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***(500) Days of Summer:* A Postmodern Romantic Comedy?**

Abstract

By considering the film *(500) Days of Summer* a postmodern romantic comedy, we can see the film as offering philosophical insights about the nature of love and its implications for the changing social institution of marriage. The overarching idea is that this film is different from many other romantic comedies, and the ways in which it differs are indicative of a change in the genre and are relevant to changes in the concepts of love and marriage. We first consider more specifically the relationship between modern and postmodern aesthetics as well as a brief history of the genre of romantic comedy. Next, we will explore how the film might be read as a postmodern film, considering the plot, dialogue, sound, and look of the film. I contend that the cinematic properties are integral to the emergence of a new romantic comedy genre and to how this change reflects broader cultural changes. All told, this analysis will provide insights into how the currency of the conception of love has changed, which has likewise changed the marriage plot as experienced by new audiences in this new millennium.

Key words

romantic comedy, postmodern love, analytic aesthetic film theory

Introduction

Prior to the opening credits of *(500) Days of Summer*, in a voice-over, the film's narrator warns us: "This is a story of boy meets girl. You should know up front this is not a love story."¹ The implication of this warning is that this film is not going to be one of those horribly sappy romantic

¹ *(500) Days of Summer*, directed by M. Webb, 2009.

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comedies or, worse yet, melodramatic romances. These genres have been much maligned by movie critics and film theorists alike. In popular culture, these films are simply derided as chick flicks. Nevertheless, *(500) Days of Summer* claims to be different from the very beginning – but not entirely different. After all, the plot structure of “boy meets girl” is the sine qua non of romantic comedies, and the narrator informs the audience straightaway that this is a “boy meets girl” sort of story. The initial setup of the film is a paradox: Could this be a romantic comedy and not a love story? The sense of paradox is foregrounded by what one would expect to be the boilerplate fiction disclaimer: “Author’s Note: The following is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.” The truth of that rather standard language is belied by the next frame, “Especially you, Jenny Beckman,” and any sense of equanimity is erased in the following frame, “Bitch.” Given that *(500) Days of Summer* is a film in which boy meets girl but it is not a love story, and the film is labeled as fiction but is also seemingly about Jenny Beckman, it invites us to question the very philosophical presuppositions of this film in order to resolve these paradoxes.

Rich in cinematic artistry, *(500) Days of Summer* serves as a counterexample to the claim that films in which boy meets girl should all be easily dismissed as trivial or unimportant. The idea that something that features a formula must be rejected as simply formulaic is addressed in the ways *(500) Days of Summer* disrupts the very formula of its genre. Noël Carroll has usefully suggested that one might think of works of art within a narrative, and by placing a candidate for the category in relation to those that might function as readily acknowledged works of art, one can help to establish that the candidate in question might indeed be appropriately considered art.² If we were to consider mainstream Hollywood romantic comedies as representing a sort of modern epoch of film, then we could be tempted to say that a film that both relies on and questions the conventions and norms might in some sense be a postmodern film. So the postmodern in this sense is not a reference to the age or time when the film was made or released, but rather it stands in relation to the modern as a commentary and reaction to the artistic norms of the modern and as a signal that it still belongs within the genre of romantic comedy.

What is to be gained from considering this film to be a postmodern romantic comedy? I will argue that it will show the film as offering

² N. Carroll, “Art, Practice and Narrative”, *The Monist*, 1988, 71.2, pp. 140–156.

philosophical insights about the nature of our understanding of love and its implications for the changing social institution of marriage, even if the label “postmodern romantic comedy” is ultimately not a perfect fit. The overarching idea is that this film is different from other romantic comedies, and the ways in which it differs are indicative of a movement within the philosophical underpinnings of the ordinary concepts of love and marriage. We first consider more specifically the relationship between postmodern philosophy and postmodern film. Then we will explore how the film might be read as a postmodern film, considering not only the plot and dialogue, but also the sound and look of the film or the cinematic properties as integral in the construction of meaning. All told, this will provide insights into how the currency of the conception of love has changed, which has likewise changed the marriage plot as experienced by postmillennials. When I suggest that the conception of love has changed, I want to be careful not to imply that the concepts of love and marriage are monoliths; nor do I want to suggest that all facets of postmillennial love are new, as many of the romance genres have questioned love’s nature. My aim here is to describe how the resonances this film has with postmillennial audiences may stem from rather broad changes in the social institutions of love and marriage in the 20th century.

