TRUE BROMANCE: REPRESENTATION OF MASCULINITY AND HETERTONORMATIVE DOMINANCE IN THE BROMANTIC COMEDY

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Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

December 2013

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This project explores the representation of white, American masculinity within the Hollywood bromantic comedy cycle. By analyzing three interrelated components (close homosociality, infantilization, and relationship to patriarchy) of the model of masculinity perpetuated by this cycle of films, this study reveals the hegemonic motives therein. Despite the representation of a masculinity nervously questioning its position within the romantic comedy narrative and the broader patriarchal structure, the results of this representation are, ultimately, regressive and reactionary. Cultural gains made concerning gender, sexuality, and race are doubled back upon in a cycle of films that appeal to regressive modes of misogyny, homophobia, and racism still present in Hollywood filmmaking, and the hegemony of white, patriarchal heteronormativity is rigorously maintained.
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CHAPTER 1
BRO-LOGUE: WHITE AMERICAN MASCULINITY’S LATEST ANXIETY

In an article published in the journal *Personal Relationships* in 2000, researchers Barbara Bank and Suzanne Hansford noted that, “Despite efforts to dismiss it, the finding that men’s same-sex friendships are less intimate and supportive than women’s is robust and widely documented” (63). Testing possible theories, Bank and Hansford concluded that emotional restraint and homophobia toward gay men “provided the most explanatory power for gender effects on both intimacy and support in best friendships” (63). Additionally, a study of American men in 1998 concluded that male-male affection was considered socially appropriate only “in contexts that were emotionally charged in some way (such as wedding, graduation, or funeral)” (Morman and Floyd 878). Only a decade later, writing in *The Age*, John Elder says, “In the old days you might have called it the thrill of being best mates—except you wouldn’t have talked about it out loud at all lest someone think you were a couple of girls. But now, it’s not only OK for two fellows to be fond of each other, to feel a little giddy in each other’s company, and perhaps even to talk to each another about meaningful things...it’s, like, cool” (“A Fine Bromance”). Such shifts in the images surrounding masculinity and friendship encourage the question: what, exactly, has changed? At an historical moment when issues of homosexuality are being more widely discussed than perhaps ever before, when the shifting economic landscape is moving away from traditionally masculine traits in the workplace, when reproductive rights continue to surface in political discussion, and when the gains of feminism are more visible in the media, it
should come as no great surprise that the image of American masculinity is constantly being renegotiated. While a specific answer to the question posed above is perhaps impossible to adequately or accurately conclude, a shift in the understanding and expression of close male friendships is undeniably occurring.

Such a shift has sparked a new term for the increased image of more intimate and supportive male friendships seen in both popular culture and life: “bromance.” The term “bromance”—a portmanteau of bro(ther) and romance—has grown considerably in popular usage, even earning a spot in *American Speech’s* “Among the New Words” in 2009. While a seemingly innocuous term, it nevertheless deserves examining. *American Speech* defines bromance as a “Strong (platonic) relationship between two men” (Barrett 192). Though vague, it remains a telling definition. The use of the word “strong,” and the inclusion of the word romance in the term itself, reveals that this is more than just camaraderie; it must be distinguished from typical friendship as it displays a level of closeness that borders on romantic intimacy. The parenthetical “platonic” reveals the uneasiness with the phenomenon. While it is intimate, it is ardently not homosexual. The “bro” in bromance keeps the “romance” in check. What is most intriguing, however, is that such a term has waited until now to come into common usage. Close male friendships are not purely a product of the new millennium, yet defining them in such a way is. Responding to this issue, Joseph Aisenberg writes in *Bright Lights Film Journal*, “What's interesting about this awkward, self-conscious term is that anyone felt a need for it at all; great friendships between men have been a subject for the poets. But then there was always something a little suspicious about
such bonds, a little juvenile, wasn't there? Now that the queer bomb has gone off in the middle of our era, the fallout of knowingness can be felt at every level of the culture, which now needs constant reassurance that things are ‘normal’” (“Here Come the Bromides”). In other words, the neologism “bromance” is “the perfect passive-aggressive salvo for the enlightened liberal homophobe” (Rowin “I Love You, Man”).

In the last decade, the term bromance has been applied to a spate of male-centered comedy films known as “bromantic comedies.” Ranging from 2003’s *Old School* to the most recent *This is the End* (2013), bromantic comedies can be understood as existing within the larger structures of male-oriented “homme-coms” (Jeffers McDonald “Homme-Com”), “Dude Flicks” (Alilunas), or “Beta-Male Comedies” (Greven “I Love You, Brom-Bones”), and their focus on male friendships takes part in a larger trend within the Hollywood romantic comedy to “explore other types of relationships… Friendships between men, between women, or between men and women have started to proliferate in the space of romantic comedy” (Deleyto 181-182). By foregrounding strong, platonic, male relationships within the narrative, bromantic comedies use the trickiness of homosocial affection as a source of humor and insight into their particular image of masculinity.

The strong male friendships are generally depicted in the bromantic comedy narratives in one of two ways. First, there is the group bromance. Featuring three or more male characters, each representing a different stage or facet of white masculinity, the group bromance brings men together to accomplish some goal. Often juvenile, the goal serves to restore an aspect of masculinity that has seemingly gone missing or to
reclaim an aspect of masculinity that has seemingly been stolen (usually by women). Examples of this include male coworkers working together to get their new friend, Andy (Steve Carell), laid in The 40 Year-Old Virgin (2005), thirty-somethings reclaiming lost adolescence by forming a fraternity in Old School, and a bachelor party searching for their lost groom in The Hangover (2009). The second type of bromantic comedy centers on a homosocial courtship. Resembling the more common romantic comedy, such films usually feature two men coming to depend on each other in order to rescue a failing, peripheral romance. Examples of this include the preying-lady’s-men-turned-lovesick-heroes in Wedding Crashers (2005), adolescents dealing with girls, virginity, and the impending distance brought on by attending different colleges in Superbad (2007), and, most consciously, the groom-to-be in search of a best man in I Love You, Man (2009). A more thorough, though admittedly not exhaustive, list of bromantic comedy films can be found in the appendix.

At the heart of the bromantic comedy is the latest “crisis” of American masculinity concerning the possible obsolescence of traditionally masculine traits in the real world sparked, in part, by the perceived marginalization of essentialist masculine qualities in the changing economic landscape. In her Atlantic article titled “The End of Men,” Hanna Rosin contends that technological advances and economic shifts are changing the power structure of American society. As she writes: “It may be happening slowly and unevenly, but it’s unmistakably happening: in the long view, the modern economy is becoming a place where women hold the cards” (60). Additionally, the increasingly present subject of homosexuality, both in the political and cinematic
worlds, has contributed to Hollywood’s increased attention about what it means to be a man. Connecting both these issues, Jennifer Lee writes, “two things changed during the last century: an increased public awareness of homosexuality created a stigma around male intimacy, and at the same time women began encroaching on traditionally male spheres, causing men to become more defensive about notions of masculinity” (“The Man Date”). The Hollywood bromantic comedy, then, has perpetuated an image of white, American masculinity that fearfully responds to a shifting social and economic landscape by escaping to the safe enclaves of close homosocial relationships. The purpose of this project is to explore the image of white, American masculinity perpetuated by the bromantic comedy. By analyzing three interrelated components of the “bromantic male” (homosocial intimacy, infantilization, and a paradoxical relationship to patriarchy), this study reveals how the bromantic comedy, despite an apparent attempt to queer the normative image of homosocial bonding and gender performance, fails to challenge the hegemonic motives of heteronormative domination and fails to critique the central drives of the Hollywood romantic comedy. In similar fashion to Susan Faludi’s understanding of the feminist backlash occurring in the 1980s, the cultural gains made concerning gender, sexuality, and race are doubled back upon in a cycle of films that appeal to regressive modes of misogyny, homophobia, and racism still present in Hollywood filmmaking.

Of Dudes and Men: Constructing the “Bromantic Male”

A thorough study of gender performance is absolutely correct in noting the plurality of gender expressions, as “what it means to be a man in America depends
heavily on one’s class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, region of the country. To acknowledge these differences among men, we must speak of masculinities” (Kimmel, Manhood in America 5). This project, however, focuses on a more singular expression of masculinity—that which is constructed and represented by the protagonists of the bromantic comedy cycle. This image of American masculinity is modern, white, and strictly heterosexual and is referred to in this project by the unifying term “bromantic male.” In a playfully written article found on the film-conscious website Screen Junkies, the nature of the bromantic male becomes better illuminated. The article, which offers “tips” on how to write a bromantic comedy, describes the importance of the male lead(s) saying:

While the romantic comedy usually casts a guy like Matthew McConaughey to take his shirt off in the lead actor role, the bromance casts guys who are pretty much like 85% of the guy population. Not very attractive and kind of mediocre at everyday life. So it’s important to write a lead actor that is dorky and not naturally smooth. We should be able to believe he is working a crappy job that he hates and has eccentric, semi-loser friends that are somehow wiser than he. You want to write a Seth Rogen, Paul Rudd, or Steve Carell. Scripting a lead stud patterned after a Hugh Jackman or Colin Farrell type to anchor your bromance movie will doom it to be dumbed down and thrust into the romantic comedy pile of crap that will be all about the chick and her everlasting struggle for true love. Gag. (“How to Write a Bromance”)

