

uh ... and I'm not one of those characters, you know, although I'm balding slightly on top, that's about the worst you can say about me. I think I'm gonna get better as I get older, you know? I think I'm gonna be the balding virile type, you know, as opposed to say ~~the~~ uh, distinguished gray, for instance, you know? 'Less I'm 'neither' of those two. Unless I'm one of those guys with saliva dribbling out of his mouth who wanders into a cafeteria with a shopping bag screaming about socialism and I broke up and I-I still can't get my mind around that. You know, I-I keep sifting the pieces of the relationship through my mind and ~~and~~ examining my life and tryin' to figure out where did the screw-up come, you know, and a year ago we were... tsch, in love. You know, and-and-and And it's funny, ~~not~~ not-I'm not a ...! morose type. I'm not a depressive character. I-I-I, uh, you know, I ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> a reasonably happy kid I guess. I was brought up in Brooklyn during World War II.



Sarah Kozloff

## About a Clueless Boy and Girl Voice-Over in Romantic Comedy Today

When I wrote *Invisible Storytellers* in the mid-1980s, romantic comedy was not one of the genres that leapt out at me. *Noir*, of course, with its use of first-person detectives; adaptations of famous novels replicating the narrator's commentary (whether first-person or third); semi-documentaries and epics with their god-like scene-setters—all appeared more prominent. When I look back at my now woefully inadequate filmography, compiled in the dinosaur days of modest VHS inventories and before people posted scripts on-line or sites streamed movies, I do spot a few romantic comedies. However, none of these occur during the golden age of screwball comedies in the thirties and the forties, when *The Awful Truth* (1937), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *His Girl Friday* (1940) and other classics appeared. And indeed, having now taught and written about romantic comedy for many years, I know that screwballs avoided voice-over, as did most of the canonical romantic comedies in the following decades. *Adam's Rib* (1949) doesn't need it; *Roman Holiday* (1953) uses a fake newsreel to set the scene; *Some Like it Hot* (1959) eschews it, as does *Pillow Talk* (1959). You won't find voice-over in my feminist favorite, *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), nor in the smash hits late in the century, such as *Moonstruck* (1987), *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), *French Kiss* (1995), *While You Were Sleeping* (1995), or *One Fine Day* (1996).

However, voice-over has become—to varying degrees, and for different purposes—a staple element of contemporary romantic comedies, including *Clueless* (1995), *The Opposite of Sex* (1998), *There's Something About Mary* (1998), *Notting Hill* (1999), *High Fidelity* (2000), *What Women Want* (2000), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *About a Boy* (2002), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004), *Wimbledon* (2004), *Hitch* (2005), *Waitress* (2007), *Sex and the City* (2008), and *(500) Days of Summer* (2009). To figure out why, we have

to think carefully about this genre's mixture of romance and comedy and how these films have changed alongside changing social mores. Moreover, we need to consider the two particular advantages of using this narrative technique: providing us unique opportunities for *intimacy* because of its ability in offering insight into characters' minds, and creating *irony* through the clash of verbal comments with the visual track.

Before we can understand this recent adoption of voice-over, however, we should quickly contextualize romantic comedy's characteristics, themes, narrative structure, and history. Because they treat interpersonal relationships, these films (as I noted in *Overhearing Film Dialogue*) privilege *talk*, not action. The scripts of conventional romantic comedies cosset the leading man and starring woman with friends and confidantes so that they can discuss their initial hatred of, or growing attraction to, the person they've met. In *The Awful Truth*, Lucy (Irene Dunne) talks to her aunt Patsy. Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) talks to her employees at The Shop Around the Corner in *You've Got Mail* (1998). "Aw, Ma, I love him awful," says Loretta (Cher), to her mother (Olympia Dukakis) in *Moonstruck*. If on-screen, diegetic dialogue can provide us access to the character's emotional journey from loathing to love, voice-over's special creation of intimacy and revelation of character interiority may not be needed.

A more important factor stems from romantic comedies' typical narrative structure. Romantic comedies trace the formation of the couple. In their most classic form, the filmmakers focus first on one side of the couple, then on the other. This creates a characteristic structure that Rick Altman, regarding musicals, terms "dual focus" (16-58). In a dual focus film, scenes centring on one lover alternate with parallel scenes focused on the other. For example, in *Pillow Talk*, we see scenes of Brad Allen (Rock Hudson) in his

apartment, and then of Jan Morrow (Doris Day) in hers; likewise in *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), scenes about Annie (Meg Ryan) in New York alternate with those about Sam (Tom Hanks) miles away. Thematic issues motivate this narrative structure. As we gain more knowledge about each character, we understand that each is missing what the other person can provide. In this manner, romantic comedies address tensions in society at large. Typically, one pole of the couple is responsible, cautious, and high-achieving (read, sexually inexperienced and/or upright), while the other is unconventional, free-spirited, and irresponsible (read, sexually experienced and liberated). The union of David Huxley (Gary Grant) and Susan Vance (Katharine Hepburn) in *Bringing Up Baby* creates a happy means that makes lovers more fulfilled as a couple than they were as singles.

