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# "I'm Taken… by Myself": Romantic Crisis in The Self-Centered Indie Rom-Com

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**Abstract:** This essay identifies a new tendency in contemporary US romantic comedy that is especially prevalent in the independent sector: the "self-centered rom-com". It argues that this trend can be read as a symptom of a crisis of romantic love in the early twenty-first century, deploying sociological theory on contemporary romantic suffering as theoretical framework to explore these films' underscoring of self-realization and simultaneous de-emphasis on romance to achieve it. The close reading of *Lola Versus* (2012), a representative example of this trend, reveals that by presenting the individual quest for self-identity as the answer to romantic disappointments, the self-centered indie rom-com poses itself as a fitting genre for the self-absorbed millennial culture in which it is inscribed while naturalizing a neoliberal rationality that constructs the subject in entrepreneurial terms and renders gender inequality as an individual affair rather than a structural problem.

**Keywords**: romantic comedy; independent cinema; romantic crisis; self-identity; millennials; neoliberalism.

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Romantic comedy today has traditionally been one of Hollywood's most popular genres, but the 2010s will probably be remembered as one of its bleakest decades. Nothing at the turn of the century seemed to foreshadow the reversal of the genre's fortunes in the new millennium. In 2002, for instance, there were eight rom-coms in the top one hundred highest-grossing films of the year, and they collectively took in $687 million in domestic box office alone. But these figures went into steep decline as the decade progressed. The last reasonably successful rom-coms (*Silver Linings Playbook* and *The Five-Year Engagement*) were released in 2012. Since then, the genre has plummeted at the box office or virtually disappeared altogether from the big screen. In 2017 only two independently produced romantic comedies made it to the top one hundred (neither of them in the top fifty): *The Big Sick* (ranked 64) and *Home Again* (ranked 87), with a combined domestic gross of only $70 million (Box Office Mojo, 2017 Domestic Grosses). In 2018, however, the genre started to show signs of recovery, with five rom-coms in the top one hundred, one of them being the breakout hit *Crazy Rich Asians*, which made a remarkable $174 million in the domestic market alone (Box Office Mojo, 2018 Domestic Grosses).

Critics' focus on romantic comedy's commercial failures during the 2010s[1] tend to sidestep the creative efforts that are taking place in less visible sites. As I have argued

elsewhere, mainstream romantic comedy may not be in its finest hour, but it is thriving on the margins (Oria). Contemporary US independent cinema is not producing canonical texts, but it is prolific in the output of films that deploy the conventions of romantic comedy, reinventing the genre in the process through new formulas that are contributing to its renaissance. One of these new approaches will be the object of analysis in this article: there is a clear tendency in the contemporary indie rom-com to diversify the film's focus-that is, to pay attention to other issues apart from romance. One of the most frequent variations is emphasis on the characters' quest for identity and self-improvement. This article will look at the tendency in contemporary romantic comedy to focus on the self rather than on the couple as a symptom of a general sense of anxiety about coupling in a social system characterized by unsettled gender power relations and of the narcissism of the millennial neoliberal culture. The films mentioned in this article participate in a discourse that connects them with relationship gurus and contemporary social theory, so I will focus on the latter-especially Eva Illouz's ideas on modern romantic suffering-as a theoretical framework to explore these movies' underscoring of self-realization and the de-emphasis on romance to achieve it. I will also take into account the neoliberal rationality that informs many of these films in an attempt to explain their construction of certain models of subjecthood. To do so, I will turn to the area where the genre has been more prevalent during the 2010s: the independent sector. More specifically, I will offer a close reading of Daryl Wein's *Lola Versus* (2012), a movie that can be considered representative of this trend for its paradigmatic plot, characters, and indie credentials.

## The Self-Centered Rom-Com

One of the paths toward the regeneration of the rom-com lies in the expansion of topics it is willing to tackle. These new topics may include atypical or thornier issues than the genre has traditionally dealt with, such as abortion (*Obvious Child* [2014]); mental illness (*Greenberg* [2010], *It's Kind of a Funny Story* [2010], *In Your Eyes* [2014]); death (*Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* [2012], *The Pretty One* [2013], *Life after Beth* [2014], *Tumbledown* [2015]); parenthood (*Happythankyoumoreplease* [2010], *Friends with Kids* [2011], *Gayby* [2012], *Begin Again* [2013], *Maggie's Plan* [2015]); addiction (*Don Jon* [2013], *The Spectacular Now* [2013], *Newlyweeds* [2013], *Sleeping with Other People* [2015], *Unlovable* [2018]); sickness (*Take Care* [2014], *The Big Sick* [2017], *Juliet, Naked* [2018]); or economic stability and career prospects (*The Giant Mechanical Man* [2012], *Laggies* [2014], *Life Partners* [2014]). However, the most popular "variation" in the rom-com plot today is a focus on its protagonists' self-development as individuals. This is an issue that the genre has traditionally been preoccupied with: the romantic quest has always run parallel to the characters' blossoming into better, more complete versions of themselves, with the members of the couple coming to know themselves "as they come to know one another" (Neale, "The Big Romance" 293). The difference lies in these films' degree of engagement with this issue: in these movies, the project of the self takes center stage, pushing the couple to the margins. In this way, romance is either sidestepped or subordinated to other aspects, such as friendship, parenthood, professional accomplishments, family ties, or simply selfdiscovery.[2]

