

Maria San Filippo (ed). *After “Happily Ever After”*: Romantic Comedy in the Post Romantic Age. Wayne State UP, 2021. Pp. 382. US \$34.99 (paper). ISBN: 9780814346747.

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For decades popular media sources and scholars alike have opined the death of the romantic comedy genre. However, the new collection of essays on the romantic comedy, *After “Happily Ever After”*: Romantic Comedy in the Post Romantic Age, edited by Maria San Filippo, rejects these claims and explores what has happened to the genre in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. The collection opens with a foreword from Tamar Jeffers McDonald and introduction from Maria San Filippo, both of which address the claims of the romantic comedy’s death, noting that this is not a new assertion but one stretching all the way back to the late-1970s. Since then, the romcom has both died and been resurrected many times over. While agreeing that the genre is less prevalent than it was during the peak of the Neo-Traditional cycle, Jeffers McDonald makes the case for the continued life of the genre, arguing that while some of the features look different than they did in previous generations, many of those changes are nearly or entirely superficial, and “seem to have been included to score cool points” (xvi) rather than to demonstrate any real change in the genre as a whole.

In addition to rejecting claims of the genre’s death, San Filippo’s introduction further establishes the purpose, context and parameters of the collection, which “seek[s] to reorient romcom scholarship by confronting the actual contours of what constitutes romcom since the 2000s, as the genre has been reshaped in response to two pervasive forces: the ‘digital era’ of screen media ... and the reconfiguration of social relations and practices linked to romance” (6). The collection explores media from the past decade and embraces “narratives that deviate from romcom formula ... and that adapt Hollywood-centric romcom’s cinematic conventions and national-industrial positionalities to fit serialized, cross-platform formats and indie and non-U.S./transnational production contexts” (4-5). In doing so these films and television shows “defy the romcom doom-sayers by attesting to romantic comedy’s continuing vitality, in new modes and forms that reimagine and rejuvenate the genre by representing romance in ideologically in artistically innovative ways” (17). The book is

appropriately divided into three five-chapter “Acts,” beginning with “What’s New is Old: Regenerating Romcom,” followed by “Love in a Time of Precarity: Romcom Realism,” and concluding with “Reimagining ‘Happily Ever After.’”

The chapters in Act 1, “What’s New is Old: Regenerating Romcom,” explore the ways that more recent romantic comedies have sought to authentically diversify the perspectives traditionally presented in the genre through diverse casts that generate new and unique plots. In the first chapter, Beatriz Oria establishes this perspective, discussing the ways that the genre has changed since 2010. In particular, Oria notes the way new and diverse voices are highlighted in the storytelling, reflecting new generations of life experience. Stories that highlight queer and/or racially diverse perspectives reflect the experiences of millennials, who are entering their thirties in this decade, while so-called “third-age” voices reflect the still-powerful “gray dollar” of baby boomers (with each of these perspectives receiving a full chapter in the section). Films of this period also tend to abandon the standard boy-meets-girl story structure and feature multi-protagonist storylines, highlight same-sex friendships alongside a heterosexual romantic plotline, and often hybridize the romcom with other popular genres.

Act 1 also explores the ways in which serialization impacts the romantic comedy. Alice Guilluy, Betty Kaklamanidou, and Ash Kinney d’Harcourt explore the way TV shows such as *The Mindy Project* (Fox, 2012-2015; Hulu, 2015-2017), *Grace and Frankie* (Netflix, 2015-2022), and *Take My Wife* (Seeso, 2016-2018) have taken up and modified or expanded the romcom generic structure (once called “boy-meets-girl” but as the characters in these series demonstrate, that terminology no longer applies in many cases) to their own ends in the wake of the genre’s waning popularity. Similarly, James MacDowell explores the way Richard Linklater’s *Before Series*—*Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004), and *Before Midnight* (2013)—uses the serial format to look at the relationship between romantic comedy and romantic melodrama. Like the texts discussed in Act 1, the *Before* series looks beyond the boundaries of the traditional romcom plot to what exists outside the opening and closing credits.

