

Love on the Margins: The American Indie Rom-com of the 2010s

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Ever since Brian Henderson famously diagnosed the death of romantic comedy in 1978 there have been numerous attempts to “kill” the genre. In view of its apparent lack of popularity in the 2010s, scholars and popular culture writers are proclaiming, once more, its demise. This article aims to question this view, arguing that the genre is alive and well, though living largely on the margins and finding alternative ways to re-imagine itself. It interrogates the term “independent” and uses genre theory to produce a non-taxonomical definition of the “indie rom-com” in the 2010s. With this purpose, this work outlines the basic conventions of these films and ends with a close analysis of a recent indie rom-com: Jim Strouse’s *People, Places, Things* (2015). The essay concludes that the relative mainstream dearth of the genre is masking a notable presence in other less visible sites. Contemporary romantic comedy is currently leading a “secret life” right before our eyes, independent cinema being rife with exciting examples of the genre. These films are finding new formulas that will eventually result in the reinvention of the genre at a larger scale, and not just in the independent sector.

Keywords: romantic comedy; independent US cinema; indie rom-com; film genre; generic conventions; *People, Places, Things*

Amor en los márgenes: la comedia romántica independiente estadounidense en la década de los 2010s

Desde que Brian Henderson diagnosticara la muerte de la comedia romántica en 1978 ha habido numerosos intentos de acabar con ella por parte de la crítica. A la vista de su aparente pérdida de popularidad en la última década, se está proclamando, una vez más, el fin del género tanto en el ámbito académico como en el popular. Este artículo se propone

cuestionar esta postura, argumentando que, lejos de estar acabada, la comedia romántica contemporánea goza de buena salud en los márgenes, donde está encontrando modos alternativos de reformulación. El ensayo explora el significado del término “independiente” y hace uso de la teoría de género para producir una definición no taxonómica de lo que significa “comedia romántica independiente” en las primeras décadas del siglo XXI. Con este propósito, el artículo trata de perfilar las convenciones principales de estas películas, ejemplificándolas con el análisis de *People, Places, Things* de Jim Strouse (2015). El ensayo concluye que la relativa “sequía” del género en el *mainstream* enmascara su prodigalidad en sitios menos visibles, pues la comedia romántica parece estar viviendo una “vida secreta” en el cine independiente estadounidense actual. En este ámbito, estas películas están encontrando nuevas fórmulas que culminarán en la reinención del género en su conjunto, y no solo en el sector independiente.

Palabras clave: comedia romántica; cine independiente norteamericano; *indie rom-com*; género fílmico; convenciones genéricas; *People, Places, Things*

I. INTRODUCTION

It has become a cliché in romantic comedy scholarship to begin an article by recalling Brian Henderson's famous diagnosis of the death of the genre in 1978.¹ Since then there have been numerous further attempts to "kill" the rom-com. More than three decades later, academics and popular culture writers are proclaiming, once more, the downfall of the genre. Critics' lack of faith in contemporary rom-com's viability is evident, as suggested by titles such as "R.I.P. Romantic Comedies: Why Harry Wouldn't Meet Sally in 2013" (Siegel 2013), "Who Killed the Romantic Comedy?" (Nicholson 2014) and "The Rom-Com is Dead. Good" (Yahr 2016). To justify their claims, these commentators appeal mainly to the genre's current lack of commercial potential. Indeed, the 2010s have witnessed a significant number of box-office flops. The disappointing figures obtained by films like *The Big Wedding* (Zackham 2013), *The Five-Year Engagement* (Stoller 2012) and *What to Expect When You're Expecting* (Jones 2012) marked 2012-2013 as especially critical years in the downward slide of the genre, with not a single rom-com in the top 100 box office performers (Nicholson 2014, n.p.). In 2015 the genre seemed to hit bottom: while the average annual US rom-com market share between 1995 and 2004 was 6.4 per cent (the highest point being at 9.9 per cent), in 2015 it plummeted to an all-time low 0.6 per cent (The Numbers 1997-2018, n.p.). The year 2016 was not much better, as the only rom-com to be found on the list of the year's fifty biggest movies was the breakout hit *La La Land* (Chazelle 2016). In 2017, the highest-grossing rom-com, the indie sleeper *The Big Sick* (Showalter 2017) did not even make it into the top 50 (Box Office Mojo, n.p.). These figures have severely affected the studios' appetite for projects within the genre, which has in turn reduced the number of rom-coms that actually get made.

This article aims to question the generalized view of romantic comedy's latest downfall. It is my contention that the genre is alive and well, living largely on the margins and finding alternative ways to re-imagine itself. This essay argues that the mainstream dearth of the genre hides a rich life in less visible sites. Romantic comedy is actually leading a "secret life"—as Celestino Deleyto (2009) would put it—but this is happening right before our eyes, since independent cinema is rife with exciting examples of the genre. This may not be readily apparent because these romantic comedies do not tend to come wrapped up in the sleek package that Hollywood has accustomed us to, or follow the conventional rom-com tick list, but this is precisely where their interest lies. These films are finding new formulas that may well eventually result in the reinvention of the genre at a larger scale, and not just in the independent sector. This article explores some of these new formulas.²

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² Contemporary romantic comedy is also experiencing a generic revival on television but this exceeds the scope of this essay.

2. WHAT IS THE INDIE ROM-COM?

To answer this question, two issues should be addressed: the contemporary conception of independent cinema and the boundaries of the romantic comedy as a genre. Over the years, critics have struggled to define the term independent, yet it has proven to be slippery, both because of its evolution, and the seemingly contradictory features it appears to encompass. In 1999, Emanuel Levy argued: “Ideally, an indie is a fresh, low-budget movie with a gritty style and offbeat subject matter that expresses the film-maker’s personal vision” (1999, 2). On the one hand, this definition relates independent cinema to low-budgets, yet numerous films that might fall under the umbrella of independent cinema have relatively substantial budgets. Gritty style and offbeat subject matter are not essential requirements either: many indies are “packaged” in a very mainstream way and deal with well-trodden topics. On the other hand, Levy links independent cinema directly with the romantic vision of a single individual who is ultimately responsible for the film. Nowadays, this is true of some films, which portray the idiosyncratic perspectives of their creators. Others, however, prefer to hide any auteurist marks.

