them, apart from those cases of parental or fraternal love, are actually very similar to one another, all versions of the same heterosexual romantic love story. With the only instance of a lesbian relationship suspiciously lost in the film's final cut and only available in the DVD extras, and the only other attempt at a same-sex relationship safely protected by the code "let's get pissed and watch porn", the tendency to ignore other types of relationships is more than obvious. It is in fact the film's insistence on ignoring 'alternative' relationships that makes them all the more conspicuous by their absence. In *Love Actually*, heterosexual romantic love is not only presented as the norm but practically as the one and only option.

For all the potential of multi-protagonist romantic comedies to include a variety of relationships of similar narrative importance and governed by different principles, the case of *Love Actually* is not such an isolated case. Some multi-protagonist romantic comedies do not hesitate to include relationships structured around recreational sex—as happens in *The Brothers McMullen* and *Playing by Heart*, among others; lots of casual inconsequential sex—*200 Cigarettes*; homosexual desire—as happens in *Queens Logic* and *This Year's Love*; single motherhood as a conscious choice—as Maria (Rosario Dawson) does at the end of *Sidewalks of New York*, or even friendship as a sort of substitute for romantic love when it comes to establishing long-lasting bonds between individuals—as is the case of Steve (Campbell Scott) and Janet (Bridget Fonda) in *Singles*. However, most of them are still concerned with heterosexual couples trying to establish and maintain successful, and ideally long lasting, emotional relationships. Things being so, it could be argued that multi-protagonist romantic comedies often fall short of their narrative potential to represent contemporary diversity regarding sexual choices and practices. These limitations, however, should not make us overlook either those films that include less mainstream options or the fact that some of those apparently less polyphonic films may also manage, through their use of a specific narrative structure, to offer a portrayal of intimate affairs which undermines some long-held precepts about intimate relationships.

## Simple Twists of Fate

Contingency and chance are, as we have seen, one of the recurrent features of the multi-protagonist film genre. It is not that coincidence is not relevant to movies with single protagonists—after all it is difficult to think of a film that does not include a coincidence of one type or another—but multi-protagonist movies rely on the role of chance to such an extent that it sometimes becomes not only



©Universitat de Barcelona

the main structuring principle behind the action but also the actual focus of the narrative. As characters' paths converge, crisscross and then drift apart, it is difficult to predict whose paths are going to converge next, what the consequences of a coincidental encounter will be, or the ultimate link between those characters that, for most of the narrative, have had no connection whatsoever. When combined with the conventions of romantic comedy, multi-protagonist films' predilection for the role of chance will become the structuring force behind characters' emotional and sexual arrangements, a formal reflection of the capricious and contingent nature of love and sexual desire.

As Kristin Thompson has pointed out, this is one of the reasons behind the use of a multi-protagonist narrative structure in Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters*, a film that employs unexpected plot twists and balances roughly equally prominent characters against one another in order to make unpredictability its central concern. During the two-year period in which the action takes place, love interests, sexual partners and characters' goals change in unexpected ways—as shown, for instance, by Holly's (Dianne Wiest) sudden decision to become a writer and Mickey's (Woody Allen) resolution to quit his job. The final romance between Mickey and Holly comes as a surprise since the two had been barely seen together before (1999: 307-308). Just as unexpected are the romance between Lee (Barbara Hershey) and her literature teacher and the survival of Elliot (Michael Caine) and Hannah's (Mia Farrow) marriage. A similar point is made in the British film *This Year's Love* and in Edward Burns's *Sidewalks of New York*, where characters keep exchanging partners in surprising ways and moving from one relationship to another, showing how unexpected and fleeting love and sexual attachments are. An extreme case of unpredictability is the final arrangement of the mostly casual sexual encounters in *200 Cigarettes*, where almost everybody ends up with the person that spectators could have least expected. In these films, the depiction of love and sexual affairs as ruled by chance is similar to a never-ending partner-swapping dance which, while reflecting how unpredictable love and sexual entanglements may be, also points to the ephemeral and short-lived nature of most of these arrangements, a pattern already explored half a century ago in the early multi-protagonist romantic comedy *La ronde* (Max Ophüls, 1950). At the same time, by bringing to the fore the links between the characters, this constant partner-swapping creates a random web which, inevitably, recalls some of the social and scientific discourses of the late 1980s and 1990s. In different but related ways, network theory, the small world phenomenon and 'six degrees of separation' experiments have emphasized the circuitry and random nature of human interaction, which has in turn influenced the basic narrative structure of contemporary multi-protagonist movies in general (Everett 2005).