This tendency is also visible in the few mainstream romantic comedies that have reached a measure of commercial success with audiences lately. Significantly, films such as *Bridesmaids* (2011), *Trainwreck* (2015), *How to Be Single* (2016), *I Feel Pretty* (2018), *Second Act* (2018), and *Isn't It Romantic?* (2019) choose to focus on their female protagonists as nuanced, fully fleshed-out characters in a process of growth rather than highlight the romantic quest exclusively. However, the scarce number of commercial rom-coms being made these days[3] has necessarily turned indie cinema into the main arena for the cinematic exploration of these issues. The topic of romance in connection with self-exploration has been dealt with in the 2010s in films such as *The Dish and the Spoon* (2011), *Hello I Must Be Going* (2012), *The Giant Mechanical Man* (2012), *Lola Versus, Begin Again, In a World...* (2013), *Obvious Child, Laggies, Life Partners, Appropriate Behavior* (2014), *The Pretty One, People Places Things* (2015), *Maggie's Plan, The Incredible Jessica James* (2017), *Alex Strangelove* (2018), and *Nappily Ever After* (2018), to name just a few.

Not everybody would regard all of these films as romantic comedies. They draw on different genres, and as mentioned before, they may include elements that seem at odds with the lightheartedness usually associated with the rom-com. This is due partly to the inherent fluidity of film genre but also to independent cinema's traditionally iconoclastic deployment of generic conventions. Celestino Deleyto acknowledges the emergence of such a concept as "independent romantic comedy" during the late 1990s and early 2000s mainly, going against the propensity to associate romantic comedy with the mainstream. With an open view of film genre, he highlights the increasing variety of approaches to intimate matters that romantic comedy as a whole has progressively incorporated in the last decades. He partly attributes this variety to the impact of independent cinema on the mainstream, thus highlighting the rich process of cross-fertilization between the two (148-57).

This process of mutual influence between the center and the margins forms part of a flexible view of film genre that goes against traditional taxonomic approaches and is in line with that of other scholars such as Steve Neale (*Genre and Hollywood*), Tom Ryall, James Naremore, Rick Altman, and Christine Gledhill. Basically, these authors regard genres not as fixed categories but as critical tools against which a text's meanings can be better understood. In this framework, trying to determine whether a particular film is a comedy or a drama is not as relevant as wondering what genre or genres constitute an effective context for its reading (Ryall 336). In this way, the notion of films belonging to certain genres is replaced by the idea of films participating in their conventions. This opens the door to a world of possibilities in the way both individual films and genres as a whole may be considered. The former become richer, more complex texts open to a greater variety of readings. The latter become freer to develop and grow, no longer constrained by the straitjacket of rigid categorization. Thus, with a more flexible view of film genre, all of the films mentioned previously can be said to deploy the conventions of romantic comedy, and all of them are engaged in various ways with the topic of self-interrogation.[4] This trend is particularly evident in the aforementioned corpus of films, which are concerned with the millennial quest for self-identity, a quest that, as the following section will show, may be read as symptomatic of a cultural context characterized by an acute romantic crisis.

**The Millennial Dating Crisis**

Unraveling the intricacies of romance has never been an easy matter for any generation, but the so-called millennial cohort seems to be particularly troubled in this aspect. It is argued that those born between the early 1980s and mid to late 1990s have difficulties establishing and maintaining healthy long-term relationships. This is mainly attributed to their "casual" approach to courtship: romance has seemingly been replaced by "hookup culture," and young people do not date; they "hang out," which makes things confusing when it comes to defining what constitutes a couple today (Weissbourd et al.; Williams). Appearances are deceiving, though. Surprisingly, research data show that millennials are actually less promiscuous than previous generations. They have fewer sexual partners than any generation since their grandparents-who averaged just two partners each at the same age-and are, in general, less sexually active (Twenge et al.).

The reasons for this tendency are diverse, but experts tend to agree that this generation's technological immersion is playing an important role in the so-called dating crisis of the 2010s (Mukhopadhyay; Ansari and Klinenberg; Sherman). Digital platforms create the illusion of permanent connection while isolating us from others at the same time. This detachment from the real world brings about a fear of the same intimacy that we long for, a scenario that was somehow anticipated in 2003 by Zygmunt Bauman, who pointed out how the virtual proximity of the digital world creates more frequent but more shallow connections, as "distance is no obstacle to getting in touch, but getting in touch is no obstacle to staying apart" (*Liquid Love* 62).

Apart from millennials' obsession with technology, there are other factors contributing to this crisis. The economic recession, for instance, brought about a new scenario of impoverishment that has necessarily affected millennials' courtship and marriage protocols. For example, in 2016, for the first time in more than 130 years, adults aged eighteen to thirty-four were more likely to live with their parents than with a partner (Fry). As a result of this new context of precariousness, many young people are being forced to delay certain life goals such as marriage and children, which have traditionally been considered markers of adulthood. This new state of things is connected to the emergence of a "new" stage in people's lives: what sociologists term "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood" and *Emerging Adulthood*). Whether young people enter this stage willingly or are forced into it, the truth is that the establishment of serious relationships is currently being pushed back. People today marry much later than previous generations.[5] They spend their twenties and thirties getting an education, starting a career, having different relationships, and experiencing life outside their parents' homes. In a word, by delaying "adulthood" through "emerging adulthood," millennials may spend more than two decades of their lives focusing on their individual projects of the self, trying to become fully fledged individuals before committing to a serious relationship and, possibly, starting a family.

