

The Subject of Love, on a Very Cultural Level: Responding to Crises in the Hollywood Romantic Comedy

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ABSTRACT: From internal and structural challenges that hinder the production of films to global conflicts that influence the stories they tell, Hollywood cinema has repeatedly proven its resilience and influence within an increasingly globalized world. This paper aims to illustrate responses to crises in the history of Hollywood using the example of Ernst Lubitsch's *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940) and its remake, *You've Got Mail* (Nora Ephron, 1998). I argue that a genre like the romantic comedy—although primarily associated with lighthearted themes—also reflects crises immediate to the lives of its audiences, whilst coming back to a nostalgic yearning for the “good old days.” In doing so, it not only caters to the needs and wants of its original audience but also serves as a document of its time.

KEYWORDS: Romantic Comedy; Hollywood; Film Studies; Crises; Nostalgia

Introduction

Resilience in romantic comedies usually looks something like this: you meet a mildly irritating but somehow charming person, go back and forth over whether you really like each other, embarrass yourself a few times along the way to make things more interesting, and, finally, get together. The genre typically works this way, whether one is watching Katharine Hepburn fall head over heels in love in a classic Hollywood screwball comedy or Kate Hudson do the same in the late 1990s. The genre's resilience itself looks a little different, though one could argue that it still follows similar strategies: improvise, adapt, embarrass yourself one or two times, and overcome.

Over the years, this formula has changed little, leaving viewers with certain expectations when it comes to this genre. Crisis is a central topic in the films—whether personal or on a broader social level—and over time, the romantic comedy depicted neurotic city slickers, identity crises, and even zombie apocalypses in its runtime. Many themes and tropes persisted, and some ring true to the zeitgeist of multiple eras; some are even deemed so relatable that a film will be remade years after its release.

In this paper, I will explore this resilience within the Hollywood romantic comedy,¹ using the example of Ernst Lubitsch's *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940) and its remake, *You've Got*

¹ While romantic comedies, or short *romcoms*, are not exclusive to Hollywood cinema, my paper focuses on the US American film industry.

Mail by Nora Ephron (1998). Outside factors and crises have always shaped and influenced the industry, both in terms of production and the content of its films: financial crises, changing audience tastes, and cultural expectations have repeatedly posed challenges for Hollywood. Even seemingly lighthearted and trivial entertainment such as the romantic comedy responds to and reflects such obstacles, and I argue that both *You've Got Mail* and *The Shop Around the Corner* show not only their characters' resilience but also how Hollywood itself emerges and adapts in times of crisis.

Cultural anxieties and the zeitgeist of an era can easily be distilled from genre films, especially due to their natural inclination to evolve, and help us understand how crises shape the film industry. The practice of remaking is especially helpful in this endeavor, since the retelling of a film allows for a fairly straightforward comparison. It allows both old and new audiences to experience entertainment tailored to their respective times, but it also enables Hollywood itself to reinvent itself: Successful films can gain new popularity—even if a remake proves unsuccessful, its original is revived as the canonical version—and films that previously failed may finally get their chance at fame. As Kathleen Loock writes:

Film remakes are inextricably bound up in questions of temporality, of memory, knowledge production, and the ways in which notions of the past and present are called up in each new rendition of the same old story. (136)

Starting over is part of the dream factory's DNA, and just like its heroes and heroines, remakes often offer the chance for rebranding, learning from mistakes, and ultimately success (at least in theory).

My choice of *The Shop Around the Corner* and *You've Got Mail* lies in this particular timelessness: both films tell similar stories of “enemies-to-lovers,” and, working under precarious circumstances within an increasingly competitive world, a story that can easily be adapted again and again without losing its relevance. Additionally, both films uphold the belief in true love and an understanding of traditional relationships and courting; though this seems outdated, both offer comfort and familiarity that audiences can cling to and even aspire to. Both films—and the genre in general—show a resilience when it comes to retelling the same story and falling back on established imagery.

It is no surprise, then, that nostalgia is a driving force behind remakes and, often, Hollywood filmmaking more broadly. The “good old days” are presented as attainable, or at least consumable, but by updating stories for new audiences, they are presented through a lens² suited to contemporary sensibilities. Nostalgia for both the traditional understanding of love and the older films themselves provides a convenient framework for Hollywood, turning yearning and longing into a spectacle that is readily consumable for viewers.

² Both films are by now classics of the genre, hence the hesitation in labeling *You've Got Mail* as a modern story. For the time of its release, however, it updated the story for an audience getting used to the Internet, chat rooms, and a seemingly increasingly anonymous world.

I will focus on two of the quintessential romantic comedies produced in Hollywood: both *The Shop Around the Corner* and *You've Got Mail* stand for qualities within the romantic comedy that many films aspire to. Because of this popularity, my focus lies not on a new rendition of the already familiar story of two shopkeepers who despise and then love each other.³ Rather, I will focus on the *Golden Age of Romantic Comedies* (ranging from the late 1980s to the mid-2000s),⁴ as it is generally understood to be the peak of the genre and still informs the standard many romcoms produced after aspire to. However, this Golden Age not only influences many romantic comedies produced today, but films of the era were in turn heavily influenced by the conventions established in the romantic comedies made in the 1930s and 40s, adapted to the realities of audiences watching them over fifty years later. This self-reflexivity highlights the modes in which Hollywood works, pointing exemplarily to Hollywood's efforts to both stay relatable and offer audiences entertainment made for them, whilst also harking back to its roots and a nostalgic, rose-tinted past.

Golden Age romcoms took their cues from films that depicted more traditional and conservative ideas of love, and romantic ideals returned to the genre in a form that refrained from spelling out desire, instead merely alluding to it. This return is characterized by the insistence on one true love, heteronormative couples, and traditional family structures. It is indicative of a "postfeminist nostalgia" (Schreiber 365-66), and what Maria San Filippo describes as "a relapse into an ostensibly outmoded desire for romantic fulfilment as a reassuring escape from the contradictions between feminist ideals and the realities of labor and mating markets" (8). The romantic comedy, then risks reverting to traditional ideals of relationships, love, and society if it does not critically reflect what kind of story it wants to tell. The charm of the genre—clearly defined roles and story arcs—is thus both a blessing and a curse, as they offer comfort and easy access but also well-defined social spaces and simplicity that do not reflect the confusions of real life.