Economic and industrial factors have probably been the most controversial when it comes to defining a film’s “independence.” Independent cinema’s popularity during the 1990s awakened Hollywood’s interest, which led to its absorption of some of these independent companies or the opening of its own specialized divisions trying to capitalize on their success. In the 2000s, the emergence of what Thomas Schatz termed “conglomerate Hollywood” meant that there were three basic types of film being produced: (1) big-budget blockbusters with an average \$100 million budget, aimed at a lucrative worldwide market fueled by globalization that accounted for seventy-five to eighty-five percent of all box-office revenues; (2) art-house and specialty films produced by the indie divisions of the conglomerates (\$40 million average budget); and (3) genre and specialty films handled by independent producers with limited distribution and a budget of less than \$10 million (2008, 31).

The second category is a gray area that would include what is commonly referred to as “Indiewood,” a term often tinged with scornful undertones. The narrowing of the gap between the mainstream and the margins was received with a certain degree of bitterness by some critics, who regretted that “the word [independent] has been corrupted. Independent no longer means ‘independent.’ It now means ‘appendage’” (Hillier 2001, xv). I believe that this bitterness sometimes stems from an inability to see the wood for the trees. Something may have been lost with the stepping of indies into the mainstream, but something else has been gained. Indie cinema today is a more inclusive term than before, capable of gathering a greater array of films and viewers under its umbrella. As John Berra argues, indie “used to describe both a mode of production, and a form of thinking, relating to the financing, filming, distribution and cultural appreciation of modern film” (2008, 10), but today it is

a more elastic term, encompassing a wider variety of films, directors, themes and genres (17). Instead of regarding this as negative, this wider conceptualization of the meaning of independent cinema has the potential to open the floor to a larger number of voices, both on the side of production and of reception, thus allowing for a richer debate and a larger social impact.

The fact that in 1999 the Spirit Awards were opened up to include all films made in the “spirit” of independence (Holmlund 2005, 7) probably legitimizes the idea that in the new millennium “independence” should be finally acknowledged to lie in a film’s “spirit” rather than in its industrial or economic circumstances. This somewhat vague term is meant to encapsulate equally elusive features, such as the film’s attitude towards the mainstream, the way it is marketed, its provocative subject matter or original aesthetics, its social or political agenda, etc., in a word, its recognizable distinctiveness from Hollywood in one aspect or another. This essay will adopt this broad though rather intangible notion of independence as “spirit,” as a “brand” that evokes certain symbolic and emotional associations in its viewers (Newman 2011, 4). In this sense, “indie” will be regarded as a cultural category characterized by a specific sensibility, style, themes, viewing practices, and, crucially, the self-aware outsider status as being “off-Hollywood” that stems from a shared consensus between film-makers and interpretive communities. This spirit does not, though, necessarily imply a radical break with the mainstream. This article will, generally, focus on accessible films with crossover potential, rather than on more alternative, *avant-garde* examples. However, in terms of budget, these films are worlds apart from big studio fares. In the 2010s the second kind of movie identified by Schatz—the mid-budget film—has virtually disappeared. Indiewood seems to be on the wane, with studios betting exclusively on multimedia juggernauts that can be sold across different verticals. As a result, the talent that used to work in the mid-budget zone has been forced to retreat to the indie scene, which is increasingly crowded these days (Bailey 2014). With one or two exceptions, the budgets of the movies discussed in this essay do not generally exceed the \$10 million mark, and many are well below this figure.

The broad conception of independent cinema adopted in this essay parallels my own equally broad understanding of film genre. Before explaining what I mean by “indie rom-com,” it should be kept in mind that genres are not clear-cut categories. The constitution of genres is, in Rick Altman’s words, “a never-ending process” (1999, 64) and their boundaries are nebulous, and thus hard to pinpoint. Drawing on Lakoff (1987) and Wittgenstein (1953), rom-com scholars like Celestino Deleyto (2009, 12-13) and Leger Grindon (2011, 73) argue that genres are constituted by the conventions films deploy rather than by the films themselves. Similarly, I will use the label “romantic comedy” for those films that participate in the conventions of this genre in one way or another. This participation will vary in degree and will determine the “centrality” of each film in relation to the corpus.

Romantic comedy has received a considerable amount of academic attention in the last decade—see Jeffers McDonald (2007), Abbot and Jermyn (2009), Deleyto (2009), Mortimer (2010), Grindon (2011) and Kaklamanidou (2013)—but most works deal primarily with mainstream examples of the genre. These scholars have tried to rescue romantic comedy from critical opprobrium, arguing for a greater degree of narrative complexity and ideological variety in the genre than has traditionally been acknowledged. The detailed consideration of individual films reveals the inaccuracy of associating the genre with patriarchal heterosexual determinism. Similarly, upon close inspection, the “boy-meets-girl” formula and other seemingly “compulsory” conventions prove to be far more elastic in the uses that they are actually put to: the happy ending, for instance, has necessarily evolved with the times in order to include constantly changing mores in the intimate realm (Deleyto 1998). Now it is no longer an unavoidable trope, having been sometimes replaced by the “happy for now”—*Knocked Up* (Apatow 2007), *The Proposal* (Fletcher 2009)—or by other alternatives to heterosexual coupling—*La La Land* (Chazelle 2016), *How to Be Single* (Ditter 2016). In the same way, the romantic plot has experienced a remarkable degree of genre-mixing in the same period, prominence being given to elements that had traditionally played second-fiddle to the romantic quest, including the following: offspring—*The Back-Up Plan* (Poul 2010), *Life as We Know It* (Berlanti 2010), *Bridget Jones’s Baby* (Maguire 2016); older characters—*It’s Complicated* (Meyers 2009), *The Rewrite* (Lawrence 2014), *Book Club* (Holderman 2018); fantasy—*Enchanted* (Lima 2007), *The Invention of Lying* (Gervais and Robinson 2009), *About Time* (Curtis 2013); action—*Knight and Day* (Mangold 2010), *Killers* (Lucketic 2010), *Mr. Right* (Cabezas 2015); the man’s point of view—*Made of Honor* (Weiland 2008), *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (Stoller 2008), *(500) Days of Summer* (Webb 2009); or the woman’s career—*New in Town* (Elmer 2009), *My Life in Ruins* (Petrie 2009), *The Intern* (Meyers 2015) (Kaklamanidou 2013, 27-124).