The elongation of the "emerging adulthood" phase and the individual's new outlook on relationships can also be connected to the neoliberal discourse's colonization of the private realm. According to Wendy Brown, neoliberalism is not just a set of economic policies but a governing rationality that infiltrates all dimensions of life, including the inner workings of the individual, who-reconfigured as a market actor-is turned into

"human capital" (31). These neoliberal subjects are "individualized, entrepreneurial, and self-investing; they are also cast as entirely responsible for their own self-care and well-being" (Rottenberg 7). This individualized view of the self undermines any form of collective action or well-being and replaces it with notions of self-responsibility and autonomous choice (Larner). This panorama renders millennials' approach to relationships highly self-centered, while providing a rationale for the delay of certain life goals that require an individual to stop thinking about the self and start thinking about the common good of the couple.

Eva Illouz makes clear the connection between self-identity and romantic crisis in the era of neoliberalism: in a context in which individual responsibility is king, the "agonies of love now point only to the self, its private history, and its capacity to shape itself" (4). For her, this connection is inextricably linked with institutional arrangements, as love "contains, mirrors, and amplifies the 'entrapment' of the self in the institutions of modernity," which are in turn determined by economic and gender relations (6). Thus, Illouz explores the ways in which current romantic suffering is rooted in the social and cultural contradictions that lie at the basis of contemporary selves and identities, arguing that something fundamental about the structure of the romantic self has changed in modernity.[6] It is not that the suffering generated by love today is new, but some of the ways in which it is experienced by the individual are (4-7). According to Illouz, psychic suffering in contemporary intimate relationships is characterized by the fact that the integrity of the self is directly at stake. Experiences of rejection and unrequited love are as relevant to the individual's life narrative as other forms of collective suffering traditionally considered by sociologists as more significant (usually of a political, economic, or social nature). In her book *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*, Illouz dissects the factors that make the contemporary experience of love pain qualitatively different from the past, and one of these factors is the "overwhelming importance of love for the constitution of a social sense of worth" in contemporary societies (16). This social view of the self seems to be at odds with millennials' apparent introversion and individualism, but as this article hopes to show, both are intimately related.

The following section will analyze how this idea of romance as a crucial site for the negotiation of the neoliberal subject's self-identity is played out in Lola Versus, an indie rom-com I consider representative of a group of films that use the conventions of romantic comedy while focusing on their characters' quest for self-definition: the self-centered romantic comedy, a tendency I intend to explore through the analysis of this film. Lola Versus has been chosen first for its paradigmatic plot, which seems to initially tread on familiar rom-com territory, only to veer to a more self-centered path as the movie progresses, and second for its indie credentials: with an undisclosed but clearly low budget, the film premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival and had a limited theatrical release, making a modest $455,754 box office worldwide. Last, the fact that *Lola Versus* features Greta Gerwig – icon of millennial self-obsession and quintessential indie romantic heroine – also contributes to boast the film's status as a central example of the self-centered indie romcom.

## *Lola Versus*: Love Hurts

Lola (Greta Gerwig), a self-absorbed twentynine-year-old hipster, is immersed in the arrangements for her wedding with her long-term boyfriend, Luke (Joel Kinnaman), when he breaks up with her unexpectedly. Her whole world is shattered. She stumbles through life, trying to put herself together, hoping that maybe the relationship can be fixed. Throughout this process she is presented as being completely devastated, especially at the beginning, when she is sunk into a state of utter disbelief and paralysis. With time, Lola's distress propels her into a quest for self-identity that initially runs parallel to her romantic endeavors. The movie is one of a group of films[7] that bring the (re)construction and improvement of the self to the forefront while highlighting the strength of the bond that is established nowadays between romantic love and selfhood and the damage a breakup may inflict on the subject in contemporary society. This is regarded by Eva Illouz as an inherently modern concern.[8] According to her, romantic love has always enhanced the individual's self-image through the mediation of the beloved's gaze (111). However, the sense of self-worth bestowed by romantic love is today more important than ever because the validation provided by love did not play a social role in the past and did not substitute for social recognition-except in cases of cross-class marriage. Now it is this "very structure of recognition that has been transformed" in romantic relationships (112). The sense of self is essentialized, and the sense of worth is inextricably linked to the self, transcending other dimensions of the individual, such as social class. But this sense of worth depends largely on its confirmation through the experience of love, so the purpose of love is, ultimately, to give us a sense of self (114), an assumption that is especially true for women in a heteronormative, patriarchal society that puts an unequal degree of pressure on the sexes to find their other half (Mukhopadhyay 108).

This question is thoroughly explored in *Lola Versus*, which is concerned with this crucial transformation in the meaning of love through the representation of its protagonist's distraught sense of selfhood after being left by her partner. Lola's cynical best friend, Alice (Zoe Lister-Jones), tells her that the breakup is a good thing because being single "builds character" – although this assertion is often contradicted by her own anxiety to find a partner through the movie. Despite the inconsistency, this idea is established as the film's main theme: the necessity to "find yourself" on your own before finding your soul mate, a quest that is boosted by the neoliberal ethos of self-improvement and self-care. This is a recurrent trope in the indie self-centered rom-com that sets it apart from more conventional examples of the genre and dovetails with millennial self-help literature (Beaton; Silva; Mukhopadhyay) and contemporary social theory, such as Anthony Giddens's idea about the need for members of a couple to complete their individual projects of the self before entering the "pure relationship," an intrinsically egalitarian model of relationship that is presented as a blueprint for lasting commitment (49-64). However, as this analysis will show, this is not an easy task because it is in direct conflict with the contemporary idea of romantic reciprocity as part and parcel of selfhood.

