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Manning Up: The representation of masculinity in
(500) Days of Summer

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Introduction

The last one hundred years have been a period of time in which western society has dramatically changed in many aspects. Two world wars, social movements, the rise of late capitalism, internet and new forms of entertainment have shaped everyday life. In this last segment we can classify cinema. Hollywood is and has been the number one film industry regarding film production in the world.

Romantic comedy is one of Hollywood's most popular and go-to genres, and throughout its history, it has faced an evolution, a constant adaptation to survive the times in which it has been produced, from the early 1930's transition to sound to the screwball comedy in the late 30s and early 40s, the comedies of seduction of the 50s and early 60s, the "nervous romances" of the 70s, the new romances of the 80s, and the neo-traditional romantic comedy that has generally dominated the genre from the 90's onwards (Grindon, 5).

It is difficult to define romantic comedy as a genre "because of the prevalence of both its constituent terms in popular film" (Jeffers McDonald, 9). This is why this genre comprehends a greater reel of films, especially as the cinema industry has widened its productions with the passing of time into independent productions and at the same time society has reshaped its socio-cultural background. This connection between text and context is precisely one of the most interesting dimensions of the genre. As Jeffers McDonald argues "The contemporary romcom reveals new insecurities and preoccupations underlying its version of the standard boy-meets girl narrative." (Jeffers McDonald, 4). Taking my cue from McDonald, I have decided to use romantic comedy comedy's take on contemporary masculinities, firstly because, even though this genre is usually associated with a female audience, it has a lot to say about contemporary male

identity, and secondly, because the predictability and apparent frivolity of romantic comedy has rendered it an overlooked genre.

As Kendall says, films represent “complex activities of negotiation” and reflect cultural changes in a “highly compromised and displayed manner” (Kendall, 57). In this way, romantic comedies have changed overtime as they are a reflection of their contemporary society, and as many other cultural products, they are very useful means of analysing the different aspects of a society in a particular period.

In this essay I am going to examine the portrayal of masculinity in the contemporary romantic comedy. This dissertation will analyse how romantic comedy’s scope on the portrayal of masculinity has widened gradually until the present day. I will explore the construction of modern masculinities in popular culture; deconstructing the fictional idea of one “mainstream” masculinity through the analysis of a representative text of the 2000s: *(500) Days of Summer* (Marc Webb, 2009). Using this film as case study, I will firstly discuss the concept of masculinity and then I will apply this theoretical framework to the romantic comedy context. After this I will analyse in depth *(500) Days of Summer*, commenting on several other films relating concepts of film genre and modern masculinity.

Masculinity and romantic comedy

Societies, eras and cultures have accounts of gender but not all of them have the concept of masculinity. In the modern usage of the term it is assumed that a person's behaviour depicts what this person is. That is, if someone's attitude is timid rather than direct, indecisive rather than confident, conciliatory rather than dominant, somehow awkward and introverted rather than witty, open, and good with people, unable to kick a ball instead of scoring a decisive touchdown and uninterested in sexual conquest rather than dominant in sex, that person would be defined as unmasculine. (Connell, 70)

There are different approaches to masculinity that are distinguished in their sense but often combined in practice; essentialists such as Freud use a core characteristic of masculinity that associates masculinity with activity and femininity with passivity (Connell, 68). The issue with this approach is that this core feature is attributed randomly. The positivist approach takes into account the differences between men and women as two separate groups but if we use this definition to categorize we would not need to use 'feminine' or 'masculine', as we would be only speaking of differences between women and men.

In contrast with the latter approaches to masculinity, there is the normative approach. I think that this is the most accurate one and the one I am going to use in this essay. In contrast with the positivist approach, the normative view recognises the differences within women and men "the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' point beyond categorical sex difference to the ways men (and women) differ among themselves" (Connell, 69). This definition offers a norm: "masculinity is what men ought to be" (Connell, 70). This creates tensions and establishes a blueprint, a 'norm of toughness' that

the closer men get to the more masculine they are. There is a very illustrative film that displays this tensions between a man and the blueprint of masculinity. In *Play it Again, Sam* (Herbert Ross, 1972) Woody Allen plays Allan, a film critic that throughout the entire film is measuring himself against the norm of toughness that in this case is personified in Humphry Bogart's Rick Blaine character in *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) who appears as a hallucination and interacts with Allan, advising him on how to be more masculine, on how to get closer to this blueprint. These interactions between Allan's unmasculine character, who is neurotic, far from confident and not very determined in the field of romance, and Bogart's masculine figure, which represents the ideal of masculinity, is the representation of the tensions culturally established between most men and the ideal of masculinity. The reality is that most men, like Allen's character, are far from this blueprint. Is this to say that the majority of men are unmasculine?