Postmodern Philosophy and/or Postmodern Film

The term *postmodernism* is an inherently difficult term, as its meanings turn on whether one is using it to describe a set of philosophical tenets (and even if one is using it in the strictly philosophical sense, whose tenets should be given the coveted status of “postmodern”) or to describe stylistic features of a work of art or other cultural artifact. One place to start is with Jean-François Lyotard in his *Note on the Meaning of ‘Post-’*, where he suggests a link between the philosophical and artistic uses of the term. Lyotard writes, “The question of postmodernity is also, or first of all, a question of expression of thought: in literature, philosophy, politics.”³ The postmodern in this sense is critically dependent upon the modern for, among other things, a source of rebellion, even though the normal cause and effect of rebellion is turned upside down. Although one might

³ J.-F. Lyotard, *Note on the Meaning of ‘Post-’*, [in:] *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. T. Doherty, New York 1993, p. 47.

assume that the postmodern necessarily comes after the modern in terms of chronology, Lyotard claims otherwise. He writes, "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in a nascent state and this state is constant."⁴ The idea here is that the postmodern and the modern in a critical sense overlap, much like the mainstream and the avant-garde. When Lyotard provocatively claims that a work must be postmodern first, I take him to be referring to the sense that in order to become mainstream, artistic conventions must first be tried out in an experimental setting. It is, of course, entirely possible that both artistic communities – the experimental and the mainstream – exist at the same time. Another idea implicit in this view is that the modern itself is ever-changing and updating. For example, the director of *(500) Days of Summer*, Marc Webb, has earned a reputation as an award-winning music video director; since music videos are a newer art form than film, it makes sense to call the first music videos in some critical sense postmodern. In part, this is because they used filming and editing techniques that would have been labeled mistakes in a feature film, such as jump cuts, which were becoming part of the standard operating procedures for music videos. Given the director's background in music videos, those aesthetic sensibilities are brought to his feature film as it is produced for Fox Searchlight, whose films are frequently screened at the Sundance Film Festival and Toronto Film Festival. The director's background led to a new artistic feel for a feature film whose uptake was ensured by the target demographic's familiarity with music videos.

The postmodern, however, is not merely a set stylistic choices for an artist. Lyotard goes further when he claims that "a postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work."⁵ In short, the position of the philosopher ensures that the artist means something by the artistic choices she makes, and that meaning cannot simply rely upon the received wisdom of established modes of expression. The reason a new form of expression is needed is that what is about to be conveyed represents a departure from the usual or what is usually represented. Lyotard continues, "Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 46.

the writer then are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done.”⁶ The postmodern in its application to film involves artistic choices relative to mainstream methods of production, and through those artistic choices, the film is imbued with postmodern philosophical meanings. Those philosophical meanings are postmodern if they challenge what is accepted as obvious by modern thinkers or ideas accepted as commonplace—some philosophers regard commonplaces as foundational intuitions. Two modern philosophical ideas are that persons are unique, unified subjects governed by rationality, or that romantic love is felt to be true at first sight. This leads to the view that modern marriage as a social institution requires monogamy and lifetime commitment to one’s beloved and, moreover, that being married is one of life’s great accomplishments. It should be clear that what is regarded as the “modern” in philosophy or “modern” in terms of what is considered intuitively true may not be the same or be contemporaneous with the modern epoch of film. That this term *modern* seems inherently unwieldy might deter the faint of heart from using it as a point of comparison to the postmodern. Given Lyotard’s aversion to any sort of meta-narratives, he would not have it any other way. However, if we think about the modern and the postmodern as being in some sort of conversation, as Carroll would have us do with works of art, then the ways in which modern ideas are portrayed by modern cinema will help us to understand how postmodern ideas are portrayed in postmodern film.

If we think of modern cinema, we would start with classical Hollywood. As David Bordwell notes, “the basic style of the classical Hollywood cinema remains – continuity editing is still assumed to be the norm.”⁷ Bordwell clarifies this view with an example:

The scene in *Jaws* (1975) where the young scientist visits the Brodys at home is handled very similarly to the restaurant sequence in *His Girl Friday*; both have three characters at a table and present the dialogue in a series of reverse shots. Clear, linear narrative remains the dominant factor in this type of filmmaking.⁸

This is sometimes thought of as a realist stance with respect to the nature of film because the shot selection created through a series of photographic-like images, aided by conventional film editing, is different from,

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ D. Bordwell, K. Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, New York 1979, p. 312.

⁸ Ibidem.

say, images created through cartooning techniques. As a matter of film-making practice, the film industry has moved from a celluloid format to a digital format in order to produce what appears on the screen. However, this does not change the audience's expectations that what is on-screen appears lifelike. The narratives are linear and complete in Aristotle's sense, meaning having a beginning, a middle, and an ending in that order, where the beginning sets the stage for the complication of the story, which signals the middle, and the end is completed by resolving the complication. Linear narratives are purpose-driven.

Modern cinema evokes a patina of realism, naturalism, and teleology that correspond with the central tenets of modern philosophy. In short, the idea is that there is an objective reality where the inherent value of the human subject provides one's life with purpose and naturally gives rise to flourishing cultural institutions. Modern in this sense highlights how the television cartoons *The Jetsons* and *The Flintstones* both are set in different times but evoke a type of 1950s sensibility. Fredric Jameson hints at this sense of modern when he rehearses the setting of a Phillip K. Dick novel in which he describes the 1950s: "Main Street, USA: Marilyn Monroe; a world of neighbors and PTAs; small retail chain stores; favorite television programs; mild flirtations with the housewife next door; game show contests."⁹ After a list of constitutive parts, Jameson continues, "If you were interested in constructing a time capsule or an 'only yesterday' compendium or documentary-nostalgia video of the 1950s, this might serve as a beginning."¹⁰ Postmodern films reject the modern in a variety of ways, including Richard Rorty's suggestions that the philosophical postmodern is marked by contingency of one's self and language, irony in response to the acknowledgment of one's contingency, and, finally, solidarity with others in the same metaphysical boat so that we can expand one's community and reduce cruelty.¹¹ In the philosophical postmodern, "absolute truths" are rejected as relics, the self-aware human subject known as Descartes' cogito becomes fragmented, and the distinction between high art and low art is interrogated.