Among the recent output of rom-com criticism, Celestino Deleyto is the only author who has explored the concept of indie rom-com in some depth (2009, 148-176). In keeping with a more open, less biased, conception of the genre, he emphasizes the great variety of approaches to intimate matters that romantic comedy as a whole has progressively incorporated in recent decades, including the increased visibility of non-heterosexual romance, the preference for friendship over love, the prevalence of a female point of view on intimate matters, and a realistic approach to the representation of heterosex, among others. He partly attributes this variety to the impact of independent cinema on the mainstream, thus highlighting the fruitful process of cross-fertilization between the two—a process that has rendered the boundaries between them quite vague. Examples such as *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (Hogan 1997), *The Object of my Affection* (Hytner 1998), *High Fidelity* (Fears 2000), *Rumor Has It...* (Reiner 2005) and *The Break-Up* (Reed 2006) confirm the

importance of indie cinema's influence on Hollywood while problematizing widely-held assumptions about the homogeneity and blandness of commercial cinema. Similarly, Deleyto acknowledges the emergence of the concept of the independent rom-com, going against the tendency to identify this genre exclusively with the mainstream, which is arguably related to a general reluctance to disrupt the well-established (and manifestly mistaken) mainstream/conservative, independent/progressive associations by mixing up the two binomials (2009, 148-157). Deleyto's book highlights indie cinema's impact on the mainstream and points to the rise of the indie rom-com during, mainly, the late 1990s and early 2000s, a period when the genre had as yet shown no signs of commercial decline. Faced, now, however, with just such a crisis, this article argues that the consolidation of the indie rom-com in the 2010s is the principal reason that the genre is not only surviving but also being revitalized. With this purpose, I will consider indie rom-coms all those films that deal in one way or another with issues of love, desire, intimacy and relationships and that do so from a mostly comic perspective and in a way that is self-consciously distinct from the mainstream, displaying a clear willingness to set themselves apart in thematic, narrative, ideological or esthetic terms.³ The next section will outline the main conventions of these movies, and this will be followed by the analysis of a recent example, *People, Places, Things* (Strouse 2015), taken here as an exemplar of the genre in its recent indie metamorphosis.

3. CONVENTIONS OF THE INDIE ROM-COM

Independent cinema runs parallel to the mainstream and is not an intrinsically oppositional film practice; it would thus be overly simplistic to consider certain formulas as the sole property of this kind of cinema. Similarly, I do not intend to provide a comprehensive taxonomy of conventions, as this would contradict my fluid vision of film genre. Rather, this section tries to paint a broad picture of the variety and relative novelty of the main elements on which the indie rom-com draws nowadays, acknowledging its richness and diversity.

3.1. Love differently

In Indiewood, rom-com appears to have found that romance and the pursuit of love need not be the only preoccupation of lovers. In this "dispersion" of their narrative focus, it is relatively common for these movies to deal with unconventional, uncomfortable or thorny topics usually overlooked by Hollywood, such as abortion—

³ This definition is in keeping with Deleyto's open conception of romantic comedy. For him, romantic comedy is a "genre which uses humour, laughter and the comic to tell stories about interpersonal affective and erotic relationships" (2009, 30).

Greenberg (Baumbach 2010), *Obvious Child* (Robespierre 2014); mental illness—*Greenberg*, *It's Kind of a Funny Story* (Boden and Fleck 2010), *In Your Eyes* (Hill 2014); death—*Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* (Scafaria 2012), *The Pretty One* (LaMarque 2013), *Life after Beth* (Baena 2014), *Tumbledown* (Mewshaw 2015); parenthood—*Happythankyoumoreplease* (Radnor 2010), *Friends with Kids* (Westfeldt 2011), *Gayby* (Lisecki 2012), *Begin Again* (Carney 2013), *Maggie's Plan* (Miller 2015); addiction—*Don Jon* (Gordon-Levitt 2013), *The Spectacular Now* (Ponsoldt 2013), *Newlyweeds* (King 2013), *Sleeping with Other People* (Headland 2015); sickness—*Take Care* (Tuccillo 2014), *The Big Sick* (Showalter 2017); or economic stability and career prospects—*The Giant Mechanical Man* (Kirk 2012), *Laggies* (Shelton 2014), *Life Partners* (Fogel 2014).