Romantic comedies set characters in constructed culturally understandable contexts, with relatable representations of masculinity and femininity. In fact, quoting Connell, "‘Masculinity’ does not exist except in contrast with ‘femininity’". This is why romantic comedy is a very useful means of analysing masculinities: in these films masculine and feminine constructions are often explicitly contrasted. In this genre, the main characters are positioned in a context that we are familiar with and by extend the masculine and feminine constructs contained in this context.

Stephen Frears' *High Fidelity* (2000) has many resemblances with the later (500) *Days of Summer* even though the latter seems to be less of a typical romantic comedy. Rob Gordon (John Cusack) as Tom Hansen is heavily influenced by pop culture; he owns a music record store himself. In one of Rob's direct addresses to the camera scenes he says: "What came first, the music or the misery? People worry about kids playing with guns, or watching violent videos, that some sort of culture of violence will take them over.

Nobody worries about kids listening to thousands, literally thousands of songs about heartbreak, rejection, pain, misery and loss. Did I listen to pop music because I was miserable? Or was I miserable because I listened to pop music?” What Rob says in one of his many asides in this film has a deep meaning. Popular culture input shapes our personalities and a genre as popular as romantic comedy is worth analysing due to the influence it has on society. As stated above, romantic comedies are constructed in culturally relatable contexts, and in a contemporary context such as the one comprehending the 2000’s the range of masculinities has widened; As Watson and Shaw say: “Masculinities are not fixed. They are not homogeneous, simple states of being” (Watson and Shaw, 135). That is, we see how the scope of masculinities has widened in this genre.

As is the case of *High Fidelity*, a milestone of the genre that inaugurated the 00’s, the romantic comedy of this decade shows a remarkable tendency to cast male protagonists who are indicative of a crisis in masculinity, they are “men who refuse to grow up, get jobs, get out of their parents’ house, get wives, get lives” (Greven, 405). As will be shown, *(500) Days of Summer* is a mixture between a coming of age story and a romantic comedy, as it revolves mainly around Tom (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) and takes only his point of view.

(500) Days of Summer: Tom's masculinity

The first thing that people notice after watching *(500) Days of Summer* is how honest of a romantic comedy it is. The film narrates the relationship between Tom Hansen and Summer Finn (Zooey Deschanel) from the limited and very subjective point of view of Tom, starting from the day that he first sees her until the day 500, when he meets Autumn (Minka Kelly). The film is independently produced and drifts away from the typical romantic comedy's archetype. Its non-linear narrative is jumping back and forth, and it shows us different stages of Tom's relationship with Summer. This kind of narrative is a very useful tool that gives this film a sense of reminiscence, as if it were someone telling us his story in an act of remembering. The plot also differs from the "basic plot of all mainstream romantic comedies where boy meets, loses, regains, girl" (Spurlock, 287). In fact, Tom and Summer take separate paths at the end of the film. Even though this film drives away from the mainstream plot, it follows the basic ideology that the romantic comedy genre supports, "the primary importance of the couple" (Jeffers McDonald, 13), since in this film, everything revolves around Tom and his reactions to Summer in the frame of a relationship.

