

Reviewing Romcom: (100) IMDb Users and (500) Days of Summer

Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore
Birmingham City University, UK

Abstract

This article contributes to academic debates around the romantic comedy genre and comedy audiences by examining IMDb user reviews of *(500) Days of Summer* (2009). Directed by Marc Webb for Fox Searchlight Pictures, *(500) Days of Summer* was promoted with the tagline 'Boy meets girl. Boy falls in love. Girl doesn't'. This presents the film as an unconventional romantic comedy in at least three ways: Firstly, it suggests that these two characters will not actually end up together, which challenges the idea of the romcom couple as 'meant to be'. Secondly, it presents the possibility that audiences might not get the happy ending we usually expect from comedy. And finally, the tagline casts the boy, rather than the girl, in the role as yearning romantic, thereby challenging the traditional gender roles of heterosexual relationships. So how did audiences respond to this film? At the time of writing, it has been rated by 75,716 IMDb users, and has an average score of 8.0 out of 10. This clearly suggests a favourable reception, but the IMDb reviews also offer qualitative data that can shed further light on how the film has been evaluated. What kinds of criteria are in operation? What elements do reviewers highlight as important for their experiences of the film? How is the film seen to fail for some viewers? Drawing on previous studies of romantic comedy, the analysis will consider how these particular audience members articulated their responses to *(500) Days of Summer*, as well as their positions as reviewers.

Key words: Romantic comedy, online audiences, critical reception, genre.

This article contributes to academic debates around film genre and audiences by examining the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) user reviews of the romantic comedy *(500) Days of Summer* (2009). Through this analysis, the study seeks to explore three interrelated issues: How romcom audiences might respond to the film's specific textual properties, what kinds of reading strategies they might adopt, and how these particular audience members

use the IMDb review facility to publish their evaluations and contribute to critical debates around the film.

Directed by Marc Webb for Fox Searchlight Pictures, *(500) Days of Summer* was promoted with the tagline 'Boy meets girl. Boy falls in love. Girl doesn't'. This presents the film as an unconventional romantic comedy in at least three ways: Firstly, it suggests that these two characters will not actually end up together, which challenges the idea of the romcom couple as 'meant to be'. Secondly, it presents the possibility that audiences might not get the happy ending we usually expect from comedy. And finally, the tagline casts the boy, rather than the girl, in the role as yearning romantic, thereby challenging the traditional gender roles of heterosexual relationships. Within the film itself, a narrator proclaims: 'This is not a love story', and we are then presented with protagonist Tom's (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) memories of his 500 days of being in love with Summer (Zooey Deschanel), a woman who claims she does not believe in romantic relationships. The non-linear narrative starts with day 488 and then shifts forwards and backwards in time, showing both happy and miserable moments from this period in Tom's life.

At the time of writing, the film has been rated by 75,716 IMDb users, and has an average score of 8.0 out of 10. This clearly suggests a favourable reception, but the 348 IMDb reviews also provide qualitative data that can offer insight into *how* the film has been evaluated. My choice of *(500) Days of Summer* as a case study was based on the assumption that the film might encourage IMDb reviewers to articulate their perceptions of romcom conventions, and of the ways in which these are negotiated in the film. The aim of the article, then, is to shed some light on how these IMDb users adopt the dual role of romcom audience member and film reviewer, on how different reviews negotiate specific criteria for evaluating this romcom, and on what this might tell us about the different meanings and pleasures romcoms can be seen to offer.

Researching online romcom audiences

As Abbot and Jermyn have argued, while the romcom has often been critically dismissed as a conservative and insignificant genre, it remains important to explore how it 'facilitates the kind of powerful emotional and personal investment often described by viewers', as well as how individual romcoms negotiate genre conventions and 'the issues and preoccupations of its time' (2009: 3-4). This study will draw on existing work on this genre, including essays from collections edited by Evans and Deleyto (1998) and Abbot and Jermyn (2009), as well as analyses by Babington and Evans (1989), Jeffers McDonald (2007) and Rowe (1995).

However, this area of literature is overwhelmingly dominated by analyses of romcom as text, and this article therefore also seeks to contribute to such ongoing academic debates by shifting attention over to audience responses. My approach to audience research is informed by a social constructionist framework that sees the reviews as articulations of

discourse, and the article is particularly interested in how different reviews construct audience identities and engage with wider cultural ideas around genre within the specific context of the IMDb site.

There are multiple online facilities where audience members can review films. IMDb was chosen for this study because it is one of the most well-known online resources for information on specific films, cast members and production personnel, and because of the high number of reviews of this particular film. Of the 348 IMDb reviews posted at the time of data collection, the sample analysed here comprises 100 reviews. This includes the first 50 reviews, which were posted between January 19, 2009 and August 5, 2009, and the last 50 reviews, which were posted between July 17, 2010 and May 17, 2011. The motivation for this sampling technique was not to compare findings across the two periods, but to capture a broad range of responses both from initial cinema audiences and later DVD viewers. The reviews were then coded to identify different kinds of responses to the film, including emotional responses, pleasures and displeasures, evaluations of specific filmic devices, interpretations of the film's themes, and perceptions of its target audience.

It is important to stress that this study clearly focuses on very specific film audiences. Firstly, internet users tend to belong to particular demographics in terms of nationality, class and age. Most reviewers included in my sample were registered with a US location, though it also includes contributions from IMDb users appearing to be from different countries, including Australia, Brazil, China, Egypt, Estonia and the UK. Secondly, many people use the internet to find out about films without ever posting a review themselves. Aside from the fact that users may simply not be interested in posting reviews, Jurca and Faltings also point out that the process requires quite a bit of effort: 'First, users must register with IMDB. Second, IMDB requires at least 10 lines of comments to publish a review. Third, the user must read all the disclaimers regarding spoilers and spoiler warnings' (2007: 3). This narrow focus on IMDb reviews means that, while the analysis will indicate majority and minority views within the sample, I am not in any way suggesting that these findings can be generalised to wider film audiences.