The unpredictability of love is a well-known convention: love in the romantic tradition is never a matter of volition. Rather, it is something people fall for even against their will and it is usually unplanned, unexpected and, therefore, unpredictable. However, the constant reshuffling of couples that happens in these movies reflects a radical departure from the romantic love paradigm. Instead of emphasizing the power of love to create an immutable and everlasting bond between two individuals, these texts portray love as a force that fades out and eventually disappears. Forever has all of a sudden become shorter and most relationships are no longer depicted as long-lasting but as short-lived and ephemeral.



©Universitat de Barcelona

According to sociologist Anthony Giddens, the shortening of romantic love's "forever" to "for now" is precisely one of the most remarkable shifts regarding intimate matters that took place in the second half of the 20th century. For him, the ideal of romantic love was shattered by the advent of feminism and the sexual revolution of the 1960s and nowadays "romantic love", with its emphasis on the special person and its everlasting quality, no longer represents the highest aspiration of contemporary men and women. It has been replaced by what he calls "confluent love", a kind of love which he defines as active, contingent and which "excludes the 'forever' and 'one-and-only' qualities of the romantic love complex" (1992: 61-63). In confluent love, the idea of the special person recedes while it is the special relationship that really matters. For Giddens, this kind of love is the main component of what he terms "pure relationship", which he defines as a social relation which presumes equality for both its members and which is "entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only insofar as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it" (1992: 58). One of the essential features of pure relationships—which are not restricted to the domains of sexuality and marriage but also applicable to friendship ties, for example—is that they are not anchored in any external conditions. Therefore, they can be terminated more or less at will by either partner at any particular moment. The separating and divorcing society of today is a consequence of marriages and emotional relationships becoming closer to the pure relationship, that is, to relationships initiated and kept going for as long as they deliver emotional satisfaction to the parties concerned. With the advent of the pure relationship, the romantic ideal of a life-long emotional attachment has been replaced by a life-long string of relationships in any of various forms, including marriage, cohabitation or dating.

In their depiction of characters falling in and out of love and getting involved in different relationships, multi-protagonist romantic comedies are a suitable formal representation of some of the changes in intimate matters described by Giddens. As Mickey observes at the end of *Hannah*, the heart is revealed—to the character's surprise—as a "very resilient little muscle". Most characters in multi-protagonist romantic comedies are already familiar with the experience of broken relationships, which brings them closer to Giddens's notions of confluent love and pure relationships than to the romantic love tradition of one true love. Besides, in most cases, the way their subsequent affairs start and what they are looking for in potential partners is very far removed from romantic ideals. Relationships seem to be plagued with fear and hesitation; characters are hardly swept off their feet. Not surprisingly, when romantic love conventions come to the fore, they are either openly criticized—as Barry and Jack do in *The Brothers McMullen* and Griffin (Stanley Tucci) in *Sidewalks of New York*—or portrayed as an unattainable illusory goal—in *The Brothers McMullen*, the youngest brother's deeply felt belief in romantic true love sounds as impossible to materialize as the Catholic precepts regarding sexuality that he is unable to follow in spite of his deeply held religious beliefs. In other cases they are revealed as a carefully staged construction that hides a mundane and completely unromantic reality—as shown by the 'released gas' incident behind the image of 'eternal love' in *The Real Blonde*. The viability of the romantic love tradition is also questioned by making young and apparently



©Universitat de Barcelona

naïve characters its fiercest defendants, as is the case of Sam (Thomas Sangster) in *Love Actually* and Martie (Natalie Portman) in *Beautiful Girls*—where her apparently sincere belief in Willie (Timothy Hutton) and her being soul-mates sharply contrasts with the unromantic relationships in which the rest of characters are involved.