Classic dual focus explores additional differences besides sexual experience. In the screwball era, the protagonists often come from different social classes. Johnny (Cary Grant) in *Holiday* (1938) is a self-made man, while Linda (Katharine Hepburn) is an heiress. Class conflict in the romantic comedy continues down through the decades to *Maid in Manhattan* (2002). Along with the dichotomy of the social class, the traditional dual focus structure between the two protagonists often brings out high achievement and careerism versus less ambition and a more relaxed attitude. In earlier movies, such as *Ball of Fire* (1941) and the original *Sabrina* (1954), the male characters are losing out on joy because they can't pry their noses out of work long enough to smell the roses. Although movies continue to chastise men for single-minded ambition, in recent offerings the career-obsessed boot fits the female characters'

smaller feet. Melanie (Reese Witherspoon) in *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002), and Kate (Catherine Zeta-Jones) in *No Reservations* (2007) elevate their work above openness to life's pleasures. Many current films set about teaching women not to let their career ambitions close them off to love.

A third contrast, and perhaps the one most important to us in the pages that follow, stems from one side of the couple being commitment-phobic. In the sex comedies of the fifties and sixties, the male characters will do anything to avoid getting "trapped." The title, *Runaway Bride* (1999), captures an action that recurs throughout the genre: when it comes down to the crunch, many characters skedaddle. The issue of commitment has been so central to the genre that scholars have labeled a subset of these films the "comedies of re-marriage." These films, which Charles Musser discovers commenced with Cecil B. DeMille's silent movies, begin with a divorce (282-313). In *One Fine Day*, for example, both main characters have been scarred by broken marriages; the day's manic events crack open the characters' protective shells, making each vulnerable and open to romance again.

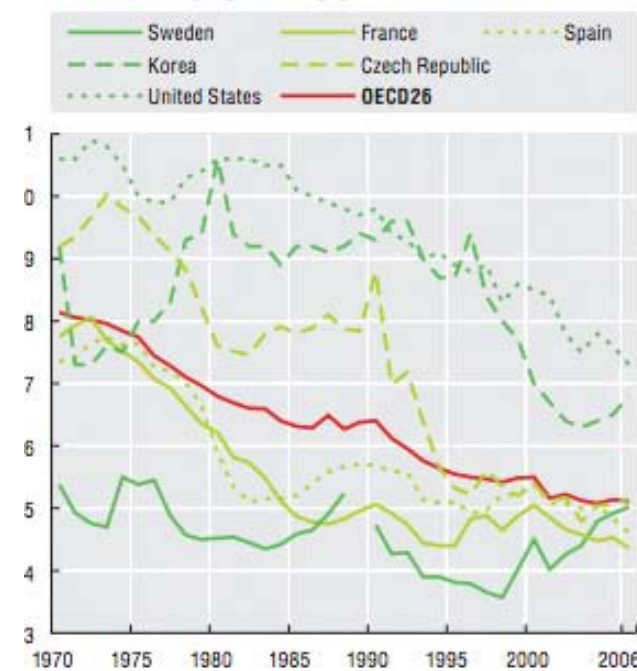
Of course, not all romantic comedies throughout film history rely on the dual focus structure. Some centre on one character: these are wholly or primarily "single focus." Frank Krutnik and Steve Neale point to Woody Allen as the primary figure of a cluster of "nervous romances" that started in the seventies after the Pill, the feminist movement, and the rising divorce rate led to a general anxiety about whether romances can ever reach that treasured happy-end (Krutnik 1990, 57-72; Neale 1992, 284-99). Allen, of course, relies heavily on voice-over in *Annie Hall* (1977)



The Return to Dual Focus in *When Harry Met Sally* (1989)

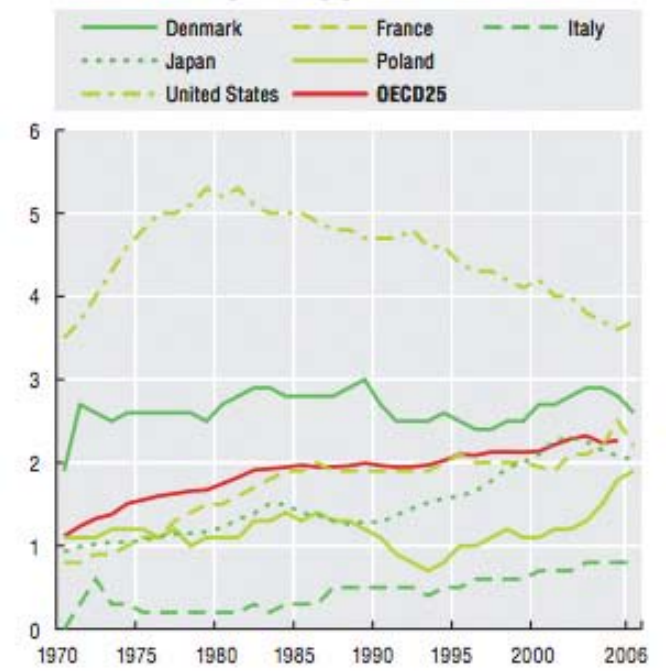
#### GE4.1. Marriage rates are generally declining