Throughout this project, the image of the bromantic male becomes more clearly comprehended, particularly regarding the relationship the bromantic male has between homosociality and homosexuality, the infantilization of the bromantic male as it relates to problems of work, the body, and sex, and the paradoxical relationship the bromantic male has toward the patriarchal structure.
Key to understanding the image of the bromantic male is understanding who is most responsible for the bromantic male’s image and the narratives of this cycle of films. Bromantic comedies are often most recognizable by recurring cast members, directors, and producers. While not limited to men such as these, the typical stars of a bromantic comedy are white, often in their mid-thirties, and feature “boyish” looks. Actors such as Paul Rudd and Seth Rogen are bromantic comedy mainstays, but others, like Owen and Luke Wilson, Ed Helms, Jason Segal, Will Ferrell, and Adam Sandler also feature prominently within the cycle. There are two other names central to the discussion of the bromantic comedy: Judd Apatow and Todd Phillips. Apatow, referred to as “hands down, the godfather of the bromance” (Carmen 50), is often in some way involved with the making of many bromantic comedies, and his name has become a shorthand marker for many films in this cycle. Saul Austerlitz, author of Another Fine Mess, notes that “Apatow has become more than a writer or director; he has become a CEO, and a brand. A Judd Apatow film no longer has to be written or directed by the man himself... Apatow’s blend of no-holds-barred raunch, discreetly rendered emotion, and bromance brilliantly tweaked the formula established by Old School and its minions” (370). If Apatow represents one “brand” of the bromantic comedy, then Todd Phillips certainly represents another. Writing, directing, and producing films such as Road Trip (2000), Old School, and The Hangover, Phillips clearly has a preoccupation with the humorous, awkward, and even deviant antics between men. In his own words: “That’s something I’m always fascinated with, the awkwardness of a heterosexual male relationship and why we are so awkward with each other and why can’t we just be
like—like girls have such an elegance to the way they are with friends...” (qtd. in Gilchrist). While certainly not the only two producing bromantic comedies, the humor, aesthetic qualities, and themes present in both Apatow’s and Phillips’ work are indicative of the cycle.

Bromantic Comedy’s Historical Antecedents

To better understand what the bromantic comedy is, it becomes increasingly important to understand from where it came. Thus far, I have referred to the bromantic comedy as a “cycle” as opposed to a “genre” and I will continue to do so due to the difficulty of generic identification. Like the dominant cultures in which they are developed and understood, film genres are neither inflexible nor fossilized. Therefore, defining and characterizing a genre is inherently problematic. Accordingly, interpreting the recent emergence of the bromantic comedy as an exclusive genre is also problematic, and it is not the purpose of this project to do so. Giving the bromantic comedy the label of “genre” gives it a certain level of fixity that it has not yet achieved, and referring to the bromantic comedy as a “cycle” of comedy films allows for these films to be understood more clearly within their cultural time and place. As genre theorist Rick Altman writes, “In order to create new film cycles, producers must attach new adjectives to existing substantial genres. In so doing, producers are ‘poaching’ on established genre territory... Cycles and genres...are all part of the ongoing remapping process that alternately energizes and fixes human perception” (38). Therefore, the bromantic comedy can be understood as being rooted in other genres—most notably
the Hollywood romantic comedy—as well as inflected by literary and film traditions that place narrative focus on male, homosocial relationships.

The connection between romantic and bromantic comedies is unmistakable and certainly cannot be ignored. As has been pointed out by numerous critics, the romantic comedy carries with it a distinct and formulaic narrative structure. The structure goes, as Claire Mortimer sums up in her book, *Romantic Comedy*: “...boy meets girl, various obstacles prevent them from being together, coincidences and complications ensue, ultimately leading to the couple’s realization that they were meant to be together.” She continues by addressing that, “[i]n keeping with the comedy genre, the narrative concludes with a happy ending, with the final union of the couple” (4).

With such narrow narrative allowances, it is clear why romantic comedies so rarely—if ever—take aim at the status quo of white, heteronormative patriarchy. This is, as critic Mark Rubinfeld notes, because the script of romantic love in these films rejects all non-heteronormative forms of coupling through the “absolute absence” of alternative coupling as a possibility (112). Similarly, in an essay concerning romantic comedies and the possibility of homosexual narratives, Debra Moddelmog writes, rather pessimistically, “[e]ver since Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* lit up the screen in 1934, the charm of Hollywood romantic comedy has never been about complex or original plots.” She continues, “[R]omantic comedies] remind us that the Hollywood film industry is still committed to the view that heterosexuality, and a particular kind of heterosexuality at that (monogamous, affluent, predominantly white), is the only acceptable choice for anyone looking for love” (163).
In recent years, the bromantic comedy has emerged as an offshoot—or, perhaps, evolutionary step—of the romantic comedy. Narratively, these films follow a similar trajectory as their romantic comedy counterparts. The primary difference, however, is that the central relationships in the bromantic comedy are the close, platonic male friendships. Within the conservative context of the romantic comedy genre, bromantic comedies appear, at least on their surface, to challenge the preconceived notions concerning heterosexual coupling and gender performance. Yet, as is argued in this project, the Hollywood bromantic comedy still upholds the dominant ideology for reasons including—though not limited to—Hollywood’s financial preoccupation. In her short concluding chapter to *Romantic Comedy*, Mortimer addresses bromantic comedies as “...an ironic take on the romantic comedy, which can appeal to both genders at the box office, reaching out to the male audience that would [normally] regard the romantic comedy as a ‘chick flick’” (135).

The cause of bromantic comedy’s recent crystallization, however, rests not solely on the shoulders of the romantic comedy. If the bromantic comedy represents a “generic stew,” then there are certainly more ingredients to it than just romantic comedy, including the screwball comedy, the vulgar teen comedy and the comedian comedy.

In the screwball comedy, a genre popular predominantly during the Great Depression, “a warring [heterosexual] couple are placed in the center of the narrative and are responsible for the madcap escapades, chaos, slapstick and witty, fast-paced dialogue that marks the progress of their explosive relationship” (Mortimer 11). Despite
the United States returning to more conservative, traditional values and gender roles following the decadence of the “Roaring Twenties,” the female lead characters of the screwball comedy were typically strong-willed and unconstrained. However, over the course of a typical screwball narrative, the female lead is tamed through a series of comic misadventures, and eventually settles into the traditional, heterosexual, patriarchal structure.

Screwball comedies were, at their heart, motivated by a battle of the sexes, reclamation of manhood, shifts in class structure, and social integration. Many of these broader social motivations behind the screwball comedies of the 1930s are being renegotiated in the Hollywood bromantic comedy and are taking part in the generic remapping process discussed by Altman. Both groups of films respond to an anxiety concerning social institutions, particularly marriage. Where the screwball comedy uses the comic mishaps of the heterosexual couple to somewhat liberate the pressures of “social institutions or structures shown to have grown rigid and unwielding to the point at which their continued viability might otherwise be under threat” (King 57), the bromantic comedy faces a similar task through the comic mishaps of the homosocial couple or group. This difference extends to sex and bodily transgressions as well, due partially to the differences in censorship standards between the 1930s and the Twenty-first century. As Leslie Harbridge writes in Comedy Studies: “…the recent spate of ‘bromance’ films…all provide a site of renegotiation of the central screwball drives, and [Todd] Phillips’ first Hangover film…marks the zenith of a genre compelled by a distinctly Bakhtinian ‘grotesque body’” (6). In this article, Harbridge states that the motivations of
class, sex, and coupling behind the screwball comedy are reappropriated in the post-production code bromantic comedy by offering up the male “body, even more exposed and problematic than before as a new site of anxiety concerning male relationships” (6). This can be seen by the exposed buttocks of Zach Galifianakis in *The Hangover*, the full frontal nudity of Jason Segal in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008), and the frank discussion of masturbation in *I Love You, Man*.

In connecting bromantic comedies to more recent comedic styles, it is apparent that these films also bear resemblance to teen comedy films. In her article titled “White Masculinity and the Vulgar Teen Comedy Film,” Lesley Speed identifies three cycles of the vulgar teen comedy. The 1970s cycle—including films such as *Animal House* (1978), *Stripes* (1981), and *Meatballs* (1979)—revolved around defiance and ridicule of authority figures. The 1980s cycle—*Porky’s* (1982), *Class* (1983), and *Losin’ It* (1983)—centered on young males’ pursuit of sexual activity. The cycle from the late 1990s, while similar to the 1980s cycle’s preoccupation with virginity, reflected a changed view of gender roles and emphasis on male friendship (Speed 821). This third group of teen comedies predicates the shift in white, heterosexual masculinity in the twenty-first century most clearly, and touches on the paradoxical dimensions discussed in this project. As David Greven writes concerning teen comedies of the late 1990s and early 2000s: “While [teen comedies] might occasionally engage in a conscious, if humorously-motivated, socio-cultural critique, they also often display a troubling, reactionary dimension” (“Dude Where’s My Gender” 14). Further connecting to their bromantic comedy offspring, teen comedies at the turn of the century also frequently featured two
or more male protagonists and emphasized male friendship. One important divergence for the bromantic comedy from these teen comedies is in the overt expression of these friendships. Where the boys of *American Pie* (1999) close their film with a toast “to the next step”—meaning adulthood—the boys of *Superbad* end their narrative by telling each other, “I love you.” Additionally, in the bromantic comedy the homosocial relationships are considered a vital aspect of heterosexual adulthood while the teen comedy “affirms homosocial ardor while suggesting that it must ultimately be renounced, repudiated, and transcended in order for teen boys to achieve coherent, properly heterosexual manhood” (Greven “Dude Where’s My Gender” 17).