Apart from crises within feminist discourse—with the ongoing decentering of second-wave feminism, which focused on white, middle-class, Western women, and some voices claiming feminism was no longer needed (Levenstein 3-4)—the romantic comedy also faced other obstacles during its long history in Hollywood filmmaking. The genre is one of the most long-lived and an evergreen within the film industry, with little indication that its popularity will fade anytime soon (despite periodic talks of the death of the genre).⁵

³ *Maintenance Required* (Lacey Uhlemeyer, 2025) is the newest version of this story: here, two auto shop managers anonymously confide in each other on an online forum, not realizing that the other is their business rival.

⁴ This golden era of the genre is generally understood to have started with Nora Ephron's commercial hit *When Harry Met Sally ...* (1989), and includes by now classics of the genre like *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995), *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell, 1999), and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Sharon Maguire, 2001). Both *Clueless* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* also reference past love stories by adapting Jane Austen's novels *Emma* (1815), and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). (cf Heffernan, Prattis, Carelli, Greenwood, and Sophia for more on the notion that this era was the peak of the genre.)

⁵ See articles by Christopher Orr (2004), Willa Paskin (2019), Haaniyah Angus (2024), and Julia Apitz-

For that reason, I will start with a very brief overview of what constitutes a romantic comedy and how the genre has evolved over the years. As I will outline below, the genre is one of the longest-standing in Hollywood, offering audiences comfort and heartfelt stories since the early beginnings of filmmaking. Understanding its general conventions helps explain how and why romantic comedies still draw people to the movies. Even when the genre is said to be too conventional and too predictable, many argue that precisely this predictability and promise of happy endings guarantee the success of romantic comedies. The genre commits to this feeling of bliss and the prospect of a life “just like in the old days,” including marriages that seemingly last forever, and fights that get resolved through grand gestures. Simultaneously, it clings to heteronormative structures that give audiences something familiar to hold onto, depicting romantic fulfillment that was already promised to older generations before them. Engaging in this yearning does not necessarily mean escaping into the past. According to social psychologists Erica Hepper and Amelia Dennis, nostalgia also has the potential to benefit those harnessing it, increasing resilience (3). Nostalgia is thus a major selling point of many romantic comedies, as it not only possibly benefits those experiencing it, but also for those who use it as a guide for future projects. *The Shop Around the Corner* will serve as the object of nostalgia sold to audiences, and key scenes show how the film tackles crises and obstacles close to the realities of a 1940s audience. *You’ve Got Mail* then uses this nostalgia, updating the story for 1990s sensibilities, but still reflecting wishes and longing that constituted the 1940 film. Here, I will highlight how the 1998 film references its predecessor and responds to similar crises, finally showing how remakes offer audiences both familiarity with the original stories and a version of a film that is more closely aligned with their immediate reality.

The Rom-Com Formula

Since the inception of film, the romantic comedy has flourished in Hollywood and has remained a staple of the dream factory. Often, films in this genre tend to have the same basic formula, inspired by the works of William Shakespeare (Grindon 1-3): Boy meets girl, boy loses girl because of conflict(s), boy wins girl back, and they live happily ever after. There are variants and exceptions to this, and Hollywood genre films follow this formula more closely than others, but at their heart, romantic comedies are generally accepted to have very predictable conventions. While many of these conventions persist, the genre has continually adapted them across different historical periods—many romantic comedies are even direct retellings of classic plays by the Bard. Basic plotlines, tropes, and straightforward titles tell the audience what kind of film they are watching and “[f]ilmmakers adapt conventions from successful films in the genre, while adding new elements to keep the movie fresh” (Grindon 2). This concept of taking the successful parts of popular films and adapting them is inherent to all genres, but few are as omnipresent and long-living as the romantic comedy. Over the decades, the romantic comedy has established and dispelled clichés and stereotypes, introduced character archetypes, developed them further, and then let them fade away—yet

Grossmann (2026) on the perceived death, or as Paskin calls it, the “decay,” of the genre.

it has remained, in a remarkable way, intact and easily recognizable to the viewer. Remakes are particularly interesting in this context, as they work with the same character types, themes, and plotlines as their predecessors, but repackage them for a different audience. It therefore seems appropriate to outline the basic characteristics of this genre and to explain what constitutes a romantic comedy in the first place.

Generally speaking, one central question in romantic comedies is: “Will they, or won’t they?” This question can be traced throughout the films and ensures that the couple in question stays interesting, with the viewer hoping for their union. But as charged with tension as this question is, romantic comedies rarely depict explicit sexual relations on-screen and rather play with visual imagery, puns, and the chemistry of their actors. This is often part of the charm of these films, and the romantic comedy has rarely been more explicit than fading black screens, hushed whispers, and jazzy music underlining the audience’s fantasy. The genre invites audiences to dream—and allows the viewer to put themselves into the shoes of the heroine and hero of the film. While identification with the protagonist is a common feature beyond genre, in romantic comedies, identification is often readily accessible, thanks to more relatable settings, careers, and situations reflecting (at least partially) the lives of their viewers.⁶ This identification is not only easy, but desirable: if the happy ending is possible for the character on screen, it is also attainable for the viewer. It may be a fairy tale version, but even so, it allows one to dream, put on the rose-tinted glasses, and see life with a little more hope than before. Contemporary audiences of *The Shop Around the Corner* were still grappling with the effects of the Great Depression, often faced with job insecurity, and had to ask themselves whether their jobs would even allow them to start a family or make them eligible for marriage. In the same way, *You’ve Got Mail* uses the growing alienation and the influence of online dating as a point of identification for its audience—fears surrounding dating were (and, incidentally, still are)⁷ such inviting points of reference for putting oneself in the shoes of Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks as Kathleen and Joe.