There are ongoing academic debates around the ethics of researching online audiences without asking their permission. My justification for still adopting this approach is based on the premise that these reviews are posted on a public website, apparently with the intention of being read by a wide audience. However, I recognise that I am shifting the reviews from their original context, where individual users would have the opportunity to remove their review, and I am therefore striving to protect the identities of cited reviewers through 'light disguise' (Bruckman, 2002). This means that I will not be stating the usernames or dates of individual reviews in this article.

Having outlined the study's key theoretical and methodological considerations, I will now move on to my analysis of the 100 IMDb reviews. The discussion will begin by examining the dual role of these posters as romcom viewers and reviewers, before examining how the reviews can be seen to evaluate *(500) Days of Summer* against four key criteria.

Romcom viewers as reviewers

As noted by Jurca and Faltings, 'The internet has made it possible for online feedback forums (or reputation mechanisms) to become an important channel for *Word-of-mouth* regarding products, services or other types of commercial interactions' (2007: 1). However, Kim *et al* further note that such reviews may be both 'numerous and varying in quality', and it is therefore important for sites like IMDb to rank them in order 'to enhance customer experience' (2006: 423). Thus, IMDb users have the opportunity to 'review the review'. At the end of each review, the site asks readers: 'Was the review useful to you?' We have the opportunity to tick 'yes' or 'no', and the results are then displayed alongside the reviews. The default review display is in this order of perceived utility (labelled 'Best'), although other options include 'Chronological', 'Prolific Authors', 'Loved It' or 'Hated It'. Otterbacher underlines that we know little about how participants choose which reviews they want to read, among the large numbers on offer. She identifies three potential strategies that users may adopt, including the selection of reviews that articulate 'views similar to their own', the evaluation of 'credibility' or taste compatibility based on an investigation of the reviewer's profile, and the use of utility rankings like the one used on IMDb (2011: 425).

At the time of writing, the highest ranking review of *(500) Days of Summer* was deemed 'useful' by 317 out of 388 people. This score could be seen as an indication of the reviewer's status, but it is worth noting that this user has only contributed three other IMDb reviews – none of which were highly ranked. Thus, while this particular review was clearly well received by other IMDb users, the high ranking is probably in large part due to the fact that it was one of the very first reviews posted for this film. If it was deemed 'useful' by a few users early on, and subsequent users displayed reviews in order of perceived utility, this particular review would have the opportunity to keep being read and voted for by a large number of people. As Otterbacher also argues, 'it is reasonable to assume that the most prominently displayed reviews are the ones most often read' (2011: 425). This could also suggest that cinema audiences are more likely to get their IMDb reviews read than those who watch a film on DVD later on – in which case they may have a greater opportunity to influence the viewing decisions of potential audience members, and the emerging critical discourse around the film.

Based on her investigation of how different kinds of user generated reviews are displayed on Amazon, IMDb and Yelp, Otterbach argues that 'the prominently displayed reviews' in these communities 'are written in a manner that one would expect of professionally produced content, while the least prominent reviews are those of a more amateur nature'

(2011: 440). The adoption of a 'professional' writing style could therefore be seen as a useful strategy for writers who want to maximise the readership for their reviews. In his analysis of IMDb discussion boards and reviews focusing on *Die Another Day* (2002), Dodds also found that 'IMDb users are overwhelmingly friendly in message tone and eager to demonstrate a "knowing" awareness of plotlines, story development and references to contemporary political and/or cultural events' (2006: 123). His study is particularly interested in examining how fans adopt dispositions ranging 'from the 'enthusiastic rather than knowing' to the 'academic' and/or the 'knowing' fan'. While such dispositions or performances can certainly also be identified within my sample, my approach differs from Dodds' in two key ways. Firstly, I am keen to stress that the reviews I am examining have not all been written by fans of *(500) Days of Summer*. Secondly, I am here particularly interested in considering performances of enthusiasm and knowledge in relation to the audience member's adopted *reviewer* role. Thus, rather than considering how reviews might display the kind of enthusiasm and knowledge that may be valued within a *(500) Days of Summer* fan community, I am focusing more on the extent to which these texts adopted the professional discourse specifically associated with the genre of 'film review'.

Some IMDb reviews conformed quite closely to the conventions of traditional film reviews written by professional critics and published in newspapers and magazines. They included expected elements such as an eye-catching opening line, information about cast and crew, a brief synopsis that does not give too much away, and evaluations of script, performances and direction. The following example is cited in its entirety:

Tom's rom-com bomb

Here is a rom-com with a number of differences, starting with the title. This Summer is not a season (even Los Angeles does not have that much sun) but a girl (the cute Zooey Deschanel) amorously pursued by Tom (talented Joseph Gordon-Levitt), both of whom work for a greeting cards company trading on triteness. The structure of the narrative is terribly post-modern in being non-chronological and the genre is subverted in not following the conventional formula. The final major novelty is a series of intersected cinematic flourishes such as - my favourites - an open-air dance sequence of triumph and a split screen depicting expectation and reality.

At the heart of the movie's success is a clever script from Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber. The film begins with the disclaimer: 'Any resemblance to people living or dead is purely coincidental ... Especially you, Jenny Beckman ... Bitch'. but Neustadter has admitted that the story was based on a real romance that he experienced while studying at the London School of Economics. The departure from the conventional rom-com resolution and the sense of

authenticity imbue this entertaining tale with an element of reality as well as much hilarity.

Drawing on the established discourse of professional film critics could be seen as a strategy to invest IMDb reviews with a sense of authority by presenting reviewers as experts. For example, the review cited above demonstrated an understanding of postmodern narrative structures and romcom conventions, as well as knowledge of the scriptwriters' source of inspiration. This display of expertise was also reinforced by a rather formal writing style that presents value judgements as objective and largely avoids any mention of personal responses – the only exception being the description of the 'open-air dance sequence' and the 'split screen' as 'my favourites'.