Marriages per 1 000 population, 1970-2006



#### GE4.2. Divorce rates are generally rising

Divorces per 1 000 population, 1970-2006



#### Society at a Glance, Organization of Economic Co-Operation and Development, Social Indicators (May 2009)

and *Manhattan* (1979), both of which mostly centre on the characters he plays (Alvy and Isaac) and do not give equal time or attention to his lovers. Allen's voice-over engages us in his thoughts and struggles and makes us sympathize with him when he is left alone.

However, in hindsight, I see Billy Wilder as the precursor of the "nervous romance." To switch for a second from genre theory to an auteurist lens: Wilder loved voice-over, using it notably in his noirs *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Sunset Blvd* (1950). It also crops up—serving a variety of purposes—in his romances, *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), *Love in the Afternoon* (1957), and *The Apartment* (1960). *The Apartment*, which also features first-person voice-over by a schlemiel character, ends happily...but just barely, because Bud (Jack Lemmon) has thoroughly compromised himself by renting out his apartment to his bosses for extramarital liaisons, and Fran (Shirley McLaine), an elevator girl so misused by one of these philanders that she tries to commit suicide, almost miss one another. *The Apartment* and the Woody Allen films tie viewers tightly to Bud, Alvy, and Isaac: we have less access to the women's feelings or emotional development.

In the late 1980s, with the appearance of *When Harry Met Sally* and *Pretty Woman* (1990) and the genre's resurgent box office popularity, scholars identified a cluster of films they termed "the reaffirmation of romance" (Evans 188). Part of what made those films so commercially successful

and made them feel so deeply reaffirming was the filmmakers' return to dual focus: we see scenes of Harry alone and then scenes of Sally alone and then scenes of them together, tied forever by a final declaration of undying love. However, as Frank Krutnik wrote in his 1998 "Love Lies: Romantic Fabrication in Contemporary Romantic Comedy," these "new romances" hinged upon the viewer's suspension of disbelief: "These films propose that it is better to believe in a myth, a fabrication, than have nothing" (30).

As the genre continued through the 1990s and the 2000s, and as divorce rates continued to rise while more and more people stayed single for longer in their lives, the myth became harder to believe. Finding the "true love" that the movies dangle seems so difficult—if not a cruel sham. Filmmakers have captured these doubts and anxieties in a cluster of recent films that focus on bewilderment, unhappiness, confusion, and (sometimes) dawning hope. Leger Grindon refers to these latest films as romantic comedies of "ambivalence" (26). Many are single focus and rely on voice-over. The lover appears late in the film, if at all, and viewers never get access to him or her the same way they observe the protagonist. He or she becomes something of a cipher, and due to the intimacy between the protagonist and us provided by his or her narration, we feel no guarantee that the romance will come to a happy conclusion. Let's look through some representative films from this cluster to see if commonalities appear in their use of voice-over.

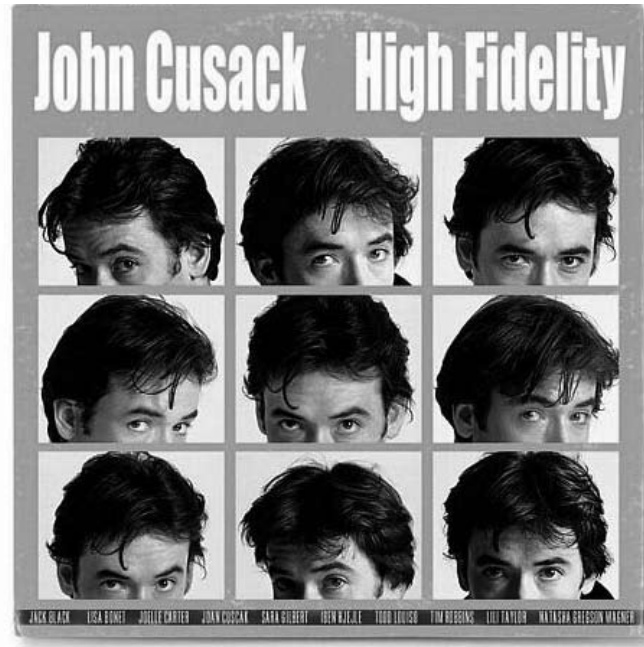
## I. The British Films

Annabelle Roe calls attention to the key role played by one British production company, Working Title, in a spate of recent romantic comedies (79-91). Voice-over is part of its house style. *High Fidelity* (total US box office gross \$27,000,000; All box office figures from Box Office Mojo) is an adaptation of a first-person novel by Nick Hornby directed by Stephen Frears and adapted for the screen by D. V. DeVincentis. The protagonist Rob (John Cusack) opens the film by speaking straight to the camera:

Rob: What came first, the music or the misery? People worry about kids playing with guns, or watching violent videos, 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?