Gender role inversion

The voice over that appears several times in the movie is the narrator and introduces us both Tom and Summer separately. This voice over is very honest but despite its apparent honesty, we as spectators are limited to Tom's subjectivity. The narrator tells us upfront that they will not end up together. This is a big contrast with the other contemporary romantic films that follow the structure of: boy meets girl, an obstacle appears between both of them but they overcome it and the boy gets the girl back. The first time we see Tom he is in a company meeting, with a bored face, not really paying attention to what

he is doing while the voice over describes him in these terms: “(he) grew up believing that he would never be truly happy until he found The One”. Tom is a very interesting character, we can say that he personifies romantic comedy and all of its ideals. All the information and social constructions that he absorbed and also misinterpreted in his adolescence through the consumption of pop culture, “sad British pop music” and romantic comedies (“a total misreading of the movie *The Graduate*”), is now influencing his views on romantic relationships and by an extension, his own vision of masculinity, as he develops his masculinity throughout the film as a reaction to Summer. Films, and by extension popular culture, do not only reflect reality but they also help to create it as well, providing an on-screen fantasy of “perpetual bliss” (Jeffers McDonald, 16) that will blur Tom’s vision of reality.

In an interview, co-writer Scott Neustadter has explained that this film is written under the influence of popular culture, “the story is told ‘super-warped’ through the mind of this person (Tom) who was expecting things to be like they are in the movies” (Ryan). Tom has an idea about love usually attributed to women, the idea that finding ‘The One’ is determined by fate. “For Tom Hansen to find it now in a city of 40000 offices 91000 and 3.8 million people, well, that could only be explained by one thing; fate”.



Introductory credits showing the parallel lives of Tom and Summer as they grow up in a split-screen reinforces the idea of meeting by fate.

On the other hand, Summer does not believe in this idea of love. About one third into the film when both Tom and Summer are discussing about the idea of love that Tom has in his mind, Summer rebates: "There is no such thing as love, its fantasy". Tom tries to argue back but Summer cannot share this idea. When Summer exposes her ideas about love, about being out of relationships and staying independent, Tom's drunk friend and co-worker McKenzie (Geoffrey Arend) exclaims: "Holy shit! She is a dude!" This seemingly shallow and vague exclamation has a deeper meaning. Both Tom and Summer do not adhere to the typical roles of men and women in relationships. In fact those roles seem swapped. In a later interview Neustadter stated that many viewers thought that the movie was playing with swapping the roles that men and women had in modern relationships: "You know, it's funny. When the movie came out, and people would talk to us, they would say, "What a brilliant idea to flip the genders." And we said, "What?" We didn't even think of it that way. It was really just "this is how all of my guy friends are" (Canavese). In fact the viewers' perceptions about this gender swap are not wrong. There are many scenes in the film that convey this idea. When Tom and Summer are having dinner in a restaurant they have their first breakup. Summer is the one that is breaking up with Tom and this catches him absolutely by surprise. Summer states that they have been arguing too much lately: "We have been like Sid and Nancy for months now", she says, to which Tom admits that they have argued but "I hardly think I am Sid Vicious". Summer replies with "No, I'm Sid", "So I'm Nancy", Tom says before leaving the restaurant.



Mise-en-scène visually suggests this swap of masculinity and femininity in this clip of the film. Summer is dressed in a grey blazer, a piece of clothing and a colour usually related to men.

Tom is a not very athletic guy. He enjoys hanging out with his two friends, consuming popular culture, listening to music and sketching buildings in his notebook. We do not see him playing sports in the entire movie except for a videogame, in fact, it is his little sister (Chloe Moretz) who has a more masculine profile: she plays soccer in her middle school team, she is confident and seems to have everything clear in her mind when advising Tom on Summer, whereas Tom cannot get his ideas straight. He keeps coming back to her for advice throughout the film, in the middle of the soccer match break she advises him, concluding with “It’s easy, just don’t be a pussy”. Tom is unable to make a move on Summer. He never asks her out formally. In fact, it is Summer the one who makes the move on Tom as he is unable to do so, which constitutes another swap in the traditional roles of romantic comedy. In the romantic comedies of the last century, especially in the screwball and the seduction cycles, “leading men were brilliantly witty and ever ready to use words as a weapon” (Grindon, 150). Walter Burns in *His Girl Friday* (1940) or Joe in *Some Like it Hot* (1959), use language in their favour in order to manipulate others (Grindon, 151) but as Alvy in *Annie Hall* (1977), Tom is more silent and not so powerful with language. In the awkward meet-cute it is Summer the one that first speaks with Tom, and he is not even able to say a word back. This may suggest that

in the 21st century, “The attractive, irresistible hero of romantic comedy has disappeared” (Grindon, 140).

