

## **The Rom Com**

### **CMST 25511, Autumn 2010**

Instructor: Ivan Ross

Email: [ivanross@uchicago.edu](mailto:ivanross@uchicago.edu)

Office: Gates-Blake 230

Office Hours: Tuesday 3:00-4:30, or by email appointment

Lectures: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 1:30-2:50, Cobb 425

Screenings: Wednesdays, 3:30, Cobb 425

For the sake of comedy in a communal environment, attendance at the screenings is required. DVDs and other video copies are available at the Film Study Center for close study. Most screenings are between 90 and 120 minutes, along with a few double features that approach or exceed 180 minutes.

### **Course Description:**

This course offers a critical survey of the history of the Hollywood romantic comedy from Buster Keaton to Nora Ephron. The course follows, and scrutinizes, the typical periodization from slapstick comedy to screwball comedy to the comedy of remarriage to the sex comedy to the radical comedy to the neo-traditional comedy—with attention to the formal/aesthetic features of the genre, its enduring themes, and its response to changing socio-cultural contexts. We'll approach the films by considering film style, film narration, genre theory, theories of comedy, popular culture studies, gender and sexuality theory, and various philosophical perspectives.

### **Texts:**

*Available at the Seminary Co-op Bookstore:*

Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007).

*Other assigned readings are available at [chalk.uchicago.edu](http://chalk.uchicago.edu). Give these texts equal priority.*

### **Requirements:**

Participation in class (active listening, productive contribution, and close reading).

\*20% of the final grade.

Four reading response papers, each 1.5 - 2 double-spaced pages, due via email.

All four responses will engage with the text's argument, pose questions to it, and do more than summarize.

One response will engage with a Cavell essay not otherwise assigned.

When you submit your responses is up you, but at least three must be turned in by the Thursday session of Week 6.

\*40% of the final grade (approximately 10% each, with some leeway to account for excellent or problematic work).

Final paper proposal. 1 double-spaced page. Due via email Thursday, November 11, 5pm.

One final paper, 9 - 10 double-spaced pages. Due via email Tuesday, December 7, 5pm.

\*40% of the final grade.

## **Course Plan:**

### **WEEK 1**

Tuesday, 9-28: Introduction

Screening on Wednesday, 9-29:

- College* (dir. Buster Keaton, 1927, 66 min.)
- When Harry Met Sally* (dir. Rob Reiner, 1989, 96 min.)

Read for Thursday, 9-30:

- Brian Henderson, "Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible?" [Chalk]
- Pursuits of Happiness*, "Film in the University"
- Frank Krutnik, "Love Lies: Romantic Fabrication in Contemporary Romantic Comedy," in *Terms of Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and 1990s*. [Chalk]

### **WEEK 2**

Read for Tuesday, 10-5:

- Seymour Chatman, "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (And Vice Versa)" [Chalk]
- Leo Braudy, "The Open and the Closed," in *The World in a Frame*. [Chalk]
- Tom Gunning, "Narrative Discourse and the Narrator System" [Chalk]

Screening on Wednesday, 10-6:

- Annie Hall* (dir. Woody Allen, 1977, 93 min.)

Read for Thursday, 10-7:

- Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium Is the Message," in *Understanding Media*. [Chalk]
- Stanley Cavell, "The Medium and the Media of Film" [Chalk]
- Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, Chapter 4
- "Annie Hall," in *Woody Allen on Woody Allen* [Chalk]

### **WEEK 3**

Read for Tuesday, 10-12:

- Pursuits of Happiness*, Introduction: "Words for a Conversation"

Screening on Wednesday, 10-13:

- Adam's Rib* (dir. George Cukor, 1949, 101 min.)

Read for Thursday, 10-14:

- Pursuits of Happiness*, Chapter 6

### **WEEK 4**

Read for Tuesday, 10-19:

- Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, Chapter 1
- Celestino Deleyto, "The Theory of Romantic Comedy," in *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*. [Chalk]
- Steve Neale, "Definitions of Genre" [Chalk]

Screening on Wednesday, 10-20:

- Holiday* (dir. George Cukor, 1938, 95 min.)
- Moonstruck* (dir. Norman Jewison, 1987, 102 min.)