He doesn't understand why his live-in girlfriend, Laura (Iben Hjejle), has broken up with him, and he recounts to us the four previous breakups that affected him deeply. Initially, we only see the women through his narration and warped perspective, but ultimately he decides to revisit each of them to discover why the relationships failed. The film has us witness Rob's journey towards maturity. We serve as his confidante; until he revisits former girlfriends, their motivations are just as mysterious to us as their actions were to him. Throughout the story, Rob, and not Laura, dominates our attention. Note that the film's poster design includes nine images of Cusack's character, and none of his girlfriends.

*About a Boy* (\$41,000,000), directed by Chris and Paul Weitz and scripted by Peter Hedges, is another adaptation of a Hornby novel. Starring Hugh Grant as Will, this story softens the main character dramatically. The movie, again, eschews giving the woman equal time. At least Laura appears in the first scene of *High Fidelity*, whereas Rachel (Rachel Weisz), Will's eventual love interest, doesn't even appear on screen until more than half-way through. We never see her alone or have access to her thoughts or feelings. The title and the poster accurately abstract the movie: the dual focus in this case exists between Will and the young boy, Marcus (Nicholas Hoult), whom he meets accidentally. In Hornby's novel, the story alternates between chapters centered on Will and those centered on Marcus, all written in the third-person, but the film script develops their characters through cleverly-written voice-over. Middle-aged, never employed, supported by the royalties of his father's



Poster for *High Fidelity* (2000)

authorship of a vapid Christmas song, Will lives unfettered by emotional ties to anyone. As he says in voice-over at the outset, contradicting John Dunne's phrase, "No man is an island" (which he believes was coined by the singer Jon Bon Jovi):

Will: A complete load of bollocks. In my opinion, all men are islands. And what's more, now's the time to be one. This is an island age. 100 years ago, for instance, you had to depend on other people... Whereas now, you see, you can make yourself a little island paradise... And I like to think that, perhaps, I'm that kind of island. I like to think I'm pretty cool.

His voice-over continually recounts his lies and evasions to keep from interpersonal engagement. Will's foil, Marcus, is a hopelessly nerdy twelve year old whose mother is clinically depressed. He too speaks directly to the viewer in voice-over:

Marcus: There were people out there who had a good time at life. I was beginning to realize I wasn't one of them. I just didn't fit. I didn't fit at my old school; I definitely didn't fit at my new one.

At first Will finds the drama of Fiona's suicide attempt exciting, but soon he recoils from any deep engagement with this needy family, revealing his thimble-sized heart through television metaphors.

Will: The thing is, a person's life is like a TV show. I was the star of "The Will Show." And "The Will Show" wasn't an ensemble drama. Guests came and went, but I was the regular. It came down to me and me alone. If Marcus's mum couldn't manage her own show, if her ratings were falling, it was sad, but that was her problem. Ultimately, the whole single mum plotline was a bit complicated for me.

Will's isolation has cut him off real people and real suffering. However, as the film proceeds, through the example of Marcus's selflessness and through Will's falling in love with Rachel, Will grows out of his self-centeredness, and even risks humiliation to rescue Marcus at a school performance. The ending Christmas luncheon demonstrates that Will has opened his life to others and Marcus now has a larger support group. Happily sitting on Will's couch, surrounded by friends, lovers, and family, each narrates his new contentment. The sequence begins with a mid-shot of Will watching TV alone.

Will: Every man is an island. I stand by that. [*Rachel comes into the shot and kisses him. Then the shot widens to show that Marcus and Rachel's son are sitting next to him.*] But, clearly, some men are island chains. Below the surface of the ocean, they are actually connected...

Helen Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1999) proceeds entirely as a series of diary entries. The film, also written by Helen Fielding and directed by Sharon Maguire (\$72,000,000), nominally keeps a similar structure through Bridget's running voice-over commentary. Bridget, for instance, starts the New Year:

Bridget: Resolution #1: Oooo- obviously will lose 20 lbs. #2: Always put last night's pants in the laundry basket. Equally important: will find nice sensible boyfriend to go out with and not continue to form romantic attachments to any of the following: alcoholics, workaholics, commitment-phobics, peeping toms, megalomaniacs, emotional fuckwits, or perverts. And especially will not fantasize about a particular person who embodies all these things.