In order to analyze an entire film, Bordwell maintains that films should be analyzed with an eye toward how they function and another toward

⁹ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, North Carolina 1991, p. 280.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, New York 1989.

how film art changes through history and the role that genre has in making meaning.¹² If the genre in question is romantic comedy, then to articulate a conception of the postmodern romantic comedy, one must first have a definition of the genre of romantic comedy, as this will provide some basis of comparison for romantic comedies; further, it will help us to see how considering *(500) Days of Summer* a postmodern romantic comedy helps to elucidate its meanings. Tamar Jeffers McDonald defines the romantic comedy genre: "A romantic comedy is 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."¹³ This seems right. McDonald captures what the long histories of different romantic comedies have in common, from the screwball comedies to the radical romantic comedy and the neo-traditional romantic comedies.¹⁴ Some of the differences are informed by general societal trends as the meaning of love and the sexual mores change drastically, whereas other changes in the genre are due to changes in narrative and cinematic conventions enabled by the ever-evolving technological capabilities that allow for different artistic choices for how the film looks on-screen. However, McDonald is clear that "it should not be believed that films straightforwardly reflect the attitudes of their particular times [...] as socially created object, they embody competing impulses."¹⁵ McDonald continues as she rehearses the view that "films never spring magically from their cultural context. [...] [I]n the case of romantic comedy, it is particularly important to stress how specific films or cycles mediate between a body of conventionalized 'generic rules' and a shifting environment of sexual-cultural codifications."¹⁶ In short, the filmic history of romantic comedies informs the representation of love in other romantic comedies, as it reflects contemporary mores about the expression of love and the evolving nature of relationships.

The screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s imply that love is an adversarial sport with films such as *Bringing Up Baby*, *It Happened One Night*, and *My Man Godfrey*. McDonald contends that "the screwball comedy delighted in exhibiting male and female characters clashing and striking sparks off each other."¹⁷ She contrasts the screwball comedy with

¹² D. Bordwell, K. Thompson, op. cit., p. iv.

¹³ T. J. McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, New York 2007, p. 9.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 4.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 38.

the sex comedy: "The sex comedy took this theme and implied that such clashing was inevitable: all men and all women were perpetually in conflict because nature had set them up – or society had inspired them – with different goals."¹⁸ McDonald attributes the rise of the sex comedies in the mid-1950s through the 1960s to the publication of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female*, the advent of *Playboy* magazine, and the diminished power of the Hays' Production Code of the 1930s. *Pillow Talk*, *Lover Come Back*, and *Sunday in New York* all qualify as sex comedies, but, "there would be no sex enacted in the sex comedy of this period: where sex is implied, there are still discreet fade-outs or visual metaphors."¹⁹ In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, a more nihilistic subgenre arose – the radical romantic comedy – with films such as *Annie Hall*, *Harold and Maude*, and *Goodbye Girl*. The subgenre is characterized by self-reflexivity as a film text about romantic relationships during times of radically changing social practices about love and sex. The neo-traditional romantic comedy can be seen as a response to the previous subgenres. McDonald describes the characteristics as involving "a backlash against the ideologies of the radical film alongside a maintenance of its visual surfaces, a mood of imprecise nostalgia, a more vague self-referentialism and a de-emphasizing of sex."²⁰ *When Harry Met Sally*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, and *You've Got Mail* are all examples of the neo-traditional romantic comedy.

The neo-traditional romantic comedy's heyday was in the 1980s and 1990s, and in its stead, I propose another genre: the postmodern romantic comedy. Just as all of the previous subgenres of romantic comedies both build upon and reject aspects of the subgenres that went before them, the postmodern romantic comedy follows suit. Candidates for this subgenre include films such as *Celeste and Jesse Forever*, *Go Fish*, *Salmon Fishing in Yemen*, *Love Actually*, and *High Fidelity*. They share with the screwball comedies unpredictability, unconventionality, and giddiness, and they share with the sex comedies the idea that love is a battlefield, as well as the mere symbolism of sex-play. They inherit the social upheavals chronicled in the radical romantic comedies, and yet they share the vague nostalgia of the neo-traditional romantic comedies. This new genre arises from "the many possibilities to live one's love life nowadays" and the changes in marriage, which include but are not limited to "the queer critiques of marriage and

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 44.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 91.

queer practices of love.”²¹ What makes the postmodern romantic comedy explicitly postmodern is how the story is told and how the telling affects how the film looks and sounds, and ultimately its meaning.