## Intimacy and Romance

In his book *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy and the Marriage Crisis,* David Shumway has argued that the changes in intimate matters that took place in the second half of the 20th century soon required a new discourse that gave people the tools to make sense of their newly discovered relationships. The resulting discourse of intimacy was mainly modelled on the shortcomings of the romantic love discourse and influenced by 1930s definitions of companionate marriage—with its expectations of closeness, friendship and psychological compatibility between the members of the couple—second-wave feminism—with its emphasis on equality—and the models and methods of family therapy—that took the relationship between the husband and the wife and not the husband alone or the wife alone as the patient (2003: 135-39). If romantic love describes what 'true love' is supposed to be, intimacy deals with the way the new cultural construction called 'relationships' actually works. If romantic love promises passion, adventure and intense emotion, the discourse of intimacy replaces them by commitment, deep communication, friendship, satisfactory sex life and the right degree of autonomy. It is precisely this discourse that Joe (Matthew Modine) is referring to in *The Real Blonde* in a fantasized scene in which he opens his heart to a blonde girl he sees through a bar window: "I love my girlfriend but I don't think she understands me in a real emotional or sexual way". As emerges from Joe's dissatisfaction, it is not the apparently much simpler concept of love but some of the expectations that the discourse of intimacy ascribes to relationships that are his real problem—the achievement of mutual sexual satisfaction being a key element in determining the good health of a relationship (Giddens 1992: 62-64). The discourse of intimacy was not the panacea that did away in one swoop with all the problems that people encountered when dealing with relationships. Rather, it complicated things in a different way. Under its appearance as bearer of the truth about love and relationships, it created certain expectations about emotional and psychological closeness between partners and a perfect combination of intimacy and autonomy which were probably as impossible to attain as the rapture promised by the romantic love tradition.

Shumway is quick to point out that the discourse of intimacy did not completely banish the romantic love tradition from the cultural sphere but rather emerged alongside it. This is also one of the findings of Ann Swidler's sociological investigation on middle-class U.S. Americans' views on love: the coexistence of two major and apparently opposite discourses on love, the romantic and the prosaic-realistic one. While the romantic view describes love as a sudden, certain, powerful and especially everlasting force between two individuals, the prosaic-realistic discourse claims that love is not sudden and certain but ambivalent and confusing and, as a consequence, it requires a great deal of self-examination. Instead of describing love as immutable, the prosaic-



©Universitat de Barcelona

realistic view of love claims that it is inevitably liable to constant change through time—*pace* Shakespeare, this kind of love does actually alter "when it alteration finds"—which may lead to its reinforcement or its disappearance. In the face of a love that may die out, the romantic convention of just one true love is replaced by the convention that a variety of people can be loved, which provides the degree of hope in the future required after the experience of a failed relationship. Moreover, Swidler, like Shumway, constantly emphasizes that, though the prosaic-realistic view of love is usually viewed as the real one, it is as historically specific and culturally constructed as its romantic counterpart.

What Swidler found surprising was not the ability of the mythic view of love to survive as an ideal and as discourse in spite of present-day attitudes and practices but rather the ease with which the individuals she interviewed could change from one to the other depending on the situation that they had to deal with (2001: 117). They usually referred to the romantic view of love with scepticism or outright disdain. It was the prosaic view that was continually invoked to explain ongoing relationships and to account for the shortcomings of the romantic love complex—the need to make constant compromises and the acceptance of the mundane demands of life, and not the moments of passion and bliss, as the 'normal' state of a relationship. However, in the midst of this prosaic-realistic view, individuals constantly resorted to the romantic love discourse in order to face such decisive issues as whether to marry somebody or not**,** or to leave somebody or not. The reason why people keep invoking the culture of romantic love at specific moments is because most relationships—married and not married—are still modelled on the romantic love ideal: an exclusive, all-or-nothing and enduring arrangement between two people.

Though the experience of present-day relationships leaves no doubt about their proximity to Giddens's model of confluent love and pure relationships—divorce rates constituting important evidence though not the only one—it seems that, as both Shumway and Swidler show, romantic love ideals have by no means completely disappeared from the picture. The persistence of some of the elements of the romantic love tradition could be interpreted as a way to counteract some of the anxieties that, as Giddens has pointed out, have inevitably accompanied the re-modelling of interpersonal relationships according to the parameters of the pure relationship. For all their positive elements and emotional rewards, pure relationships are also a source of anxiety because they are, by their own nature, contingent. Therefore, those in this type of relationship are always, even if only unconsciously, aware of the possibility of its dissolution (1991: 186-87). Although the romantic love complex can never erase this ever-present threat, its ideal of a long-lasting relationship gives individuals the necessary hope to take the risk to get involved in a new relationship after a failed one. When the fictional interviewer in *Sidewalks of New York* asks Tommy (Edward Burns) whether, after a recent break-up, he is not scared of getting hurt again in the future, his reply suggests that he regards broken hearts and failed relationships as "the price you gotta pay to potentially be happy". He knows that relationships do not last forever. However, in the face of repeated failures, it is the romantic love ideal of the happily-ever-after that gives him the strength to keep on trying.