With this contradiction at its core, the film proceeds to unravel the complexities and tensions of millennial single life, as the protagonist is forced to plunge into a hookup culture populated by individuals in the emergent adulthood stage, which she previously

bypassed altogether through her early stable relationship with Luke. This "culture" is characterized by a remarkable dating crisis brought about in part by the advent of new technologies-although this dimension of the contemporary romantic scenario is not fully pursued by the film, *Lola Versus* does hint at millennials' frustration with online dating and social media, which are presented as useless tools for finding romance through the jaded character of Alice-but especially by a chaotic dating scene with no clearly defined rules. The film dissects this bewildering romantic panorama by showing a confused Lola navigating her relationships with three different men, none of which can be conventionally labeled. *Lola Versus*' structure is one of the elements that set the film apart from more conventional examples of the genre. Mainstream romantic comedies tend to follow a fairly predictable unfolding and denouement. The indie self-centered rom-com, on the other hand, often features a looser structure, as is the case in *Lola Versus*, which eschews climactic moments and typical genre tropes to focus on the evolution of its protagonist's subjecthood. One of the most recurrent conventions in romantic comedy is that of the "right" partner and the "wrong" one. The right partner is the protagonist's destined soul mate, whereas the wrong partner represents an aspect of the personality of the protagonist "that stands in the way of couple's formation and that thus has to be cast aside" (Neale, "The Big Romance" 289). Both roles can usually be anticipated from the beginning. Indie rom-coms, on the other hand, are more likely to deploy these conventions with a revisionist spirit. In the case of *Lola Versus*, the protagonist has romantic encounters with three different men, but the roles of the right/wrong partner are not clearly assigned. In the end, romantic comedy's main convention-the happy ending granted by heterosexual coupling-is subverted, as none of the men end up turning into her perfect match.

Her first relationship is with Luke, her ex-fiancé, whom Lola perceives as her soul mate at first but who becomes the wrong partner as the movie progresses. In a moment of weakness she goes back to him, and they have sex, which seems to bring them closer again, but the kind of bond they can uphold after the breakup is uncertain, and Lola decides not to see him again. The reasons for Luke's decision to end their engagement in the first place are not initially clarified. However, it is later revealed that it was the pressure of commitment that made him break up with Lola. Once the wedding became "real," the prospect of finally settling down overwhelmed him. This links in with the idea of millennials being a generation that does not accept the "good enough" marriage (Ansari and Klinenberg 126). They are looking for a soul mate, a mythical being who is assumed to be hiding in the sea of options that is apparently accessible to the individual in today's globalized world. However, this excess of choices produces what is known as the FOBO ("Fear of Better Options") syndrome (Parker). Once millennials find a stable partner, the feeling that there might be a better choice out there if only they search hard enough is inescapable. The idea that Luke ends his engagement to Lola because of his fear of settling for anything less than "the one" is hinted at later on, when she learns he is "hanging out" with other girls (not dating them). "This is what we should be doing. You should be doing it too," he admonishes her, in an attempt to rationalize his decision as part of his own project of the self: it is implied that in the emergent adulthood stage, individuals are expected to have a number of informal relationships before settling down with their soul mate. The problem with this idea is confirmed at the end of the

film: the FOBO syndrome never disappears, and the search seems equally never-ending, which leads Luke back to square one, asking Lola to take him back.

The second man in Lola's life is Henry (Hamish Linklater), her best friend, with whom she starts an affair of sorts. Lola and Henry are frequently shown "hanging out" (again, not dating), and the rom-com connoisseur is led to believe he is the right partner for Lola. Following the conventions of the genre, there is a montage sequence in which the two friends are shown having fun while exploring the city of New York, thus suggesting their compatibility as a couple in contemporary cinema's romantic playground par excellence (Jeffers McDonald; Deleyto). However, *Lola Versus* does not fulfill our generic expectations because this relationship does not have a conventional happy ending. Lola "forces" Henry into a relationship with her only to let him down, first because of her fixation on Luke and second because of her fling with a random man she meets in a shop. Lola and Henry's relationship does not have a name: Henry says, "We don't have to label it. We can just be." The ambiguity of their romantic status echoes one of the problems of hookup culture: its lack of rules brings about a great deal of misunderstandings and potential fallouts. This is what happens when Lola-entitled by the casualness of her relationship with Henry-agrees to go on a date with Nick (Ebon Moss-Bachrach), the third man she becomes involved with. Nick is an unambiguous wrong partner: a thoroughly uninteresting person with whom she has a deeply unsatisfying one-night stand and whose only narrative function seems to be highlighting Henry's suitability as boyfriend.

When Henry learns about the affair, he gets angry. Lola justifies herself by claiming she did not know the conditions of their relationship. In this way, the confusion about the rules governing millennials' romantic arrangements leads astray a relationship full of potential. In the end Lola and Henry do not become a couple, thus subverting the viewers' generic expectations about one of romantic comedy's main tropes, and friendship is presented as a more suitable option for them, with the text pointing at Lola's flawed personality as the primary reason for the relationship's failure. In this way, the film problematizes the roles of the right/wrong partner, presenting more nuanced characters and updating the genre by combining two ideas: Lola's troubled sense of self and the confusion surrounding today's dating protocols as a recipe for disaster in its protagonist's life trajectory.

