*Provisional Syllabus*

**Romantic Comedy / Matrimonial Tragedy**

Spring 2018

English 180b

**Prof. Sherman**

email: davidsherman@brandeis.edu

office: Rabb 136

office hours: Wed. 10:00-11:00, Thur. 1:00-2:30, and by appt.

office phone: 781-736-8214

**Class Schedule:**

Monday 2:00-4:50

Rabb 119

In this course, we’ll flirt with, court, and maybe—just maybe—fall in love with the film genre of romantic comedy. We’ll examine romantic comedies, from early to recent cinema, to understand its powerful narrative machinery and unique social functions. What are the genre’s rules and structures? What variations can we trace within these? If we were to try and create a persuasive rom com, how could we work creatively within these rules?

To understand this genre world, we’ll attend to its careful aesthetic strategies and sensuous effects, and especially to its distinctive techniques for representing desirable faces, bodies, and voices. We’ll also consider how the genre’s comedic pleasure is involved in the way people fashion gender identities, sexualities, and marriages. And we’ll think about how successful rom coms imaginatively play with other aspects of identity, including ethnic, religious, racial, and class identities, as a part of their explorations of romance. Finally, we’ll consider the role of technology and artificial intelligence in rom com plots, which often explore passionate attachments at the edges of concepts of the human.

We’ll become rom com theorists, as well as aficionados. To sharpen our work, we’ll also explore the genre tension between rom com and films about broken or tragic marriages—the dark underbelly of the rom com worldview.

This is a four-credit course. I expect students to spend at least nine hours a week preparing for class sessions and completing assignments.

**Learning Goals**

- Develop the skills to describe the logic of a popular film genre and to analyze individual films as a function of its genre; to learn basic concepts in genre theory
- Develop the skills to interpret complex imaginative texts, in writing, in critical conversation with others in an interpretive community; to understand significant arguments in published criticism about specific films
- Ability to construct a plausible premise and plot for an entertaining romantic comedy, as a way to demonstrate facility with the possibilities and requirements of a genre
- Learn a major current within U.S. film history; consider how the genre of rom com evolved to engage its shifting cultural situations
- Ability to assess the implications of theoretical investigations into gender and sexuality for interpreting the cultural effects of rom com
• Ability to assess the genre’s imaginative engagement with several aspects of social identity, as these are at stake in romance; understand the genre’s representations of distinctions between public and private spheres, as these affect the formation of identities

Rights, Rules, and Requirements:
• Laptops may be used in class only with permission and for accessing relevant course materials. If you use a laptop for other purposes (email, web browsing), you will be asked to leave the class and be considered absent for the day. Bring other materials (e.g., paper, pens) for taking notes.
• All assignments must be completed and submitted to receive course credit. Late work will be penalized by one plus/minus for each day past the due date.
• Three unexcused absences lowers the final course grade by one plus/minus, and each additional absence by another plus/minus.
• If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.
• You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Please consult Brandeis University Rights and Responsibilities for all policies and procedures related to academic integrity. Students may be required to submit work to TurnItIn.com software to verify originality. Allegations of alleged academic dishonesty will be forwarded to the Director of Academic Integrity. Sanctions for academic dishonesty can include failing grades and/or suspension from the university. Citation and research assistance can be found at LTS - Library guides.

Written Assignments
Interpretive Essays: Two 5-7 page analyses of assigned films, with emphasis on formal and stylistic features that motivate original interpretive claims. 20% each.

Genre Taxonomy: a research project into a romantic comedy sub-genre or niche group of rom coms, including a genealogy, taxonomy of defining features, and assessment of its cultural significance. 30%

Film Treatment: pitch for an original rom com, as part of class competition with outside evaluator. 20%

Movie Review: short review of current rom com, posted in public forum and intended to shape public opinion. 10%

*Note that some films in this list may change*

Films and Readings:
Unit One: What are Romantic Comedies? Will we fall in love with them?
Films:
   Frank Capra, dir., It Happened One Night
   Preston Sturges, The Lady Eve
   Charlie Chaplin, dir., Modern Times
   Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, dirs., I Love You Phillip Morris
   Michael Showalter, dir., The Big Sick

Readings:
   Northrop Frye, “The Mythos of Spring: Comedy”
   Stanley Cavell, Pursuits of Happiness, chs. 1 and 2
Unit Two: Falling in Love Again, or, Repetition and Desire
Films:
   Harold Ramis, dir., *Groundhog Day*
   Alain Resnais, dir., *Last Year at Marienbad*
   Michel Gondry, dir., *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*
Reading: Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*

Unit Three: Romantic Swerves
Films:
   Adrienne Shelly, dir., *Waitress*
   Maria Maggenti, dir., *The Incredibly True Adventure of 2 Girls in Love*
   Ang Lee, dir., *The Wedding Banquet*
   Eric Schaeffer, dir., *Boy Meets Girl*
   Mike Nichols, dir., *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*
Reading:
   Celestino Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy* (selections)

Unit Four: Machinery of Romance
Films:
   Spike Jonz, dir., *Her*
   Craig Gillespie, dir., *Lars and the Real Girl*