3.2. Crazy in love

Romantic comedy's protagonists have always been presented as non-conventional. However, in the indie rom-com—as happened often in the screwball comedy—these characters are true eccentrics, and their integration in society constitutes a difficult (sometimes impossible) process. Their eccentricity may be defined in terms of age, sexuality, race or occupation. The characters in these films are not usually alpha males and females, and they do not have high-flying jobs nor tend to lead remarkable lives, a fact that is often emphasized by the narrative—*Happythankyoumoreplease* (Radnor 2010), *The Giant Mechanical Man* (Kirk 2012), *Save the Date* (Mohan 2012), *Hello I Must Be Going* (Louiso 2012), *Drinking Buddies* (Swanberg 2013), *In a World...* (Bell 2013). Moreover, they are not usually played by glamorous stars, but by relatively ordinary-looking actors. When big Hollywood stars are featured in these films their beauty or glamor tends to be downplayed. Thus, unlike mainstream rom-coms, which lean towards reasonably well-adjusted and conventionally attractive twenty-somethings in top jobs, these films make room for older—*Enough Said* (Holofcener 2013), *Hello, My Name is Doris* (Showalter 2015)—or younger protagonists—*Submarine* (Ayoade 2010); *Moonrise Kingdom* (Anderson 2012), *Sing Street* (Carney 2016); quirky—*The Dish and the Spoon* (Bagnall 2011), *Slow Learners* (Argott and Joyce 2015); or even mentally unbalanced characters—*Greenberg* (Baumbach 2010), *Silver Linings Playbook* (Russell 2012), *Safety Not Guaranteed* (Trevorrow 2012). Indie rom-coms also favor under-represented minorities, often featuring central characters who are non-white—*An Oversimplification of her Beauty* (Nance 2012), *Newlyweeds* (King 2013), *Top Five* (Rock 2014), *People Places Things* (Strouse 2015); and non-heterosexual—*BearCity* (Langway 2010), *The Kids Are All Right* (Cholodenko 2010), *Boy Meets Girl* (Schaeffer 2014), *Your Sister's Sister* (Shelton 2011), *Gayby* (Lisecki 2012), *Appropriate Behavior* (Akhavan 2014), *Life Partners* (Fogel 2014), *Me Him Her* (Landis 2015).

3.3. Boy meets girl, with a twist

There are myriad screenplay writing manuals explaining the “compulsory” plot points that a rom-com should feature. The typical rom-com plot is generally considered to consist of the following: meet cute, initial antagonism, overcoming of obstacles, transformation, happy ending.⁴ Indie rom-com plots are prone to a looser narrative structure. This is the case of *The Dish and the Spoon* (Bagnall 2011), *2 Days in New York* (Delpy 2012), *Before Midnight* (Linklater 2013), *Drinking Buddies* (Swanberg 2013) and *Maggie’s Plan* (Miller 2015). These films tend to eschew “important” plot points, such as climactic endings, as happens in *Your Sister’s Sister* (Shelton 2011), *Save the Date* (Mohan 2012), *Appropriate Behavior* (Akhavan 2014) and *Top Five* (Rock 2014).

The “unconventionality” plot-wise of these movies is also apparent in the frequent subversion of other typical tropes of the genre, such as the obstacles that the couple has to overcome to reach their happily ever after: in mainstream rom-coms obstacles are often of an external nature, at least the more ostensible ones. While there are many exceptions to this, the romantic quest in Hollywood rom-coms is more often than not hindered by straightforward impediments: she is married to someone else, he lives miles away, the father of the heroine hates the chosen partner. Obstacles in indie rom-coms, on the other hand, are more often internal, that is, related to the characters’ mental lives. *Lola Versus* (Wein 2012), for instance, suggests that its protagonist is single because she needs to get over her ex first. The inability to get over a past relationship is a recurrent “obstacle” in these films: Rose (Greta Gerwig) and the nameless homeless boy (Olly Alexander) with whom she spends time in *The Dish and the Spoon* (Bagnall 2011) never actually get to be romantically involved due to her obsession—bordering on mental illness—with her husband’s infidelity. Something similar happens to Pat (Bradley Cooper), the male protagonist of *Silver Linings Playbook* (Russell 2012), although he does eventually manage to find love with Tiffany (Jennifer Lawrence), who is still trying to recover from her husband’s death. Internal obstacles also keep characters apart in *Greenberg* (Baumbach 2010) and *Safety Not Guaranteed* (Trevorrow 2012)—the male characters are mentally deranged—*Don Jon* (Gordon-Levitt 2013)—he is a porn addict—*Your Sister’s Sister* (Shelton 2011)—he is grieving over his brother’s death—*Liberal Arts* (Radnor 2012)—he is too moral to date a younger girl—*Sleeping with Other People* (Headland 2015)—he is a womanizer, she is obsessed with her ex—*Her* (Jonze 2013)—he cannot open up, and *Life after Beth* (Baena 2014)—she is a zombie!

⁴ Of course, not every Hollywood romantic comedy falls into this pattern. Romantic comedy admits more variation than critics usually concede. However, the most representative examples of the genre do follow this structure, which is why the formula has become paradigmatic.

3.4. Happily ever after?

The happily ever after has traditionally been one of the defining features of the Hollywood rom-com. Although this tendency is starting to change (Deleyto 2009, 30-38; Ruiz-Pardos 2010) as mainstream films nowadays present an increasingly larger number of options for their happily ever afters, indie rom-coms are more likely to feature anti-climactic, open or ambiguous endings—*The Romantics* (Niederhoffer 2010), *Your Sister's Sister* (Shelton 2011), *Ruby Sparks* (Dayton and Faris 2012), *Save the Date* (Mohan 2012), *Top Five* (Rock 2014) which may even include the final separation of the couple—*The Dish and the Spoon* (Bagnall 2011), *Liberal Arts* (Radnor 2012), *Celeste and Jesse Forever* (Toland Krieger 2012), *Begin Again* (Carney 2013), *Her* (Jonze 2013), *Comet* (Esmail 2014). Even if the couple stays together, by the end, some films exude an air of provisionality and uncertainty, replacing the “happily ever after” with the “happy for now”—*Greenberg* (Baumbach 2010), *Tonight You're Mine* (Mackenzie 2011), *Obvious Child* (Robespierre 2014), *Sleeping with Other People* (Headland 2015). In other cases, the happy ending lies not in the formation of the couple, but in other alternatives to romantic love. Fulfillment may take the shape of friendship—*Drinking Buddies* (Swanberg 2013), *Life Partners* (Fogel 2014); parenthood—*Gayby* (Lisecki 2012), *Maggie's Plan* (Miller 2015)—professional accomplishment—*The Giant Mechanical Man* (Kirk 2012), *In a World...* (Bell 2013), *Begin Again* (Carney 2013), *The Incredible Jessica James* (Strouse 2017)—family ties—*Your Sister's Sister* (Shelton 2011)—or simply finding one's self-identity—*It's Kind of a Funny Story* (Boden and Fleck 2010), *Hello I Must Be Going* (Louiso 2012), *Lola Versus* (Wein 2012), *Appropriate Behavior* (Akhavan 2014). This is a particularly popular “category,” where the romantic relationship is not an end in itself, but rather a vehicle for self-discovery which is presented as a higher aim than the union with the opposite sex.