The Graduate (Mike Nichols, 1967) is also a good example of gender-inversion as Ben (Dustin Hoffman) is the one being “hunted” whereas Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft) is the sexual predator “seeking pleasure without responsibility or caring”(Gibson). In this case Summer is the one that dominates the relationship and “hunts” Tom, but unlike *The Graduate*, Summer seeks something more equal, also because both Tom and Summer are in a similar socio-economic position.



In *Annie Hall* we can also observe the swap of gender roles in the clothing and in the meet-cute. Annie takes the lead in approaching Alvy and in inviting him for a drink.

The blueprint of masculinity

Throughout the film, Tom makes many failed approaches to the aforementioned “blueprint of masculinity”, and those approaches push him away from Summer. Tom is trying to measure himself as a man. He asks Summer about previous relationships: his high school boyfriend was a super-hot rower, and in the semester she spent in Sienna, she dated Fernando Belardelli, “also known as the Puma”, a statement made while the camera

zooms in at his large crotch. There is a scene in the movie where Tom and Summer are in a busy modern pub having a drink sitting by the bar, presumably after dinner late at night. Tom is dressed in casual clothing with a teen-like appearance. Their conversation is not very engaging and Summer seems rather bored. Suddenly, a man in a suit boldly approaches Summer from her side and engages in conversation with her, completely ignoring Tom. After Summer rejects the guy approaching him, he asks: “You are with this guy?” (referring to Tom) and keeps hitting on Summer. Finally, after Summer sends the guy off he turns back and says: “I can’t believe this, is your boyfriend”. Tom’s masculinity is challenged by other men, apparently more masculine and successful than him. And Tom does what a man would do in that situation, punch the guy. Summer had solved the conflict in a pacific way and when it was over, Tom stood up and punched the guy. Tom’s masculinity had been threatened and he had to respond as the man in the movies would do, following the “The norm of toughness”, Tom’s attempt to reach the masculine ideal through an unnecessary fight at a bar.

Half an hour into the movie we can find one of the most celebrated scenes in the film, because of its peculiarity and also because of its comic elements. However, if we approach this scene from an analytic point of view we can observe that it is very rich in the meanings it conveys about contemporary notions of masculinity. This scene plays the morning after Tom has sex for the first time with Summer. In the entire movie we do not see any explicit sex scene more than a kiss; sex is always implicit. Before having sex with Summer Tom speaks to himself in the mirror, measuring his own masculinity before deciding to go for it. The scene starts after Tom kisses Summer on the bed at night in a context that makes obvious that they will end up having sex. After this, we see Tom leaving his house and going to work in an unusual walk. As soon as he opens the vestibule door of his house with energy and a big smile on his face, the first chords of “You Make

my Dreams Come True” by Hall and Oates start playing. We see then a point of view shot where we see the people that Tom is passing by and everyone is nodding his head to him with a knowing look. He checks himself in a car window and the reflection he sees is Han Solo winking back at him. As the scene moves on, things seem to get more and more detached from reality; he walks past a fountain that erupts with violence and power, everyone greets him to the point when he is kissing ladies in the hands and doing bro hugs with the guys (who are policemen, plumbers, construction workers...). The scene ends up in a choreography where Tom is carried on the shoulders of two men as a successful sports star after a match, just after he swings in the air as he if he had “scored” a home run. Is Tom more masculine now after having sex? It seems so. It seems that now Tom is closer to the “blueprint of masculinity” that reigns supreme in contemporary culture. He sees himself as Han Solo, the brave hero in the *Star Wars* saga. He is suddenly recognised by everyone and he has turned himself into the friend of every man and the gentleman of every lady. It seems that society has finally accepted Tom as a “real” man. This adds to the equation that in order to reach the norm of masculinity sex is another ladder that a man has to climb in order to be there.



Harrison Ford in Han Solo’s character blinks back at Tom as his own reflection. A western-like hero in the *Star Wars* saga. The influence of media especially film on the construction of masculinities; Tom sees himself as one of the heroes in the films. Masculine, brave, a real man.