The enduring presence of the romantic comedy is thus no surprise, with Hollywood and other film production companies worldwide continuously producing romantic comedies throughout

⁶ While most romantic comedies do try to put their protagonists into realistic careers, the genre has long been scrutinized for its sometimes outlandish ideas of jobs that are intended to earn the living of its characters. Especially Hallmark movies, produced by the Hallmark Channel which debuted in 2001, providing a space for “upbeat and uplifting” films (Braithwaite 490) often feature unusual careers, including Christmas ornament painters and the genre frequently fails to accurately depict financial realities of many professions. This, however, speaks to the fairytale character ascribed to the genre.

⁷ This ongoing relevance of *You’ve Got Mail* not only shows how pervasive online communication has become to this day, but also speaks for the film’s status as one of the most influential romantic comedies. Despite its release nearly thirty years ago, it still offers audiences an easy identification, even if technology has since evolved beyond AOL chatrooms. Combined with the girl-next-door quality of Ryan and Hanks’s boy-next-door charm, it is easy to see the ongoing influence of these romantic comedies of the Golden Age.

the years. More surprising is the equally enduring formula that most films follow: despite its longevity, the romantic comedy has never deviated much from its idea of love and relationships. As adaptable to historical and social changes as it may be, the genre still represents ideals brought into circulation hundreds of years ago. As Peter William Evans and Celestino Deleyto write, “[t]he concept of love itself, the ultimate *raison d’être* of the genre, has [...] undergone important changes in our culture, but, in a certain sense, all those changes were already part of the contradictory structure of Shakespearean comedy” (3). This is especially the case for the neo-traditional romantic comedy, a type of film that was made popular in the aforementioned Golden Age of romantic comedies. Drawing on idealized concepts of heteronormative and lasting relationships of the 1930s and 40s, which it was inspired by, these films come back to the modes and values portrayed in comedies that still insisted on the “one true love.” However, while still clinging to a traditional view of romance and relationships, these films also included self-reflective tendencies and feminist thinking,⁸ trying to establish the woman who can have it all (i.e., a happy relationship, stable career, and sense of self-realization) (McDonald “Foreword” xi).

Naturally, this means that there is not *the* romantic comedy that defines a whole genre, and likewise, films produced in different eras influence the genre’s overall reputation and development. Amanda Ann Klein, scholar for film genre theory, attributes this ever-changing nature and lack of total definition to the industry responding to outside demands, pointing out that “[a] cyclical approach to film genres does not privilege one group of texts as being the most central in a genre’s corpus; instead, it views each cycle within that genre as an attempt to attend to the changing needs of the audience and the film industry” (189).

This evolution pushes the romantic comedies’ boundaries and allows for more diverse ways to depict love, including less common character constellations, the question of whether there is “one true love,” or premises that, while still focusing on romance, feature elements usually associated with other genres.⁹ Remakes illustrate this phenomenon in a clear way: by taking the successful elements of a film and tailoring them to a new audience, they adapt an already established formula and make it work again, even if the original is decades old. In this way, remakes try to strike a balance between being familiar and being relevant: they bring back nostalgia for a time gone by and make it easier for viewers to still relate to the story.

⁸ Examples for this phenomenon are *Miss Congeniality* (Donald Petrie, 2000), *Sweet Home Alabama* (Andy Tennant, 2002), and *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell, 1999). All films depict women with successful careers, who then go on to find the love of their life without having to choose between one of them and although *Sweet Home Alabama* does change the protagonist’s career, she is still thriving in her new job.

⁹ This includes films like *Lars and the Real Girl* (Craig Gillespie, 2007) and *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright, 2004): Gillespie’s film, starring Ryan Gosling, features a man falling in love with a sex doll, while *Shaun of the Dead* sets its love story behind the backdrop of a zombie apocalypse.

However, these films still follow the genre conventions: supporting characters function as comic relief, various obstacles keep the lovers apart, but ultimately, they end up with the “right” person. Despite a shift into a more self-aware mode starting in the 2010s—a shift attributed to the cyclical nature of all genres¹⁰—there are still connecting themes and motives in romantic comedies. Shakespearean dramas and novels by Jane Austen are still popular inspirations for various films, whether in the form of direct adaptations or retellings; happy endings with two people embracing their love are the norm; conventionally attractive people dominate the screens. Everything is infused with a certain zest for life.

Exactly for this reason, romantic comedies are often regarded as low-brow and less “serious” than other genres that deal with love and heartbreak: critically acclaimed films like *The Lobster* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2015) also heavily rely on love and relationship dramas, but by being labeled as a drama, these films often enjoy a much higher standing than one that is labeled as a romantic comedy. Many romantic comedies are seen as purely female entertainment—with films of the genre dismissively being called “chick flicks”—and not as noteworthy as other, seemingly more serious genres. Critically acclaimed films like *Poor Things* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2023) or *Sometimes I Think About Dying* (Rachel Lambert, 2023) are often not categorized as romantic comedies, even though they follow the genre’s conventions, testifying to the genre’s low reputation as something that does not produce thought-provoking and deeply moving works.¹¹ Compared to commonly regarded more “intellectual” films that depict the same situations in a more serious light, romantic comedies tend to emphasize the pleasant emotions and tell the audience that things are going to work out. This upbeat-ness also contributes to the genre’s popularity and its longevity, often harking back to seemingly simpler times and the prospect of a happy ending promised by love stories told before.

Crises and the Appeal of Nostalgia

The romantic comedy is, by definition, prone to rely on rose-tinted imagery and stories infused with hope. Nostalgia is a phenomenon not only reserved for films, and throughout the years the idea of the feeling has gone through numerous changes: after being labeled a disease at first,¹² nostalgia became a more accepted form of sensibility and, as Svetlana Boym writes, “[t]he symptom of sickness came to be regarded as a sign of sensibility or an expression of new patriotic feeling” (11). Nostalgia has always been part of the human condition, and as

¹⁰ Rick Altman, known for his work on genre theory, explains that no genre stays fixed, and rather changes in predictable ways. Since “genres are regularly said to develop, to react, to become self-conscious, and to self-destruct” (21), they offer the opportunity to respond to different demands, without privileging one approach over the other.