While the cycles of film comedy previously mentioned provide a basis for the narrative and thematic structures of the bromantic comedy, the wave of bromance films often overlap with the surface structure of comedian comedy as well. In her book, *Comic Politics*, Nicole Matthews notes that comedian comedies make up a significant proportion of the most commercially successful comedies of the 1980s and 1990s. By “comedian comedies,” she refers to films that “feature a recognizable star performer whose persona and comic routines can be spotted from previous performances on stage, television or film” (67). More specifically, comedian comedies feature a star whose persona, physicality, or comic routines stand above the narrative. Examples of this include Robin Williams’ comic voices in *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987) and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) or Jim Carrey’s bodily and facial contortions in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994) and *Liar Liar* (1997). Often, in the case of comedian comedies, the emphasis is on “performance virtuosity and characters who tend to be less realistic,
bordering on stereotypes” (Mortimer 82). In keeping with this tradition, bromantic comedies often rely on the routines and personas of actors such as Seth Rogen to portray a lazy stoner, Paul Rudd to play a loveably flawed romantic, and Ed Helms, Luke Wilson, and Owen Wilson to play semi-castrated husbands and boyfriends.

While clearly connected to cycles of film comedy mentioned above, bromantic comedies are perhaps most obviously linked to the tradition of ‘buddy’ narratives found in literature and film. Among the most popular of these films were a collection of features made by Paramount Pictures during the 1940s and 1950s starring Bob Hope and Bing Crosby. Mixing adventure, music, and comedy, these ‘Road to…’ movies—such as Road to Singapore (1940), Road to Zanzibar (1941) and Road to Utopia (1945)—placed Hope and Crosby’s characters in the middle of some sort of scheme in which they agree to “swear off women.” That is, until Dorothy Lamour’s character is introduced. Upon meeting this new woman, the two men square off as rivals, only to have their bond intensified by the resolution of the narrative. In his writing on the ‘Road to…’ movies, Steven Cohan notes that these films clearly offer a “classic instance of Hollywood’s narrativization of homosocial masculinity“ (157). By that, he refers to the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who writes in Between Men that, “…in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: that the bonds of ‘rivalry’ and ‘love,’ differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent” (21). By referencing Sedgwick’s work on homosocial triangles, Cohan notes that the romantic rivalry between the men, and the presence of Lamour’s character, further intensifies and
legitimizes the potentially transgressive pleasure these two men find in each other. As Cohan writes, “The expectation that [Lamour] will inevitably turn up on the scene gives these two ‘friends of Dorothy’ more license than usual for transgression, for pushing the buddy relation past its official limits” (157).

The connections between the ‘Road to...’ movies of classical Hollywood and the bromantic comedies of the 21st century are numerous: both sets of films place narrative importance on male friendship and intimacy, both are rife with examples of Sedgwick’s homosocial triangles, both spotlight the need for men to, at times, separate themselves from women, and both employ jocularity as a tool to both approach and dissociate from transgressive, queer masculinity and behaviors. Though sharing many deep-structural elements, the two film sets are certainly not identical. First, the ‘Road to...’ movies set up the male protagonists as romantic rivals, whereas the bromance is not a rivalry. In the bromantic comedy, the homosocial relationship between males functions as more mutually beneficial and supportive. Besides differing from the ‘Road to...’ movies on style, narrative structure, and comic allowances in a post production-code film industry, bromantic comedies also respond to a different social context. Whereas bromantic comedies feature an image of masculinity born in an uncertain economic landscape, greater political discussion concerning the definition of marriage and reproductive rights, and narrowing of the gender gap in education, military, and the work force, the ‘Road to...’ movies feature an image of masculinity formed, in part, by the Second World War. As Steven Cohan writes: “the buddy relation had unusually strong cultural significance during the 1940s because of the intensity with which men formed close
friendships in the all-male military environment of World War II” (155). Cohan goes on further to say that the ‘Road to...’ movies should be read “in terms of the gender slippages occurring during the 1940s, when, as institutionalized by the Army buddy relation, the homosociality underlying American masculinity could all too easily ‘queer the deal’” (156).

Before continuing with this historicizing of male homosociality in film, it is important to note one major difference between the bromantic comedy and previous films that have featured strong male bonding. “Traditionally,” writes Justin Wyatt, “films have presented male bonding within set generic frameworks. The male group and bonding between individual males within that group are central to those films with a strong male institutional bias: generically the war film, western, police/detective film, as well as variants such as the prison, fraternity, or sports film” (52). The bromantic comedy, however, strips away the generic institutions that traditionally facilitate male bonding. There is an everyday quality to the bromantic relationship that denies a mitigating purpose for these men to be together. In an episode dedicated to the bromantic comedy, IFC podcaster Matt Singer says, “in the bromantic comedy you’re really focusing on guys in their natural habitat. Guys, like, in isolation...how they relate in circumstances that aren’t, sort of, extraordinary” (qtd. in Willmore). As Ramin Setoodeh writes, “Buddy comedies are nothing new, but the bromance shows us that straight guys, even without the aid of a high-speed car chase, can bond almost as strongly as heterosexual lovebirds” (73).
Certainly, the ‘Road to...’ movies featuring Hope and Crosby are not the only “buddy” narratives found in American cinema. Following 1969 films such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Midnight Cowboy*, and *Easy Rider*, Hollywood churned out numerous buddy films throughout the 1970s. The films, according to theorist Robin Wood, all contain variations of the same central attributes, such as: the journey, the marginalization of women, the absence of home, the male love story, the presence of an explicitly homosexual character, and death (227-228). In his chapter, “From Buddies to Lovers,” Wood notes that this cycle of films is often either ignored or denigrated as purely misogynistic and homophobic. While not discounting these criticisms, Wood instead locates the central problem, or the driving force, behind the cycle as “not the presence of the male relationship, but as the absence of home” (227). Here, Wood states that ‘home’ is understood “not merely as a physical location but as both a state of mind and an ideological construct, above all as ideological security. Ultimately, home is America... [T]he films are the direct product of the crisis in ideological confidence generated by Vietnam and subsequently intensified by Watergate” (228).

In the social context defined by a collapse of the concept of “home,” these buddy films of the 1970s carry with them some of the same masculine “baggage” seen before in the ‘Road to...’ movies and seen currently in bromantic comedies. That is, there is always something oddly troubling about male relationships. Concerning 1970s buddy movies and the issue of homosexuality, Wood reveals how the films suggest but never allow the consummation of male-male relationships; therefore “the films are guilty of the duplicitous teasing of which they have often been accused, continually
suggesting a homosexual relationship while emphatically disavowing it” (229). The presence of an explicitly homosexual character is transcribed into the bromantic comedy and serves nearly the same purpose of inoculation: allowing the male leads to essentially say, “we are close, but not *that* close.” However, the bromantic comedy also has a more complicated relationship to homosexuality that is discussed further in Chapter 2 of this project. Further, Wood attempts to understand what made these buddy films so popular during the 1970s. As he states, the cycle’s popularity “testifies, no doubt, to the contemporary ‘heterosexual’ male audience’s need to denigrate and marginalize women, but also, positively, to its unconscious but immensely powerful need to validate love between men” (Wood 230). In many respects, this same argument could be applied to the popularity of contemporary bromantic comedies, though certainly not without some caveats. While women’s roles are clearly marginalized within the narratives of bromantic comedies, women are still viewed as necessary for the protagonists to become fully “men.” In other words, whereas men of the 1970s buddy films leave home, family, patriarchy and (often) die, men of bromantic comedies leave only to return to the white, patriarchal, heterosexual constructs they thought they were rebelling against. Another important distinction is that bromantic comedies are, perhaps, given a little more freedom; where the misogyny and homophobia of the buddy films raises valid and serious concerns, similar reactions to bromantic comedies are more easily ignored due simply to the humor.

To believe that the bromantic comedies of the twenty-first century are merely comedic reiterations of the 1970s buddy film would be misleading and inaccurate. At
the very least, that notion fails to address changes to the buddy formula and shifts in
masculine representations that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s. Buddy films of the
1980s, in fact, shared a remarkable resemblance to their 1970s counterparts. As Robert
Kolker writes in *A Cinema of Loneliness*:

> The “buddy” is an extension of the cultural cliché of “male bonding,” a situation
> in which men can fantasize about being released from the repressions imposed
> by the company of women. In film, the “buddy” allows adventure, joking, safe
> community, marginalization of women, and the apparent absence of sexuality.
The “buddy” complex views sexuality as an obstacle to manly acts. But this
denial of sexuality carries a covert admission of the possibilities of
homosexuality, which, of course, is inadmissible. (280)

That resemblance, however, only goes so far. The buddy films of the 1980s are
distinguished from their 1970s predecessors by adhering to the hard-bodied,
hypermasculinized culture of the Reagan era. As Susan Jeffords notes in her book, *Hard
Bodies*, this shift in masculine representation is tied to social shifts under the Reagan
presidency, one that promised smaller government and cuts to bureaucratic institutions.
Where the heroes of the 1970s buddy films rebelled against social institutions, the
“heroes of the hard-body films suggest a different kind of social order, one in which the
men who are thrust forward into heroism are not heroic in defiance of their society but
in defiance of their government and institutional bureaucracies” (*Hard Bodies* 19).