Read for Thursday, 10-21:

- Kristin Celello, "The Chaos of Modern Marriage: Experts, Divorce, and the Origins of Marital Work, 1900-1940," in *Making Marriage Work: A History of Marriage and Divorce in the Twentieth-Century United States*. [Chalk]
- Beth Bailey, "Calling Cards and Money," in *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America*. [Chalk]
- Marcia Citron, "'An Honest Contrivance': Opera and Desire in 'Moonstruck'"

## WEEK 5

Read for Tuesday, 10-26:

- David Shumway, "Talking Cures: The Discourse of Intimacy," in *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis*. [Chalk]
- Kay Young, "Conversation Makes the Couple," in *Ordinary Pleasures: Couples, Conversation, and Comedy*. [Chalk]

Screening on Wednesday, 10-27:

- It Happened One Night* (dir. Frank Capra, 1934, 105 min.)

Read for Thursday, 10-28:

- Pursuits of Happiness*, Chapter 2

## WEEK 6

Read for Tuesday, 11-2:

- Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, Chapter 2
- Tina Olsin Lent, "Romantic Love and Friendship: The Redefinition of Gender Relations in Screwball Comedy" [Chalk]
- David Shumway, "Marriage as Adultery: Hollywood Romance and the Screwball Comedy," in *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis*. [Chalk]

Screening on Wednesday, 11-3:

- The Awful Truth* (dir. Leo McCarey, 1937, 91 min.)

Read for Thursday, 11-4:

- Pursuits of Happiness*, Chapter 7
- James Harvey, "Leo McCarey," in *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood from Lubitsch to Sturges*. [Chalk]

## WEEK 7

Read for Tuesday, 11-9:

- Selections from Alessandro Pirolini, *The Cinema of Preston Sturges* [Chalk]
- Selections from William Paul, *Ernst Lubitsch's American Comedy* [Chalk]
- Selections from Billy Mernit, *Writing the Romantic Comedy* [Chalk]

Screening on Wednesday, 11-10:

- The Shop Around the Corner* (dir. Ernst Lubitsch, 1940, 99 min.)
- The Lady Eve* (dir. Preston Sturges, 1941, 94 min.)

Read for Thursday, 11-11:  
--*Pursuits of Happiness*, Chapter 1

### WEEK 8

Read for Tuesday, 11-16:  
--*Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, Chapter 3

**\*\*\*Final Paper Proposal Due Today In Class**

Screening on Wednesday, 11-17:  
--*Pillow Talk* (dir. Michael Gordon, 1959, 102 min.)  
--*Down With Love* (dir. Peyton Reed, 2003, 101 min.)

Read for Thursday, 11-18:  
--Kay Young, "Romantic Comedy and the Male/Female Comedy Team," in *Ordinary Pleasures: Couples, Conversations, and Comedy*. [Chalk]  
--Dennis Bingham, "'Before She Was a Virgin ...': Doris Day and the Decline of Female Film Comedy in the 1950s and 1960s" [Chalk]  
--Kristin Celello, "Radical Feminists, Liberated Housewives, and Total Women: Searching for the Future of Marriage, 1963-1980," in *Making Marriage Work: A History of Marriage and Divorce in the Twentieth Century*. [Chalk] [Optional]  
**\*\*\*Final Paper Proposal Returned Today In Class**

### WEEK 9

Tuesday, 11-23: No assigned readings. **Final Paper discussion groups during class.**  
No screening Wednesday, 11-24 | No class Thursday, 11-25 [Happy Thanksgiving!]

### WEEK 10

Read for Tuesday, 11-30, (and come prepared for heated/gladiatorial debate about the present and future of the romantic comedy genre; bring dvd clips from your favorites if you'd like):  
--Stanley Cavell, "The Good of Film" [Chalk]  
--A. O. Scott, "A Fine Romance, My Friend, This Is" [google it]  
--Roger Ebert's reviews of *Sex and the City 2*, *Did You Hear About the Morgans*, and *Minnie and Moscovitz* [google them]  
--Raymond Carney, "Beating the System: *Minnie and Moscovitz*," in *The Films of John Cassavetes*. [Chalk] [Optional—to be read after having seen the movie]

Screening on Wednesday, 12-1:  
--*Minnie and Moscovitz* (dir. John Cassavetes, 1971, 114 min.)

No class Thursday, 12-2  
**\*\*\*Final Paper Due Via Email Tuesday, 12-7, 5pm**