¹¹ Both films deal with topics not associated with romantic comedies, making their labeling as such significantly harder. Still, discourse about both movies often focuses on the dramatical elements of both films, with the romantic comedy aspects often being dismissed or only partially acknowledged.

¹² Originally, the term *nostalgia* was reserved for “the realm of pathology and disorder” (Jacobsen 7), and categorized as a treatable disease, commonly among mercenaries with homesickness.

Michael Hviid Jacobsen writes, “an indelible part of the way humans connect the present and the future with the past,” concluding that “[w]hether regarded as a negative or positive thing, nostalgia is here to stay” (1).

Today nostalgia is a heavily mediated emotion, “manifested in the intense public re-cycling of narratives, images, sounds, characters and styles associated with the often recent past” (Higson 121). The change in the perception of nostalgia also means that the emotion is no longer limited only to returning to an actual home, or that there even is an actual desire to return. Those memories and feelings are not necessarily negative or positive, and nostalgia is, as Jacobsen writes, a complicated emotion “that contains many different—at times even mutually opposing—dimensions and connotations” (17). In fact, we see this mediated experience in the seemingly ever-increasing influx of pre-used images and cultural products and the revival of several properties of the past. Not only do many films and series make a comeback in the form of remakes, sequels, and prequels, but there is also a noticeable tendency towards “rediscovering” other artifacts of the past, such as hairstyles, clothes, and other properties, signaling a longing for a bygone time. This is not a new development of the twenty-first century. Certain trends and imagery seem to come back after a while, and not only genres get rediscovered. One only has to think about the 1970s rediscovery of 1950s rock’n’roll, which resurfaced decade after decade again, as Simon Reynolds writes:

Pop culture in the first half of the seventies was in large part *defined* by this yearning to return to the fifties. The nostalgia craze spilled beyond music to movies and television. And it carried on into the late seventies and, fitfully, the eighties too. The fifties just kept on coming back, wave after wave of never-ending revivalism. (277; emphasis in original)

As Reynolds’s quote suggests, this phenomenon can be applied to cinema as well: in the face of economic crises and rapidly changing cultural trends, the film industry is not immune to the desire for a return to the past. Aside from franchises and sequels, remakes offer the same sense of familiarity and a “rediscovery” of images that have already shaped past generations. Remakes, however, have the added benefit that this revival seems to have something to offer everyone: either as a return to one’s own past, with the opportunity to revel in one’s own memories, or as a chance to experience the romanticized aspects of the past.

Romantic comedies respond not only to current social anxieties but remakes also link them to crises that occupied audiences decades before—the fear of losing one’s job is as prevalent in 1940s *The Shop Around the Corner* as it is in 1998’s *You’ve Got Mail*, and both 1940s Klara (Margaret Sullavan) and 1998’s Kathleen are heavily defined by their career. Exploring remakes and their takes on stories dealing with crises helps clarify these developments through the lens of nostalgia.

The rising interest in nostalgia also has a grimmer reason. As Jacobsen writes, its “[return] as an emotion in contemporary society ... appears as a relevant and powerful topic for understanding many social and political transformations taking place in recent years such as the rise of populist movements and nationalism within many different parts of the Western

world” (4). My understanding of nostalgia that I heavily borrowed from Higson mainly concentrates on the temporal ambivalence, the tension between past and present “and in the different ways past and present are valued” (Higson 124). Especially in a conservative, more patriotic understanding the present lacks the “goodness” of the past and is an “inadequate place, perhaps even a degenerate place” (Higson 124), rather than feeling a real or perceived loss. It is not a response to an actual event or moment, but rather the past seen from a modern, rose-tinted perspective: it is a “reorganization of the contemporary experience” (Higson 124). Nostalgia is not about returning to an actual home—it is about the longing, the yearning, and the experience of it all (Higson 125). Instead of trying to go back to another time, this experience is at the forefront, and oftentimes, the aesthetics and idea of a certain time are enough to satisfy the nostalgia one feels. The lack of subcultures¹³ and third spaces, where people would meet up, seems to coincide with this focus on the idea of a time, as it also emphasizes the aesthetics of belonging rather than the actual experience. Instead of creating new experiences with the past as a guide, the past itself becomes the event; it becomes consumable as spectacle. The past is no longer reflected upon, and as Peter Fritzsche puts it: “This is nostalgia without melancholy” (1618). As I will explain in more detail in my analysis of both films, this lack of engagement with the actual past is also reflected in the 1998 remake of *The Shop Around the Corner*, and my reading is strongly influenced by this fairy-tale-ization of the themes and plotlines that were already predominant in the 1940 original.

Nostalgia does not follow logical patterns or facts, and experiencing it cannot be fully articulated through reasoning. As Boym writes, nostalgia is not about convincing others through any objective means, but “it seduces” (13) and convinces others through a shared sense of loss and yearning, working on both a highly personal and communal level.

As I will outline in my analysis, this wish to return to another time, and with it the revival of popular genres such as the romantic comedy, often has cultural reasons and implications. As McDonald writes about the longevity of the genre, and with it the continuous reproduction of norms and values:

The neo-traditional romantic comedy has lasted beyond the usual decade which bracketed the flourishing of earlier sub-genres. Films in the now-dominant form, marked by their rejection of advances made in the radical film and older conventions, have persisted since the end of the 1980s until the present time, thus spanning over fifteen years, three American presidencies and their various, varying historical and social contexts, including the full emergence of the AIDS crisis, the reassertion of “family values,” the rise of the religious right and a corresponding emphasis on sexual caution, monogamy and abstinence (*Romantic Comedy*, 88).

¹³ While subcultures still exist, they vary wildly from movements like the punk scene in a pre-internet age: today, the aesthetics often dictate the group a person feels belonging to (think cottage core, tomato girl aesthetic, dark academia styles and so on), with music and actual belief systems becoming less important (see Schofield and Adegoke).

