

Book Review: From France with love: gender and identity in French romantic comedy by Mary Harrod FROM FRANCE WITH LOVE: GENDER AND IDENTITY IN FRENCH ROMANTIC COMEDY by Mary Harrod

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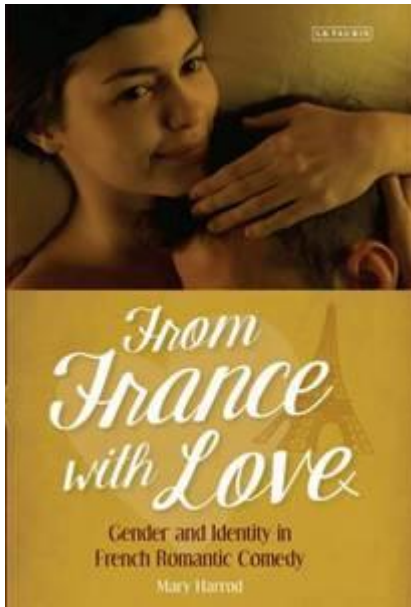
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FROM FRANCE WITH LOVE: GENDER AND IDENTITY IN FRENCH ROMANTIC COMEDY
By Mary Harrod (I. B. Tauris, £62/ \$99)264 pages. Hardback. ISBN: 9781784533588

Review by Diane Rodgers (July 2015)

French romantic comedy has been enjoying something of a popularity boom, beginning slowly in the 1990s and showing no sign of waning two decades later. The 'comédie romantique' (still a relatively new term in the French language) now firmly standardised as a popular film genre in France. The rom-com genre has outperformed all others financially, responsible for around 50% of domestic box office takings and the lion's share of French film production. So why, Mary Harrod poses, has the area been so badly neglected by scholarly research?

This book is not, perhaps, for those with a casual or passing interest in the genre; some degree of academic knowledge and awareness of related literature is assumed here. However, throughout the study, Harrod makes a strong case for academic attention and the need for further study on this contemporary cycle of films. Drawing from extensive research, and a feminist framework, we are presented with how there has been a slow shift towards promotion of the female point of view in more recent films, with a large proportion of female writers and directors taking the helm. This shift may seem late in coming in comparison to the rest of the world, but perhaps unsurprising for a country which didn't allow women to vote until 1944 and generally has exhibited delayed liberalisation in terms of modern female life in France.

Harrod discusses this relatively new phenomenon and newness of privileging female subjectivity from a number of different perspectives and cites over a hundred films as examples here, which in themselves clearly highlight some of the difficulties in categorising the genre. Rom-coms veer from the traditional boy-meets-girl narrative, to family-centred ensemble pieces, to other recent trends such as rom-coms featuring male duos; male buddy 'bromance' comedies.

The rom-com is historically seen as frivolous and lacking in substance; deprecated as an object unworthy of study, not least in France where critics have tended to denigrate domestic efforts as "pathetic imitation[s] of former Hollywood models". However, Harrod argues, comedy itself is highly regarded in literature and can be profoundly revealing about the social world and, of course, the very notion of romantic love is frequently central in western fiction, remaining irresistibly alluring throughout the ages. So, perhaps the fact that romance can be used as forum for women to explore their identity, emotional lives and experiences is the very thing that makes it at once historically overlooked by patriarchy and yet invaluable in terms of social significance.

Harrod examines the French version of romantic love, alongside changing dynamics of contemporary notions of the couple. Although there are a huge number of film titles mentioned in passing, there are a few more engaging case studies which allow for detailed understanding of the issues under discussion. Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (2001); one of France's most successful rom-coms ever to make a mark at the international box office, is studied here as an example of the genre before it was well-established in the domestic market. Harrod remarks upon a

number of atypical elements with the film; although having a feel-good Hollywood style ending, it displays notions of disjointed and fragmented families, with the central couple more akin to childlike friends rather than romantic lovers (the film also has suffered allegations of misogyny and racism).