Interestingly, the millennial romantic scenario is compared to the near past via Lola's conversations with her ex-hippie father, Lenny (Bill Pullman). Lola's parents seem to have led a liberal lifestyle in the 1970s that included the practice of "free love," a concept that clashes with today's steadfast "soul mate" ideal, which paradoxically reigns supreme despite-or maybe because of-the hookup culture (Willoughby and James 100-03). These conversations between father and daughter portray millennials as being more conservative than previous generations and aspiring to unrealistic standards of romance and monogamy. Lola wants a "conventional" lifestyle, seemingly rejecting the free-floating model of intimacy her parents chose, but she is confronted with the messiness of turn-of-the-millennium relationships: in the second decade of the twenty-first century, lifelong monogamy is on the wane, and dating protocols are increasingly difficult to decode, a reality she painfully experiences firsthand. Implicitly, the film seems to suggest that today's hookup culture is not so far removed from the 1970s

mores in terms of promiscuity or sexual freedom, but the way in which many individuals experience that freedom is diametrically different. The ideals of lifelong monogamy and conventional family life linked to the ideological backlash of the 1980s and the postfeminist concept of "having it all" in the 1990s and 2000s have plunged the sexes into a deep state of crisis. This has fostered a schizophrenic dating scene in which people long for commitment but have to face a very different reality: one characterized by a fleetingness and provisionality in personal relationships that dovetails with equally uncertain living conditions and mores (Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*; Willoughby and James 195) partly brought about by the recession in the new millennium. Unlike in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when some individuals gave themselves to sexual experimentation, promiscuity, and even polyamorous relationships with reckless abandon, this lighthearted approach to relationships is generally not guilt-free for many in contemporary Western societies. This is especially true for women, who are routinely held responsible for the success or failure of their relationships by today's culture of self-help (Mukhopadhyay 85). The contingent nature of romantic attachments constitutes a legitimate source of anxiety and a potential trigger for personal crisis, as happens to Lola, because (idealized) monogamous romantic love is regarded today as one of the main pillars sustaining our sense of identity in a neoliberal context that tries to counterbalance a new sense of precariousness (both sentimental and economic) with the security of coupledom.[9]

If love is considered one of the main sites for the negotiation of self-worth, this means that it is the individual's performance in a relationship that establishes that worth. Social worth and recognition do not stem from the self; they are continuously achieved through interaction with others (Illouz 119; Honneth 39). This turns love into the main arena for "ontological insecurity and uncertainty at the very same time that it becomes one of the main sites for the experience of (and the demand for) recognition" (Illouz 123). This paradox brings about a great deal of suffering to Lola, who finds it impossible to disassociate her social value from her romantic relationships. However, this feeling is contradicted by a powerful neoliberal discourse that urges her to "work on herself" – that is, to establish her worth autonomously – as a precondition for the formation of a successful romantic relationship, rather than as a consequence of it.

As Lola starts her downward spiral, the movie unveils its ideological agenda through its participation in the neoliberal discourse of self-regulation, which promotes the idea that individuals must take full responsibility for their well-being. Through the movie, the protagonist is repeatedly told to "improve herself": after falling out with both Luke and Henry, a confused Lola seeks advice in her mother (Debra Winger), who tells her to "be the bigger person" in her relationships with them-that is, to evolve toward an upgraded version of herself. She tries to start this process of growth, but it does not seem to work, which is conveyed narratively through short scenes that point to her failure: she goes to the psychiatrist because she wants to "be in the moment," but she cannot even turn off her cell phone; she takes up yoga classes but cannot concentrate. Meanwhile, Henry and Luke move in together, an idea Lola cannot come to terms with. Her misfortunes seem to peak when Henry and her friend Alice become an item. When she learns about this, she has a breakdown. Henry's response is in line with that of her mother: "Just work on yourself, Lola," he admonishes her, verbalizing the ethos of self-monitoring that millennial popular psychology discourses address mainly to women (Mukhopadhyay 8).

The implication is, again, that she needs to be whole before being part of a relationship-that is, to improve herself before attempting to maintain any social bonds. After this, Lola seems to hit bottom. This marks an inflection point that precipitates a moment of anagnorisis, visually conveyed by Lola literally standing alone at a crossroads in Manhattan, watching happy couples go by while her extradiegetic voice-over says, "I wish I could say that this was someone else's fault. That it was Luke's fault. Or Henry's fault or Alice's. But it's not. It's me." With these words the film makes clear that Lola is entirely to blame for her sorry state, and now she is finally aware of it, which is emphasized visually by the shaky close-ups of her anguished face and the final long shot that captures her disorientation and loneliness in the midst of the crowd.

This plot twist is highly tendentious since the film never provides actual evidence for the faults that led Luke to break up with Lola in the first place. By contrast, the men in her life are not judged by the text (or at least not at the same level as Lola), even though they seem to be highly flawed: Luke is the one who broke the relationship-for reasons that are not made explicit-but he is never blamed for it, and it is Lola who has to "change." Henry "betrays" Lola by dating her best friend, but he is the offended party when Lola confronts him. Finally, Nick is portrayed as a highly unattractive partner and unskilled lover, but this is also presented as Lola's fault for making a poor choice. In short, the film is, in neoliberal fashion, blaming the (female) individual for what is at bottom a structural problem: the instability that characterizes contemporary romantic relationships and the unbalanced power struggle between the sexes.