3.5. Reality bites

Indie rom-coms purport to search for more “authentic” representations of romantic relationships. This may include the deflation of romantic ideals and myths like the soul mate or the “One,” so crucial in earlier approaches. They often focus on the transitory nature of romantic love, on the seriality and provisionality of relationships, on infidelity, divorce, instability, uncertainty, and the role of luck and coincidence in the formation and dissolution of attachments.

Apart from movies depicting new love, the penchant of these films for realism is also apparent in their focus on already formed couples, and not only on the courtship process, as is often the case in Hollywood. These movies show a wide variety in their representation of love, often depicting tumultuous, dull, awkward or unhappy relationships. The couples featured in these films often require “work” to stay afloat, something rarely explored by mainstream cinema, which is reluctant to show us what

happens after the couple's final kiss. This is the case of films like *Friends with Kids* (Westfeldt 2011), *Ruby Sparks* (Dayton and Faris 2012), *2 Days in New York* (Delpy 2012), *Celeste and Jesse Forever* (Toland Krieger 2012), *Before Midnight* (Linklater 2013), *The One I Love* (McDowell 2014), *Maggie's Plan* (Miller 2015) and *I Do... Until I Don't* (Bell 2017), all of which feature slightly older characters than the average mainstream rom-com and the everyday reality of quotidian, non-idealized love.

3.6. Let's talk about us

Indie rom-coms are frequently "relationship stories," their focus often lying in the interrogation and problematization of the actual workings of romantic relationships, exploring their constructed nature and conventionality in the process. This "thematization" of relationships is apparent, for example, in *Ruby Sparks* (Dayton and Faris 2012), *An Oversimplification of her Beauty* (Nance 2012), *Celeste and Jesse Forever* (Toland Krieger 2012), *Her* (Jonze 2013), *What If* (Dowse 2013), *Appropriate Behavior* (Akhavan 2014), *Comet* (Esmail 2014), *Two Night Stand* (Nichols 2014), *Life Partners* (Fogel 2014) and *Sleeping with Other People* (Headland 2015). In these films dialogue often fulfills purposes other than the advancement of the plot, as the characters obsess and over-analyze their relationships without necessarily getting anywhere or drawing any conclusions. In this sense, some of these films are reminiscent of the "nervous romances" of the 1970s (Krutnik 1990) or the "relationship films" that followed them (Shumway 2003, 157-187). In some of these indie rom-coms dialogue follows a "conversational" style or is partially improvised by the actors, thus echoing the "mumblecore" tradition, as in *Audrey the Trainwreck* (Ross 2010), *Your Sister's Sister* (Shelton 2011), *Before Midnight* (Linklater 2013), and *Drinking Buddies* (Swanberg 2013).⁵ Again, this style contributes to increasing the impression of realism in the representation of relationships.

3.7. Let's talk about sex

Sex in mainstream romantic comedy has been traditionally downplayed, delayed until the final union of the couple or simply disregarded. The new wave of "raunchy" rom-coms produced by Hollywood—*The Ugly Truth* (Luketic 2009), *Bridesmaids* (Feig 2011), *Friends with Benefits* (Gluck 2011), *No Strings Attached* (Reitman 2011)—appear, on the surface, to bring about a change in this pattern. However, the openly farcical approach to sex and the body in these films may not be the most appropriate way to explore the place of sexual desire in relationships. Indie rom-coms, on the other hand, frame their treatment of sex within the same aspirations of realism mentioned

⁵ "Mumblecore" is a term that designates a style of film, born in the early 2000s, characterized by low production values, naturalistic performances, an emphasis on dialogue over plot and on the personal relationships of its characters.

above. In these movies sex is frequently highlighted in different ways: it is actually shown on screen in realistic terms—*Greenberg* (Baumbach 2010), *Your Sister's Sister* (Shelton 2011), *Lola Versus* (Wein 2012), *Before Midnight* (Linklater 2013)—and it often plays a more important role in the courtship process—*Save the Date* (Mohan 2012). It may be unconnected to romance, thus highlighting sexual satisfaction as an end in itself—*Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* (Scafaria 2012). It may be more explicitly represented and talked about—*Two Night Stand* (Nichols 2014), *Obvious Child* (Robespierre 2014), *Sleeping with Other People* (Headland 2015)—or underrepresented sexual practices, such as masturbation—*Gayby* (Lisecki 2012), *Her* (Wein 2012), *Don Jon* (Gordon-Levitt 2013)—or threesomes—*Appropriate Behavior* (Akhavan 2014), *Top Five* (Rock 2014)—may be made visible as part of the “plastic sexuality” blueprint of the turn of the century (Giddens 1992, 2). Alternatively, sex may be negatively presented as a source of tension or neurosis, or as an obstacle for romantic fulfillment—*Don Jon* (Gordon-Levitt 2013), *Boy Meets Girl* (Schaeffer 2014), *Sleeping with Other People* (Headland 2015), *That's Not Us* (Sullivan 2015).