(500) Days of Summer as a Postmodern Romantic Comedy

The postmodern is sometimes described as occupying a liminal space at a threshold filled with ambiguity and marked by transition. It is this feature of the postmodern that gives rise to the paradoxes where *(500) Days of Summer* is a romantic comedy, but not a love story, whose coincidental nature of its representation inherent in the fiction warning is belied by a calling-out of a specific girl, Jenny Beckman. These paradoxes can be seen as self-referential and embodied as postmodern irony. It is funny that while most acknowledge that even fiction writers are advised to write about what they know, the link between knowledge and the truth is fractured by the formal requirements of labeling one’s work “fiction.” In the foreword to the published shooting script, Scott Neustadter writes, “while it is technically not a true story in the strictest sense, believe me when I tell you that virtually everything in its pages became true.”²² The absolute truth of the moderns and the quest for certainty gives way to a truth from a particular perspective, and that perspective is gained by remembering and re-remembering. The circular narrative structure calls to mind Homer’s *Odyssey*, and in this case our hero, Tom, is set to resolve the loss of his great love. However, while the story is told from Tom’s perspective, Tom is not the film’s narrator.

Before the credits, during the opening scene, the narrator, who in the shooting script is described as having a “distinguished voice,” sets the stage. The next image is a simple intertitle of a number in parentheses, (488). The image on the intertitle is important, as it presents an image of downtown L.A., which will be our guide to telling us where in the seasons of the relationship the action is taking place. It is ironic because Los Angeles geography does not admit of the traditional four seasons. The

²¹ This phrasing was suggested by the journal’s reviewer. For an early example of queer critique, see: A. Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, Minneapolis 2009.

²² S. Neustadter, M. Weber, *The Shooting Script: (500) Days of Summer*, New York 2009, p. xi. I refer to the shooting script and check it against the DVD – where they differ, I use the dialogue on the DVD.

aesthetic choice of the intertitle is important because it harkens back to the origins of cinema, when the intertitle's whole purpose was to provide the dialogue in silent film and to advance the narration of the storyline. The intertitles function to clarify the nonlinear narrative as the story proceeds by bouncing back and forth like the free associations of a stream of consciousness through the days of the soon-to-be-doomed romance. How the romance is doomed is not obvious in the establishing shot, where Tom and Summer are sitting on a bench in Angelus Plaza in downtown L.A., as the image slowly changes from charcoal sketch to sepia film to full color. The screenplay calls for "CLOSE On their Hands, intertwined. Notice the wedding ring on her finger. CLOSE ON Tom, looking at Summer the way every woman wants to be looked at."²³ It is, after all, day 488 of this summer romance. The image of this scene will be replayed toward the end of the film, a nod to *Pulp Fiction*, whose famous denouement occurs twice within the film.

The intertitle changes from Day 488 to Day 1. We see Tom sitting at a conference table at what we assume to be his day job. The narrator not only introduces the film as "a story of boy meets girl" but also gives the critical background information that will set up the competing visions of the nature of love. The narrator proclaims, "The boy, Tom Hansen of Margate, New Jersey, grew up believing that he'd never truly be happy until the day he met [...] 'the one.'"²⁴ The image now features a preteen Tom watching the film *The Graduate*. The film mocks the documentary genre with its sardonic voice-of-God voice-over and continues to diagnose the genealogy of his belief: "This belief stemmed from early exposure to sad British pop music and a total misreading of the movie *The Graduate*."²⁵ The image changes to what we assume is the same office where Summer is busy doing clerical work. The narrator continues his voice-over: "The girl, Summer Finn of Shinnecock, Michigan, did not share this belief."²⁶ We then see a teenage Summer in her adolescent bedroom looking at herself in the mirror. The voice-over continues, "Since the disintegration of her parents' marriage, she'd only loved two things. The first was her long dark hair. The second was how easily she could cut it off and feel nothing."²⁷

²³ Ibidem, p. 1.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 2.

²⁷ Ibidem.

The narrator has nearly completed setting the stage. He does so by following the first step in the romantic comedy narrative: boy meets girl as well as its postmodern paradox. The image turns to what we assume is the present day, and we see Summer enter the meeting where Tom is sitting at a conference table. The narrator continues, "Tom meets Summer on January 8th. He knows almost immediately. [...] [S]he's who he's been searching for. This is a story of boy meets girl. But you should know up front this is not a love story."²⁸

However, *(500) Days of Summer* is clearly about love. Tom begins with a clear idea of what that entails. A philosophical origin of the idea that there is "the one" or that one should be searching for one's other half is found in the Speech of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*. Aristophanes suggests a mythical account of the origin of love, in which at one time humans were creatures with two faces and eight arms and legs who were completely happy and powerful. These human-like creatures were becoming haughty with power. The gods were not amused and cut these creatures in half so that they would spend the rest of their days condemned to search for their other half, and this searching is deemed the origin of love. We see an allusion to this story during the opening credits: There is a split screen where parallel images show Tom and Summer in their childhoods, each in their own separate worlds, as the screenplay puts it, "disconnected and yet somehow not."²⁹ The images look like home movies made with a first-generation VHS tape – the handheld camera providing a giggling and somewhat grainy image. The first image we see is an extreme close-up on young Tom's eye on the left and a matching extreme close-up of Summer's eye on the right. The split screen gives the impression that the two are each other's matching half. The images continue with Summer playing on a swing set and Tom at a beach and as teenagers with Tom playing guitar and Summer turning cartwheels.