Another difference during the 1980s was the emergence of the biracial buddy film,
which would give the white hero a black sidekick. As Ed Guerrero writes in *Framing
Blackness*, “These films are able to attract the demographically broadest possible
audience while presenting, containing, and in some instances fantastically resolving the
socially charged and vexed issue of race relations on the screen” (128). Responding to
the issue of sexuality, Cynthia J. Fuchs notes that the biracial buddy films of the 1980s use the “transgressiveness of black-white difference to displace homosexual anxiety thereby sustaining the secrecy of masculine intimacy and vulnerability” (201).

Interestingly, the mitigating presence of black and white buddies has not translated to the bromantic comedy, which, with few exceptions, is unmistakably whitewashed, fueling notions that the image of the bromantic male is a product of white privilege.

The 1990s brought with it its own set of changes, not only to mainstream Hollywood’s representation of masculinity, but to the broader social context of post-Reagan America. As Jeffords writes:

> As the economy grew worse (the national debt doubled under Bush’s first two years), as the threat of communism grew less (Gorbachev, the leader of the ‘evil empire’, was named ‘Man of the Year’ by *Time* magazine in 1990), as many on the right became increasingly outspoken and independent (Randall Terry’s ‘Operation Rescue’), as reports of drug use increased, as AIDS moved clearly out of the closet and into white heterosexual homes, as the Iran-Contra scandal refused to disappear, as George Bush came under attack for his relationship with Manuel Noriega, as the Reagans were accused of abuse and neglect by their daughter, Patty Davis, U.S. mainstream citizens began to worry that the social order that had seemed to be so smoothly instituted under Ronald Reagan had begun to deteriorate. (*Hard Bodies* 140)

It is in this social context that Hollywood masculinity underwent a “90s Switch.” Moving away from hard-bodied action of rebellion against corrupt government institutions, the action stars of the 1980s began entering family life during the 1990s. It is in this period that 1980s stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger took on roles in *Kindergarten Cop* (1990) and *Junior* (1994), Harrison Ford starred in *Regarding Henry* (1991), and Bruce Willis even voiced a baby in *Look Who’s Talking* (1989). As Jeffords writes, “Just as they have abandoned the external bodies that defined them in the eighties, these new men of the
nineties are turning away from the external concerns of government, law, international
drug cartels, militarism, and crime that occupied their time and energy in the eighties.
Their focus now is on the improvement of their ‘internal’ selves: their health, their
emotions, their families, and their homes” (“The Big Switch” 207-208).

Perhaps it is in this context that the rise and popularity of bromantic comedies
begins to be more clearly understood. Rather than merely recycled generic conventions
and repurposed thematic elements from films past, bromantic comedies follow a
tradition in Hollywood filmmaking of responding to—not always coherently or
consistently—the dominant ideology. As Robin Wood writes, rather colorfully, “That
familiar monster ‘the dominant ideology’ is—even in an overwhelmingly reactionary
period like our own—neither monolithic nor static. It might be likened to a protean
octopus: like Proteus, it can perpetually transform its appearance while remaining the
same underneath; like an octopus, it can reach out in all directions and engorge
whatever it thinks it can digest (also like an octopus, it sometimes makes mistakes)”
(240-241). Therefore, the bromantic comedy is not simply a buddy film for the new
social context just as it is not simply a romantic comedy for men. It is, in many ways, a
liberal attempt to engage with social issues including feminism, marriage equality, the
queer movement, and even reproductive rights. However, the bromantic comedy, like
its many predecessors, fails to provide a coherently “liberal” stance. Liberalism has, as
Wood writes, “always been a phenomenon the octopus digests quite easily” (241).
Herein lies the central problem for which this project accounts: that in its surface-level liberalism, and deep-rooted fear of an uncertain and changing social landscape, bromantic comedies present a model of modern, white, American masculinity that is ultimately regressive and reactionary. By failing to critique the place of privilege from which the bromantic male emerges, and serving to uphold the heteronormative patriarchal structure they appear to be queering, the bromantic comedy merely falls in line with the dominant ideological structure. To illuminate the discussion of masculinity perpetuated by the bromantic comedy, this project critiques three interrelated components of the bromantic male to exemplify how homosocial bonding contributes to the reinstatement of heteronormative patriarchal power within the narratives of these bromantic comedies.

Chapter 2 concerns the issue of homosocial intimacy within the cycle as being grounded in a mixture of homophobia and homophilia. For the purported “openness” of the homosocial setting, the bonds of men actually serve as a primary site of masculine policing. While operating as a site for men to safely voice their insecurities about masculine posturing and their status as American men, the bromance ultimately serves to reinstate the cultural normality of heterosexual coupling as well as patriarchal dominance. Paying close attention to the film *I Love You, Man*, this chapter will more thoroughly reveal the complicated responses these films have toward homosexual possibilities as part of the attempt to help white, heterosexual men maintain their place as the normative heads of the ideological landscape.
Chapter 3 focuses on the infantilization of masculinity as seen in the bromantic comedy. In this, the bromantic male, through his homosocial bonding, retreats to more regressive stages of masculinity which are manifested in three distinct “problems” the bromantic male must eventually overcome. These include the problem of work, the problem of the body, and the problem of sex. What the infantilization of the bromantic male ultimately achieves is an adult fulfillment of the fantasy of childhood—a fantasy that hinges on the promise of social mobility and adaptability.

In Chapter 4, the aim is to critique the paradoxical relationship the bromantic male has to the patriarchal structure. In their disillusioned response to their expectations of heterosexual coupling and patriarchal family life, the bromantic comedy involves a “bromantic escape”—a retreat from the seemingly stifling conditions of the patriarchal structure that are suggested to be limiting the bromantic male’s ability to successfully express his masculinity. Of course, the bromantic escape brings with it tender insights about heteronormative coupling that encourages their return, but the insights are rarely so “tender.” Rather than return to the patriarchal structure with a greater awareness of gender, racial, and sexual equality, the men merely return with more essentialist notions of masculinity that help secure their place at the top of the structure.

This project concludes with Chapter 5, an epilogue, which synthesizes the arguments made throughout, as well as provides insight into where more research could benefit the broader discussion surrounding masculinity and the bromantic comedy. To facilitate this discussion, the epilogue includes a brief analysis and
comparison of two films left largely unaddressed within the body of this project: *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007) and *Humpday* (2009). In this analysis, the deep-structural elements of the bromantic comedy are seen to not necessitate a simply reactionary image of masculinity. The analysis also supposes the possibility that future films foregrounding close male friendships have the potential to critique the dominant ideology of white, heterosexual patriarchy to which the current spate of bromantic comedies so forcefully adhere.
Anxious about calling a man he just met, Peter Klaven (Paul Rudd) in the bromantic comedy *I Love You, Man* says, “I’m really nervous about this one.” To which his brother Robby (Andy Samberg) says, “That’s because you really like him.” Because it uses the language of a nervous romance, the scene might be interpreted as a potential homosexual courtship if it were not already known that Peter is actually searching for a new friend to be “best man” at his upcoming wedding. “I hate this,” says Peter, “there are no rules for male friendship.” In this scene, as throughout the film, Peter’s masculine insecurities are intensified by the “trickiness” of male homosociality. The bromantic comedy cycle, as stated in the introduction, uses this trickiness of homosocial affection as a source of humor and insight concerning the cycle’s particular image of masculinity. By using the close homosocial grouping as a site where masculine insecurities are paradoxically mocked and safely voiced, the bromantic comedy’s image of masculinity straddles a line between identifiable heroes or parodic caricatures. Such a line is also straddled in these films between homophilia and homophobia. By manipulating these ideological incoherencies, the bromantic comedy presents a masculinity built on an image of egalitarian “enlightenment,” though still rooted in homophobic panic. What emerges is a cycle of films perpetuating a model of masculinity rife with egalitarian and queer potential, though ultimately serving to secure heterosexuality’s dominance by, as
Richard Dyer writes about whiteness, making white heteronormativity seem “not to be anything in particular” (126). The cultural invisibility and taken-for-grantedness of white heterosexuality is achieved in these films through a manipulation of audience identification and careful policing of bromantic masculinity.

Part of the difficulty in understanding these films as either purely “progressive” or simply “reactionary” arises from them having a range of perceived agendas, inconsistent messages from film to film, and incoherent motives to their representations of those characters coded as men. Put another way, one’s reaction to these films might hinge on whether they read the films as ironic reappropriations of the romantic comedy schema, or merely long-winded gay jokes; whether they take each iteration of the bromantic comedy on its own, or lump them all together; and whether they view the male leads as identifiable heroes, or parodic louts.

**Tears and Jeers: The Heartfelt Humor of the Bromantic Male**

In the case of the bromantic male leads, their tendency to teeter between wildness and tenderness reflects a broader trend in romantic comedies to present male characters who regularly fluctuate between comic aggrandizement and touching vulnerability (Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*). Take a scene from Judd Apatow’s *Knocked Up* (2007) as an example. After inadvertently impregnating his one-night stand, Allison (Katherine Heigl), Ben Stone (Seth Rogen) finds himself part of her family. Later in the film Ben and Pete (Allison’s brother-in-law played by Paul Rudd), escape their angry women by venturing to Las Vegas together where they take psychedelic
mushrooms and attend a Circue du Soleil performance. When the two are back in their hotel room, the mood of the scene turns from comic to heartfelt:

Ben: Do you think they’ll take us back?
Pete: Yes, but I don’t know why. Do you ever wonder how somebody could even like you?
Ben: All the time, man. Like every day. I wonder how you can like me.