Some IMDb users will simply post the odd review, as illustrated by the following opening statements from two different users:

I usually write a review when a movie touches me.

I've made a habit of writing my more recent reviews only on films that I truly enjoyed.

In contrast, others demonstrated greater investment in the film reviewer identity, producing large numbers of reviews and developing their own signature review styles. For example, some adopted their own scoring systems for all their reviews, in addition to scoring each film on IMDb's own ten point scale. One user profile had, at the time of writing, produced 86 reviews, and summed up its review of *(500) Days of Summer* with '*** out of (****)'. Another profile had produced 3769 reviews, and concluded this one with a version of its usual tagline: 'Bob's Evaluation -- 2 of 3: Has some interesting elements' [username changed for this article]. 'Bob's' user profile linked to an external website that described him as a 'writer and consultant', while other *(500) Days of Summer* reviews also included links to external sites focusing on film or entertainment media more broadly. Beyond assessing individual films, such reviews clearly also functioned to promote the status of the reviewer as a film commentator.

While some IMDb reviews draw on the established discourse of critical film reception, others challenge the conventions of film reviews in terms of content or writing style. Crucially, many of the reviews in this sample provide very detailed information about the plot. While reviews found in newspapers and magazines will always avoid giving away the ending, IMDb reviews often revealed major plot twists as well as the final resolution of the film:

PS: I don't like Summer. I like the story, but I do agree that Summer is cold and didn't care much for Tom's feelings. And I do agree that she got married very soon after she broke up with Tom.

Revelations like this one were often flagged up by the heading '*** This review may contain spoilers ***', which gives readers the option of avoiding such information. However, while some audience members actively seek out spoilers (Gray and Mittell, 2007, Caldwell, 1999), these clearly labelled spoiler reviews will necessarily exclude any reader who would prefer the opportunity to be surprised by the film. As texts, they could therefore be seen to serve a primary function that is different to that of traditional film reviews. Rather than offering readers a basis for deciding whether they want to see the film or not, they might instead function more as a facility for the reviewer to contribute to critical debates around the film. As such, spoiler reviews may be less interested in encouraging or discouraging potential film viewers than in promoting a particular discourse around the film.

Moreover, the IMDb review section also includes spoiler reviews that have *not* been labelled as such. The following extract is from a review that did not give readers any warning that they are about to find out whether Tom and Summer will end up together:

I always wasn't too keen on the solution of the movie and the way Tom passed on to Autumn. The whole sequence felt a bit stale - as if the scriptwriter got hit by a deadline and quickly pasted on the first ending that came to mind.

While the promotion of *(500) Days of Summer* certainly suggests that the film challenges the romcom formula, new viewers may well still want to experience 'the details of the journey' (Stilwell, 2009: 27) and wonder if the couple will overcome the challenges 'thrown in their way', so that 'romance triumphs in the end' (Harbidge, 2009: 179). Such unlabelled spoilers mean that potential viewers who are keen to retain the opportunity to be surprised by films may choose to avoid reading IMDb reviews before seeing movies. This could clearly limit the overall readership of the review section. However, the site can also be seen as a facility for continuing to engage with films *after* the viewing experience has ended. For example, some reviews commented on opinions expressed in other reviews, as seen in the following extracts from three different users:

Some reviewers claim this movie is refreshing for a romantic comedy and I have to agree and will help notice the little things in relationships as well.

A lot of people have commented that this movie is fresh, charming, delightful... well I don't see much of those characteristics.

Man, who's rating these movies?

Thus, beyond storing an extensive supply of user generated recommendations and warnings, the IMDb review section also offers a way for audiences to extend their engagement with a film they have already seen, by facilitating the sharing of pleasurable experiences as well as frustrations and disappointments.

The second key way in which some IMDb reviews diverged from established film review conventions is in terms of writing style. In particular, some reviews abandoned the detachment often suggested by professional critical discourse, as seen in the following extract from a review that gave *(500) Days of Summer* 10/10:

The BEST there is.....
there are rarely any good romantic movies that depict the reality of life and love with such Honesty and sincerity..... there's not a single moment in this movie that u will find unindulging.... the scenes between Zooey and Joseph are MAGICAL... i don't remember such Magical Chemistry between two actors..... The conversations and especially the good times in the relationships will put a wide GRIN on your face..... It feels like being in love..... and for the sad part..... OH GOD!!!!!!!!!!!! yes there are times when i got teary eyed... but at some point near the end....the movie just CRUSHED me..... Broke my heart Lierally..... OH GOD it was really like being in a relationship with this Couplse for the 95 minutes of duration..... the comedy the humor the dance numbers and all the artistic stuff...as well as the SOundtrack are all A+.....

Unlike the distanced tone adopted in the review cited earlier on in this article, reviews like this adopted a far more personal writing style and place more emphasis on articulating subjective emotional responses to the film. As seen here, emotive language, block capitals and multiple exclamation marks were also sometimes used to indicate the strength of such responses.

This review had one of the lowest utility scores among the *(500) Days of Summer* reviews, with only 2 out of 8 readers describing it as 'useful'. Discussing the potential impact of spelling and grammatical errors on the perceived credibility of reviews, Otterbacher suggests that 'participants may devalue a poorly written review, even if its actual content is valid' (2011: 430). This could be a contributing factor to the low score that this review received. However, Otterbacher also underlines the tendency of many online users to adopt a writing style that is closer to speech, and to use 'unconventional symbolic representations to substitute for richer clues such as body language' in order to 'enhance communication' (*ibid*). Thus, it may therefore not necessarily 'be the case that more prominent reviews necessarily contain more standard language' (*ibid*). This is also indicated by the reviews I am

focusing on here, as different approaches to writing and editing were evident among both the 'best' and 'worst' reviews.