The romantic comedy narrative is set within the opening minutes of the film: Boy meets girl. The very next scene occurs on Day 290/500 in Tom's apartment, where his little sister, Rachel, and Tom's friends, Paul and McKenzie, endeavor to comfort a clearly distraught Tom, who is breaking his dinner plates on the kitchen counter. Rachel asks Tom to tell her what happened as we see Tom rehearse the events from earlier in the day. We see a series of images that will be repeated three times throughout the

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 3 (emphasis original).

²⁹ Ibidem.

film. Rachel, Paul, and McKenzie urge Tom to get over her. The scene ends with Tom proclaiming that he does not want to get over her; he wants to get her back. The romantic comedy plot is furthered – boy loses girl – as we are set up to believe that the rest of the film will abide by the formula. And it does, to a certain extent.

We flash back to an earlier time; we see the very beginnings of the courtship. They meet at work and flirt during an office party to celebrate the engagement of a coworker, Millie. Tom and Summer are embarking on a workplace romance where Summer is the new receptionist and Tom has taken a job writing greeting cards to make ends meet, even though he has trained to be an architect. It seems significant that both are working for a greeting card company since the greeting card is symbolic of a facile expression of emotion, as opposed to building their chosen careers or following the oft-given advice of doing what you love and never working a day in your life. Tom will say as much when he quits toward the end of the film. During one of Summer and Tom's first conversations, Summer asks Tom whether he has always wanted to write greeting cards. He replies, "I don't even want to do it now."³⁰ There are references to many levels and objects of love in the film. After the conversation with Summer, we see Tom begin an architecture sketch as he recalls his vocation – a form of love. Clearly, the idea of love is being expanded beyond the mere romantic love or infatuation commonly associated with romantic comedies.

The intertitle reads "154," and the image of a tree in full, bright green leaf cuts to a scene in which Tom is walking alongside his friend Paul. Tom announces, "It's official. I'm in love with Summer."³¹ There is a cut to images that will be repeated two more times in the film. Tom's voice-over proclamations of love can be heard over images of Summer's smile, hair, knees, and eyes. Tom even loves Summer's imperfections, such as the birthmark on her neck. Tom declares, "I love how she makes me feel like anything's possible [...] like life is worth it."³² There is a moment where Tom is speaking directly to the audience, like Alvy Singer in *Annie Hall*. However, Tom's sentiment is optimistic about love, whereas Alvy's speech embodies a nihilism found in many radical romantic comedies. Paul responds, "This is not good." Later, the film will show the same sequence of images with Tom proclaiming that all the things he previously loved, he

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 16.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Ibidem, p. 19.

now hates. There is a postmodern element in this repetition of images, suggesting that reality is perspectival. The foreshadowing of the relationship's impending doom is matched as Tom is playing a video game with his sister. She warns him that "just 'cause some cute girl likes the same bizarre crap you do doesn't make her your soulmate."³³

The nonlinear narrative continues as we flash back to Day 28, when we are introduced to Summer's nihilistic views about love during a workplace party at a karaoke bar. McKenzie plays the wingman. He asks Summer if she has a boyfriend. She replies that she does not want one because "I just don't feel comfortable being anyone's girlfriend. I don't want to be anybody's anything, you know?"³⁴ When McKenzie confesses his confusion, Summer continues, "Okay, let me break it down for you. I just like being on my own. Relationships are messy and feelings get hurt. Who needs all that? We're young; we live in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. I say, let's just have as much fun as we can and leave the serious stuff for later."³⁵ Tom furthers the conversation by asking, "What happens when you fall in love?" Summer laughs the suggestion off; her position is clear – "There is no such thing as love. It's just a fantasy."³⁶ Summer suggests that they "agree to disagree." They all continue drinking. Later, Tom sings his desire for Summer by performing the Pixies' song "Here Comes Your Man." The evening ends with McKenzie being escorted to a cab, so drunk that he slurs as he reveals that Tom likes Summer. Summer verifies that Tom likes her as a friend. The scene ends with Tom and Summer parting ways – "just friends." During the very next scene, near the photocopy machine at work, Summer kisses Tom. It can't be love because Summer has already said that she doesn't believe in it. What is it then? The relationship is neither fish nor fowl, and it cannot be easily defined because no ready-made label is apt.

When describing what he calls the comedy of remarriage, Stanley Cavell compares it to the genres of old and new romantic comedy. The old romantic comedy "shows a young pair overcoming individual and social obstacles to their happiness, figured as a concluding marriage that achieves individual and social reconciliations."³⁷ Cavell claims that this

³³ Ibidem, p. 20.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 27.