The popularity of the neo-traditional romcom and its persistent influence on the genre prove the audience's longing for romantic stories and a wish for a return to a more traditional understanding of love. This popularity and influence of this particular type of romantic comedy proves to be a two-way-street: it informs tastes and expectations of audiences, whilst also responding to a traditional understanding of love informed by decades of similar storytelling before. McDonald's observation neatly illustrates the tenacity of this particular brand of the romcom: with its familiarity and insistence on traditional love, the neo-traditional romcom proves especially successful with audiences that look for an outlet or distraction from crises that surround them.

Not only audiences were affected by financial turmoil or changing sensibilities over the years. As mentioned above, Hollywood itself had to respond to various crises throughout the decades and adjust the ways they tell stories. One of the major events that changed how Hollywood produced pictures was the 1948 "Hollywood Antitrust Case," also known as the Paramount Decree. Along with putting an end to block-booking,¹⁴ the way the Hollywood studio system operated changed drastically: The stars were no longer tied to a single studio, which gave them greater leverage in contract negotiations, and with the end of vertical integration, the studios no longer had a guarantee that they would be able to sell the films they produced. With the rise of independent filmmakers, no guarantee to sell their B-movies and the increasing popularity of television and other leisure activities, Hollywood had to rethink their production and contemplate how to make their pictures more appealing again. The turn to the past as inspiration for films is thus not only a reminiscence for the audience; Hollywood itself turns to its Golden Age of filmmaking¹⁵ to inform the Golden Age of the Romantic Comedy.

Blind Dates and Great Depressions: *The Shop Around the Corner*

In romantic comedies, crises are typically reflected in the personal stories of the protagonists: the world may not be at stake, and films of this genre typically do not produce heroes and heroines of epic proportions who face great adversities. Still, the genre responds to crises that influence people's lives, including financial crises and growing perceived rates of loneliness, and insists on a happy ending for its protagonists.

¹⁴ Until it was outlawed in the US Supreme Court decision, block-booking was a system of selling pictures prevalent in the Hollywood studio system. The studios sold large numbers of their films to independent theater owners who did not know how many B-movies were among them. Independent theater owners were thus forced to rent out a studio's whole program in order to have access to A-movies (Schatz 39).

¹⁵ The Golden Age of cinema is often understood to be around the Hollywood studio era of the 1930s and 40s (see Grainge 66), with no definite consensus on the exact time frame of this period (with a general understanding that it started with the silent movie era in the 1910s and ended with the demise of the studio era in the 1960s).

Ernst Lubitsch's *The Shop Around the Corner*, tells the typical love story of two people who think they hate each other, only to later find out that their nemesis is really their soul mate in disguise. The film was released in 1940 and is based on a 1937 Hungarian play by Miklós László. The German-born Lubitsch had already made a name for himself in Hollywood by directing romantic comedies like *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) and *Design for Living* (1933), and he came to be known for his "sophisticated comedies"¹⁶ and elegant moviemaking.

With *The Shop Around the Corner*, Lubitsch departed from his usual subject matter: set in pre-war Budapest during the Great Depression, the film tells the story of two employees of a leather goods shop who cannot stand each other, but fall in love after exchanging letters with each other, without knowing that they are writing their rival. The film does not align with Lubitsch's usual "sophisticated comedies," that usually focus on the upper class, depicting wealth, lavish lifestyles, and characters who, despite this wealth, are never shown in the workplace or working at all. *The Shop Around the Corner* focuses on the middle class rather than the upper class, and the characters' occupations play a significant role in their characterization. This shift in setting displays a realization that what is shown on screen matters deeply to the audience: Having experienced the hardships of financial turmoil, many "[p]eople were drawn to films that *reflected* their troubles as much as ones that gave them relief" (Killen; emphasis in original). The cinema served not only as an escape from everyday life—though its role as entertainment offering a glimpse into a completely different reality should not be overlooked—but also as a means of sustaining hope in difficult times. The film industry also had to become more creative to lure audiences into theaters, as people weighed their spending decisions more carefully. The Great Depression hit Hollywood just as hard as the rest of the nation, yet interestingly, this period also saw rapid technological advancements that made films more spectacular than ever and ushered in Hollywood's Golden Age (Kaufman). This escapism and fascination with films were also reflected in the romantic comedies produced during that time, and their mix of relatable themes and a hopeful tone could give audiences the relief they wanted.

Unlike Lubitsch's later films, *The Shop Around the Corner* is less experimental¹⁷ and, as Paul Williams writes, it seems as "if the conventionality of approach were itself a reflection of the

¹⁶ This term is often used to describe Lubitsch's style of filmmaking in general (see Schneider 60-61 for a comprehensive breakdown on Lubitsch's style), marked by witty banters, an acknowledgment of the bitter sides of life, and an emphasis on the "artifice of sophisticated comedy and the romanticized milieu of high society" (Novak 171). These films are also often marked by a "larger-than-life attitude" and the lack of financial hardships for the protagonists (175). Furthermore, the term generally refers to films that draw on suggestive humor and "light-hearted immorality," usually employing cynicism and a certain lack of sentimentality (Greene 56-57).

