

Celestino Deleyto 2009: *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*. Manchester: Manchester UP. xi + 208 pp. ISBN 0719076749

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My aim in this book is...double: on the one hand, as far as generic theory is concerned, I will be taking issue with the notion of belonging as the most appropriate way to talk about film genre; on the other, I will be arguing that there is more to romantic comedy than meets the eye, that the genre's presence in films is richer, more complex and less ideologically determined than it has generally been taken to be, and that it can often be found in the most unexpected places. (3)

Celestino Deleyto here reveals the manifesto for *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*, a work which contests many of the habitual assumptions about the genre. Deleyto is well-placed to take on this task: he has written and published widely on romantic comedy, as well as compiling and editing, with Peter Evans, one of the foremost collections on the topic, *Terms of Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and 1990s* (1998). In his new book, however, Deleyto exceeds even his own previous achievements, producing a new take on the genre as provocative as it is innovative. And so the term *manifesto* is not an exaggeration: Deleyto proposes that we – film theorists, critics and audiences alike – abandon the ways that romantic comedy has been traditionally conceived and dismissed. By using his new paradigm we are enabled to re-evaluate this generally despised genre, while specific films habitually excluded even from the romcom's lowly ranks will be reappraised. The author devotes his first two chapters to demolishing established views of the romantic comedy and genre per se, and the remaining three to proving the validity of his new theory via the close textual analysis of various films not usually deemed belonging to the romcom.

This, however, is precisely the concept to which Deleyto states his fundamental objection: the notion of *belonging* and genres. When writers believe that films 'belong' to specific genres, Deleyto attests, this reveals their anxieties about border patrolling, and their fears about (a taken-for-granted) purity becoming tainted. What seems a common-sense and commonplace term indicative of familial relations between texts actually hides deep if unconscious investments in a rigid system of classification. In my 2007 book on the genre, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, I concluded my historically-situated survey of the screwball, sex comedy, and 'radical' Seventies romantic comedy by coming up-to-date and repining that, by contrast with its genuinely comical forebears, the contemporary romcom is unfunny and liable to render the whole genre moribund. Deleyto contends that my disillusionment with contemporary products results from the small size of my catchment pool. Were I to employ the wider and more generous classification he proposes, many of my objections to the contemporary genre would disappear.

Deleyto demonstrates this by offering a synopsis of Steven Soderbergh's 1998 film *Out of Sight* which makes it sound like a romantic comedy, complete with the archetypal romcom convention, the 'meet cute': the future lovers meet when locked together in a car boot. While the film is usually understood as a thriller, Deleyto insists that denying the romcom elements inherent in the narrative diminishes our understanding not only of this one text but more widely of the genre's potential as a whole. He goes further: the history of the genre shows that romantic comedy has always been enriched by films such as *Out Of Sight*, which most theorists would not recognise or would reduce to minor entries in the canon. Yet insisting on the central importance of texts like this is part of Deleyto's project to revivify the genre and overturn the critical contempt its films usually attract.

But Deleyto is not content to alter only the familiar contours of the *contemporary* romcom. He insists his more ample reading of the romantic comedy be applied retrospectively also, and thus examines older films habitually felt not to 'belong to' the genre, in order to demonstrate further that notions of belonging lead to a stunted understanding. He suggests another film for inclusion in an enlarged list of romantic comedies: *Rio Bravo*. This famous 1958 Western may at first seem an odd choice for addition to the ranks of films like *It Happened One Night*, *Pillow Talk*, and *Annie Hall* but Deleyto has his reasons: the very qualities which make the film seem unlikely to fit the genre – its male sensibility, reliance on violence and mistrust of the civilising effects of women – are the elements necessitating the inclusion of its romantic comedy aspects. The antagonism to the female inherent in the Western genre needs to be weeded out if the West is to thrive – if indeed the nation is to do so, and hence the importance of subjugating the hero, John T. Chance, played by iconic Westerner John Wayne, to the laughing female Feathers (Angie Dickinson): "The text...sees this irrational fear of women as an impediment not only to the hero's humanity but to the future of the country. At this point, romantic comedy, like the Seventh Cavalry, comes to the rescue..." (16).

Romantic comedy rescues the film as well as the hero by importing female desire into the narrative. In this way, Deleyto asserts, the film's romantic comedy scenes emphasise the gender equality necessary for the salvation of hero and nation.

The potential of romantic comedy to alter the trajectory of the narrative is one of the topics *The Secret Life* investigates. The other is equally moot: many audience members and theorists – again including me – have often castigated the romantic comedy, especially the current forms of the genre, for being neither sufficiently romantic nor comedic enough. Yet the laughter engendered by comedy is vital, Deleyto insists, to the success of the romantic comedy's project. He finds that humour is imperative to the creation of what he calls the *space of romantic comedy*, a protective bubble inside the film which permits the characters room and time to find themselves and each other: "... a space which transforms reality...by protecting the lovers from the strictures of social conventions and psychological inhibitions. This comic, protective, erotically-charged space is the space of romantic comedy" (18).

