The faint aroma of performing seals: the nervous romance and the comedy of the sexes

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Author: Frank Krutnik
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When love congeals, it soon reveals The faint aroma of performing seals, The double-crossing of a pair of heels--I wish I were in love again.

--Lorenz Hart (1)

Heterosexual love may be a "many splendored thing," but it is also a game with quite precise though not immutable sets of rules or conventions. Courtship, seduction, adultery, and marriage are all highly codified and regulated activities, subject to individual inflection but never open totally to individual control. Being so fundamental to the perpetuation of "culture," heterosexual intimacy poses a specific paradox which is integral to the way romantic comedy operates; namely, "affairs of the heart" are so personal and so individual and yet at the same time so readily familiar and so conventional. Since time immemorial, poets, dramatists, and the like have been singing the praises and "tricking out" the problems involved in love and its vicissitudes, yet there is a profound resistance to conceiving of the game of love in terms of a regime of conformity. Hence, the term romantic has come to signify something of a revolt against the norms, against the cultural regimentation of desire, against marriage. The grand passions experienced by Anna Karenina, Catherine Earnshaw, and the Lady of the Camellias represent a determined apotheosis in defiance of duty, convention, and marriage, the ultimate destination of which is death rather than a dishonorable compromise to the mundane. Such heroines represent one particular extreme which cannot be tolerated within the genre of romantic comedy. The other extreme is the acknowledgment of marriage as stultification, a far less noble sacrifice of individual desire. It is between these two polarities that the comedy of the sexes operates, preserving passion while regulating desire within a workable, livable orbit. Thus, as I have considered elsewhere, the "screwball" romantic comedies of the 1930s solve the problem by validating love as a kind of totalizing intimacy which receives its most valuable expression in the form of play. (2) The screwball films celebrate heterosexual relationships founded upon vitality, charisma, and an almost childlike sense of playfulness. However, these idealized visions of romance are very firmly located within a certain era which, since the end of World War II, has been cast persistently (at least within the genre of romantic comedy) as some kind of golden age of simpler options, a heterosexual arcadia.

Before looking at the current state of play in Hollywood's comedies of love, sex, and marriage, it is worth suggesting certain transmutations within the genre between the screwball era and the 1970s. In general, one can see generic forms as a functional interface between the cinematic institution, audiences, and the wider realm of culture. Films never spring magically from their cultural context, but they represent instead much more complex activities of negotiation, addressing cultural transformations in a highly compromised and displaced manner. In the case of romantic comedy, it is particularly important to stress how specific films or cycles mediate between a body of conventionalized "generic rules," some of which have...