¹⁷ As Williams writes, Lubitsch later films were often an "odd comingling of genres," with "looser, [...] looser, often lopsided narrative structures." (165) He lists the examples of *Ninotchka* (1939), which depicts the clash between Soviet communism and capitalism, and *To Be Or Not To Be* (1942), focusing on a troupe of actors in Nazi-occupied Warsaw.

film's milieu" (165). Additionally, the individual is not as prominently featured as in other romantic comedies: the film focuses on groups and jobs and the social positions within the shop's hierarchy. The film rarely depicts characters on their own, and dialogue often revolves around money, business, and their jobs. The title card opening the film informs us that this is the story of a community, united by their place of work:

This is the story of Matuschek and Company—of Mr. Matuschek and the people who work for him. It is just around the corner from Andrassy Street—on Balta Street, in Budapest, Hungary. (*The Shop Around the Corner*, 00:01:19-00:01:30)

The shop itself is always depicted as busy, with clerks talking to customers, rearranging merchandise, and cleaning the shop. Even in scenes focusing on intimate moments, the mise-en-scène transforms the individual experience into a group emotion: Kralik (James Stewart), already corresponding for some time with his mysterious pen pal and planning on going further with their relationship, hopes to convince store owner Mr. Matuschek (Frank Morgan) to give him a raise. On a particularly busy day, he is called into his office, his coworkers cheering him on and wishing him luck. However, instead of the desired raise, Kralik is fired, with Matuschek suspecting him to be the lover of his wife. After a series of arguments between the two, Matuschek gives him a letter of recommendation, "which certainly won't handicap [him] in seeking employment" (*The Shop Around the Corner*, 00:36:45-00:36:52).

Kralik leaves the office and is immediately surrounded by his coworkers. In front of them, Kralik opens and reads the letter, letting them be part of his termination. There are a few shots of individual characters in this scene: Kralik and Matuschek are briefly shown in a shot-reverse-shot sequence, and just after Kralik leaves the office, he is shown alone, deep in thought and not responding to Pirovitch (Felix Bressart), who asks him how it went. When Kralik fails to answer, each of his coworkers is shown briefly in single shots—apart from Pirovitch and Ilona (Inez Courtney), who were decorating a window together—showing their confusion and concern. What follows is a medium shot lasting for over a minute, starting with Kralik in the center. He is joined by Pirovitch as he opens the letter, and as he reads along, the shot zooms out a little as Ilona and another long-time coworker, Flora (Sara Haden), join. While Kralik reads, the shot stays neatly fixed, apart from a short zoom-out, with him remaining at the center of the group. The only people missing from this union are Klara, excused by her rivalry and animosity with Kralik, and Vadas (Joseph Schildkraut), who is later revealed to be the actual lover of Mrs. Matuschek. Kralik shares this deeply intimate and vulnerable moment with the people he has been working with for nine years, and who, despite not always seeing eye to eye, earned his trust. The shop is shown to be the center of their lives, literally, and apart from a few scenes in a restaurant and a hospital, *The Shop Around the Corner* treats its titular location as the focal point of the characters' lives.

This scene highlights *The Shop Around the Corner's* handling and understanding of crisis. Here, the crisis in question is a highly communal affair, affecting Kralik and his colleagues deeply, but also during a time of general job insecurity both in the film and in the viewers' reality. The Great Depression was barely over for the contemporary audience, and many people would



have empathized with Kralik's situation. His personal crisis, against the backdrop of societal anxieties, reflects the zeitgeist of the time, framing real insecurities and sorrows under the guise of the romantic comedy.

The main character, Kralik, appears to only exist within the store and its social network. The film is not explicitly political in the sense that it depicts struggling workers trying to make ends meet or calls out injustices in the face of financial crises; still, the film responds to such outside factors that its audience had to grapple with too, repackaging them in a romantic comedy with a focus on love and company rather than the reasons behind economic crises. It emphasizes the inner workings of social groups, and “a sense of the connectedness all pervasive from individual to individual” (William 168). Economic anxieties are, in the logic of *The Shop Around the Corner*, not limited to one person, but rather run through a collective, affecting all members of a group. Indeed, Kralik's love interest, Klara, can empathize deeply with him, as she was in a similar position at the beginning of the film: their love is thus deepened over the bond of shared hardships.

Indeed, this change in focus from individuals to groups reflects cultural change and an acknowledgment of different realities. After Lubitsch's picture *Angel* (1937) failed, he quickly realized that he had to adjust his movies to the audience's new reality after experiencing the Great Depression. Audiences no longer wanted to see the “high jinks of the highborn” and would rather see a cinematic representation of their own lives. As Lubitsch himself stated, “[n]o one used to care how characters made their living—if the picture was amusing. Now they do care. They want their stories tied up to life. People nowadays have to make their living” (qtd. in William 163). Instead of lavish opulence, the romantic comedy was now closer to the lives of the audience and depicted the anxieties and realities of the working class, responding to the changed attitudes and sentiments of the audience. The genre offered the prospect of discussing serious topics such as class relations and unemployment through comedy, taking the edge off unpleasant issues. It acknowledges the audience's reality, but instead of dwelling on the anxiety caused by job insecurity, the romantic comedy emphasizes the possibility of overcoming struggles, facing adversities, and ultimately getting the happy ending the viewer wished for.

“What's so Wrong with Being Personal, Anyway?": *You've Got Mail*

58 years later, *You've Got Mail* takes the premise of *The Shop Around the Corner* and gives it a new spin: here, too, two business rivals fall in love with each other without knowing who exactly they are falling in love with—this time, instead of relying on letters, the internet provides a (for that time) modern possibility to communicate with strangers anonymously. This version was directed by Nora Ephron, who is, like Lubitsch, known for her work in romantic comedies. My choice of this adaptation of *The Shop Around the Corner*, rather than the latest version, *Maintenance Required* (Lacey Uhlemeyer, 2025), is based on the impact of the 1998 version: Released during the Golden Age of romantic comedies, it is now regarded

as one of the most beloved and influential films of the genre. The Golden Age's tendency to reference conventions from traditional romantic comedies, as outlined above, highlights the nostalgic desire to return to a seemingly better time—disregarding the actual hardships of that era—when romance seemed easier and more attainable, and less complicated due to the internet's impact on meeting new people.

You've Got Mail updates the premise for its contemporary audience, and like *The Shop Around the Corner*, it adjusts itself to audiences' realities and changing expectations. The stakes are slightly changed in this one: instead of two people working together in one store, *You've Got Mail* uses the conglomeration of businesses as its entry point. Joe Fox (played by Tom Hanks), an updated version of James Stewart's Alfred Kralik, runs a major book chain that is planning on taking over an independent children's bookstore—called "The Shop Around the Corner," as a not-so-subtle nod to its inspiration—belonging to Kathleen Kelly, played by Meg Ryan. Both communicate online anonymously as "Shopgirl" and "NY152" via an AOL chatroom, having met there virtually before the start of the film.