The intensity expressed in the review cited above may in some ways also been seen as specific to reviews of romantic films. As Sutton notes, the romantic film text 'provides the spectator with a *mise-en-scène* that "ravishes" him or her, which provokes his or her loving desire, provokes an active, performative engagement with the film' (2009: 45). Thus, while the reviewer mentions 'the comedy the humor' of the film, the focus is here primarily on the articulating the film's success in eliciting a feeling of 'being in love' – with the passion, excitement and despair that feeling can entail. Abbot and Jermyn identify this affective response as a key factor in 'The low critical esteem that typically meets the rom-com in contemporary cinema', arguing that 'romantic fiction generally is thought to be essentially calculating in its execution, cynically manipulating an emotional and sentimental response from the viewer' (2009: 2). Thus, while I have previously noted the circulation of an IMDb review discourse that draws heavily on that associated with professional film critics, the review cited above clearly demonstrates that this space also includes a broader range of critical discourses that can, in some ways, be seen to challenge dominant ideas around the cultural value of the romcom genre.

My analysis of the *(500) Days of Summer* reviews has so far focused on the dual role of these IMDb contributors as audience members and film reviewers. I have examined the extent to which these reviews can be seen to conform to the established conventions of the 'film review', and suggested that the adoption of this 'professional' discourse can be seen as a strategy to invest the review with a sense of 'authority' or expertise. However, I have also considered how IMDb reviews often break with film review conventions. In terms of content, many include spoilers that reveal major plot twists or even the film's ending, while reviews also often use a more subjective and informal writing style that underlines the articulation of personal emotional responses to the film. I have suggested that this emphasis on emotions can, in some ways, be linked to the affective responses that are encouraged by the romcom genre, and that have often been devalued by professional film critics. The remainder of my analysis will explore this idea in more detail by discussing how reviews assessed whether *(500) Days of Summer* fulfilled four key requirements: A sense of 'authenticity'; a pleasurable emotional investment in the portrayed romance; comedic pleasures; and originality. This discussion will consider the extent to which the film was seen to offer some of the meanings and pleasures associated with the romcom genre, but also look at how IMDb reviews positioned it in relation to established romcom conventions.

Authenticity

Much academic work on the romcom genre has examined the extent to which such films offer ideologically progressive or conservative representations of gender and sexuality (Kendall, 1990, Lent, 1995, del Rio, 1998). As McCabe argues:

Nothing quite troubles post-feminist scholarship more than our continued cultural investment in the scripted fantasy of heterosexual romance conditioning our desires, our fantasies, our expectations of finding *the one*, our need to be undone by love ... We have learnt how to critique heterosexist-based romance, to know that it is restricted (and restricting) and to aspire to theorise differently. But we remain at the same time absolutely beguiled, incapable of ever quite relinquishing the belief that being loved will somehow complete us. (2009: 163-164)

Rowe also suggests that the romcom 'speaks to powerful needs to believe in the utopian possibilities condensed on the image of the couple; it addresses the wish for friendship between men and women, and for moments of joy in relationships constrained by unequal social power' (1995: 56). The idea of romantic love is of course completely central to the 'rom' part of the 'romcom' genre, and while the narrator in *(500) Days of Summer* proclaims that 'this is not a love story', perceptions of how the film portrays romantic love tended to frame review debates around its themes as well as the characters, performances and the film's overall cultural value.

Different reviews interpreted the key theme in *(500) Days of Summer* in different ways, as seen in the following extracts from three different reviews:

This movie is about A relationship, A great love of your life but not THE ONE TRUE love of your life that you end up being with. In real life, we will all meet and fall in love most likely with more than one person in our lifetime. Just because you do not end up married to your previous significant others for the rest of your life doesn't mean that the love you shared with those people wasn't real. The beauty of love isn't that it MIGHT last forever because sadly it doesn't always happen. The beauty of love is that it happens AT ALL.

Tom holds movies, songs, and even greeting cards responsible for preventing people from saying what they really feel and for the corruption of emotions, causing them (especially love) to be completely indefinable. It's a fantasy that can only be recognized by or compared to peers who believe they've attained it. During his evolving perception of love, we see a spectrum as diverse as the special effects and soundtrack that compliment the imagery.

However, while reviews offered different perspectives on *why* Tom and Summer's romance fails, recurring readings highlighted the film's portrayal of the 'highs and lows' of relationships, heartbreak, and the process of learning from relationships – whether they suggested that Summer 'learns what true love is' or, more frequently, that Tom learns to

accept 'that the one woman in his life may not be the right one'. These readings clearly differed from those associated with more traditional romcoms:

Like any genre, the rom-com relies on a basic formula and reiterates expected narrative and ideological elements. Thus, most commonly, two people meet, various obstacles are thrown in their way, yet romance triumphs in the end and the genre is seen finally to celebrate the sanctity of the couple. (Harbidge, 2009: 179)

(500) Days of Summer may instead be seen to negotiate certain changes in the conventions of the romcom genre. As Deleyto Alcalá argues:

[T]he genre, throughout its Hollywood history, has constantly explored and attempted to negotiate social changes in the relations between the sexes (or within them). The result has often been contradictory or ideologically confused texts but it is precisely those contradictions that make their role in the history of culture particularly significant.' (1998: 42)

Thus, the film can be seen to draw on discourses around gender relations, romance and sexuality that have been articulated in previous romcoms. For example, the focus on heartbreak, rather than a successful relationship, can be traced back to the so-called 'radical' romcoms of the 1970s, which explored the 'transience' of love (Jeffers McDonald, 2009: 150). Some reviewers described this portrayal as 'insightful', suggesting that audiences could learn from the processes that the characters go through:

What undoubtedly ends up making this picture so brilliant is how relatable it is to its victims and victimizers alike. When all is said and done, there is most definitely a lesson to be learned by Tom's experiences. Everyone you meet along the way, whether just passing through or sticking around for awhile, has a purpose. In the end nothing lasts forever, relationships begin, relationships end. Try to be thankful for all the people that broke your heart, they more than likely helped you find yourself in the process ...especially you, Summer...bitch.