Deleyto sees this space within romantic comedies as operating very much like the 'green space' that permits the lovers' adventures in the comic plays by Shakespeare: thus

Susan's aunt's house in the Connecticut countryside in *Bringing Up Baby* (1937), away from the distractions of the city, provides the locale the couple needs to quarrel, play and learn to love in much the same way as does Illyria in *Twelfth Night*. Deleyto stresses that this space is not just a geographical, but specifically also an erotic and comic one. But it needs both elements to work: without the combination of both eros and humour, many films' resolutions would not be possible, as attested by the famous final line of *Some Like It Hot* (1959). Here millionaire Osgood responds to the revelation that his new love 'Daphne' is actually a man with the accepting words, "Well, nobody's perfect". While this ending can be read, Deleyto notes, as "a subversion of the traditional happy ending of the genre" (35), he specifically interprets it also as emphasizing the sexual utopia the film's comic space proposes.

Although asserting the perennial importance of both the comic and erotic to the genre, the author does not suggest that an ahistorical or timeless quality inheres in the romantic comedy. Far from it: Deleyto insists on returning films to their originating historical contexts in order to read them. To this end he then devotes a chapter to investigating two romantic comedies, *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) and *Kiss Me, Stupid* (1964), both of which were perceived to be problematic on release.

Deleyto examines the Lubitsch film by unpicking its generic threads, and noting that "There are two types of intergeneric encounters in the movie" (60), between the comic, and the thriller or adventure elements, and then between two different types of comedy, satirical and romantic. Rather than being haphazard encounters, he suggests that the comic treatments of the romance, and of the Nazis, are linked and interdependent. The space which permits the love triangle to flourish is also that which ensures the safety of all the lovers against their common enemy. Deleyto notes that the film uses Carole Lombard's established on-screen 'screwball' character; further investigation of her star persona might have been profitable to round out this discussion even more, since the star was widely known to be cheerfully libidinous. Lombard frequently and publicly asserted her right to live 'like a man' and to choose her (successive) sexual partners outside of marriage. Reading Maria Tura as a version of Lombard herself would then add to the character a further dimension, one of self-reference.

If *To Be or Not to Be* represents a rare encounter between screwball and satirical comedy, *Kiss Me, Stupid* occupies an even rarer position, since it advocates not only adulterous relationships but suggests that prostitution can fulfil the woman, an idea Deleyto notes "was not only ahead of its time, but to a very great extent, also ahead of our time" (83). He then examines this frequently-reviled film and ends by suggesting that its comic space recuperates it since, like *Rio Bravo*, *Kiss Me Stupid* actually promotes an acceptance of female sexual agency and desire. Here the small town of Climax, Nevada acts as the space of romantic comedy. Finding himself stranded in Climax, Dino, well-known singer and lothario, encounters two would-be song writers, Orville Spooner and Barney Millsap, who try to lure him to buy their songs by offering him Orville's wife Zelda. Orville is, however, too jealous to pander his real wife and recruits local casual prostitute, Polly the Pistol, to impersonate her. Polly plays her role of demure wife so well that Orville becomes jealous of Dino's attentions to *her*, and the pair retires to the marital bed. Dino meanwhile ends up in Polly's trailer where, through

a series of plot exigencies, he finds himself entertained by Zelda. Wife and courtesan have thus changed places. Deleyto finds the film's redeeming move is to show that Zelda, who had a teenage crush on Dino, responds *positively* to his assumption that she is a prostitute: with him she can live the ultimate fan fantasy of sleeping with the long-desired star. While previous critics have found the film tasteless, seeming to suggest all women are interchangeable, Deleyto provides a close analysis of the film's camera work and editing to show this is not its intent.

Deleyto then illustrates how his more generous definition of the genre equally serves texts which are traditionally felt to be outside the romcom, in looking at "romantic comedy on the dark side" (103). Here he examines Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 thriller *Rear Window* and Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989). The former seems to fit more easily into a discussion of the genre, since Hitchcock films frequently sustain the lightness of tone permitting eroticised verbal sparring between the male and female protagonists. Deleyto determines to examine the film alongside romantic comedy in order to see how the film's use of and deviation from romcom norms enhances its drama: "In this chapter I look at *Rear Window*, again not as a romantic comedy, but as a text in which this genre interacts with another one, in the case the non-comic suspense thriller, producing, as a result of this cross-fertilisation, relevant consequences for our understanding of the film" (105).