In the light of these apparently incompatible but actually coexistent views of love and intimate matters, we are left with a heterogeneous and at some points contradictory love culture. People are faced with constant evidence of the



©Universitat de Barcelona

contingent nature of most relationships in the form of divorces, break-ups and serial monogamy. Nevertheless, there is still some craving for the life-long quality of the romantic love tradition. Multi-protagonist romantic comedies seem to be particularly well equipped to deal with the coexistence of these two traditions and the contradictions that they sometimes bring to the surface. As characters' narrative lines are affected by chance meetings and they move from one partner to the next, intimate relationships and marriages are portrayed as subject to continuous revision and shown to be generally short-lived. Relationships are portrayed as being ruled by anything but romantic ideals but some characters still reveal a heartfelt belief in romance and its conventions.

The British multi-protagonist romantic comedy *This Year's Love* is a good example of this internal contradiction. This film follows the lives of six different characters through a three-year period. Each year they are paired off in different sexual arrangements which, in one case, include a same-sex relationship. The characters get together, talk about love and commitment, make plans for the future and then each relationship ends and a new one takes its place. However, the ideal of romantic love still lingers in the back of their minds as is implied by one of them saying that it is only after seven relationships that the "right one", that is, the one that will last forever comes along. When she realizes that the partner her friend has just broken up with was number eight, the theory is not immediately dismissed. Rather, she tries to justify its prevalence by claiming that one of the seven relationships did not really count. A similar contradiction seems to lie at the heart of the film's main theme whose refrain, "This year's love had better last", refers to the contingent and ephemeral nature of love relationships while still betraying a weak and remote hope in the possibility of establishing a lasting bond with another person. *This Year's Love*, however, does not satisfy characters' desires for permanence and stability. As the film ends, one of the initial couples gets together again while the rest of characters are seen about to start new relationships with different partners. Though the film has to end, it makes clear that life and love go on and the different sexual arrangements that we have witnessed in the previous two hours are the best evidence that these new relationships will not be any different from the ones we have seen before.

The usually open endings of multi-protagonist films are an appropriate formal representation of the contradictions between these discourses and the never-ending nature of serial monogamy. Since multi-protagonist films tend to portray characters lacking in clear-cut goals or problems, it is usually difficult for the endings to show a final resolution of the affairs. Most of them seem to reject the solid closure that, according to Neupert (1995: 102), satisfies individual and social desire for moral authority and offers stability and a purposeful interpretation of life; a type of closure that usually stands in sharp contrast to the chance and alterity found in the world around us. In accordance with their depiction of love and sexual relationships as transient and casual arrangements between people, the resolutions tend to be contingent as well. In some of them the situation at the end is very similar to that at the beginning and characters seem to have neither changed nor learnt anything about themselves. The ending of *The Real Blonde* shows Joe (Matthew Modine) and Mary (Catherine Keener) finally having sex as a way of both expressing their love for each other and overcoming their crisis. However, the similarities of this final scene with the opening one are too obvious to make us think that their troubles are finally over.



©Universitat de Barcelona

Rather than a definite ending to the couple's problems, this seems an acknowledgement of relationships as the site of constant struggle**,** plagued by crises and, hopefully, reconciliations. In *Beautiful Girls*, Willie (Timothy Hutton) makes the on-the-spot decision to go back to New York with Tracy (Annabeth Gish) but, as he confesses to Moe (Noah Emmerich), he has not solved any of the doubts that took him to Knight's Ridge in the first place. The somehow never-ending nature of the characters' troubles is formally reinforced by the last shot which, instead of following Willie and Tracy on their way back to New York, stays in the Ridge, the village where, as is said several times, "nothing changes but the seasons".

Therefore, multi-protagonist romantic comedies stop rather than end. Though some couples may get formed at the end, the films always tend to make clear that the final arrangement is just as provisional as the previous ones. This is, for instance, the case of *Sidewalks of New York* in which the lives of six different characters crisscross while they talk about love and sex and get involved in different relationships. Although some of the characters state several times that they are looking for stability, the film's fragmented narrative structure—where segments showing its goal-bereft characters' lives are interspersed with fragments of the characters looking directly at the camera and talking about their lives in a documentary-like manner—undermines the possibility of any teleological narrative and, accordingly, the final pairing-off of some of the characters does not seem more stable than any of the arrangements we have witnessed before. The never-ending nature of the process is made clear by Tommy at the very end: "We are searching for that thing that we have so much trouble in finding but, you know, maybe that's part of the fun of the whole thing".