*Lola Versus* ignores this, propelling its protagonist to a journey of self-discovery and holistic self-improvement that encompasses body, intellect, and spiritual life. A montage sequence shows her doing yoga (this time successfully); settling down in her own apartment away from parents, friends, or romantic partners; taking care of her body at a spa; and making progress with her dissertation. The topic of her thesis is significant for her self-healing process: she analyzes silence in contemporary media and popular culture. In the last stages of her writing process, certain words are highlighted on her laptop screen and associated through editing with different images: "obsession" (connected to Luke), "possession" (linked to her wedding ring, suggesting the connection between marriage and economic security), and "powerlessness" (accompanied by an image of her crying over the loss of Luke and the life she wanted). The most conspicuous word is "silence," the topic of her dissertation. So it is suggested that it is in the silence of her solitude that she finally finds herself: throughout the movie she is presented – following the cliché about millennials (Stein) – as a needy and self-centered person, constantly obsessing about her relationships and overanalyzing them with others. It is therefore implied that what Lola needed was to be with herself-that is, to grow into her new self on her own. This process culminates with the defense of her dissertation, whose conclusion coincides with the completion of her self-discovery process. She ends her thesis by quoting Mallarmé's views on shipwreck: "The man without a vessel, a solitary plume, overwhelmed, untouched. With very few words on the page the writing itself creates space for silence and pause. For in this world of shipwreck . . . there is hope in uncertainty." These words epitomize the lesson Lola has learned: her life has gone astray; she has shipwrecked. Afraid of being on her own, she has clung desperately to the people around her, but she has suffocated them with her demands, and now she feels abandoned. She has had to go through a process of soul-

searching to discover that the key to overcoming her personal crisis lay within herself, and this could be achieved only through introspection and "silence." In the end, she takes comfort in the idea of finding "hope in uncertainty." A new world of possibilities opens up before her, one that is scary but also optimistic. This is the essence of the self-centered indie rom-com: being comedies after all, these movies present the turmoil of contemporary relationships as a trigger for personal crises that set in motion a process of self-growth that is to end in uncertain, albeit usually hopeful, denouements.

This open ending contrasts with the "happily ever after" routinely associated with mainstream romantic comedy, usually based on the heterosexual romantic union as *raison d'etre*. The film's willingness to put forward an unconventional happy ending for its protagonist can be connected with indie cinema's traditional interest in the construction of alternative-apparently more realistic-discourses. This is made evident in Lola's final conversation with her mother, in which compares her story with the fairy-tale plot of traditional romantic comedy. Lola says that stories such as Cinderella's are damaging because "we all get obsessed with shoes, and then we think that some guy is going to come put them on our feet. I actually thought I was living in a fairy tale and that Luke's shoe fit me perfectly. I guess no shoe is a perfect fit, especially when you have slightly irregular feet." Unlike fairy tales-and unlike Hollywood rom-coms-there is no Prince Charming in this story, and the heroine is not perfect either. This means everyone needs to find their "own style" – that is, a shoe to fit one's own irregular foot-as pointed out by Lola's mother. As a consequence of this, if you cut through the "emergent adulthood" phase and settle down with your partner early on in life-the one who put the apparently perfect shoe on you-it may happen that one of your feet outgrows the other, as in Lola and Luke's relationship. This is "scary," as Lola says, but it is presented as a more believable approach to relationships than that of the mainstream rom-com. With its less formulaic structure, its problematization of the trope of the right/wrong partner, and its willingness to deal with more serious issues, independent cinema possesses an aura of "realism"[10] that presents the discourse of individual self-improvement as a crucial ingredient for the happy ending, irrespective of the romantic union. However, this is problematic because it places the burden of the individual's happiness entirely on her shoulders: the movie makes Lola wholly responsible for her ordeal, naturalizing an image of the self as a commodity that can be "remade" at will, thus disregarding larger forces at play in this process.

This centrality of the autonomous self for the romantic well-being of the individual is connected to what Illouz terms the "moral structure of self-blame." In a romantic breakup, moral responsibility veers toward the abused person, who blames herself for being left. She feels defective, and her sense of self is threatened (145-48). This is so because autonomy is placed at the center of the self, and popular psychology's discourse on how self-worth should come from self-love is ubiquitous. However, this is an inherently flawed argument because it denies the social nature of self-value: self-love stems from the recognition of others; it cannot spring magically from the self alone (149-51). This has dramatic consequences in the intimate realm because "the theme of 'self-love' fundamentally plays up the theme of autonomy and further entraps the self in making it carry the burden of the failures of love" (151). *Lola Versus*, like other indie self-centered rom-coms, seems to flaunt this new moral structure of self-blame that dovetails with the neoliberal rationality: if the individual is wholly responsible for her

own well-being, it is implied that she is also to blame for her failures. The film suggests that Lola's predicament is her fault, even though it seems clear that she is the victim of her partner's behavior. As previously mentioned, the text never reveals the flaws that led Luke to break up with her in the first place. The emphasis lies instead on the urgency of Lola's self-work, self-love, and self-autonomy as preconditions for successful romantic fulfillment. This normalizes something that, in Illouz's view, is not "normal," since self-value is inseparable from the recognition of others. Thus, the self-centered indie rom-com may actually be promoting a standard of love and identity impossible to attain, while further entrenching neoliberal rationality in the private sphere.