The film came out during a time of relative peace, nestled between the end of the Cold War and the War on Terror. Despite conflicts such as the Gulf War, the nineties saw growing optimism about globalization, technological developments, and increased social connectedness.¹⁸ As Chuck Klosterman, essayist with a focus on American popular culture, writes:

Many of the polarizing issues that dominate contemporary discourse were already in play, but ensconced as thought experiments in academic circles. It was, in retrospect, a remarkably easy time to be alive. There were still nuclear weapons, but there was not going to be a nuclear war. The internet was coming, but reluctantly, and there was no reason to believe it would be anything but awesome. The United States experienced a prolonged period of economic growth without the protracted complications of a hot or cold war, making it possible to focus on one's own subsistence as if the rest of society were barely there (2-3).

However, the rise of the neo-traditional romcom also responded to cultural crises of the time: the AIDS crisis, a reassertion of "family values," and a rise of the religious right—with its emphasis on sexual caution, monogamy, and abstinence—all contributed to the popularity of traditional romantic comedies (McDonald 88). As mentioned before, nostalgia is often a way to fall back on comforting imagery in times of crises; especially cultural anxieties could be eased by coming back to nostalgic ideals, offering comfort in the best case or fueling conservative movements in the worst.

¹⁸ No decade is spared from global crises, and the 1990s are no exception, given the Gulf War, the genocide in Rwanda, numerous civil wars, and other conflicts. The idea that the 1990s were a more peaceful era seems far-fetched, yet many columnists and authors agree that, on the surface-level, it was a time of prosperity which is now remembered more fondly (cf. Freedland, Harries, Milbrand, "1990s").



You've Got Mail explores these developments through the lens of the romantic comedy. The Internet now poses both the chance and the risk of moving through life anonymously; globalization offered the possibility to meet people outside of one's usual surroundings, and the workplace served as an essential part of one's identity, similar to Lubitsch's film before. The opening credits for *You've Got Mail* introduce us to the idea that romance now happens in a more isolated, yet weirdly intimate way: starting with a computer screen, the film opens with a familiar sight for many viewers of that time. We hear clicking, typing, and beeping sounds meant to emulate the technological reality the viewers were in at that time. After a mouse click on the screen, the credits reveal a 3D rendition of New York, which slowly builds itself up to be increasingly detailed. As soon as we see the outline of Manhattan, Harry Nielsen's "The Puppy Song" starts to play—a song nearly 30 years old at the time the film was released—with the virtual version of Manhattan becoming more realistic. So far, there is not a single person in sight, and this sequence detaches the romance (and comedy, for that matter) expected in a romantic comedy from the film by focusing instead on the alienating experience of the new technology.

However, both films depict an unchanged hope for true love, and the audience's wish for a happy ending that will reassert the notion of this one true love. The crises are now less focused on the group like in *The Shop Around the Corner* before, and come back to the individual: although the identification with the work place still plays a major role, the new reality of *You've Got Mail* shows the risk of alienation, a fear of anonymity even within relationships, and the erasure of the independent business by the cutthroat culture of the conglomerate.

Nearing the end of act two, Kathleen decides to close down her shop and surrender to the power of the conglomerate. The night before her final day, she had broken up with her boyfriend Frank (Greg Kinnear) after it became clear to both of them that they were only a match on paper. On her last day at the store, Kathleen is surrounded by well-meaning customers and supportive colleagues: The scene begins with a shot in front of the store; we can already hear voices from within. Inside, Kathleen is busy organizing the clearance sale; the camera follows her, keeping her in the center of the frame as she talks to customers, all of whom emphasize what a tragedy this is; the camera continues to focus more on her. For a brief moment, as Kathleen steps behind the counter, she is surrounded by her colleagues, who are equally busy selling the remaining merchandise. The camera returns to Kathleen; however, the next shot shows her in the center of the frame, where another customer, on the verge of tears, tells her how proud her mother would be of Kathleen, while Kathleen nods along. At this moment, we see only her face; the emotions of the customers or colleagues are not shown. She is, as she declares, "taking time and almost looking forward to it," (*You've Got Mail*, 01:22:47-01:22:53) showing the same confidence and positive temper she has displayed throughout the rest of the film. We then follow Kathleen into a bookstore owned by Fox: Here, too, she is mostly shown alone, wandering among the shelves and reflecting on the fact that customers are now browsing her competitor's store. Unlike with Kralik earlier, Kathleen's defeat is not shared within the community she has built in her store. While she receives

sympathy and good intentions from her employees and former customers, her most painful moment is reserved for her alone, and the film focuses on how she deals with the situation. As *You've Got Mail* demonstrates, the individual is at the center of the romantic comedy, reflecting the reality of a world in which alienation has continued to grow.

Both movies take the same premise of rivals turned to lovers, and of only revealing your true self through anonymous messages. This framework then is adapted to audience realities that were shaped by financial crises, unemployment, and overall changes in culture and society. The fact that both films still work and were successful in their respective times shows that remakes have the potential to reinvent themselves and simultaneously archive their own history. As Kathleen Loock writes, Hollywood has always relied on a “self-historicization” to show what has changed within the industry throughout the years. A remake such as *You've Got Mail*, therefore, serves as a stand-in

for a specific period in film history, it remembers its own history, defined by cinema's state-of-the-art technology, visual aesthetics and narrative style, popular stars, and politics of representation. At the same time, each rendition resonates with the historically respective context of production, and it encourages viewers to recognize themselves as members of a movie generation. (136)