In his book *Masculinity in the Contemporary Romantic Comedy*, John Alberti suggests that this scene, and moments like this often found in bromantic comedies, harkens back to the nervous romantic comedies of the 1970s, especially those of Woody Allen, saying, “Their loutishness derives from parody and comic exaggeration, as in the drug trip sequence and the Circue du Soleil performance... The poignancy of the self-loathing they express in this scene, on the other hand, registers more with the neorealism of *Annie Hall* (1977), working to enlist our sympathy and compassion for these characters” (31).

Beyond this confusion over this balancing act of audience identification, the issue of homosocial affection triggers some confusion concerning the cycle’s understanding of homosexuality. To help facilitate this understanding, take the integral sleeping bag scene from *Superbad* as an example. After a long day and night, the goals of which were to secure some alcohol and get laid at an end-of-the-year party, High School best friends Seth (Jonah Hill) and Evan (Michael Cera) find themselves camping out in the basement of Evan’s home. Occurring near the end of the film, the two have already experienced their misadventures and have come to realize that the impetus of their travails that night are based on the mutual fear of their impending separation
following graduation. Lying on the floor, face-to-face, the two might appear to be lovers if it were not for them being in separate sleeping bags. They speak:

Evan: I owe you so much. You carried me. I Love you. I love you, man.
Seth: I Love you? I Love You! I’m not even embarrassed to say it, I just, I love you.

The two say “I love you” several more times in the scene, bemoaning the fact that they do not express it everyday. The scene ends with Seth reaching over and touching Evan on the nose while making a “Boop” sound. Then Seth rolls closer, holds Evan in his arms, and whispers one more time “I Love you.”

Of course, the scene is played up for laughs, calling attention to the closeness of the friendship through the visual and spoken parallels to a tender moment between two lovers. The “joke” is even taken into the next scene as Evan wakes up to find Seth already getting dressed, trying to leave before his buddy notices. The two then share a glance that reads: *what exactly happened last night?* The humor arises partially from the mixture of homophobia and homophilia discussed above, including the possible response of “homophobic anxiety” in the male viewer, as well as an important “feature of the neotraditional romantic comedy: the appeal not just for laughs but for tears as well” (Alberti 40). With such a scene in mind—the level of affection quite typical of a bromantic comedy—the ideologically ambiguous model of masculinity begins to be better illuminated, and the issue of identification becomes even more pertinent to discussing the progressive potential of the cycle.

There is some merit to understanding these displays of affection and vulnerability as demonstrated by the scene in *Superbad* as a push towards a model of
masculinity teeming with anxiety about the macho posturing of the traditional alpha male. Such anxiety leads some to call the men of bromantic comedies more complex, relatable, and even enlightened. Responding to the first two films of writer-director-producer Judd Apatow (The 40 Year-Old Virgin and Knocked Up), Mark Olsen writes in Film Comment that “The pawns maneuvered around the chessboard of high-concept comedies rarely seem like fully imagined individuals, yet somehow, Apatow’s two features are populated by characters who are both funny comic creations and three-dimensional people” (32). Additionally, even Superbad, full of its own misogynistic jokes and comic high jinks, represents for some a more enlightened version of adolescence. Analyzing Superbad from a sociological perspective, Robert Bulman and Nicole McCants write, “A film like Superbad challenges us to ask how adolescent boys can learn to be men without ridiculing and dominating women, and without fearing that close friendships with other men undermine their masculinity or heterosexuality” (69).

This model of masculinity, one full of concern about sexual and social competency and abounding with anxiety toward the aggressiveness of alpha manliness, extends beyond the High School age of Superbad’s main characters. Concerning the films’ representation of heterosexual male anxiety, Claire Mortimer describes the bromantic comedy by saying, “These films work to reclaim masculinity for a generation that sees feminism as a historical movement and is familiar with conflicting representations of men in popular culture, ranging from the metrosexual icon of David Beckham to the macho posturings of many hip hop stars” (135-136). In I Love You, Man, a film whose very premise centers on the importance and awkwardness of male
friendships, the issue of social and sexual inadequacy touches nearly every scene. Recently engaged Peter Klaven is depicted from the beginning of the film to contrast the confident alpha male archetype, which partially explains his lack of a male best friend. The scenes immediately following his engagement to Zooey (Rashida Jones) reveal his lack of social confidence: kissing while driving makes him visibly nervous, he has no one to call to tell of his engagement, and his office rival Tevin (Rob Heubel) sends him a pornographic video that causes him to gag. Even Zooey’s post-engagement phone call to her friends where she says “perfect, totally understated,” is delivered with just enough ambiguity to make the audience question if she is referring to her new ring or to Peter. Additionally, Peter is routinely contrasted with more traditionally masculine men. Not only does he fail miserably at socializing with his fiancée’s best friend’s stoic husband Barry (Jon Favreau), but he also has an awkward time connecting to members of his fencing club who plan a camping trip without him. Even within his own family, Peter’s brother Robby, who despite being gay (an issue discussed in greater detail in this chapter), is more aligned with the patriarchal structure than is Peter, as it is made clear that Robby is their dad’s best friend. Such alignment is further revealed in a camera pan over various household objects. In one particular photograph, Peter is seen celebrating with his mother who had just sold a house. The fact that Peter has followed in her occupational footsteps reveals something of a rejection of the patriarchal line. Peter is clearly more connected to his mother than to his father. This photo along with moments that find Peter cooking elaborate dishes and exclaiming his love for the film Chocolat
(2000) contribute to the narrative of Peter’s social and sexual anxiety about fitting within a homosocial world.

Peter’s character type, the heterosexual male teeming with sexual and social anxiety in response to more essentialist notions of masculine performance and identification is repeated across the bromantic comedy spectrum. Superbad’s Evan, Hall Pass’s Rick (Owen Wilson), The Hangover’s Stu (Ed Helms), Clerks 2’s Dante (Brian O’Halloran), and The 40 Year-Old Virgin’s Andy (Steve Carell) all represent a model of masculinity that not only nervously counters the alpha male position, but also needs to cover up this anxiety over sexual competency through attempts at boasting within the homosocial enclave. Their attempts at sexual boasting would seem, from a typical patriarchal perspective, to suggest women’s sexuality as the mysterious Other, but the real Other for these characters is their own sexuality (Alberti 35). Therefore, the bromances that emerge within these films represent a site where a man’s sexuality is not only discovered, but also maintained. For the nervous male, the homosocial bonding is not only helpful, but also essential, to gaining social and sexual capital and (re)entering into the patriarchal structure.

Bro to Bro: Masculinity as Split

Following a series of unsuccessful attempts at finding a best man for his wedding in I Love you, Man, Peter then meets Sydney Fife (Jason Segal) at an open house event. Their first meeting is the bromantic equivalent of a “meet-cute”—Peter is struck by Sydney’s use of open house events to meet divorced women. Despite the fact that Sydney seems to possess greater mastery of sexual and social situations than does
Peter, he should not be understood as the Alpha male counterpart to Peter’s Beta. Rather, Sydney—and the other bromantic iterations of this type—represents, in Freudian psychoanalytic understanding, more of a return of the repressed; this character serves as a resurfacing of pre-Oedipal sexuality following in the tradition of the screwball comedy (Glitre 56). More specifically, Sydney provides a more “id” counterpart to Peter who appears primarily driven by his superego. Sydney, then, is presented as more forthright about his sexual desires and is also more promiscuous. His presence in Peter’s life encourages Peter to express his sexuality more openly, and doing so helps Peter’s work, social, and romantic life. Such a pairing, typical of the bromantic comedy, suggests and perpetuates a model of split masculinity, where both sides come together in benefit for each other.

This idea of split masculinity seen in the bromantic comedy cycle remains mostly consistent with David Greven’s assertion that the rise of dual-protagonist films (not just comedies) in the 1990s and 2000s represents a psychic doubling and rivalry. He suggests that dual-protagonist films in this era regularly portray male characters as “complementary halves of a dyad that suggests not two individuals but two warring halves of one consciousness” (Manhood in Hollywood 129). His ideas connect to the model of masculinity we see in the bromantic comedy cycle when he accounts for the more recent emergence of the “beta male,” saying:

Recently, some critics, considering the rise of obese and slovenly and diffident heroes who, triumphing over the once-dominant suave, pumped-up male, now get the proverbial girl, have described this split as a contrast between the old-style alpha male and the new-style beta male, the hard-body against the soft, the Adonis against the schlub. I believe that the psychoanalytic paradigms of narcissism and masochism most resonantly and poignantly illuminate that split.
Narcissicism and masochism emerge as competing modes of masculinity locked in bitter contest. (*Manhood in Hollywood* 159)

While certainly pertinent to the construction of masculinity seen in bromantic comedies, and helpful in understanding the image of split masculinity seen in the cycle, this account only goes so far. Crucial to the understanding of these films, and the image of masculinity therein, is that these two (or more, as the case may be) bromantic males are not rivals nor should the split masculinity of the bromantic males be understood as “warring halves.” Therefore, rather than act as a competition (for a woman, for a goal, for narrative dominance) the close, homosocial interaction actually serves the hegemonic benefit of upholding heteronormativity and assisting the bromantic male characters into their patriarchal positions. This heteronormative assistance is accomplished through an increasingly attentive policing of masculinity and heterosexuality that responds more specifically to the split model of manhood found in the bromantic comedy. This attentive policing is achieved through a number of narrative devices including: construction of a “bromantic discourse,” a more explicit articulation of the “rules” of masculine friendships, and an ever-careful co-opting of queer sensibilities.