Like *Pride and Prejudice*, which zeros in on Elizabeth Bennett and her gradual understanding of the true nature of the people around her, this story centres solely on Bridget (Renée Zellweger); we never see Daniel Cleaver (Hugh Grant) or Mark Darcy (Colin Firth) except when she is in the scene. And although the camera sometimes lingers

on facial expressions, viewers interpret more wisely than she does, and Bridget's voice-over is the only one we hear. Bridget—who in the novel is close to an alcoholic and a compulsive dieter and binger—comes off in the film as a wonderful free spirit whose only flaw is her susceptibility to emotional fuckwits like handsome Daniel; a weakness she finally surmounts. But mostly, as Mark Darcy tells her, we like her just the way she is.

Two other British films deserve quick mention here: *Notting Hill* (\$116,000,000), written by Richard Curtis and directed by Roger Michell, and *Love Actually* (\$60,000,000), written and directed by Richard Curtis. *Notting Hill* revolves around Will Thacker (Hugh Grant). Will is just an ordinary shopkeeper, while Anna Scott, the American movie star played by Julia Roberts, is an unknowable, unreachable, mega-celebrity. *He* gets the voice-over introduction to the film, explaining his neighborhood, setting the scene, and telling us that his wife deserted him; the film focuses on *his* loneliness and heartbreak throughout. Hugh Grant's voice—here and in other films—is perfect for voice-over: recognizable, resonant, expressive, with a London accent that is just slightly high-toned.

*Love Actually* also uses Hugh Grant's voice-over at the film's opening in the International Arrivals Terminal of Heathrow Airport. These documentary sequences of real people greeting one another differ so from the rest of the fictional stories that we can't quite tell whether the voice-over commentary about the importance of love comes from Hugh Grant's character (the British Prime Minister), or serves as a third-person omniscient judgment. On his commentary track, Richard Curtis has said that his inspiration for the film came from being stuck in the Los Angeles airport, watching people greet one another and realizing love's universality and multiple guises.

## II. American Films

Three high-budget, big box office films vary widely in how integral voice-over is to their scripts. *There's Something About Mary* (\$176,000,000), directed by the Farrelly brothers, merely starts with Ted (Ben Stiller) retelling in voice-over to his psychiatrist the story of his blighted high school prom date with Mary (Cameron Diaz) and how he's been in love with her ever since. *What Women Want* (\$183,000,000), directed by Nancy Meyers, also begins with voice-over; in this case with Nick's (Mel Gibson) ex-wife, Gigi (Lauren Holly) speaking. However, Gigi merely serves as a surrogate to explain Nick's childhood. Raised by a Las Vegas Stripper, Nick is a terrible chauvinist and womanizer who never listens to women until he undergoes a life change when a

freak electrical accident makes him able to overhear women's thoughts. *Hitch* (\$179,000,000), written by Kevin Bisch and directed by Andy Tennant—note the movie's single focus title—uses the protagonist's voice more substantively. It starts with Alex Hitchens (Will Smith) doling out to men, whether in the film or in the audience, his rules for romantic success. Although he is wildly successful as a date doctor, Hitch himself only pursues fleeting relationships because his heart was broken in college. Soon enough, however, Hitch gets entangled with the tabloid journalist, Sara, played by Eva Mendes. Despite presenting scenes showing Sara alone, à la Will's nomenclature, we could call this movie, "The Hitch Show."

These films, and most of the British examples discussed earlier, suggest a pattern. They centre on *men's* journey to greater sensitivity and love. They offer audiences intimate connections with attractive male stars in order to woo (heterosexual) women viewers and offer (heterosexual) male viewers attractive role models. Although the male character may start off emotionally stunted, through being bonded to such a likable star via access to his private musings and voice, we care for him immensely and welcome his psychological progress towards greater sensitivity, emotional commitment, and marriageability. Although *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) and *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past* (2009) don't use voice-over, they share this basic plotline. These thematic similarities provide plausibility to the conclusions of the psychologist Amy Shalet who argues that changes in gender expectations wrought by feminism now allow men to be more romantic (A17). Are these movies object lessons for the men in the audience: *this is how you should behave towards women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?* In Cynthia Lucia's interview, Stephen Frears argues vehemently regarding *High Fidelity*, "It's a feminist film. It's a cry for men to grow up" (13). Or do these films, again, marginalize women characters in the one genre that supposedly addresses female viewers? Do they merely present to women an updated fantasy: *the current or future men in your life can/will mature into caring, sensitive adults, eager for commitment?*

I want to switch now to a single focus, voice-over film centring on a young woman. *Clueless* (\$57,000,000) falls into a sub-genre that Stacey Abbott terms "Prom-Coms." Abbott astutely notices that several contemporary movies make their characters work out their conflicted feelings towards high school and the complicated feelings of rejection or acceptance of that shark-like venue (52-64). *Clueless*, chronologically the first of the voice-over romantic comedies I listed in the introduction, presents a slantwise adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma*, updating the story to 1990s Los Angeles, showing a young girl who tries to do good deeds but miscalculates through naïveté and an over-assess-