³⁵ Ibidem.

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ S. Cavell, *Pursuit of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1981, pp. 1–10.

subgenre of romantic comedy can trace its genealogy to Shakespeare. We could name any number of Nora Ephron films that meet this mark. In comparison, new romantic comedy “stresses the young man’s efforts to overcome obstacles posed by an older man [...] to winning the young woman of his choice.”³⁸ At first glance, *(500) Days of Summer* seems to have more in common with new romantic comedy, as the plot focuses on Tom and his obstacles. However, we should be clear that the new romantic comedy from Cavell’s perspective has a happy ending because the hero, indeed, overcomes his obstacles. We know from the very beginning of the film that Tom does not.

Cavell introduces the comedy of remarriage where “casting as its heroine a married woman; and the drive of the plot is not to get the central pair together, but to get them *back* together, together *again*.”³⁹ The idea of remarriage foregrounds “the fact of marriage in [that] it is subjected to the fact or the threat of divorce.”⁴⁰ What I am calling the postmodern romantic comedy is likewise deeply informed by the threat of divorce in that the social institution of marriage as stemming from something like Aristophanes’ love must be redefined if divorce becomes as common as marriage itself. Love cannot mean “never having to say you’re sorry,” as the tagline suggests from the 1970s *Love Story*. I am arguing for a new genre of romantic comedy. The postmodern romantic comedy recognizes that love is messy and imperfect and that happily ever after is really only the beginning or that there may be no happily ever after. Moreover, love for a variety of things, from pancakes to Ringo Starr and even Los Angeles, help to round out one’s humanity. This is not the full-blown nihilism that the character Summer suggests in the first conversation about the nature of love at the workplace karaoke night, but instead love means something different for both the individual who experiences love and the coupling it allows. One might fall in love, but there is no guarantee of forever. Tom ends up being okay that their relationship doesn’t have a label, but he wants “consistency, I need to know that you won’t wake up tomorrow and feel a different way.”⁴¹ Summer responds, consistent with postmodern love, “I can’t promise you that. Nobody can.”⁴² The persistent

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 1.

³⁹ Ibidem, pp. 1–2 (emphasis original).

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 2.

⁴¹ S. Neustadter, M. Weber, op. cit., p. 61.

⁴² Ibidem.

existential threat to the relationship is a new recognition about the reality of romantic love. The prevalence of divorce means that love may well not last. In place of everlasting love, love's postmodern value is to further one's authenticity and provide a learning environment for one's actualization, which can still be postmodern, even if neither self-actualization nor authenticity are peculiarly postmodern pursuits since it is the ambient conditions under which the terms are negotiated that give rise to the label "postmodern" in terms of love and marriage. In sum, one of the features of a postmodern romantic comedy is that the definition of love is subject to negotiation within the film itself. Moreover, language seems inadequate to address this sort of love, which is why we need both the images and the story.

After the kiss in the copy room on Day 29, we jump to Day 282, where Tom and Summer are shopping in IKEA. Tom, in a mocking attempt to play house after endeavoring to turn on the taps of display sinks, reports, "Honey, our sink is broken [...] seems like all of our sinks are broken."⁴³ Summer rejects this playful pose. However, we see why Summer's rejecting Tom's playfulness is so puzzling as the scene quickly changes to IKEA on Day 34. That structurally the same sorts of moments can have completely different emotional valences becomes clear when Tom's playfulness suggests that the couple is playing house, a postmodern gesture to Jameson's postmodern as 1950s ironic nostalgia. "Home Sweet Home," Tom proclaims.⁴⁴ We should note that this gesture is not furthered simply by means of the plot, but also by the characters' dress or costumes. In the DVD commentary, director Marc Webb explains that they dressed Zooey Deschanel in clothes that appear both classic and timeless. When they are playing house, during the Day 34 IKEA scene, they joke about the sink being broken and how that is why Tom bought a house with two kitchens. Summer follows, "doing her best Donna Reed impression."⁴⁵ After they pretend to dine on bald eagle, Summer pulls Tom into the next room by saying, "I'll race you to the bedroom."⁴⁶ They playfully chase each other through the store into the bedroom displays and cuddle on a bed. Tom reveals, "Darling, I don't know how to tell you this, but there's a Chinese

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 36.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 37.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 38.

family in our bathroom."⁴⁷ The playful awkwardness is sealed with a kiss, as well as an explanation that Summer is not looking for anything serious.