While conventional romantic comedies either saw a wedding, or the promise of one, or at least the promise of eternal love and a stable relationship as the final stage of the courting process, the lack of a final resolution in multi-protagonist romantic comedies implies that, as a consequence of certain cultural changes in the notion of love, contemporary relationships are a continuous process where one cannot talk about a final stage any longer. Therefore, even the few multi-protagonist romantic comedies that include a wedding at the end of some of the narrative lines cannot help questioning the definitive nature of that arrangement. *Choose Me*, for instance, is structured around the coincidental meetings which intertwine the lives of five L.A. residents. Out of mostly coincidence, former-prostitute Eve (Lesley Ann Warren) ends up marrying Mickey (Keith Carradine), a character that has the habit of proposing to every woman he kisses. On the trip to Las Vegas somebody asks Eve whether she is in Las Vegas gambling, to which she answers "You could call it that, I'm on my honeymoon". The film ends with a close-up of both Mickey and Eve in which we can glimpse her attitude towards the future by seeing her face change from a smile to an expression which evokes a myriad of feelings: uncertainty, questioning, pensiveness, shock, resignation, and fear.

Rather than convey a belief in the utopian possibilities of these final couples—as do other romantic comedies in which improbable couples get formed at the end—the open endings of multi-protagonist romantic comedies reinforce the idea of intimate relationships as contingent and short-lived, subject to constant change and plagued by uncertainty. In this respect, a theory of romantic comedy that continues to posit the uniqueness of the couple, the



©Universitat de Barcelona

exclusivity of their love and the 'always and forever' as the only possible ideology monolithically reflected by the films is revealed as clearly insufficient to accommodate the generic combination that has been explored here. Many romantic comedies may continue to put forward the 'love defeats everything' romantic discourse to fit into the traditional 'boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy wins girl' structure, but the genre, in its present form, has more than one type of story to tell. The crisis of relationships and marriage; the proliferation of intimate options offered by contemporary society; the interconnectedness between people as a consequence of recent cultural changes and globalization processes, and the prevalence of the pure relationship over romantic love are all factors that have affected the representation of intimate matters in romantic comedy. Like romantic love, romantic comedy may well not be what it used to be, but, through such new developments as its combination with the multi-protagonist movie, it still stands not only as one of the most popular film genres but also as a cultural discourse at the forefront of the representation of desire and intimacy.[1]

## Works Cited


Deleyto, Celestino 2009: *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy.* Manchester: Manchester UP. Forthcoming.

Everett, Wendy 2005: "Fractal Film and the Architecture of Complexity". *Studies in European Cinema* 2.3: 159-71.

Giddens, Anthony 1991: Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. Cambridge: Polity P.

—— 1992: *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity P.

Krutnik, Frank 2002: "Conforming Passions?: Contemporary Romantic Comedy". *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood.* Ed. Steve Neale. London: British Film Institute. 130-47.

Neupert, Richard 1995: *The End: Narration and Closure in the Cinema.* Detroit: Wayne State UP.

Paul, William 2002: "The Impossibility of Romance: Hollywood Comedy, 1978-1999". *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*. Ed. Steve Neale. London: British Film Institute.

Shakespeare, William 1986 (1609): "Sonnet 116". *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. New York and London: Norton.

Shumway, David R. 2003: *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy and the Marriage Crisis.* New York and London: New York UP.

Swidler, Ann 2001: *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters.* Chicago and London: The U of Chicago P.

Thompson, Kristin 1999: *Storytelling in the New Hollywood.* Cambridge, MA. and London: Harvard UP.



[1] Research towards this essay was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education, project number BFF2001-2564, and the Diputación General de Aragón, project ref. H12. I would also like to thank Celestino Deleyto for his comments on an earlier version of this article.




©Universitat de Barcelona

## Films Cited

*200 Cigarettes* (Risa Bramon García, 1999)
*Beautiful Girls* (Ted Demme, 1996)
*Brothers McMullen*, *The* (Edward Burns, 1995)
*Chasing Amy* (Kevin Smith, 1997)
*Choose Me* (Alan Rudolph, 1984)
*Denise Calls Up* (Hal Sawen, 1995)
*Friends with Money* (Nicole Holofcener, 2006)
*Hannah and Her Sisters* (Woody Allen, 1986)
*Last Days of Disco*, *The* (Whit Stillman, 1998)
*Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003)
*Playing by Heart* (Willard Carroll, 1998)
*Queens Logic* (Steve Rash, 1991)
*Real Blonde*, *The* (Tom DiCillo, 1997)
*Ronde, La* (Max Ophüls, 1950)
*Secretary* (Steven Shainberg, 2002)
*Sidewalks of New York* (Edward Burns, 2001)
*Singles* (Cameron Crowe, 1992)
*This Year's Love* (David Kane, 1999)



©Universitat de Barcelona