This idea of the film as 'intelligent' and 'insightful' was often linked to notions of verisimilitude, with a large number of reviews describing the film as 'realistic', 'authentic', 'genuine' and 'true'. These are examples from three different reviews:

I'm 60, so I've had some experiences and seen some movies, and I think that this is the first film (that my old brain still remembers) to truly depict what it feels like to be in love, particularly when the feelings are unequal! Despite the

humor of many scenes, the emotions expressed were very realistic. The scene with the dancing, etc., in the park? Yes, that IS what it feels like!

But this romantic comedy actually has a realistic beat to it. Not that fairy tale happily ever Hollywood crap. Like this movie was about a REAL relationship. It's about heartbreak and coping with it, with kind of a dark sort of comedy feel to it.

What I really like about the film is that it is different, yet very realistic. So often our 'dream' girl is just not quite a fit in this world, yet she and the next guy are just right. Doesn't seem fair, but in reality, it is not only fair, but perfectly just.

However, this idea of 'reality' was also contested in two ways. Firstly, the emphasis on the 'everyday' was precisely the reason the film was seen to fail for one reviewer:

The movie was really disappointing, what depicts reflects real life, every day stuff, but let's be honest.. if you go with your girlfriend to the cinema with the promise of a romantic movie, you'll feel robbed with this movie!

This reviewer appeared to be more attracted to romantic comedy's 'air of fantasy and detachment' (Babington and Evans, 1989: 6) than representations of mundane 'reality', and *(500) Days of Summer* therefore failed to offer the desired viewing experience. In contrast, a small number of reviews also complained that the film *lacked* verisimilitude, describing it as 'overwritten', 'contrived' and 'calculated':

This film just felt very contrived to me. It is somewhat stylishly done, but that I think is what irked me to a point. Again, it just seemed TOO polished, TOO self conscious, TOO gimmicky. When you strip all that away, you're left with an unremarkable story about two unremarkable (and not overly likable) people. I guess clever marketing works, to which this film is a testament, but really all you are left with is an overly long commercial geared towards an increasingly fickle and easily manipulated generation.

Such reviews also dismissed the idea that the film offers any valuable insight, describing it as 'cod philosophy', as having 'no substance', and as being 'a fluffy romantic comedy'. These negative reviews all located the film's failure in that it is trying 'too hard' to be 'original' or 'cool and kooky'. This response can perhaps be seen as a rejection of increased self-awareness in the romcom genre (Stilwell, 2009: 28, Harbidge, 2009: 178), which I will return to later on in this article. For now, I would like to emphasise the centrality of debates around verisimilitude and authenticity in these reviews; while many reviewers valued the perceived 'sincerity' of the film's portrayal of romance and heartbreak, some identified

pretence as the film's main shortcoming. A sense of authenticity thus appears to be a key criterion in audience evaluations of this particular romcom.

Being 'swept away'

While the reviews cited above discussed the film's verisimilitude and its potential for teaching viewers about romantic relationships, other reviews focused more on the emotional impact of following this 'roller coaster romance', including what Babington and Evans call 'the pain of romantic comedy' (1989: 5). Some described the experience of 'rooting for' Tom, of wanting Summer 'to *see* love in Tom', of falling in love with the characters, and of finding the film 'brutally heartbreaking'. As Sutton argues in his discussion of love in romcoms, 'The romantic comedy provides a privileged space in which a direct, affective relation with the spectator is actively sought' (2009: 45), and this sense of experiencing romance was identified as a key source of pleasure in many reviews. The film was seen to facilitate this experience in various ways, but the reviews included a recurring emphasis on its 'likeable' and 'interesting' characters, its convincing performances and the 'chemistry' between Joseph Gordon-Levitt as Tom and Zoëy Deschanel as Summer. The following examples are extracts from two different reviews:

Zoëy Deschanel and Joseph Gordon-Levitt were both incredible, the latter particularly. He was sweet and charming, and it was easy to be swept up into his world.

Joseph truly deserves an Academy Award for literally placing us, the viewer right into his shoes.....every height of ecstasy he feels when he interprets a kiss from Summer or a sweet and touching hand holding session as a declaration of love(sadly reading more into it than is actually there) to every agonizing low he feels when Summer leaves/breaks up with him.

However, a far smaller number of reviews also saw *(500) Days of Summer* as failing to offer this desired emotional response:

The two leads do maintain some kind of chemistry, but it's told to us from the very beginning that this is not a love story, so there's no reason to get caught up in their romance. Another facet that the film is missing is that it never shows their relationship in full bloom. We only see the beginning and the end, for the most part. Why does the male lead long for Summer after they break up? That's not really established. He's basically in love with being in love. Summer is more cautious (aka mature) than that. Basically, it relies on melodrama (music set to action) to elicit some kind of emotional response, and a lot of it is repetitive. As far as charming or delightful go, this is a break up movie. It's depressing more

than anything. But if you like what the clichés that have filled independent cinema, this movie should satisfy.

As these diverging views demonstrate, though, the wider critical reception of romcom may have derided the genre's perceived manipulation of emotional responses from its audience members (Abbot and Jermyn, 2009: 2), but the IMDb reviewers tended to place great value on such responses. While they disagreed over whether the film's focus on a failing relationship actually succeeded in offering them a pleasurable viewing experience, the feeling of being invested in the romance appeared to be a second key criterion in the evaluation of this romcom.