The negotiation of love is furthered in the next scene in Tom's bedroom, where the couple is becoming intimate. Tom excuses himself for a moment in order to give himself a pep talk in his bathroom's mirror. "Settle. She's just a girl [...] wants to keep it casual. Which is why she's in my bed right now but that's casual. That's what [...] casual people do."⁴⁸ The next shot is from behind Summer in bed, where we see Tom emerging from his bathroom pep talk, and as part of a postmodern pastiche, it replicates an iconic shot from the poster for the film *The Graduate*. As a nod to a sex comedy trope, the screen fades to black with the sound of Hall and Oates's "You Make My Dreams Come True." It recalls the 1980s music videos as well as the great romantic comedy musicals such as *Singin' in the Rain*. The postmodern pastiche continues as the next scene has the feel of a music video. The screenplay suggests that "it's the greatest morning of all time!"⁴⁹ We see Tom dancing down the street, checking his reflection in a store window only to find *Star Wars'* Han Solo staring back. The visual metaphors pile on as we see random passersby give Tom high fives and a group of businessmen and others break into a "Busby Berkeley-style choreographed dance."⁵⁰ Tom mocks hitting a home run as a phallic-shaped water fountain suddenly bursts full with water. The UCLA marching band soon joins the parade, with Tom as the parade marshal, and a cartoon bluebird lands on Tom's hand as an homage to *Mary Poppins*. He is still dancing even as he reaches his office building. This is love's apotheosis. However, we know already that this is not the sort of everlasting love that is alluded to in other romantic comedies' happily ever after. From the best day to the worst day, matching on the image, the elevator doors open to Day 303, where a clearly heartbroken Tom enters the office, passes a new secretary, and checks his email. Summer's voice-over states, "So great to hear from you. I can't this week, but maybe next? I hope this means you are ready to be friends."⁵¹ The special effects elongate the sound of "friends" and continue the aesthetic break from the naturalism so common in mainstream Hollywood cinema.

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 39.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 40.

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 41.

What happens between Days 45 and 303 is the rise and fall of the romance. The idea of love itself is expanded as at different times in the succeeding scenes, Summer proclaims her love for Ringo Starr, pancakes, and her coworker, Millie. An emotional intimacy ensues as Tom and Summer share their stories, hopes, fears, and dreams. The comedy becomes physical as their love has a carnal aspect. While shopping in a record store, Summer pulls Tom into the adults-only section. We see them at Tom's apartment watching their selection. Summer suggests that shower sex doesn't look too difficult. The sex comedy genre's discretion is repeated again when we see a bathtub's curtain rip and they fall out laughing: "Shower sex is hard." Tom and Summer's courting involves trips to art museums, where the avant-garde is mocked by calling it "complex" and a statue that could only be poop motivates a change in plans. In a post-modern move, so-called high art gives way to so-called low art, as Tom and Summer hatch a plan to go to the movies – the art-cinema façade with its French films invites us to regard the movies as art. The expansion of the idea of love continues as Tom takes Summer to Angelus Plaza, the site of the film's opening, a place that he loves and where he shares his love of Los Angeles by showing how the skyline visible from the park could be different, even more beautiful. We see how the intertitles are architectural sketches of Tom's vision, the same vision Tom draws on Summer's arm as if it were a tattoo. He explains the history of the buildings – the Continental 1904, another building with orange hue 1911 – and how he would change things if he were an architect. Tom clearly loves Los Angeles.

The fall of the romance is signaled by Tom's unease about the relationship with no name. He seeks his sister's advice about the situation, and she suggests that he should just ask Summer, but understands that the reason Tom doesn't is because he is afraid of the answer. While seeing Tom and Summer doing many of the things that led to the rise of the romance, such as going to movies and record stores, we see the same footage, but the music has changed. When Tom presses Summer about their relationship status, he responds, "This is not how you treat your friend. Kissing in the copy room, holding hands in IKEA, Shower Sex? Friends, my balls."⁵² We see Tom on a rebound date with Allison. This is a disaster of a date where Tom cannot stop talking about Summer. Allison inquires, "She never cheated on you? Did she ever take advantage of you in any way? And she told you

⁵² Ibidem, p. 59.

up front she didn't want a boyfriend?"⁵³ That an individual has responsibility for one's role in an emotional entanglement signals a change in the notion of love undergirding many other romantic comedies, where love has its own agency and the lovers fall under Cupid's spell. That is, in those other romantic comedies, love is something that, once discovered, can only temporarily be rendered asunder. A postmodern love is love as education, involving a thrill of discovery. Once the lesson is learned, the attraction may lessen as the lovers seek ever greater self-realization. The rebound date ends in the karaoke bar with Allison leaving a drunken Tom singing on the stage. In another type of romantic comedy, we might simply chalk this up to the "boy loses girl" part of the plot.

The office party celebrating Millie's engagement is one bookend of the romance; Millie's marriage ceremony is the other. Tom unexpectedly encounters Summer on the train en route to the wedding. When we see Tom and Summer traveling together, we sense some hints that the film might abide by the romantic comedy formula where boy and girl are reunited at the end. In a beautiful sequence, we see Tom and Summer travel along the Pacific Coast with the bright summer sunlight painting an orange nostalgic hue to their conversation. Tom has the book *Architecture of Happiness* by Alain De Botton as a nod to one of his loves, architecture. We learn Summer is working elsewhere – a sign that she has moved on. Yet, this is their opportunity to reconnect. The wedding is beautiful as Tom and Summer sit together at the outdoor venue. We see them rehashing their relationship at the reception while they sit at the kids' table playing duck-duck-goose with their tablemates. They dance, and on the train ride home, Summer rests her head on Tom's shoulder. We think at last that Summer and Tom will live happily ever after. Summer ends the evening by inviting Tom to a party at her house the following week.