Just as the mainstream romantic comedy often has been accused of putting forward unrealistic representations of romance that set impossibly high standards for romantic fulfillment, the indie rom-com, despite its more truthful and "mundane" appearance in its approach to relationships, actually may be just as idealistic as its more commercial counterpart, since its promotion of the "love yourself before loving others" ethos may be equally defective from a sociological perspective. *Lola Versus* seems to be partially aware of this. In one of the final scenes, Lola apologizes to Alice, verbalizing the lesson she has learned: "It's like everyone always says: to love someone else, you have to learn how to love yourself. But I don't know. After this year, I don't think that's true. I think to love yourself, you have to learn how to love other people." Here the film seems to acknowledge that self-worth does not spring magically from within but comes from without. But is loving other people enough for that? According to Illouz, it is not; this love needs to be returned because the self-image is negotiated through social interaction, not in isolation. This is not the case for Lola, who-as neoliberal subject-undertakes self-healing as an individual process. In this way, the film presents a solution for its protagonist's identity crisis that is as fantastical as some of Hollywood's unlikeliest happy endings.

Moreover, the structure of self-blame presented in *Lola Versus* is not gender-neutral, given that it is especially common in the case of women:

> Because women's self-worth is the most closely tied to love, because they have been the prime target of psychological advice, and because the use of psychological advice is an extension of their activity of monitoring themselves and their relationships, they are also the most likely to have absorbed the structure of that advice, namely being left or simply being single points back to a deficiency in the self that plots its own defeat. (Illouz 153)

Women are more likely to feel responsible for their romantic failures, and consequently for their abandonment, because men have the upper hand in the process of monitoring recognition in relationships (Illouz 153-54). This is partly due to the fact that men can "follow the imperative for autonomy more consistently and for a longer part of their lives and, as a result, they can exert emotional domination over women's desire for attachment" (138). Many popular culture texts like *Lola Versus* show how the pressure on women to settle down is stronger: while Luke carelessly pursues fleeting relationships, Lola has flash-forwards of herself as an old woman and ponders freezing her eggs. Self-help dating advice also promotes this culture of female self-blame explicitly, in that it normally places the burden of romantic failure on women's

shoulders, trying to convince them that they need to change themselves to achieve success, which differs greatly from the kind of advice addressed to men (Mukhopadhyay 88-90). This discourse, which links in with the neoliberal ethos of individual self-improvement based on a cost-benefit calculus (Rottenberg 55), is wholeheartedly embraced by the film, which launches Lola into a self-improvement spree, but not Luke.

At bottom, the imbalance in the process of recognition expresses fundamental social divisions by gender. In contemporary Western societies, "men need women's recognition less than women need men's recognition. This is because, even in a contested patriarchy, men and women both need other men's recognition" (Illouz 155). The ontological insecurity that characterizes the current romantic crisis is therefore unequally distributed between the genders, but this is sidestepped by the film, which-in neoliberal fashion-attributes Lola's suffering exclusively to her flawed individual character, disregarding other social, economic, and cultural circumstances. As a result, despite the film's being a women-centric text that emphasizes female subjectivity, it can be argued that its ultimate agenda is not as feminist as could be expected (quite the opposite). Whereas the male characters' shortcomings remain unchallenged, the film presents Lola as "defective" and in need of self-improvement to be deserving of her happy ending, instead of acknowledging that her situation might be the product of larger forces at play, including power relations between the sexes. In this way, Lola is rendered as the epitome of the neoliberal feminist subject: individualized and entrepreneurial, she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being, never demanding anything from social institutions "or even from men as a group" (Rottenberg 70).[11]

This idea is confirmed by the film's denouement. *Lola Versus* ends with a scene in which Lola throws a birthday picnic that symbolizes she is ready to enter a new, more "mature" stage of her life. In this picnic she makes amends to Henry and finds closure for her relationship with Luke. Disappointed by the single dating scene, Luke asks her back, but she refuses his offer by reasserting her need to be with herself: "I'm taken . . . by myself. I've just got to do me for a while." Her newly found sense of self is reaffirmed in the closing scene: in a recall of Cinderella's story, we see her walking down the street on her own in a new pair of shoes. They are high-heeled stilettos, a type of shoes we have never seen her wear before, and she has bought them for herself; she has not waited for a man to do it. She is not used to them yet, though, and she trips and falls down, implying that being alone is not always easy, but what matters is being able to get back on your feet again. She also has bought flowers for herself. The very last shot shows us Lola, contented, sitting by herself in her own apartment, with her flowers and her brand new shoes, as the voice-over announces the end of an era and the beginning of a new one, thus proposing an alternative happy ending that privileges the attainment of self-identity over romantic attachments, which seems to undermine the traditional "happily ever after" of romantic comedy. This ending seems to lend itself to a feminist reading in which the female protagonist is presented as an autonomous, self-sufficient character without the need of a man by her side. The assertion of female identity through consumption is a well-known trope in (post)feminist fantasies of female empowerment at the turn of the century that seems to support this idea. However, the choice of such uncomfortable footwear as a symbol for her brand-new self problematizes the feminist interpretation, and so does the hasty happy ending, which cannot erase from the mind of the viewer Lola's ordeal through a movie that has blamed her consistently for her

suffering and has disregarded Luke and his advantageous position in a heteropatriarchal society as the most likely culprit for her tribulations. In this way, *Lola Versus* and other indie self-centered rom-coms may be subverting formal conventions of the genre, but that does not mean they are necessarily breaking with some conservative discourses traditionally associated with romantic comedy; rather, they may be simply naturalizing entrenched patriarchal social values through a new packaging.