Act 2, “Love in a Time of Precarity: Romcom Realism,” shifts away from the strictly American, Hollywood film, to a more inter- and transnational point of view. It establishes these films not only in a cultural setting, but also a political one, influenced by local, national, and international politics. Maya Montaez Smukler focuses on the *Harold & Kumar* films—*Harold & Kumar Go To White Castle* (2004) and *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* (2008). These films satirize and challenge conservative U.S. politics from the perspective of racial minorities while addressing stereotypes and racism in the workplace, generational culture clashes with family, and the highs (no pun intended) and lows of romance both at home and abroad. Moving outside Hollywood, Manuela Ruiz takes a somewhat optimistic look at the potential for transnationality in French film as she explores *Samba* (2014), while Mary Harrod argues that the conservatism of right-wing politics is still visible in popular in French romantic comedies of the past decade.

Further, Act 2 explores the ways that romantic comedies integrate political perspectives and political theory in their storytelling. Tom Cunliffe explores Johnnie To’s critiques of capitalism in *Don’t Go Breaking My Heart 1* (2011) and 2 (2014) which “reflect cultural and sociopolitical trends locally in Hong Kong, nationally in China, and globally” (146). The films draw a comparison between romance and consumerism, establishing romance as “window shopping”: transitory and superficial. As such, the films ultimately end

cynically, “in which the characters seem doomed to repeat the same mistakes, fails to proffer the traditional happy couple at the film’s end and it seems that none of the characters will be fulfilled in their relationships” (159-60). Similarly, Martha Shearer identifies capitalism in the form of gentrification as a problem in the film *Obvious Child* (2014). Unlike To’s films, however, *Obvious Child* caves to the generic expectations and “sacrifices the bookshop and all it stands for . . . in order to construct its romantic narrative” (175), reflecting the differing values of a film set in Brooklyn rather than Hong Kong.

The final Act, “Reimagining ‘Happily Ever After,’” deconstructs love and romance, both in theory and literal relationships, in order to challenge the conclusions of the genre itself. The essays in this section do so by often using television series as examples because of the long-term possibilities offered by the medium. In the opening chapter to this Act, Elizabeth Alsop rejects the idea that the television series she discusses are “post-romantic,” but rather that they are post- “the conventions that have so often constrained [romance’s] presentation in popular culture and circumscribed the range of desires and outcomes permitted the female protagonist” (221). Similarly, John Alberti explores the ways the series *Love* (Netflix, 2016-2018) simultaneously affirms and questions romcom tropes throughout its run, particularly in terms of gender expectations. Meanwhile, Sueyoung Park-Primiano explores the ways the films of Hong Sang-soo manipulate standard romcom tropes to lay bare other ideas about love and society.

In the final chapters of the collection, Deborah Jermyn challenges the arguments that have long been made about the romcom’s conclusion in a “happy ending,”—i.e, the wedding and the theoretical (but almost never seen) unproblematic marriage that follows. She also challenges the cultural assumptions that often accompany these arguments about the HEA that these marriages reinforce the conservative and patriarchal. Jermyn presents “wrong-coms” as examples of how problematic the marriages in romantic comedies can be. Similarly, Maria San Filippo explores the idea of “conscious uncoupling” and stories about breaking up.

This collection successfully argues for the continued life of the romcom in new and interesting forms and formats. The inclusion and emphasis of serial romantic comedies that push the boundaries of audience expectations strengthens this argument as it demonstrates a clear understanding of the ways social and technological shifts impact the ways that this, as well as other genres, is currently consumed. The inclusion of the foreword by Tamar Jeffers McDonald and the contributions by top scholars in the field of romantic comedy studies ensures that this collection will become an important contributor in the continuing conversation about the romcom.