**The Man-Date Mandate: Policing Hetero-Masculinity**

Using Michel Foucault’s work as a model, Ellen Seiter summarizes the concept of discourse, and the normalizing power it has, by writing:

In its current usage, discourse carries the stronger implication of speech governed by social, material, and historical forces, which disallow certain things from being said or even thought while forcing us to say certain other things. The term has been used by scholars frequently throughout the 1980s, often in a rather vague way. Many scholars use it in Michel Foucault’s sense to refer to a
set of complex, multilayered texts that determine and limit what can be said or known about certain subjects and therefore serve particular interests in the power structure of society. (62)

In the case of the bromantic comedy cycle, heteronormativity and the power structure of patriarchy are at least partially maintained through a language system, or bromantic vernacular, that “rescues” the everyday closeness of a bromantic relationship from slipping into something that might be construed as either overtly feminine or possibly homosexual.

The most ubiquitous term in this bromantic vernacular is the word “man,” often added as a made-up prefix to otherwise mundane words or activities (man-caves, man-bags, man-o-lanterns). For example, when I Love You, Man’s Peter is encouraged to seek out a new male best friend, he is told to go on a series of “man-dates.” The need to emphasize the “manliness” of such an outing spotlights the latent homophobia and trickiness of male friendships. In line with the theory of discourse, this use of the word “man” serves as a way to control how a meeting between two straight males is supposed to be understood. The fear of a “man-date” turning into a romantic “date-date” is articulated by Peter’s gay brother Robby, who instructs him how to act in the situation saying, “casual lunch or after work drinks. No dinner and no movies. You’re not taking these boys to see The Devil Wears Prada.” Of course, the term “man” shows up in numerous other places in the film, most notably in the title. Here again, the title and phrase “I Love you, man” reveals the trickiness of male affection highlighting the need to specify the love as “manly” and strictly heterosexual. Such is perfectly articulated in
Clerks 2’s final moments when Randall (Jeff Anderson) says to Dante (Brian O’Halloran), “You’re my best friend and I love you...in a totally heterosexual way.”

If “man” is not used specifically, then it might often be replaced by the word “bro.” It has already been discussed how the shorthand for “brother” plays a role in the creation of the portmanteau “bromance,” but it often appears in the dialogue of these films as well, usually in the formation of nicknames. In the climactic scene of I Love You, Man, Peter and Zooey are about to exchange their vows. The two male leads had had a falling out, and it is unclear whether or not Sydney will make it to the wedding ceremony and perform his best man duties. Of course, Sydney arrives just in time, and the two exchange their own version of bromantic vows:

Peter: I love you, man.
Sydney: I love you too bud.
Peter: I Love you, dude
Sydney: I love you, Bro Montana.
Peter: I love you, Holmes.
Sydney: I love you, Broseph Goebbels.
Peter: I love you, muchacha.
Sydney: I love you, Tycho Brohe.

The “bro” nicknames can also be understood as part of the bromantic vernacular, working to police homosocial masculinity. On one hand, it highlights the characters’ cleverness and attention to esoteric cultural references. On the other, the inclusion of “bro” allows for the nicknames to maintain a constant connection to masculinity, and frees them from being understood merely as “pet names” which might be exchanged between two lovers, heterosexual or otherwise.

Beyond the bromantic vernacular or masculine discourse, heterosexual masculinity is also policed in these films through a seemingly necessary need to more
carefully articulate the “rules” of masculinity and friendship. Perhaps out of the homosexual panic associated with male closeness, characters in these films frequently articulate some of the finer points of what it means to be a bromantic male. This articulation of the rules is usually done by one half of the bromantic pair for the social and sexual benefit of the other. Most often, it is the more overtly sexualized (the Sydney character type) who explains the rules. That is, the bro who “knows” takes on the task of equipping the more repressed bromantic male not only with greater sexual competency, but also with instructions on how to properly conduct himself as a male friend. Across the cycle we see Superbad’s Seth instruct Evan, Hall Pass’s Fred instructs Rick, Role Models’ Wheeler instructs Danny, and, of course, I Love You, Man’s Sydney instructs Peter. In each case, the “bro in the know” serves to alleviate some of the sexual repression in the other and, by doing so, allows his friend to reenter the patriarchal structure with greater sexual and social competency.

In I Love You, Man, Sydney not only instructs Peter on the bromantic vernacular—Peter stumbles through awkward attempts at giving nicknames many times—he also instructs Peter in how a man should think and talk about sex. When Sydney invites Peter into his “man-cave” (another “man” term), the two discuss masturbation, which makes Peter visibly uncomfortable. It is clear in this scene that masturbation is a topic Peter has not discussed very often (or perhaps ever). The openness of the pre-Oedipal sexuality represented by Sydney facilitates something of a liberation in Peter, who throughout the movie becomes more and more comfortable in his own skin, and more capable in his work and love-life. While Sydney’s sexual and
social guidance might appear to be somewhat liberating to Peter, it only really ever serves to promote heteronormative sexuality, and give the male characters just enough of a release to better retake the patriarchal control that they fear is slipping in their lives. The hedonistic freedoms and sexual promiscuity of Sydney, or any of the other “bros in the know,” are, in the end, exposed as ultimately unfulfilling, and the bromance then is seen as a mutually beneficial cooperation that equips both men with the hegemonic tools necessary to keep heteronormative coupling as part of the patriarchal status quo. A more thorough discussion of this can be found in the Chapter 4 of this project.

The third point of heterosexual policing comes from an often-troubling relationship these films have with homosexuality. On one hand, the unmistakable closeness and the more overt displays of affection between males in these films open up a more queer potential for their friendship as it appears to reinstate homosociality with the concept of desire, possibly defending “the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual” (Sedgwick 1). In that respect, it could be asserted that such desirous affection between homosocial men reflects broader societal changes concerning homosexual tolerance. This assertion is certainly not without merit. At the very least, Gallup Poll numbers would suggest that more Americans than ever are “accepting” of homosexuality with nearly eight in ten adult Americans responding that they personally know someone who is gay and nine in ten queer-identified respondents saying their communities have become more accepting in the past few years (Page). Additionally, the model of masculinity presented in these
films would also be consistent with studies that have shown males with greater media exposure are more likely to be accepting of homosexuality (Calzo and Ward), especially considering the frequency of pop-culture references made by the bromantic males.

On the other hand, for every step forward, there seems to be at least two steps backward. The front of tolerance is mitigated by factors such as: the heteronormative motives of the romantic comedy, depictions of homosexual panic as manifested through the humor, and a re-breaking of the homosocial/homosexual continuum. As suggested in the introduction to this project, the bromantic comedy cycle is most generically tied to the Hollywood romantic comedy, and many of the generic conventions and ideological motivations of the romantic comedy remain present throughout the cycle and make bromantic comedies subject to the genre’s limitations. Therefore, despite a possibly liberal image of tolerance and acceptance concerning homosexuality, bromantic comedies nonetheless function in the same manner as romantic comedies to depict heterosexuality as “the natural, inevitable, all-encompassing sexuality” by preserving its illusion of universality, which is “undoubtedly central to its hegemonic authority” (Kirkland 3). Despite the apparent tolerance, the generic conventions of wish fulfillment preserve the normality of heterosexuality wherein homosexuality is the polar opposite, the “other.” This conventional mentality, and façade of open-mindedness is clearly expressed in a line from The 40 Year-Old Virgin, where Jay (Romany Malco) calls into question Andy’s sexuality saying, “It’s OK if you fuck guys, I got friends that fuck guys...in prison.” His comment, though easily written off as a joke in the film, nevertheless undermines the acceptance he is trying to convey to Andy.
In addition to the generic limitations under which these films adhere, the same model of masculinity that would appear to be more accepting and tolerant of homosexuality also reveals a fear of proximity. In discussing issues surrounding homophobia, James Keller says, “...when the stigmatized and sublimated desires become embodied in the homosexual, and the aspersions of association are cast upon the heterosexual male subject, the predictable response is the subject’s hysterical and often violent effort to disassociate himself from the shameful subject” (177). Keller goes on to connect this to representations of violence against homosexuals in films like *American Beauty* (1999) and *Urbania* (2000), and in television shows such as *Oz* (HBO 1997-2003). Of course, films of the bromantic comedy cycle do not feature physical violence between straight and gay men, doing so would obviously clash with the liberal façade of these films and call into question their status as comedies. The dread of proximity, however, does manifest itself in the use of humor, and the slippery slope between homosociality and homosexuality is often played up for laughs. As Alexander Doty writes about queerness and humor:

> Comedy is fundamentally queer since it encourages rule-breaking, risk-taking, inversions, and perversions in the face of straight patriarchal norms. Although you could argue that most comic gender and sexuality rule-breaking is ultimately contained or recuperated by the traditional narrative closure (as it attempts to restore the straight status quo), or through the genre’s “it’s just a joke” escape hatch, the fact remains that queerness is the source of many comic pleasures for audiences of all sexual identities. (81)

Despite the queerness of comedy, humor is still used as a non-violent way to distance the bromantic male from the proximity of homosexuality and homosexual desire.
Humor acts as a way to avoid the “stigmatized desires” of homosexuality and keep the bromance between the male characters undeniably straight.