Understanding the potential of the romantic comedy space which Deleyto has laid out for us, we can thus see how this film evokes it and shows it menaced by the murderous forces belonging to the other half of the film's generic mix. The film teases the viewer on the occasion of Lisa's introduction by showing Jeff asleep, vulnerable in his chair, as a dark shadow looms over him. This potential threat then seems dispersed when the reverse-shot reveals Lisa, leaning in for a kiss. Yet the space of romantic comedy which this kiss creates could also become the "gothic space of the thriller in which murderous drives often signify sexual obsession and repression" (123). Thus both romance and murder have staked a claim to the unfolding narrative and will thereafter battle to see which can claim the couple.

While death threatens but does not separate the couple in Hitchcock's film, in Allen's it is triumphant: the woman is murdered. Deleyto sets himself his most difficult task in discussing *Crimes and Misdemeanours* in terms of romantic comedy, since the death of love is at its heart. Yet the film could so easily be assumed, before reading its synopsis, to be a romcom. Its director's credentials are hard to overlook: Allen is the man who practically invented, with films such as *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Manhattan* (1979), both the 1970s form of the romantic comedy – sexually savvy, witty and self-reflexive – and the now-inevitable use of New York City as *the* locale of love. Here again is the usual setting and theme, love failing amongst hip Jewish intellectuals on the Upper East Side. But the hero is not the usual Allen schlemiel. Instead of complaining about his girl-friend to his analyst, he hires a hit man to kill her.

Deleyto asserts that the generic mixing occurring in the film is no accident: "Allen uses the thriller in so far as it can affect the evolution of his brand of romantic comedy" (129). Allowing 'his brand' to evolve far enough to include murder seems to indicate that Allen was frustrated by association with the romantic comedy and wanted to start

afresh. While *Crimes and Misdemeanours* then frequently looks like Allen business-as-usual, its narrative takes it into different territory. Deleyto seems to enjoy the 'permeability' of the comic by the darker elements of the film's plot, "the elasticity it shows in allowing itself to be transformed by the thriller" (130), but to many audience members the film merely seems cruel, meting out harsh punishments to the few good characters, allowing the bad to flourish. When the film concludes with a fluid sequence of images from earlier scenes, it is difficult not to see Allen reworking the famous montage ending of his earlier *Annie Hall*. Deleyto reads the end of the film as leaving the viewer with "resigned optimism" (142) but for the lover of romantic comedy this emotion is very hard to conjure: not only the heroine of *Crimes and Misdemeanours* but *Annie Hall* itself seems to have been slain by the conscious reworking of a montage-conclusion.

One final point arises in Deleyto's discussion of the Allen film which ties into his final chapter, where the important part played by independent movies in the development of the romantic comedy is considered. This is the proffering in *Crimes and Misdemeanours* of forms of love alternative to the heterosexual tradition. Deleyto finds comfort in the presentation of the non-romantic relationship between Cliff and his niece Jenny. However, Cliff is played by Allen himself, and this prompts a problem: in the light of his much-publicised affair with and later marriage to his (virtual) step-daughter, it is difficult for the viewer now to ignore extra-diegetic awareness of Allen's own erotic preference for young girls. This seems to me inevitably to affect responses to the film's advancement of the non-erotic but still loving relationships *Crimes and Misdemeanours* presents.

In the final chapter Deleyto is pleased to find independent pictures free to promote unusual forms of love and friendship. He concludes, however, by examining an indie film with a straightforwardly heterosexual romance, *Before Sunrise*, the 2004 follow-up by Richard Linklater to his earlier film *Before Sunset* (1995). While this brought together a French woman and an American man for a single night of romance in Vienna, in the later film the couple meet again in Paris, and once more experience a romantic frisson. Deleyto concludes that the second film self-consciously revisits the reluctance of the first to turn sexy talk into action, yet finds that this very lack of any conclusive movement towards consummation is the film's charm.

Thus *Before Sunrise*'s frank avowal of the difficulty of intimacy provides a useful point for Deleyto to take stock of what the contemporary romcom has become. Concluding, he contrasts the rigidity of the criticism directed at the genre with its own remarkable fluidity and flexibility, as evinced in films such as Linklater's, and demands that it be afforded a more supple treatment by theorists and audiences alike.

With this book Deleyto is not attempting to add a dry little monograph to the literature on romantic comedy. His task is bigger: to rewrite the entire concept of the genre in order to enlarge its surface area and thus prove the problems many critics have with it are actually problems inherent in our own, too small, conception. The book passionately challenges orthodoxies, providing indispensable reading for anyone who teaches or researches not just romantic comedies but film genre as a whole, as well as readers who want to enrich their perception of what romcom can do. This provocative

and fascinating book asks readers to reappraise their own prejudices, to go back to the familiar films and seek out new ones, to give up the lazy adoption and maintenance of platitudes. In doing so, its author seeks to liberate the romantic comedy from its despised position at the bottom of the generic hierarchy. The genre may have been waiting a long time, but at last Deleyto, like the Seventh Cavalry, has come to the rescue.

#### Works Cited

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