The film not only calls back to the plot of the original film, but through not-so-subtle references, such as calling Kathleen Kelly's store “The Shop Around the Corner” and nods to other popular romance stories, such as *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, the film ranks itself among such stories and invites audiences to draw the comparison. Nostalgia is the driving force in the film: heavily inspired by the 1940 film, it openly remakes the premise and points to its past. It draws on romance stories from decades apart, reminding audiences that love, unlike crises and conflicts that change throughout the years, is a fixed thing, attainable for them. It caters directly to the nostalgic wish for fairytale-like love stories, and by including references to not only popular romantic comedies from the Golden Age of Hollywood, but also to novels written over a century earlier, the film, in a way, falls back on established imagery to create both familiarity and novelty. Here, the past serves both as the source material on which the film is based and as a consumer product for the audience; it repackages ideas that were already popular in the 1940 version and presents them to a new audience. Indeed, the complete film uses nostalgia not only as inspiration but also to further its plot: apart from the reference to older love stories told in films and novels, Kathleen herself is also heavily motivated by her past. Her deceased mother lingers in all of her decisions, and she is constantly reminded of her presence in the shop. Her decision to close down the no longer profitable bookstore is thus not only caused by economic crisis, but also by a deeply personal one, as she inherited it from her mother. The past is the guiding force of the film and packaged for the viewer to consume.

Simultaneously, these references make the past accessible for a newer generation of viewers who have not yet been familiarized with the original texts, yet have a general understanding of such stories through popular culture and interacting with other media. McDonald sees this

as a common trait of the neo-traditional romcom, citing the nostalgia for precisely such films as a decisive criterion for their success (86). She argues that the “audience is expected to get the references to the older movies and realize the kind of romantic love she seeks is old-fashioned, but not impossible,” (86) and that romantic ideals are less complicated and messy than they seem to be in a postmodern world.

Indeed, the insistence on a happy ending is what makes the romantic comedy so successful throughout the years, even when the stories sometimes seem a little too good to be true. The success of romantic comedies stems from this ambivalence: it is the fairy tale transported into current times, offering relief and escape. Audiences’ awareness of the fabrication of the love story also heavily influenced the genre starting from the late 1990s, with an increase in romantic comedies that depicted love in a more cynical and sometimes unflattering way.¹⁹ However, my chosen films still cling to the traditional understanding of love and, as Wes D. Gehring writes, “[t]hough romantic comedy has its fair share of funny scenes, it is dead serious about the importance of love” (67). Crises such as wars and the threat of alienation caused by new technologies may influence the context and the way lovers find each other, but ultimately, love triumphs in this genre, and as both *The Shop Around the Corner* and *You’ve Got Mail* make clear, it remains the central focus of these films. Crises and conflicts serve as the hook for new versions of a story, allowing for easier identification of a certain generation with a film version, while the plots and themes themselves stay nearly the same. With this, remakes can have it all: the familiarity wished for by audiences, and the novelty demanded by both Hollywood and the viewer.

So, what about “Happily Ever After?”

The romantic comedy has been subject to cultural and economic changes throughout its lifespan, and like its heroines and heroes, it emerged victorious time and again. Both *The Shop Around the Corner* and *You’ve Got Mail* tell the age-old story of enemies-to-lovers while simultaneously incorporating economic and cultural challenges within their narratives. The ultimate result is the same: the couple the audience rooted for gets together, true love prevails, and the viewer is left with the pleasant assurance that happy endings are possible. The 1998 version draws more heavily on the viewer’s immediate lived experience, thereby offering them the opportunity to experience a film that feels both familiar and fresh.

Remakes like *You’ve Got Mail* have the chance to adjust their narratives to new generations and shifting audience tastes and demands. Genres like the romantic comedy are often dismissed for following familiar tropes and re-telling the same story over and over again, yet a new adaptation like *You’ve Got Mail*—based on a work over 50 years old—shows that,

¹⁹ Examples for more cynical romantic comedies include *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005), *There’s Something About Mary* (Peter & Bobby Farrelly, 1998), and *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, 2007). All of these films still tell love stories and feature happy endings; however, love is often portrayed as messy and in a less flattering fashion than usual in films prior.



despite changes in culture and society, central themes can remain relevant for contemporary audiences. Crises directly influence narratives and the ways movies are produced, but the resilience of both the romantic comedy and Hollywood cinema more broadly shows that the industry is ever-adapting to new audience expectations and industrial demands as well as shaping them for future endeavors. Despite these changes, these movies' thematic concerns—such as identity, community, and workplace affiliation—often remain consistent. The use of familiar stories and imagery not only updates movies to reflect current realities but also responds to and upholds a nostalgic wish for tradition and the reaffirmation of classic love stories.

Other adaptations of *The Shop Around the Corner* also feature this reaffirmation: the 1949 musical version, *In the Good Old Summertime* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1949) replaces Great-Depression-Budapest with turn-of-the-century Chicago, but the plot remains the same; and the aforementioned *Maintenance Required* relocates the story to modern Oakland. The continuous adaptation of the same story proves that retelling a story again and again is both viable for Hollywood and often appreciated by the audience, despite its negative reputation. Audiences still long for these kinds of stories, where in the end, everything works out, and true love is still a possibility. The re-use of familiar plots and dynamics attests to the timelessness of these films, and promises new audiences the same feelings of hope, love, and ultimately closure.

Reliving the same stories again and again promises comfort, with the audience knowing what they will get and that they will likely not be disappointed. This applies not only to the genre of romantic comedies, although the genre is known for offering comforting and predictable stories. The practice of remaking has consistently produced film versions that satisfy the need for both familiarity and novelty, offering newer generations the opportunity to experience the same stories that were created before their time, while at the same time bringing the films up to date technologically and culturally. The remake can thus reflect the new sensibilities of an era and demonstrate how Hollywood has evolved as an industry. A remake is therefore not only an opportunity for the audience to experience a film anew, but also for the industry to look back on the past, recalling the “good old days” of the Golden Age of cinema, and dreams of times gone by. In the same vein, however, this return shows an industry less likely to take risks on new projects, upholding conservative ideals, and only marginally responding to calls for more diverse stories and characters. It risks catering to conservative movements when ideas are simply reiterated without critical engagement and consideration of what made them work in the first place. Remaking, then, treads a fine line between updating and parroting ideas.

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