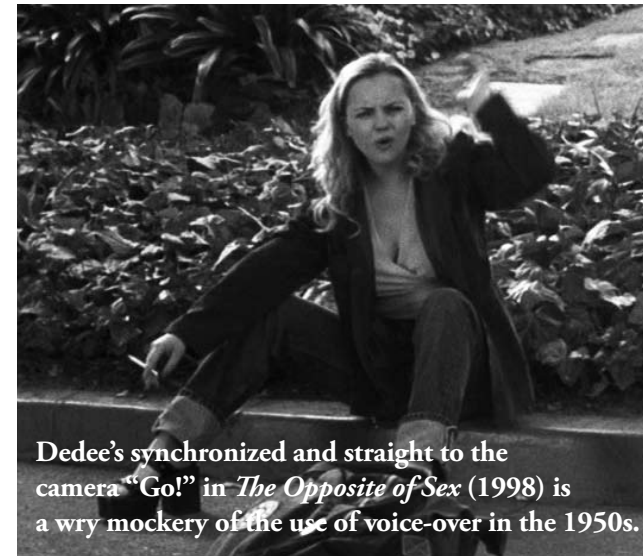
ment of her powers. Writer/director Amy Heckerling creates humor and disjunction with high culture by employing a unique and unusual verbal idiom, "Valley Girl Speak." In Cher's (Alicia Silverstone) practice, Valley Girl speech relies not only on "like," but incorporates *au courant* references to pop culture and buzz words. As Nora Lovotti notes in her thesis, "Cher's narration often includes phrases such as 'the buzz,' 'snaps,' 'eww' and 'mental.'" More than that, Cher's voice-over and the camera have a teasing, interdependent relationship (13). After we see a montage of happy, laughing teenagers, Cher begins narrating:

Cher: So, OK, you're probably thinking, "Is this, like, a Noxzema commercial, or what?!" But seriously, I actually have a way normal life for a teenage girl. I mean I get up, I brush my teeth, and I pick out my school clothes.

After the last line, the camera shows Cher matching her skirt and top through a complicated computer program of choices—definitely not the normal method by which most girls pick out their clothes. The disjunction between the visual and aural track above pokes fun at Cher the shopaholic, but the example below, after Cher has matured, pokes fun at audience assumptions, or the "horizon of expectations" that form a contract between audiences and each genre film (Neale 2003, 171). Cher and Josh have just kissed, and Cher says in voice-over: "Well, you can guess what happened next . . ." Cut to the scene of an outdoor wedding ceremony, showing a couple only from the back. But Cher immediately breaks in: "AS IF! I am only 16, and this is California, not Kentucky." The wedding turns out to be that of her teachers, not of her and Josh. In Jane Austen's day, girls married young, but this will never do for our Cher, who has further adventures in her "make-over of the soul" before she walks to an altar.

Moving further down the slope of box office popularity brings us to two independent films whose voice-over narration I find most intriguing. The issue that captivates me is not clever writing; we see great scriptwriting in both *Clueless* and *About a Boy*. The particular significance of the narration of *The Opposite of Sex* (\$6,000,000, written and directed by Don Roos), and *(500) Days of Summer* (\$32,000,000, written by Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber, and directed by Mark Webb) is the way in which the narrator's position straddles the line between the first-person and third, or intra- and extra-diegetic, creating an ironic frisson.

The *Opposite of Sex* uses a first-person narrator, sixteen year-old Dedee (Christina Ricci), but she is completely unruly both as a person and a narrator. Cynical, angry, and



Dedee's synchronized and straight to the camera "Go!" in *The Opposite of Sex* (1998) is a wry mockery of the use of voice-over in the 1950s.

totally unscrupulous, she talks about herself, but she also wields a god-like omniscience in terms of her range, communicativeness, and a wry self-reflexivity (Bordwell 57-61). She addresses the viewer in the beginning:

Dedee: If you're one of those people who don't like movies where some person you can't see talks the whole time and covers up all the holes in the plot and at the end says, "I was never the same again after that summer" or whatever, like it was so deep they can't stand it, then you're out of luck. Things get very complicated here very quick. And my guess is you're not gonna be up to it without me talking.

Dedee breaks in with narration throughout the complicated story that follows, involving multiple characters and relationships—some straight, but most homosexual—often with caustic remarks about the other characters. But in the end, when she has given up her out-of-wedlock baby to her nurturing older half-brother and is trying to flee town, she sits down to ponder:

Dedee: Sex always ends in kids or disease. . . or like, you know, relationships. That's exactly what I don't want. I want the opposite of all that. Because it's not worth it, not really, is it—when you think about it?

We see a montage accompanied by soft music, of tender moments between many different characters, including Dedee (looking younger and less jaded) with her first boyfriend.