Comedy

A third recurring criterion was the perceived comedic value of the film. The majority of the sampled reviews described the film as 'funny' or 'witty', although few provided much further detail about what the reviewer had found funny about it. This might suggest that the film was seen to lack clearly signalled comedic moments, such as jokes, instead relying more on humour as 'a general tone, pervading all parts of a text, and existing even when nothing specifically funny is taking place' (Mills, 2005: 16). For example, some reviews explicitly constructed the humour as 'subtle', or contrasted it with 'laugh out loud' comedy:

Now this is a very original romantic comedy, sure it isn't a laugh out loud movie but the story and everything else is so well done I couldn't care less.

It's not a full-on laugh out loud affair, but it doesn't need to be. We already have the characters, and their non-linear track of things as they come, and the filmmakers go for an approach to heighten whatever moods are on display.

Others also constructed the film as 'charming', 'endearing' or 'cute', rather than funny. This lack of emphasis on humour might indicate that many reviewers privileged the 'rom' over the 'com' in this film, and perhaps also suggests that *(500) Days of Summer* retains the 'emphasis on the importance of tears' associated with 'post-classical' romcom (Jeffers McDonald, 2007: 85).

However, a lack of emphasis on comedy can also be seen in much academic literature on this hybrid genre. While important exceptions include Babington and Evans (1989), Deleyto (1998), Jeffers McDonald (2009), Redmond (2009) and Rowe (1995), analyses of romcom films do not tend to pay much attention to how comedic elements contribute to the films' meanings and pleasures. Both romantic and comedic texts are often culturally devalued, and romcoms thus face critical dismissal both as 'lightweight' chick flicks and as 'frivolous and 'anti-intellectual' comedies (Abbot and Jermyn 2009: 2). However, romance has been brought onto the academic agenda through a feminist concern with exploring texts

targeting female audiences, and this has perhaps led to a privileging of discussions of more 'serious' issues around gender and sexuality. As Abbot and Jermyn note, there is a cultural assumption that 'eliciting laughs from the audience is antithetical to "serious" reflection' (2009: 2), and it therefore remains important to draw further academic attention to this area of analysis.

Nevertheless, across the sampled IMDb reviews, there were examples of reviews that described the film as 'hilarious', rather than as having 'subtle' humour, while some also foregrounded its comedic aspects by beginning to identify specific elements as funny:

The dialogue was funny, but grounded, stuff that people would really say, adding to the humour.

There are funny moments here too, even in the frequent brooding. On a date with a new girl there is ex-embellishing followed by drunken karaoke that is so horribly real you have to laugh.

At one point, we break into an extremely lively and hilarious musical number full of marching bands and a little animated bluebird tweeting precociously. At another point, we are thrust out of the story and directly into the offices of a record company where business executives try to figure out why there was a huge spike in sales of the Belle And Sebastian CD *The Boy With The Arab Strap* in northern Michigan. Trust me, in context, it is quite funny.

Reviews also often described the humorous tone of this film as 'quirky', 'offbeat', 'whimsical' or 'dark'. In many cases, these elements were constructed as enjoyable, and reviewers used these labels to position the film in opposition to 'mainstream' romcom. In his discussion of audience responses to films characterised as 'off-beat', Barker argues that 'off-beat' is 'a vernacular label: temporary, unstable, seeking to include films providing the right kind of challenge and sense of belonging to a wished-for interpretive community' (2008). Drawing on this idea, I would argue that IMDb reviews used terms like 'quirky' and 'off-beat' to position themselves in relation to viewers of conventional or 'mainstream' romcom. The next section will explore this idea in more detail.

Originality

The importance of distance from 'mainstream' romcom was also indicated by the large number of reviews emphasising that *(500) Days of Summer* is not a typical romcom, as well as by statements such as these:

I am not into the typical romance film genre but this film delivers a common theme in such a intelligent and clever way that leaves you wanting to see it over and over again.

The story flows at a steady pace without dragging and has a perfect balance of the romance and comedy that this story holds, though you should know, it's not your average rom-com. It can appeal to both genders and as a male who is not a fan of romantic films should say a lot about it.

I was pretty reluctant to see this movie, but I had a free pass (for an advanced screening of it) so I went. I expected a cheesy chick-flick love story. It was a sort of love story, but I'm thrilled I saw it.

Thus, while this film was often seen to offer pleasures commonly associated with the romcom genre, including laughs as well as a powerful investment in the depicted romance, many reviews still seemed intent on 'rescuing' (*500 Days of Summer* from this genre. This can presumably be linked to the romcom's low cultural status. The second and third extracts both highlight that romcom films are commonly dismissed as 'chick flicks', which 'in all their incarnations are frequently critically constructed as inherently trite or lightweight' (Abbot and Jermyn, 2009: 2). I have previously examined review discussions around the ability of (*500 Days of Summer* to offer valuable insights into romantic relationships, and this debate could now be seen to map onto the question of whether this film can be positioned within the category of 'lightweight' chick flick. Importantly, however, only two reviewers explicitly dismissed the film as such, while five maintained that it would appeal to both men and women, and two argued that it was primarily a film for *male* audiences. Considering that the romcom 'audience is enduringly presumed to be predominantly female' (Abbot and Jermyn, 2009: 2), the question of the film's gendered appeal received surprisingly little attention in the sampled reviews. This may well be due to the film's focus on a male protagonist.

In her discussion of romcoms centred around male characters, Jeffers McDonald terms this group of films 'homme-com' and argues that they frequently focus on gender role reversals and 'set out to prove the male hero can be as sensitive, as heartsick and desperate for love as the female' (2007: 109). Reviews also identified these themes in (*500 Days of Summer*:

We have the great and charismatic Joseph Gordon-Levitt who plays 'Tom' (3rd Rock from the Sun, Brick, INCEPTION) who wholly represents the hopefully romantic and perhaps foolish romantic who wants that one great person in his life. He has a lovable geeky mannerism with no time for circumlocution, no time for one-night-stands or other quick endeavours. He rages through all the typical energies of love, angst, hope, determination. His yin to his coherent yang is Zoe Deschanel's character 'Summer' who has an aura of melancholy and

nostalgia of previous non-standing relationship surrounding her, whilst JGL's character tries affectionately to break her hard-shell prejudices of there being 'no such thing as love'.