But how real is this scene outside Tom's point of view? Outside the influence of popular culture that constructed the ideal of masculinity in Tom's mind? Director Marc Webb made his feature film directorial debut with *(500) Days of Summer*. He had previously directed many music videos for bands such as Green Day and Maroon 5. The music played during this scene is not picked by its musicality as it repeats many times during the chorus "you make my dreams come true". The dreams and ideals about masculinity seem to become a reality, everything and everyone seem to recognise him as a man. Is this a dream come true? Does sex solve the tension between being a regular man and the strive to reach "the norm of masculinity"? This scene is one of the funniest in the film, and its comedy derives from the fact that Tom is delusional about his self-portrayal, specially his masculinity. But, could this joy be a product of the love, or more accurately, the infatuation that Tom feels about Summer? Or could this happiness stem from his masculinity ideals fulfilled after having sex? Throughout the entire film there is an unusual colour scheme that is broken in this scene. Summer is the only character in the film that wears blue clothes, matching the colour of her deep blue eyes. Taking into account that this film is narrated through Tom's limited point of view, Tom sees Summer as the One, her blue clothes pay tribute to her blue eyes. But in this scene all the women are wearing blue clothes.



The cartoon bird that interacts with Tom reinforces the idea of delusion, also it is a bluebird, remarking the importance of colours in this scene.

Tom is not happy because he finally made love with Summer, he is happy because he reached, at least for a moment, and in his head, the blueprint of masculinity through sex. Media and popular culture present masculinity in a close relation with sex performance. It is a cultural phenomenon that easily sinks into men. This creates schemata, called sexual scripts, that “instruct people how to understand and act in sexual situations. They operate on cultural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels” (Masters et al., 410) In this case, the cultural level is the more significant one and in this scene it is the one that Tom is influenced by. Even though “gendered sexual scripts are hegemonic at the cultural level, research suggests they may be less so at dyadic and individual levels” (Masters et al., 411) These different levels influence each other and despite the “culture level sexual script” having a great influence over the others, these are the ones that make the difference. As Watson and Shaw argue, “Masculinities are not fixed. They are not homogeneous, simple states of being” (Watson and Shaw, 135). The idea that “men want sex and women want love” is part of a cultural level sexual script. This is a very widespread belief, profusely represented in film. For instance, in the movie *40 Days and 40 Nights* (Michael Lehmann, 2002), the protagonist Matt (Josh Harnett), who is a very ordinary guy, refrains

from any sexual activity – including masturbation – for a period of 40 days, in order to get over a breakup. The comic element in this film is the suffering of the protagonist when agreeing to remain celibate because a guy *has to* be sexually active. His friends scan his room for any erotic material and the girls that he meets at parties try to seduce him in an extreme way. He resists despite of the great sexual input that he sees on the media. He ends up getting her girl back after this period and performs exceptionally well on bed. On the other hand, we have *Lars and the Real Girl* (Craig Gillespie, 2007), Lars (Ryan Gosling) a very awkward, lonely virgin who is unable to establish a relationship with people and especially with women (besides his sex doll). He is having a man to man conversation with his older brother Gus (Paul Schneider) about Bianca (the sex doll). Lars says that in Bianca's culture they have rituals and ceremonies that after you "do them, you know you are an adult". What I interpret that Lars is describing here is the process of becoming a man. Seconds later Lars asks his older brother: "How you knew, that you were a man... was it sex?" to what his brother does not know what to answer. Later in the same scene, Lars keeps chasing his brother asking for an answer. He replies that in order to be a man he should "man up".

From card writer to architect

Going back to *(500) Days of Summer* and Tom's masculinity, we can observe an evolution of his masculinity as the movie progresses. This is related to his position and his ambitions in the social and work sphere. Tom's current job and where he meets Summer is at "New Hampshire Greetings" a greeting card office where he has been working in "for about 3 or 4 years". When Tom and Summer first have a conversation she asks Tom if this is the job that he wanted. He replies with "I do not even want to do it now". Tom studied to be an architect and we can observe that he is passionate about architecture; he shows Summer downtown Los Angeles' commonly overlooked architecture, they frequently

visit a bench that has a view of a characteristic skyline (which is a recurrent spot in the film) and draws it on Summer's forearm.