3.8. The game of love

Although many indie rom-coms try to present themselves as a “slice of life,” using the classical style look, a considerable amount of these films offer a more self-conscious look by means of formal games, which may include narrative complexity, unusual visual esthetics or generic play. Some offer different types of pleasures to the savvy spectator: “puzzle” and time-scrambling narratives—*Begin Again* (Carney 2013), *Comet* (Esmail 2014); multi-protagonist ensembles which prompt the viewer to establish connections—*The Romantics* (Niederhoffer 2010), *Happythankyoumoreplease* (Radnor 2010), *That's Not Us* (Sullivan 2015), *I Do... Until I Don't* (Bell 2017); and subjectively playful narratives that may include science-fiction or fantasy elements (Newman 2011, 182-217) as in the case of *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* (Scafaria 2012), *Her* (Jonze 2013), *Life After Beth* (Baena 2014), *Comet* (Esmail 2014), and *In your Eyes* (Hill 2014). The inclination for science-fiction and fantasy contrasts with the gritty realism of many other indie rom-coms and may occasionally be seen as a way to create “parallel universes” in which romance can actually happen, as in *Safety Not Guaranteed* (Trevorrow 2012) or *The One I Love* (McDowell 2014), for instance.

Apart from generic play, there is also a considerable number of indie rom-coms that flaunt a self-conscious style or some form of formal distinctiveness in terms of narrative, esthetics or visual style, such as *Tonight You're Mine* (Mackenzie 2011), *Almost in Love* (Neave 2011), *Ruby Sparks* (Dayton and Faris 2012), *Newlyweeds* (King 2013), *Comet* (Esmail 2014), *The Man on Her Mind* (Guthrie and Hruska 2014), and *Me Him Her* (Landis 2015). In the most extreme cases, formal experimentation becomes an end in itself, and is not necessarily motivated by plot or character development. This formal

self-consciousness may be seen as a way to problematize the way in which romance is represented and desire is channeled in the mainstream rom-com. This is the case of *An Oversimplification of Her Beauty* (Nance 2012), a quasi-experimental film whose scrambled narrative arguably mirrors the non-linear, often chaotic way in which human memory works. The movie becomes a faithful account of the protagonist's emotional memory, thus resembling the way in which we recall past relationships, which rarely follows the Hollywood three-act structure.

3.9. Not that kind of girl, not that kind of guy

Hollywood romantic comedy has regularly been accused of painting fairly traditional pictures of gender roles, with women normally seeking security through marriage and men refusing to relinquish their freedom. The truth is that the genre is not as conservative as is routinely claimed, and the portrayal of gender roles in the mainstream has moved with the times, evolving from petrified notions of masculinity and femininity towards more contemporary depictions of gender. Indie cinema, on the other hand, has been frequently regarded as being on the progressive side of the equation. Again, this is not always necessarily the case: the ideology of a film, or any cultural text, is never a simple matter and it certainly does not depend exclusively on its industrial context. Only particular examples of a genre can be deemed to be progressive or conservative, not the genre as a whole. However, it can be safely argued that indie cinema is, if not necessarily ideologically ahead of the mainstream, at least more engaged with the depiction of a wider variety of gender roles. The indie rom-com frequently offers more nuanced and idiosyncratic representations of heterosexual masculinity and femininity. For instance, it is common to find insecure men seeking commitment and assertive women who are not necessarily interested in emotional stability—*Ruby Sparks* (Dayton and Faris 2012), *Save the Date* (Mohan 2012), *An Oversimplification of Her Beauty* (Nance 2012), *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* (Scafaria 2012); and an abundance of beta males and females—*Greenberg* (Baumbach 2010), *The Giant Mechanical Man* (Kirk 2012), *In a World...* (Bell 2013), *Slow Learners* (Argott and Joyce 2015). This increased complexity in the portrayal of gender roles sometimes makes the happy ending problematic.

The nuanced representation of gender also extends to non-heterosexual frameworks. These movies tend to break with stereotypical portrayals of the LGBT community, offering more “real” representations of people as individuals rather than as a token example of a category, as for instance in *The Kids are All Right* (Cholodenko 2010), *BearCity* (Langway 2010), *Your Sister's Sister* (Shelton 2011), *Gayby* (Lisecki 2012), *Appropriate Behavior* (Akhavan 2014), *Life Partners* (Fogel 2014), *Me Him Her* (Landis 2015), *Naomi and Ely's No Kiss List* (Hanggi 2015) and *That's Not Us* (Sullivan 2015). A small number of films also delve into non-normative gender frameworks,

problematizing essentialist male/female models through transgender or gender-fluid characters. Such is the case of *Boy Meets Girl* (Schaeffer 2014), a ground-breaking film that depicts the romantic relationship between a transgender girl and her best friend, a straight man, from a comic perspective.

4. *PEOPLE, PLACES, THINGS: AN INDIE ROM-COM*

Evidently, not all of the above themes and perspectives are to be found in every indie rom-com. Similarly, many mainstream rom-coms participate in these conventions on occasion. Genres are in constant flux, and the mainstream and indie sectors feed off each other. In the case of romantic comedy, the current drought in the mainstream forces fans of the genre to turn to the “periphery,” whose generic departures are arguably contributing to the development of romantic comedy as a whole in a more significant manner than their Hollywood “cousins” are.

People, Places, Things (Strouse 2015; henceforth *PPT*) is an example of a film that pushes the boundaries of the genre from the margins. Written and directed by Jim Strouse and produced by Beachside Films—an indie company established in 2013 and specialized in low-budget movies—it premiered at Sundance in 2015 to positive reviews, and was picked up for limited theatrical distribution in the US by The Film Arcade, another recently-founded independent distributor. It tells the story of Will (Jemaine Clement), a graphic novelist and professor in his early 40s who discovers that his long-term partner, Charlie (Stephanie Allyne), is cheating on him on their twin daughters’ fifth birthday. He walks in on her while she is having sex with Gary (Michael Chernus), an off-Broadway monologist with whom he clumsily tries to fight in an attempt to avenge his honor. It is no use, though, as Charlie breaks up with him on the spot. A year later, he is still trying to put himself back together, but his life seems to be going nowhere, while Charlie is pregnant and engaged to her lover. Depressed by his job, his tiny apartment and the little time that he is allowed to spend with his daughters, he forces himself to go on a blind date with Diane (Regina Hall), the accomplished mother of one of his students. They do not seem to hit it off at first but they eventually start a promising relationship that is abruptly disrupted by Will’s unresolved issues with his ex-partner. His ineptitude in the romantic realm is only matched by his failure to thrive in his career and his incompetence as a single parent. These issues take center stage in a romantic comedy that widens its scope to include topics such as parenthood, art, professional accomplishment, and above all, the explicit search for self-identity after a traumatic break-up. The film depicts Will’s painful process of re-invention as he finishes writing a novel and becomes a better father to his daughters, while opening himself up to the possibility of starting a relationship with someone new.