Dedee: Okay, so maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it's not all shit. Maybe. . . God damn it! I thought the whole

idea was *I* know what happens next. I'll tell you one thing. I'm not gonna go back to Bill's house and be this big changed person for you. I told you right off I don't grow a heart of gold. And if I do, which is, like, so unlikely, give me a break and don't make me do it in front of you! [*Dedee glares at the camera and motions it away.*] Come on, guys, go, okay? Go! [*Black screen.*] I'll give you this much, though . . . [*Fake dreamy tone of voice.*] I never was the same again after that summer.

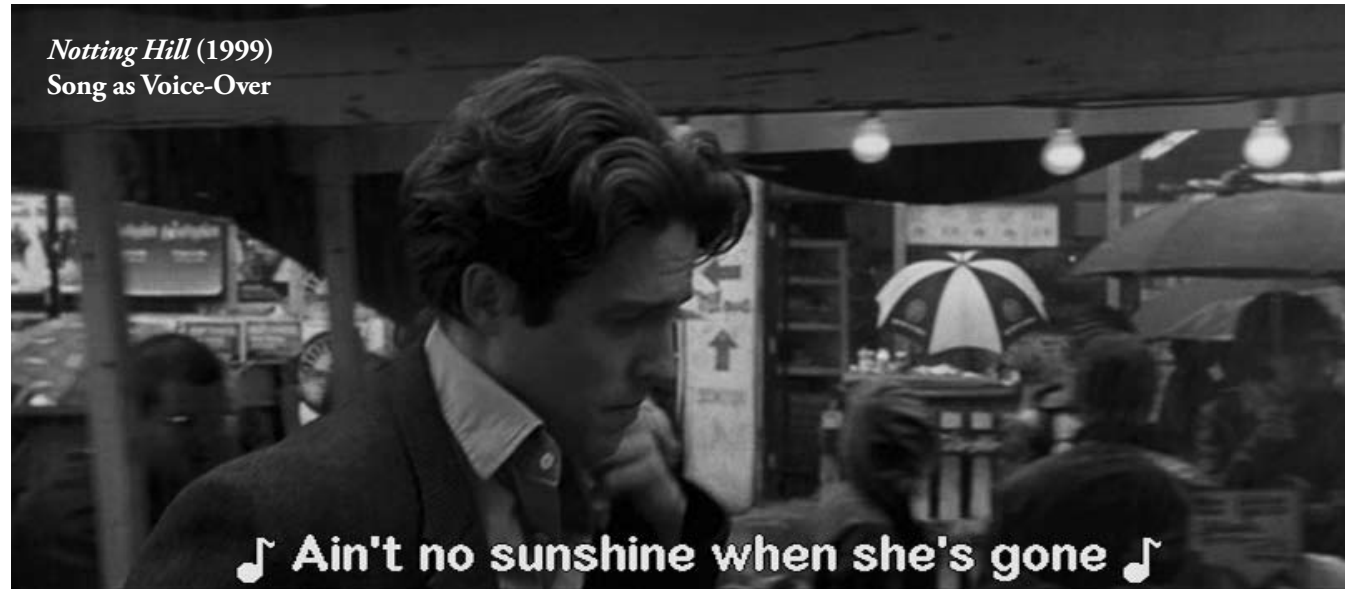
*(500) Days* works in the opposite direction. It features an "omniscient" third-person male narrator, with an over-the-top, deep, sonorous voice, who elicits laughter throughout the film because of the portentous manner in which he talks about trivialities. Crucially, as the film progresses, one realizes that this narrator is not really omniscient. Although the narrator feints towards dual focus—he voices Tom's (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) thoughts—he is so closely tied to Tom as to be his alter ego:

Narrator: This is a story of boy meets girl. The boy, Tom Hansen of Margate, New Jersey, grew up believing that he'd never truly be happy until the day he met The One. . . Tom meets Summer on January 8th. He knows almost immediately she's who he has been searching for.

The narrator tells us how Tom feels when they meet, but he keeps from us Summer's (Zoey Deschanel) reaction. Summer's true feelings remain mysterious throughout the film; although Summer tells everyone she is not looking for permanent love, Tom doesn't want to believe her, and the camera colludes by always painting Summer through his love-struck eyes. In his opening remarks, the narrator intones: "This *is* a story of boy meets girl, but you should know upfront, this is not a love story." I maintain that *(500) Days* is a love story, just an unhappy, unrequited one—a love story for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The narrator's unreliability appears again at the film's ending, when Tom meets a new woman, Autumn, and finally falls in love with the Right One. As the scene starts, Tom ascends an old-fashioned elevator. The camera rests on the elevator's gears in motion; a shot the director notes, in his commentary track on the home release of the film, that he explicitly included to show the gears of Fate turning.

Narrator: If Tom had learned anything, it was that you can't ascribe great cosmic significance to a simple earthly event. Coincidence, that's all anything ever is; nothing more than coincidence. . . Tom had finally

Notting Hill (1999)  
Song as Voice-Over



learned there are no miracles. There's no such thing as Fate. Nothing is meant to be. He knew; he was sure of it now. He was *almost* sure.