Summer is the 'dude,' looking for casual, no-pressure romance, taking the role of the stereotypical, uncaring guy and not the relationship-demanding, over-affectionate girl.

This role reversal could be identified as one way in which the film breaks with the romcom's reputation for being 'slavishly formulaic, adhering to well-worn and obvious conventions (boy meets girl; boy and girl face obstacles to their romantic union; boy and girl conquer obstacles to find true love)' (Abbot and Jermyn, 2009: 2).

This question of whether *(500) Days of Summer* challenges or adheres to established conventions was a frequently recurring debate across the reviews, and 'originality' can be identified as a fourth key criterion in evaluations of this film. A large number of reviews constructed it as 'fresh', 'innovative', 'creative' or 'surprising', focusing particularly on its depiction of an unsuccessful relationship, its use of a non-linear narrative, and other stylistic devices, such as one scene using the style of a film musical and another scene using a split screen to contrast Tom's expectations with the realities of his meeting with Summer after their breakup. These examples are from two different reviews:

The plot was interesting, original and unpredictable (Completely opposed to the bland and formulaic romantic comedies that appear every year)

The originality and creativity present in this movie is, honestly, the best thing about it. It's just so damn easy to fall in love with it. The setup of time passing, the cinematography, the inventive narration, hell, even the after-sex dance party in the streets were simply phenomenal.

In contrast, a much smaller number of reviews dismissed this idea of originality, instead describing the film as 'formulaic', 'predictable' or 'dull'. When elaborating on these descriptions, however, reviews tended *not* to position *(500) Days of Summer* as a 'mainstream' romcom, but instead argued that it was following the conventions of indie movies:

Remember when independent films were really independent? 500 Days Of Summer is so dull and Sundance friendly that I felt angry leaving the theater. What really made me nuts was reading after that the creators of the film actually thought they were making some kind of radical romantic comedy.

As a Fox Searchlight Pictures production, *(500) Days of Summer* is clearly the product of an international media corporation, rather than a financially independent production. However, as Stilwell points out: 'Indie music, like indie film, began as a financial definition but became a genre determined more by style and attitude', and 'many major film companies now have their indie arm' (2009: 26-27) designed to target audiences that oppose 'mainstream' Hollywood movies. I have previously noted that some reviews accused the film of trying 'too hard' to be 'cool'. These criticisms can be seen as part of a wider discourse that addressed a perceived tension between subcultural opposition and 'artistic authenticity' (Thornton, 1995: 30) on the one hand, and corporate marketing strategies on the other.

Conclusion

This article has sought to contribute to academic debates around the romcom genre by shifting attention from texts to audiences. Analysing 100 IMDb reviews of *(500) Days of Summer*, it has examined how these audience members adopted the role of film reviewer, highlighting ways in which different reviews could be seen to follow or break with the established discourse of critical film reception. Arguing that the use of such a 'professional' tone could be seen as a strategy to invest the review with a sense of 'authority', the discussion also contrasted this approach with reviews that foregrounded subjective audience experiences of the emotional responses encouraged by the romcom genre. However, while I have offered some reflections on how these different review styles might be received by other IMDb users, further qualitative research could provide valuable insights into how audience members make use of such review sites to plan future viewings or extend their engagement with films that they have already seen.

My analysis of the IMDb reviews has also aimed to identify some of the ways in which audience members evaluate romcom in terms of both form and content. The discussion identified four key evaluation criteria. The first was the perceived 'authenticity' of the romantic relationship portrayed in the film, and the interpretation of the characters' experiences as 'real'. This was closely connected to notions of verisimilitude in terms of performances and narrative – particularly in terms of the film's focus on an unsuccessful relationship, and its lack of a happy ending, which were contrasted with 'cheesy' Hollywood films and constructed as 'true to life'. The vast majority of reviews stressed the value of this perceived authenticity. Many suggested that audiences could 'learn' from the insights offered by the film's portrayal of Tom and Summer's relationship, or stressed the pleasurable experience of being 'swept away' by the romance and heartbreak. The experience of this powerful emotional investment was identified as the second key evaluation criterion, which demonstrates that these romcom audiences tended to reject the devaluing of such affective responses within the romcom genre's wider critical reception. Moreover, the evidence that such enjoyment can be gained from a film seen to focus on a

breakup also demonstrates the potential for narrative pleasures outside of those associated with the conventional romcom plot:

Part of the joy for the audience is knowing that no matter the contrivances of the plot, the couple will end up together at the end. Occasional plots that cast at least some doubt on which characters will end up together, like those of *Sabrina* (1954) or *While You Were Sleeping* (1995), are rare. The pleasure is in the details of the journey, just as it is in the details of a conventionally structured 32-bar pop song or its verse–chorus descendants. (Stilwell, 2009: 27)

The third evaluation criterion was identified as the film's ability to offer comedic pleasures, and my analysis highlighted that readings variously described the film as 'hilarious' and 'subtly' humorous. However, while considering the ways in which some reviews identified specific moments as sources of humour, I noted that they all focused far more on the film's potential for offering romantic, rather than comedic pleasures, and suggested that this may reflect textual properties that foreground the pain of heartbreak. Arguing that the reviews' privileging of romance, rather than comedy can also be seen in academic analyses of romcom, I also stressed the need for further studies focusing on the role of comedy in this hybrid genre.

The fourth evaluation criterion identified through this analysis was the requirement for originality, which was negotiated through debates around the extent to which the film was seen to break with established generic conventions. While the majority of reviews constructed *(500) Days of Summer* as 'fresh' or 'innovative' in terms of its non-linear narrative and its ending, some dismissed the film as a 'calculated' attempt at targeting indie audiences. As my discussion has suggested, then, the reviews could be seen to 'rescue' this film from the devalued romcom genre through their articulation and negotiation of these evaluation criteria, and through the repeated claim that 'this is not a typical romcom'. Thus, their evaluations can be seen to orientate themselves in relation to ideas established by pre-existing critical discourse.