Part of the issue of humor here is the use of homophobic insults, which James M. Patterson analyzes by relating Apatow’s *The 40 Year-Old Virgin* to sociologist CJ Pascoe’s work on “fag discourse” and adolescent males. In his paper, Patterson responds to the tendency of the film to equate something negative with being gay, and how this is done through the use of humor. One example of this is when fellow Smart Tech employees Cal (Seth Rogen) and David (Paul Rudd) exchange insults beginning with the phrase, “Do you know how I know you’re gay?” and ending with humorous answers such as “because you like Coldplay” or “because you macraméd yourself a pair of jean shorts.”

As Patterson describes, “What fag discourse provides, in *Virgin*, is an unhealthy example of redirecting one’s fear of risk (as defined by trying to meet women) into something that demeans someone else to the same degree one experiences their own demeaned status” (“Do You Know How I Know You’re Gay?”). This also reflects that the humor in these films, as related to homosexuality, can best be understood in terms of both incongruity and superiority. In humor studies, the notions of incongruity and superiority are typically thought of separately, but Jeroen Vandaele makes a case for applying them together in the case of film comedy, and points to how this interaction works in the process of normalization (221). That is, in the bromantic comedy cycle, the use of humor supports heteronormativity by making homosexuality both incongruous with (do you know how I know you’re gay?) and inferior to (because you like Coldplay) heterosexuality.
This notion of homosexuality as being both incongruous and inferior recalls the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and her ideas concerning “male homosocial desire” present in 19th and 20th century literature. In her chapter on homosexual panic, she describes the construction of homophobia through male homosocial relationships. Here, she describes the power involved in binary categories, saying that the category of homosexual “comes not necessarily from its regulatory relation to a nascent or already-constituted minority of homosexual people or desire, but from its potential for giving whoever wields it a structuring definitional leverage over a whole range of male bonds that shape the social constitution” (87). In that, the homophobia that arises in homosocial bonding can be seen as a “mechanism for regulating the behavior of the many, by the specific oppression of the few” (Sedgwick 88). Therefore, such gay-centered humor in the bromantic comedy cycle is less about defining homosexuality—there is certainly no link between liking Coldplay and identifying as homosexual—and more about regulating heterosexuality.

This regulation through humor is evident by the way that queerness is “othered” in the bromantic comedy cycle, making heterosexuality—specifically, white, male heterosexuality—the undisputed norm. By that, the bromantic comedy cycle often applies stereotypically queer characteristics onto characters that already differ from the image of masculinity established by the bromantic male protagonists in terms of race, class, or nationality. This is exemplified most clearly by The Hangover, and its character Leslie Chow (Ken Jeong), a feminized Asian gangster with a purposely-ambiguous name. In an article focused on writing queer characters for film and television, Michael Green
calls *The Hangover* "One of the more offensive films of recent years in terms of its representation of race, gender, sexuality" (35-36). He adds to this by saying:

*The Hangover*, even more widely seen, resorts thoughtlessly to crude stereotypes and epithets, and though it keeps the sexuality of the Asian gang lord played by Ken Jeong nominally ambiguous, the movie nevertheless supplies him with a number of outrageous and flamboyant tics and behaviors that exhibit the most offensive gay stereotypes. This stereotypically feminized Asian man—a character portrayal going back in cinema to at least D. W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* (1919)—and a number of stereotypical black and Latino characters are set up as thugs/foils in contrast to the middle-class heterosexual white heroes. (33)

If *The Hangover* resorts to crude stereotypes, its sequels take them to the next level of offensiveness. In the second and third installments, Leslie Chow takes on even more stereotypically flamboyant traits, including sniffing other males’ butts like a dog.

What Leslie Chow’s character in *The Hangover* series, and most other queer-coded characters in the bromantic comedy cycle serve, at least partially, is the role of inoculation. They function as something of a “disclaimer—our boys are not like that” as Robin Wood writes regarding the presence of explicitly homosexual characters in the buddy films of the 1960s and early 1970s (299). Effectively, these characters coded as queer, and in many cases written as explicitly homosexual, often serve to alert the audience that no matter how close the bromance might appear, it will never be *that* close. On one of his man-dates, *I Love You, Man*’s Peter has dinner with Doug (Thomas Lennon), a man who has recently moved to town. After their dinner, they express how good their time was and make arrangements to meet again. Doug, misunderstanding the intentions behind the dinner, kisses Peter, who is more stunned than visibly repulsed; Peter later needs to brush his teeth more excessively than usual. Needless to
say, the two do not go out again, but the scene is recalled later in the film when Peter and Sydney are trying on tuxedos for the upcoming wedding. Doug happens to see them together and mistakes the pair for a romantic couple, calling Peter a “whore,” for standing him up. The misunderstanding plays on dramatic irony, as the audience knows that Peter and Sydney are not gay, and no matter what they appear to be, they will never be like Doug. His presence, and the humor that arises from it, helps inoculate Peter and Sydney’s bond from the fear of being understood by the audience as anything other than strictly platonic.

Peter’s younger brother Robby is another explicitly homosexual character in *I Love You, Man.* While his presence challenges some of these assertions concerning inoculation, even his characterization plays on the issue of homosexual panic. Working as a gym trainer and identified as his father’s best friend, Robby is presented as more traditionally masculine and also more aligned with the patriarchal structure than is Peter, a rare instance in the cycle when a homosexual character is not immediately coded as ‘other’ like Leslie Chow in *The Hangover* films. It becomes clear that if not for his sexuality, Robby would be far better suited than Peter in the heterosexual bro-world. It is even Robby who instructs Peter on what a man-date should and should not be. It is then revealed that Robby understands the tricky world of heterosexual friendships because he enjoys ‘turning’ straight men. He informs Peter that he is bored of chasing after gay guys, as there is not much of a challenge. He says, “Not only do I know men, but straight guys are my specialty. Hooking up is easy, meeting platonic male friends, not so much.” Robby then helps a man (wearing a wedding ring) with his bench-
pressing, and the two share a smile signaling that a romantic encounter might be imminent. This moment suggests that if this film played out from Robby’s point of view, *I Love You, Man* would probably resemble a gay conversion fantasy like the realist gay romantic comedies *Edge of Seventeen* (1998) and *Beautiful Thing* (1996). But even such conversion fantasies do not always suggest a more socially tolerant or egalitarian take on homosexuality, as they rely, according to James Keller, on “both the dissolution and maintenance of a distinction between homosexual and heterosexual” (9). In order to fit with the fantasy of desire, the man Robby wants to turn must “become the homosexual’s private heterosexual, remaining ostensibly straight while engaging in queer sex and romance” (Keller 9). Given that *I Love You, Man* remains strictly within the heteronormative romantic comedy structure, and it is told from Peter’s point of view and not Robby’s, it would not make sense that the audience follows in the wish-fulfillment narrative of the gay-conversion fantasy. Rather, Robby’s conquest might be understood as the slippery slope of homosocial bonding—what might happen if your bromance gets a little too close. Therefore, despite some of the challenges presented to the inoculation theory, even the presence of Robby in *I Love You, Man* reflects some of the homosexual panic produced by the depictions of homosocial masculinity in the bromantic comedy.

What this chapter demonstrates is in part the paradoxical messages these films perpetuate regarding male affection as well as the reactionary mentality of the cycle towards homosexuality. Rather than approach a changing economic, social, and political landscape optimistically, the model of masculinity represented in the bromantic comedy
cycle appears to be grounded in a mixture of homophobia and homophilia. For all the surface-level liberalism and openness to displays of platonic affection, there nevertheless remains the hegemonic desire to keep white, heterosexual masculinity the unquestioned universal standard, the “not anything in particular.” Through a careful policing of masculinity and heterosexuality, and within the larger generic structure of the Hollywood romantic comedy, the progressive potential of the image of the bromantic male is either greatly limited or entirely eliminated by the shortcomings of the bromantic comedy cycle.

What keeps this issue political is its relationship to power. As is hinted at in this chapter, and more fully developed in the remaining three, the paradoxical and reactionary model of masculinity is really part of a larger hegemonic battle to regain patriarchal control in a social landscape that would suggest patriarchal control is slipping. For men to regain control, it would seem they must learn to do so under somewhat new terms. In a world where women are becoming more a part of the capitalist workforce, and issues surrounding homosexuality are being discussed more than ever, the hegemonic playing field is changing and men are trying to stay on top. What arises then, is that the site where men are able to discuss their insecurities and reveal their homosocial affection is precisely the site where dominance is once again reinstated. Within the seemingly liberated and tolerant environment of the bromantic relationship, white, heterosexual men are able to reclaim their place as the normative heads of the ideological landscape. Just as Sydney’s guidance eventually leads Peter back into the patriarchal structure and safely back to the altar, so too does the
bromantic comedy suggest that all men need to get back on top is a little help from their friends.
CHAPTER 3

“DON’T LET THE BEARD FOOL YOU. HE IS A CHILD”: INFANTILIZATION AS SOCIAL ADAPTABILITY

Referring to Hollywood as “youth-obsessed” is somewhat akin to referring to the Pope as Catholic. While the usual criticisms concerning Hollywood’s youth obsession revolve around actors (especially female actors) deemed “past their prime,” an examination of recent box office returns reveals that the level of youth obsession extends beyond Hollywood’s stars and starlets. In 2009, for example, six of the top-ten highest grossing films of the year either featured adolescent main characters (Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen, Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince, The Twilight Saga: New Moon, The Blind Side) or were animated features marketed primarily to families and children (Up, Alvin and the Chipmunks: The Squeekquel). Also on this top-ten list is the bromantic comedy The Hangover (“2009 Domestic Grosses”). Though not featuring young actors (the protagonists are all played by actors in their thirties) and not marketed to children (the R-rating certainly limits its youth reach), The Hangover is nevertheless indicative of Hollywood’s adolescent fixation at the levels of genre, narrative, and character. Even by nature of being comedies, films of the bromantic comedy cycle already have a certain juvenile appeal as comedies naturally “employ infantile modes of thought; they manifest the structures of thinking of the unconscious, structures repressed by critical reason” (Carroll 320). More specifically to the bromantic comedy, in addition to the psychologically juvenile allure of comedy, these films also
present narratives and characters that fearfully respond to the social expectations of adult masculinity.