As Tom makes his way to the party, the narrator informs us, "Tom walked to her apartment intoxicated by the promise of the evening; he believed that this time his expectations would align with reality."⁵⁴ We see Tom's reality versus expectations on a split screen. The expectations race ahead of the reality, yet the images have much in common until Summer opens her apartment door. Tom expects Summer to greet him with a hug and a kiss, to open the gift he gave her immediately and fawn over the fact that it is the same book he was reading on the train. Instead, Summer

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 79.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 88.

welcomes him tacitly and introduces him to other friends at the party. The hopes that the party invitation may be an invitation to rekindle the relationship are dashed. Even his attempt to entertain other partygoers with an ironic quip fails. Tom soon realizes that this is Summer's engagement party. The haunting sounds of Regina Spektor's refrain "I'm the hero of this story – I don't need to be saved"⁵⁵ further echo Tom's despair. As he flees from the party, the image moves from color to charcoal, the image erases the background, and Tom is left as a silhouette against a blank background. This break from Hollywood realism is aesthetically interesting and philosophically important, as it conveys the hollowness of his experience. He is reduced to a mere shadow of himself.

However, Tom has much further to fall. We see him spend three days in bed, leaving only to buy more hard alcohol and junk food, missing three days of work. When he returns to work, he lashes out at the superficial and sentimental nature of the greeting card industry. He quits. We see him consult his little sister again when she is briefly taken out of her soccer game. She suggests that maybe Tom is only remembering the good parts of the relationship, and that he should look again, when he remembers, to see what else is there. We see a flashback to scenes that we previously had witnessed only in glowing, warm lights, but this time they show Summer's ambivalence as a common thread through all of the scenes. We see Tom watching *The Graduate* again, and this time seeming to get it. The screenwriters explain, "We wanted to follow a guy sifting through the memories of a relationship, moving backwards and forwards through time as he starts to see things he might not have seen while he was going through it."⁵⁶ We see Tom move forward by developing a portfolio and interviewing for architectural firms. The film circles back to its opening scene with Summer wearing her wedding ring, sitting with Tom on the park bench at Angelus Park. Tom expresses confusion that Summer could not commit to him, but then less than a year later is married. Summer learns from Tom that the idea of love is not simply a fairy tale, continuing the idea of love's relationship to knowledge and personal growth, as one might expect with the circular narrative structure. The film ends with Tom interviewing for a new job, and while waiting to be called, he discovers another attractive job applicant. They converse and discover that they both love Angelus Park. Tom invites her for a coffee. Her name is Autumn. The numbers return to

⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 114.

Day 1. The ending is ambivalent, as there is a reluctance on Autumn's part to agree to the date. We are left with only potential love, and this potential represents the promise and the fragility of postmodern love.

Conclusion

When describing postmodern film, Catherine Constable suggests that "at stake here is a repositioning of postmodern aesthetics as the aesthetic strategies of mass culture, which recognizes that the products of mass culture are capable of offering a variety of forms of complicitous critique."⁵⁷ While there is no doubt that the innovative filmic aesthetic properties, such as the charcoal intertitles or the repetition of nonlinear juxtapositions, function to ease the uptake of the film's meanings, these techniques can still be called postmodern. The foreign film parodies, the dance sequence, and the brilliant reality-versus-expectations split screen when Tom attends Summer's engagement party are all designed to make Tom's state of mind clearer. However, it is clear that Tom's specific perspective is being privileged over the objective realism of classical Hollywood films, and this change signals the influence of postmodernism on the artistry of film. Moreover, it does so premised on radical changes in the institution of marriage, as well as an underlying conception of love. No social institution is unchanging, and this is true with marriage. The advent of no-fault divorce has created a generation whose idea about the permanence of love has been shaken, and this change is foregrounded in the film as it explicitly mentions that both Tom's and Summer's parents are divorced, and features greeting card mock-ups dedicated to "Other Mother's Day." Not only has the institution of marriage changed, but how we identify its key component, love, has likewise changed. This film offers a vehicle to represent these ongoing changes, and we might think of this as postmodern filmic aesthetics meets millennial meanings. A postmodern romantic comedy may be a subgenre in the ongoing development of film – a change made necessary due to the changes in the institution of marriage and the social demographics of cinema's audience and to the changes in film's artistic conventions. An analysis of *(500) Days of Summer* has shown how specific filmic elements give rise to cues that help us track the changes

⁵⁷ C. Constable, *Postmodernism and Film: Rethinking Hollywood's Aesthetics*, New York 2015, p. 89.

of the social currency of love, marriage, and their changing meanings. At this point, one might wonder about the question mark in the title of this article. I suggest that if there is anything certain in postmodernism, it is the irony of its uncertainty. It is by working through the paradoxes that we can gesture toward the meaning of the film.⁵⁸

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