This study often, intentionally, raises more questions than it answers - Harrod notes the "babbling polyphony of discourses" apparent within the genre from race, religion, sexuality and commitment, to defining the very construct of 'romance' itself. The fact that there are so many areas of question is what makes Harrod's work feel like it's bursting at the seams; further research is clearly called for to even begin to adequately cover all the issues raised here - but the fact that they are acknowledged is a good start.

Timeless human issues such as male and female positioning to commitment and adultery are frequently deliberated in rom-coms, views on which have changed over time. In French cinema, adultery has traditionally been seen as something of a joke; almost an endearing trait in men and integral to the experience of marriage. Harrod notes that, though the notion still persists and is far from dead, adultery has been significantly deglamourised and is significantly less socially acceptable in modern French cinema (and, we infer, French society). Female desire is increasingly prominent in such films but, as Harrod points out, even in films made by women, female promiscuity seems to result in emotional emptiness at best (using *Bridget Jones* as a point of comparison).

The significance of the effect of cinema on society (and vice versa) should not be underestimated; changing social attitudes has been linked with audiences taking cues from their cinematic hero(ine)s or, at least, are reflected in them. An important example Harrod gives here is the film *Pédale Douce* (1996) which had significant impact on the case for gay and lesbian equality and made a key contribution to legal change for same sex couples to adopt children in France.

Alongside foregrounded representations of alternative or queer gender positions, Harrod discusses the emergence of new types of heroine, and conflicting versions of womanhood represented by French female stars. She presents Audrey Tautou and Marion Cotillard as unthreatening, childlike versions of femininity whereas more modern trends seem to allow for more comic heroines; favouring intelligence over naïvety and becoming, therefore, more believably realistic rather than (male) romantic fantasy. *Romald et Juliette* (1989) is noted as a key departure from conforming to norms of physical attractiveness of French female protagonists (especially in terms of slimness), but it remains that the rom-com genre still contributes substantially to traditions of idolising the female body (as opposed to achievement). Harrod notes the double standard in attitudes here; in 2005's *Je préfère qu'on reste amis*, Gerard Depardieu is described as "just within the bounds of healthy size in this film" (having put on a substantial amount of weight in recent years), yet continues to be cast in leading roles - the same would be unlikely for a female lead.

The history of women needing to be 'rescued' - usually a low status woman by a rich man (à la *Pretty Woman*, 1990) - also still pervades; the two most recent rom-coms Harrod saw at the time of concluding this study, she says, both show career goals for women as unfulfilling, even belittling, which, in the case of male characters is invariably the opposite. She also addresses the still current hot topic of age difference in the coupling of stars; many male co-stars are at least 20 years senior to their partner (in the 1999 film *Venus Beauté*, Audrey Tautou is a scandalous 49 years younger than co-star Robert Hossein).

A particularly interesting pattern that arises here is that, increasingly, characters in French romantic comedies express desire to be part of a family unit; well beyond simply the romantic desire of coupledness. This is highly significant in a social context - the fact that a high proportion of female directors opt for the family ensemble narrative adds fuel to the concept that romance for men ends with conquest whilst for women it is a more of an ongoing narrative.

Harrod gives a broad picture of the evolution of the nature of family as a social unit in film, into less conventional formats; seen in the shift towards ensemble rom-coms, the dethroning of marriage as a central goal, alongside inclusion of same-sex relationships. The emergence of the nurturing father is discussed also - with *Trois hommes et un couffin* in 1985 (later remade in the USA as *Three Men and a Cradle*); although less prominent into the '90s and beyond, nonetheless, motherhood for women became less often an exclusive life-goal.

Whilst Harrod's book may not be for the casual rom-com viewer, she argues her case well: this is clearly an area of distinct social significance for film studies, unfairly neglected and even scorned by scholars and critics alike. Hopefully there will be enough academic interest in the near future for the fascinating questions she raises to be taken on board and developed by others.