The characters in *PPT* are not played by A-list actors and, although not without charm, Will is not a conventional rom-com hero. Stuck in middle age in his teaching job, he is depressed, insecure, conflicted, witty, disarmingly honest and tenderly vulnerable, thus displaying a mixture of features that paint an alternative picture of

what a rom-com lead is. *PPT* provides a more nuanced representation of gender than is common in the genre, one which legitimates beta masculinity as a viable—even desirable—option for romance. This romance is interracial, Diane being played by an African-American actress and Will by a part-Maori New Zealander. The fact that this is a non-issue in the film arguably points to indie cinema's greater openness to the normalization of interracial romance on the screen. In addition, Diane is slightly older than Will. By having a divorced mother in her mid-forties portrayed as a desirable romantic partner, *PPT* distances itself from Hollywood's ageist tendencies.

PPT's premise is not new, but its loose narrative structure sets it apart from the well-trodden rom-com formula. The film does not focus on the romantic entanglement exclusively, and when it does, it avoids familiar plot developments: the “meet-cute” between the new lovers is not very “cute,” as they go through an ill-fated first date. The courtship process lacks the “getting to know each other” and the “having fun together” parts, as they move practically straight to bed, or rather, the floor of Diane's Columbia office, in their second encounter. The obstacles keeping the lovers apart in this movie are clearly internal, as Will does not seem able to get over Charlie, despite how attractive Diane is. Finally, their relationship is abruptly interrupted, just as the romantic plot starts to pick up, by his doubts and his comic excess of sincerity. The viewer's expectations are not fulfilled by the ending, as no romantic reconciliation with either of the women in Will's life is explicitly shown. The movie has no big climaxes, no dramatic turning points, and no closed ending. This lack of recognizable tropes or familiar plot points makes the film more convincing in its implicit claims of realism. The characters move in and out of relationships, attachments are formed and dissolved without grand gestures and all these vicissitudes are presented as a “slice of life.” *PPT* strives for greater realism in the representation of relationships, focusing on the darker side of love—infidelity, heartbreak, loneliness, economic struggle, the “work” that real relationships require to stay alive after the initial infatuation—and deflating romantic myths such as that of “love at first sight,” the “One” or the “happily ever after.” On the contrary, the film highlights the blurriness of the boundaries of romantic narratives and the provisionality of relationships in the contemporary romantic arena, where even the strongest-looking ones seem to have an expiry date, just as in real life.

This realistic approach to relationships is, nevertheless, characterized by a deep self-consciousness. In contrast to what is customary in the genre, Will has no sidekick to talk to about his sorry state, no confidant to dissect his relationships with. However, he constantly interrogates himself through his art: the graphic novel he is writing is used to communicate his inner struggles, functioning as a means to unraveling the intricacies of his relationships with Charlie, Diane and his daughters, and to unload his anger towards Gary and his frustration at his professional stagnation. The movie is sprinkled with Will's illustrations, which fit into the narrative diegetically, becoming a meta story presented in a distinctive visual style that is intensely self-reflexive.

The film's self-reflexivity also extends to its deployment of a number of romantic comedy conventions, such as the protagonist's learning process, the last-minute romantic gesture, the wrong partner or the happy ending. This is especially evident in the film's denouement. In one of the last scenes of the movie Will attends Charlie's wedding. Before the ceremony, he spots Gary and walks resolutely towards him, determined to make amends for his pathetic attempts at fighting him at the opening of the film. His self-assured walk conveys the character's transformation: the tracking shot that accompanies his steps moves from right to left, signaling a "backward movement" that suggests an attempt to go back to the past, not only to resume his unfinished fight with his ex-partner's lover but also to settle his unresolved issues. When he reaches Gary, Will announces that he is going to punch him, which Gary accepts graciously as long as he is not hit in the face. After a polite exchange between the two, Will punches him in the ear, which is followed by an absurd discussion about whether or not the ear is part of the face. The awkwardness of the scene speaks about the nuanced kind of gender representation which indie films often feature: the ridiculousness of the physical confrontation (of a sort) presents an alternative model of masculinity while highlighting the film's self-awareness of the conventions of romantic comedy. The rom-com connoisseur knows that a final showdown between the two male rivals is required in order to resolve one of Will's main conflicts, but the extreme politeness with which the confrontation is carried out and its subsequent "analysis" by its contenders turns generic clichés upside-down while emphasizing both characters' unequivocal status as beta males. While the final scenes emphasize that Will has completed a learning process that has turned him into an improved, more resolute version of himself, the model of masculinity that he represents is unconventional and, in the film's discourse, closer to real twenty-first-century people, something which is celebrated in the film as part of the character's idiosyncratic charm, rather than highlighted as a deficiency.