**Conclusion: A Self-Centered Genre for a Self-Centered Culture?**

The self-centered indie rom-com seems to have captured its *zeitgeist*, tackling the contemporary dating crisis in an apparently realistic manner. These films privilege the definition of self-identity over romantic achievements, which is symptomatic of the narcissistic millennial culture of which they are a product. This variation in the traditional rom-com plot is presented as a "natural" reworking of the conventions of the genre, which has to be constantly updated to keep up with its changing social context. However, the neoliberal assumption that individuals need to work on themselves to merit the status of eligible romantic partners sidesteps an important element of romantic love: the unconditionality that lies at its very core, the notion of loving the chosen partner despite their flaws, and the idea that self-realization stems from the selfless projection of love onto the loved one. These are notions traditionally upheld by romantic comedy, which has abhorred self-absorption and has celebrated the social dimension of love since the times of the Roman New Comedy. In this sense, the self-centered rom-com brings a major twist to the basic structure of the genre, giving an impression of "realism" that is, as this analysis has shown, as deceptive as the most starry-eyed Hollywood fairy tale. Similarly, the revision of some of romantic comedy's main features-such as the focus on romance and the couple, the happy ending, the trope of the right/wrong partner, and the familiar narrative structure-does not necessarily translate to ideological destabilization.[12]

These films seem to put forward the idea that the key to overcoming the current romantic crisis lies exclusively in the hands of the individual, thus placing a formidable pressure on the self, who must take active steps on the road toward self-improvement instead of simply waiting for love to "happen," as previous romantic narratives have traditionally suggested. This idea of personal accountability dovetails with a neoliberal ethos that considers the individual as wholly responsible for her trials and tribulations, largely disregarding the social, economic, and political conditions that play a preeminent role in the shaping of people's fates. One of these dimensions is the power relations between the sexes: the uneven distribution of autonomy determined by gender imbalance means the structure of self-blame and self-doubt is particularly intense in the case of women, and therefore romantic suffering is more likely to be a source of anxiety for them. By presenting the quest for self-identity as the answer to its characters' romantic disappointments, the self-centered indie rom-com poses itself as a fitting genre for the narcissistic millennial culture in which it is inscribed. However, it fails to acknowledge the complexities of the bigger picture of the contemporary romantic panorama, one that is characterized by an acute crisis framed by a neoliberal rationality that produces new forms of (individualistic) subjectivity and presents structural gender

inequality as a personal problem that calls for individual solutions of self-improvement. There might be hope in uncertainty, but the reasons for this uncertainty might need to be sought beyond the self.

## Footnotes

1. The reasons commonly adduced to account for this panorama include an unprecedented scarcity of genuine stars interested in the genre (BrodesserAkner; Siegel; Orr; Romano; Buchanan), mediocre scripts and lackluster characters (Singer), and studios' preference for franchises and big-budget tent-pole films based on marketing and merchandising (Brodesser-Akner; Siegel; Romano; Nicholson). Last but not least, some critics point to changing social mores as a possible cause for the decline of traditional romantic comedy (Rosenberg; Johnson; Yahr), including the apparent lack of real obstacles keeping lovers apart these days (Orr).

2. Arguably, the beginnings of this tendency can be traced back to *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), an interesting transitional text whose protagonist's preoccupation with romance equals her obsession with self-improvement.

3. The fact that *Bridesmaids* and *Second Act* barely qualify as such attests both to this dearth and to the new relevance of issues that previously were peripheral in the genre.

4. For a discussion of film genre and the concept of the indie rom-com, see Oria 148-51.

5. Millennials tend to wait longer than previous generations to marry. Just 26 percent of this generation is married. When they were the age that millennials are now, 36 percent of Generation X, 48 percent of baby boomers, and 65 percent of the members of the Silent Generation were married ("Millennials in Adulthood"). By 2016, the median age for first marriage had reached its highest point on record: about twenty-seven for women and twenty-nine for men (Livingston and Caumont).

6. Eva Illouz considers "modernity" as the period that followed World War I, but in her book she tends to focus on the most recent four decades (8-9).

7. Examples include *The Dish and the Spoon, Hello I Must Be Going, The Giant Mechanical Man, Begin Again, In a World..., Obvious Child, Laggies, Life Partners, Appropriate Behavior, The Pretty One, Maggie's Plan,* and *The Incredible Jessica James*.

8. The strong connection between romantic love and selfhood is a phenomenon of the lengthy period regarded by Illouz as "modernity," but the neoliberal rationality that considers the self as an asset that can be marketed has made this link much more relevant in the last few decades.

9. *Lola Versus* hints at the fact that one of the most distressing aspects of its protagonist's breakup has to do with the sudden loss of financial security provided by her engagement, since her partner's economic support had allowed her to go back to school to get her PhD. It is implied that after the breakup, she no longer can uphold the kind of life she was leading. The issue of economic precariousness and its connection with romantic failure is dealt with in other self-centered rom-coms such as *The Giant Mechanical Man, Laggies, In a World. .., Life Partners, Hello I Must Be Going, Begin Again,* and *Bridesmaids*. For more on this issue, see Negra and Tasker.

10. For an explanation of the distinctive features of the contemporary indie rom-com, see Oria.

11. Interestingly, the kind of films of which *Lola Versus* is a representative example may be considered as a flip side of the man-child comedies of Judd Apatow and imitators: whereas female-centered movies usually require their female protagonists to "grow up" in order to achieve happiness, Apatow's male characters' childishness is not only unpunished but often even celebrated.

12. These films are also deceiving in their suggestion that the self can actually be "defined" before death. They present this as a necessary task that the subject must undertake to achieve happiness but disavow the fact that self-improvement is a never-ending process.

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