This highlights one of the ways in which audience engagement with comedy and other popular forms of film and television can be constrained by dominant discourses around genre and quality: While sites like IMDb may be seen to challenge the asymmetrical power relationship between cultural elites and 'regular' audience members by offering users the opportunity to contribute to public debates around films, these 'amateur' reviewers are still operating within a discursive environment where ideas of cultural value have long since been established by professional critics and other privileged voices. I would therefore argue that, while the power relations between media audiences and media producers have been extensively debated in the fields of media and cultural studies, the significance of professional and amateur critics is still in need of further exploration.

Biographical Note:

Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore is Lecturer in Media and Cultural Theory at Birmingham City University. Her main research interests are media audiences and screen comedy. Contact: ikbore@googlemail.com.

References

- Abbot, Stacey and Jermyn, Deborah, 'Introduction – A Lot Like Love: The Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema', in Abbot, Stacey and Jermyn, Deborah (eds.), *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009, pp. 1-8.
- Babington, Bruce and Evans, Peter William, *Affairs to Remember: The Hollywood Comedy of the Sexes*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1989.
- Barker, Martin (2008) 'The Pleasures of Watching An 'Off-Beat' Film: The Case of Being John Malkovich', *Scope: online Journal of Film Studies* [WWW document] URL <http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/article.php?issue=11andid=1020> [visited 11 April 2011]
- Bruckman, Amy (2002) 'Ethical Guidelines for Research Online' [WWW document] URL <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/~asb/ethics/> [visited 11 April 2011]
- Caldwell, Nick (1999) 'Spoilers and Cheaters: Narrative Closure and the Cultural Dimensions of Alternate Reading Practices' [WWW document] URL <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/9912/spoilers.php> [visited 05 May 2011]
- Del Rio, Constanza, 'Something Wild: Take a Walk on the Wild Side (But Be Home before Midnight)', in Evans, P. W. and Deleyto, C. (eds.), *Terms of Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and 1990s*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998, pp. 75-92.
- Deleyto, Celestino, 'Love and Other Triangles: Alice and the Conventions of Romantic Comedy', in Evans, P. W. and Deleyto, C. (eds.) *Terms of Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and the 1990s*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998, pp. 129-147.
- Deleyto Alcalá, Celestino, "'They Lived Happily Ever after': Ending Contemporary Romantic Comedy', *Miscelánea*, 19, 1998, pp. 39-55.
- Dodds, Klaus, 'Popular Geopolitics and Audience Dispositions: James Bond and the Internet Movie Database (IMDb)', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 31, 2006, pp. 116-130.
- Gray, Jonathan and Mittell, Jason, 'Speculation on Spoilers: Lost Fandom, Narrative Consumption and Rethinking Textuality' [WWW document] URL http://www.participations.org/Volume%204/Issue%201/4_01_graymittell.htm [visited 14 May 2011]
- Harbidge, Leslie, 'A New Direction in Comedian Comedy? *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Punch-Drunk Love* and the Post-Comedian Rom-Com', in Abbot, S. and Jermyn, D. (eds.) *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009, pp. 176-189.
- Jeffers McDonald, Tamar, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* London: Wallflower, 2007.
- Jeffers McDonald, Tamar, 'Homme-Com: Engendering Change in Contemporary Romantic Comedy', in Abbot, S. and Jermyn, D. (eds.) *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009, pp. 146-159.

- Jurca, Radu and Faltings, Boi, 'Reporting Incentives in Online Feedback Forums: The Influence of Effort' [WWW document] URL <http://liawww.epfl.ch/Publications/Archive/Jurca2007f.pdf> [visited 4 April 2011]
- Kendall, Elizabeth, *The Runaway Bride: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1930s*, New York: Knopf, 1990.
- Kim, Soo-Min, Pantel, Patrick, Chklovski, Tim and Pennacchiotti, Marco, 'Automatically Assessing Review Helpfulness'. *Proceedings of the 2006 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing*. Sydney: Association for Computational Linguistics, 2006, pp. 423-430.
- Lent, Tina Olsin, 'Romantic Love and Friendship: The Redefinition of Gender Relations in Screwball Comedy', in Karnick, K. B. and Jenkins, H. (eds.) *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 314-331.
- McCabe, Janet, 'Lost in Transition: Problems of Modern (Heterosexual) Romance and the Catatonic Male Hero in the Post-Feminist Age', in Abbot, S. and Jermyn, D. (eds) *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009, pp. 160-175.
- Mills, Brett, *Television Sitcom*, London: BFI, 2005.
- Otterbacher, Jahna, 'Being Heard in Review Communities: Communication Tactics and Review Prominence' *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 16, 2011, pp. 424-444.
- Redmond, Sean, 'The Healing Power of Romantic Love in Popular Indian Romantic Comedies: Raja Hindustani', in Abbot, S. and Jermyn, D. (eds) *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009, pp. 65-78.
- Rowe, Kathleen, 'Comedy, Melodrama and Gender: Theorizing the Genres of Laughter', in Karnick, K. B. and Jenkins, H. (eds.) *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 265-281.
- Stilwell, Robynn J., 'Music, Ritual and Genre in Edward Burns' Indie Romantic Comedies', in Abbot, S. and Jermyn, D. (eds) *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009, pp. 25-37.
- Sutton, Paul, 'Après Le Coup De Foudre: Narrative, Love and Spectatorship in *Groundhog Day*', in Abbot, S. and Jermyn, D. (eds.) *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009, pp. 38-51.
- Thornton, Sarah, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, Cambridge: Polity, 1995.