In the next scene Will confronts Charlie. At first, she is nowhere to be found, as she is having second thoughts about the wedding. Again, the scene constitutes a playful re-examination of the classical rom-com formula, as her clichéd line "I knew you'd know where to find me" is met with Will's dry remark "it kind of helped that you texted me where you were." (Strouse 2015, 1:18-50). The scene thus self-consciously subverts one of the genre's best-known tropes, the quasi-magic serendipity that connects the lovers, allowing them to find each other in their hiding place at the critical point which makes or breaks the couple. *PPT*, on the contrary, opts for a more mundane meeting arrangement, which is, once more, connected to indie cinema's penchant for realism. Will and Charlie hold a short but poignant conversation:

CHARLIE: I'm afraid I'm making another mistake.

WILL: I don't think of what we did as a mistake.

CHARLIE: It didn't work out.

WILL: It did... And then it didn't.

CHARLIE: What does that mean?

WILL: It means... We can't predict what's going to happen. Or how we're going to change.

CHARLIE: I love you.

WILL: I love you, too. But if you wait any longer, you're going to miss your wedding.

CHARLIE: Are we friends?

WILL: We're more than that.

CHARLIE: What are we?

WILL: We're parents (Strouse 2015, 1:18-58)

This dialogue is representative of the indie rom-com's general take on romance. Firstly, it presents the individual's romantic trajectory as a succession of relationships, emphasizing the seriality of modern romance and dismissing the myth of the "One": Will and Charlie were not each other's perfect match, but they had a fulfilling relationship while it lasted, and that is what counts. Charlie is on her way to the altar, but Gary does not seem to be an improvement on Will, which problematizes her "happily ever after." Secondly, the "I love you's" exchanged by the characters are deeply self-aware in their subversion of the traditional rom-com's ending. Their declaration of love has more to do with companionate love, which is based on friendship and commitment, than with the romantic love often depicted by Hollywood (Sternberg 1998, 20). Again, this idea constitutes an obvious disruption of the expectations of the viewer, who was maybe hoping for a grand romantic gesture on Will's part in order to regain Charlie's love. On the contrary, he gives her the final push to marry her "wrong partner," and this is not necessarily perceived as an unhappy turn of events. Finally, the last lines of dialogue spoken in the film provide one of the keys for its "happy ending": Will and Charlie may not be lovers anymore, but they will be friends, and more importantly, they will be parents together. Friendship and parenthood are thus put on equal footing with romantic love as rightful paths towards personal realization and happiness, pointing to a future for the genre in which the meanings of what love is able to encompass are significantly expanded. This exploration is carried out through a self-conscious deflating of familiar generic tropes and their replacement by concerns that appear to be more in synch with contemporary experience of relationships.

This does not mean that romantic love is altogether excluded from the picture, either. The last minutes of the film show Will attending the ceremony. He is witnessing somebody else's happy ending: pregnant Charlie's new beginning with a new partner. He does not seem sad or bitter, though. A series of point-of-view shots together with Jemaine Clement's subtle performance provide the key to interpreting the scene: he has made the decision to close a chapter in his life and start a new one. Does it involve a romantic interest? It is likely, but uncertain. The last scenes show Will walking away from the wedding party. He has surreptitiously stolen some flowers. Are they for

Diane? Will she take him back? The open ending leaves the spectator wondering, but one thing seems clear: he has finally managed to pull himself together and the flowers symbolize this new beginning, drawing a parallel with the bouquet that Charlie carries on her way to the altar. *PPT* does not really end, it simply “stops” at this point, with an ambiguous but optimistic nod towards personal realization as a legitimate option for individual happiness instead of romantic love.

5. CONCLUSION

People, Places, Things has a suggestive title. Its “unspecificity” seems to announce, among other things, its generic “diffusion.” It deploys comedy, drama and romance (all of them in small doses), but it is difficult to unproblematically classify it as any of the above. As this essay has shown, the independent romantic comedy of the 2010s is characterized by a playful generic spirit. Some instances feature unusual generic combinations, mixing romantic comedy with science fiction, horror, comedian comedy, the musical or the disaster movie. These films are often hybrids of two or more genres, but the main feature of the indie rom-com is, arguably, its resistance to any kind of generic categorization. These movies like to explore conventions and often contest them, which frequently compromises their clear alignment with particular genres. This is the case for most of the films mentioned in this article. As opposed to Hollywood, the romantic quest is sometimes understated and many of these movies cannot be classified as laugh-out-loud comedies or tear-jerking dramas. This kind of cinema is often perceived as a “genre in itself,” one that cannot be easily pigeonholed and that is often filed under the broad tag of “Independent Cinema” in databases such as filmaffinity.com and imdb.com. This lack of a recognizable generic framework constitutes an important part of their appeal and identity as “off-Hollywood.”

Generic “indeterminacy” does not mean that the independent rom-com does not participate in the conventions of clearly established genres. The difference lies in the movies’ self-conscious attempt not to present themselves as belonging to any particular genre. Unlike Hollywood movies, which tend to rely heavily on the use of generic markers, the independent rom-com strives for the opposite: to “dilute” these markers. Mainstream movies try to agglutinate as many genres as possible in a single product in order to attract the widest possible audience. Independent films, on the other hand, while often generically complex, tend to target a niche audience, and this audience, more often than not, reads independent cinema as a genre in itself. This “genre” is defined by opposition to the mainstream and contributes to the construction of these particular spectators’ sensibilities as “alternative.” So, paradoxically, the same feature—generic complexity—may serve two different purposes, or rather, create different effects, depending on the individual case. This is partly due to the different use both groups of films make of generic conventions: while Hollywood tends to deploy these conventions in a more predictable way, addressing an audience that seeks more repetition than

variation in their generic mix, the independent rom-com consciously subverts these conventions more frequently, trying to please a smaller niche, but one which expects a greater degree of distinctiveness from familiar Hollywood formulas. The result is often a crossover product that draws on the Hollywood romance but with a twist on what is, in essence, well-trodden territory. However, the “twist” is precisely what makes these films interesting and, as I have argued here, the key to the genre’s renewal as a whole. Romantic comedy may be moribund for the big studios nowadays, but it is thriving on the margins, waiting on the wings to become Hollywood’s next big thing once more.

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