Tom is stuck in his card-writing job. He took it because he “needed a job” and becoming an architect “just didn't work out”. In the opening scene of the film we can observe both Summer and Tom looking more mature. Tom is dressed in a suit, hair gelled and combed back. Surely his looks are much more masculine compared to how we normally see him through the film. It is the day 488 and they seem happily together when they look at each other. The non-linear narrative is setting us in a misleading scene.

When Tom is left by Summer he spends three days in bed, drinking and not going to work. When he finally shows up the company has the weekly meeting in which everyone presents their projects. Tom has no project this week and nothing to contribute. When he is asked about this he starts criticising the greeting cards: “this is shit”, “this is lies, we are liars”. Tom is here questioning the ideals that mainstream popular culture is selling to ordinary people. “let them (Americans) speak for themselves (instead via greeting cards)”. His monologue keeps revving up: “It's these cards (holding a Valentine's Day card) and the movies and the pop songs, they're to blame for all lies and the heartache, everything.” Tom is referring to love, but this also can be extrapolated to the cultural constructions of masculinity that create all these tensions between most men and the ideals of masculinity. It is in this same scene that Tom quits his job.

He starts pursuing his failed career as an architect. In another – more realistic – musical scene he is getting his life together, working hard on his own and studying in order to get a job in one of the architectural studios on his wish list. He crosses out many, we can assume because of failed interviews, and keeps on studying and trying. At the end of the musical scene we see him, suited up, gelled hair, ready for an interview. He seems a self-made man. The transition from card writer to aspiring architect affects his

masculinity in the only honest way that we see in the film. This is Tom's coming of age, it is the only successful attempt that he has at reaching a normative masculinity. This is reinforced by how Tom is dressed up. The final act presents him waiting for an interview where there is another female candidate waiting as well. They exchange a few words and they seem interested in each other. He is called for the interview and the narrator states how Tom had finally learnt that there are "no miracles, nothing as fate". Tom goes back to the waiting hall and asks the girl out for a coffee after the interview. Tom is now able to perform what he was unable to do with Summer, to ask a girl out. As they both introduce themselves, we get to know that her name is Autumn. Tom looks into the camera, breaking the fourth wall and smiling, then the film rewinds to day 1 of what we assume is his new relationship, and the end credits are displayed. The "Summer effect", as the film describes it, has worn out in Tom. This can also be referred to all the cultural exposure that created misleading ideals that Tom took as truth ("a complete misreading of the movie *The Graduate*").



Tom, the card writer, VS Tom, the aspiring architect.

Conclusion

Films have a fundamental impact on societies, just as societies have on films. It is a bidirectional feed that continuously changes as the sociocultural context does. In the middle of a superhero-blockbuster boom, action-packed films with the usual stars or catchy thrillers, a genre such as romantic comedy can be easily overlooked and taken for granted. But it is often in romantic comedy that we can find the most accurate and complex constructions of masculinity, some of which deviate from those generally constructed in other genres. In this essay I have taken an approach to contemporary masculinities from the perspective of romantic comedy, analysing the male protagonist of *(500) Days of Summer*.

The analysis has revealed an evolution in Tom's masculinity as the story advances, especially in relation to women. By swapping the established gender roles of men and women in romantic comedy this film differs notably from others of its genre. Its aspirations for realism and honesty also render it a very interesting case study: the film is self-conscious about both the conventions of romantic comedy and modern representations of masculinity, as it denounces the unreal construction of gender that are delivered by popular culture via – in the case of the film – greeting cards, films and pop songs, but at the end it reinforces one of romantic comedy's most clichéd conventions by giving it a romantic closure. This happy ending is ambiguous, though. Being a coming-of-age film, the text does not really dwell on the possibility for new romance. It rather chooses to highlight the evolution of Tom's gender identity, who finally lets go of his romantic ideals – the Summer effect – to eventually meet Autumn, whose name is the next season, a more mature one, while Summer means infatuation, bliss, childhood dreams and all the gender constructions perpetuated by popular culture that had shaped Tom's identity so far. Will "Autumn" finally bring happiness for Tom? We will never know, but what we know for sure is that *(500) Days of Summer* seemed to open the door for more nuanced representations of masculinity in the romantic comedy of the 2000s.

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