The narrator speaks not from a position of knowledge, but as a conduit of free indirect discourse of Tom's doubts and feelings. The irony, again, is delicious.

### III. Popular Music Scores

Many critics discuss the use of popular songs in romantic comedies since the new romances of the late 1980s (Garwood 282-298). These songs prime our romantic longings, their familiarity rouses our nostalgia for a time when love seemed simpler and more assured, and they cross-promote the film. Re-watching several romantic comedies for this essay, however, I am struck by how often the songs serve a function similar to first-person voice-over—that is, they give us interior views of the character(s)' emotional state at that point in the story. When pre-converted Nick in *What Women Want* struts into his advertising agency, we hear Bobby Darin singing “Oh, the shark, babe, has such teeth, dear. . .” Nick thinks of himself as the deadly womanizer Mack the Knife. When Will's heart has been broken by Anna's rejection in *Notting Hill*, in a bravura shot designed to look like one take, he walks through the seasons—starting with a wind-swept fall—unfolding on Portobello Road, and we hear, “Ain't no sunshine when she's gone; it's not warm when she's away.” After Tom in *(500) Days* has slept with Summer, Hall and Oates sing, “You make my dreams come true.”

Pop love songs differ from other types of musical scores because they use personal pronouns: I, you, she, he. Once the filmmakers mix those songs over images of the cinematic narrative, the pronouns magically slip to refer to the characters. I believe this applies broadly to all romantic comedies. When we hear “One fine day, you're gonna want me for your girl” during the opening credits of *One Fine Day*, the “you” becomes Jack (George Clooney) and the “me” becomes Melanie (Michele Pfeiffer), even though the audience has yet to be introduced to the main characters. The connection between pop songs and the character's innermost feelings shouts at us in *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), when Patrick (Heath Ledger) sings *on-camera*, “Can't take my eyes off of you” to Kat (Julia Stiles).

But if the pop songs can serve as first-person narration, they can also assume the functions of extra-diegetic commentary. “Pretty woman, walking down the street” shouldn't be construed as Vivian's thoughts in *Pretty Woman* (if that were the case, she'd be a crazy narcissist); these are the comments of a third-person narrator addressing the filmgoer. The same holds true when Jimmy Durante sings, “Make someone happy, make just *one* someone happy,” in *Sleepless in Seattle*; this command addresses the viewer, rather than articulating the characters' thoughts. And “God only knows what I'd be without you,” which chimes again and again throughout the ending of *Love Actually* as the screen splits and splits—showing us images of hundreds of loving embraces—speaks not for one specific character, but for Richard Curtis's overall philosophy.

Sometimes, as Ian Garwood argues, pop songs comment on the action ironically. Garwood points to the opening “Wishin' and Hopin” number in *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), which is so over the top that it seems to satirize

the hope of getting into “his” [Michael's] heart (285). Another example occurs in *French Kiss*, where the Italian song, “Via con me” (Away with me), accompanies Kate (Meg Ryan) wandering alone all night through the dark Paris streets after losing her fiancé, her luggage, and her passport. The English refrain in the song, “It's wonderful,” resounds with dark irony given her circumstances, compounded by the fact that every time Kate almost sees Paris's beauty—symbolized here by the Eiffel Tower—she misses it. Eventually Kate will embrace her French adventure and learn to live “la vie en rose,” sung at the end by Louis Armstrong, but at this point of the film she is thoroughly miserable. The clashing mismatch between lyrics and visual track—a mismatch that Chion would call “anempathetic” (8)—creates pathos.

### Final Thoughts

Dual focus romantic comedies, where the storyline and camera switch from one person to another, automatically imply an all-knowing viewpoint, order, and inevitability. The viewers realize that these two beautiful stars belong together, and the narrative structure, in its even-handed portrayal of the complementary opposites, yin and yang, shows us that they will (eventually) fit together to make the complete Taiji circle. This fatedness and comfort pertains even to multiple storyline romantic comedies such as *Love Actually*; although some of the individual romances don't work out, the narration's wide range of knowledge is itself comforting—someone/something has The Big Perspective. Single focus romantic comedies, on the other hand, make viewers more anxious; in a way, these films bring us back to *film noir*. Like the protagonist we follow, we can't be sure what is going to happen or when. If lives are not at stake, hearts are.

The prevalence of voice-over in contemporary romantic comedies arises mostly out of a desire to bond us as closely as possible to the protagonist, to heighten our emotional engagement and desire. Simultaneously, as shown above, the voice-over is often ironic and funny, allowing the films to eschew sentimentality, wink at the audience with in-jokes, and appeal to both male and female viewers in this cynical age. In *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, I discuss how screwball comedies strive to sabotage the language of love (198). These voice-overs are thus the perfect accompaniment for an age of postmodern ambivalence about whether we live as islands, as island chains, or as the adorable, long-devoted elderly couples in *When Harry Met Sally*.

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