In the previous chapter, this project revealed how the paradox of male affection and the troubling relationship with homosexuality exhibited by the bromantic male limit the cycle’s “liberal potential” by upholding patriarchal heteronormativity’s unscrutinized dominance. This chapter, in continuing the analysis of masculine representation, explores the infantilization of masculinity in the bromantic comedy cycle. In much the same way that homosocial affection assists in the maintenance of patriarchal heteronormativity’s uninterrogated authority, so too can the adolescent fixations of the bromantic male be understood as a hegemonic tool in a changing social landscape in which fear of containment encourages this model of yet-to-be-defined manhood. That is, the model of masculinity represented in the bromantic comedy cycle works to stave off definition; it perpetuates a nebulous state of arrested development that works for hegemonic authority by choosing to redefine social and sexual success rather than be defined by failure. By highlighting three key “failings” redefined by the bromantic male (failure in work, failure in body, and failure in romance), this chapter will expose adolescent fixation in the bromantic comedy cycle as a fearful, reactionary response to a perceived loss of power. It is a response that lends credence to Arthur Brittan’s assertion that “what has changed is not male power as such, but its form, its presentation, its packaging. In other words, while it is apparent that styles of masculinity may alter in relatively short time spans, the substance of male power does not” (52). The youth-obsessed model of “failing” masculinity, then, can be understood as merely
the modern “packaging” of white, American masculinity, still full of the standard hegemonic ambitions.

“Slackerism” for the New Economy: The Problem of Work

Across the spectrum, bromantic male protagonists are rarely represented with satisfying employment. The few that have jobs typically find nothing but misery in them, or else they perform them with comical ineptitude as demonstrated in the opening montage scene from *Role Models*. With the task of speaking to schoolchildren about the dangers of drugs, Danny (Paul Rudd) and a minotaur-costumed Wheeler (Seann William Scott) represent *Minotaur*—a fictional energy drink company reminiscent of Monster or Red Bull. The scene cuts from shots of the pair chugging energy drinks to speaking at assemblies to driving in their decked-out Minotaur truck. The comedy of the opening scene is built upon a certain amount of cynical irony; not only do Danny and Wheeler encourage kids to say no to illegal drugs in favor of highly caffeinated sugar drinks, but the audience also sees the pair smoking a joint outside one of the schools. The scene also emphasizes the pair’s immaturity when they have a run-in with a middle-schooler following their assembly:

**Middle Schooler:** Hey! Nice cow outfit, homo. Where can I pick one of those up, the gay zoo?

**Danny:** Oh, no, it’s not a cow, it’s a Minotaur. It’s a creature of myth, and he got this one out of your mom’s closet.

**Wheeler:** She let me keep it after I fucked her.

For *Role Models*, the narrative conflict occurs when Wheeler throws a surprise party for Danny for their ten years together at Minotaur. Realizing that he has spent a decade in this job leads Danny to question his life, and he becomes prone to verbal outbursts
directed at his girlfriend (Elizabeth Banks), Wheeler, and even a coffee shop barista. An emotional outburst at a school assembly, which ends with Danny and Wheeler destroying their truck and a school statue, finds the duo without jobs and potentially facing criminal charges.

It should be made clear here that this problem of work faced by the bromantic males is not equivalent to a problem of money. Though most bromantic male characters experience either a loss of employment or career disillusionment, the narratives rarely imply that the male characters are failing to make ends meet. In *Knocked Up*, Ben Stone has no job, but informs Allison, the woman he got pregnant, that he has been living off a legal settlement from an accident with a mail carrier years earlier. When Allison discovers a bank statement, realizing just how little he has saved, she grows concerned, but the issue of money is never really addressed nor solved beyond that point. Even for Danny and Wheeler in *Role Models*, the loss of their jobs does not translate into a change of financial lifestyle. By emphasizing the problem of work over the problem of money, the bromantic comedy further underlines the bromantic male as a product of privilege without adequately critiquing that position.

Failures in work are also clearly seen in the leads of *The Hangover* franchise. Phil (Bradley Cooper) is an uninterested schoolteacher who skims money from the field trip fund to support his Vegas getaway. Stu (Ed Helms), although a successful dentist, is always clear to introduce himself as a “Doctor,” suggesting insecurity he feels about “only being a dentist.” Finally, Alan (Zach Galifianakis) comes across as almost entirely unemployable, but he benefits from living with his wealthy parents. To a certain extent,
many of the bromantic males across the cycle might be understood as millennial incarnations of the “slackers” of Generation X. The heavy reliance on pop-culture-infused dialogue in bromantic comedies, for example, acts as one connection between the contemporary bromantic male and the 1990s Gen Xer, as both groups form identity, in part, by their relationships with mediated fantasy and popular culture. Jonathon Oake’s words concerning 1994’s *Reality Bites* could be just as true for the bromantic male: “Gen X spectatorship, I would argue, marks the historical reification of spectatorship to the level of subjectivity...even when they are not participating in actual spectatorship, they are still defined by the trope of the ‘spectator’ or, in other words, by their relationship to contemporary media culture” (91). Even Edward Ericson’s 1998 description of Generation Xers in *American Enterprise* fits well with the bromantic male’s identity, saying, “Today’s young people...[are] suckers for the instant gratification of booze and drugs. They’re enormously confused about sex and scared to death of marriage... Even the name they bear, and despise, ‘Generation X,’ bespeaks their nondescript status. This label conveys a sense of formlessness, of waiting for a script to be written” (38). Perhaps bromantic males, like Danny and Wheeler in *Role Models*, are the images of the young Gen Xers all grown up; perhaps the problems of work are a continuation of their “nondescript status,” of “waiting for a script to be written.”

Even given the bromantic male’s infusion with Generation X sensibilities, he must still be understood within the modern social and economic context. The problems of work faced by the male leads, especially during a very real time of economic difficulty, would certainly call into question their desirability—both romantically in the
narrative and concerning audience identification. Such a presentation of male characteristics, however, is not wholly unprecedented. A study on sexual humor in Hollywood films found that male leads are often represented as having lower socio-economic status during periods of actual economic threat (McIntosh et al.). The authors of this study offer a “lowered expectations hypothesis” as at least one possible reason for this, saying, “bad times lead people to feel less optimistic and less powerful, and consequently they lower their expectations, even in the realm of fantasy and fiction… One thing is clear: when times are bad, society resonates with ideals that are less than ideal” (McIntosh et al. 253). While the study is somewhat limited in its scope (only the top-grossing comedy films from 1951-2000 were included), it is a beneficial starting point in understanding the connection between the real economy and masculine representation. Though, especially in the case of bromantic comedies, perhaps the “lowered expectations hypothesis” could be better translated as a “wish fulfillment hypothesis.” Put another way, because these films are generally written by, directed by, and starring men, and marketed with men in mind, the bromantic comedies might serve to satisfy a desire the real world appears to rarely allow: perpetuation of the myth of the schlubby slacker who gets the pretty girl.

The fantasy of wish fulfillment is also used in explaining an important female character type: “the cougar.” Though not unique to the bromantic comedy cycle, and certainly not entirely new—The Graduate’s (1967) Mrs. Robinson is arguably film’s most iconic cougar—the image of a domineering, overtly sexual woman often plays some kind of role within the bromantic comedy cycle. In The New York Times, columnist Gail Collins
posited the idea that the cougar trope “isn’t about desperate middle-aged American women. It’s about desperate young American men who are latching onto an older woman who’s a good earner” (Collins and Brooks). While this idea has its obvious limitations, it nevertheless responds to the issue of economic threat and the filmic representations of male and female characters, and fits with Hanna Rosin’s proposal that popular culture’s increased depictions of “Alpha females” (such as the cougar) and increased depictions of “Omega males” (“…often-unemployed, romantically-challenged loser”) are reactions to a changing economic landscape to which women are becoming better suited (70,72). Whether or not Collins is accurate in her hypothesis that men might seek to latch onto the successful older woman, the overt presence of the sexually domineering woman is undeniable, and the motivations for their cinematic presence seem to be playing on a combination of male fantasy and fear. Such is seen by the numerous failed sexual encounters of The 40 Year-Old Virgin’s Andy, as well as a scene in Role Models that finds Wheeler telling a woman, acting as a kind of schoolteacher-dominatrix, that this is one of his “top four all-time fantasies.”

If Hanna Rosin’s supposition is correct; if the depictions of the “often unemployed, romantically challenged loser” are indeed responses to changing economic conditions, then the bromantic male’s failure in work surely affects his construction of masculine identity. For the bromantic male, with his strong ties to Gen X sensibilities, constructing his identity through work signals an abandonment of his adolescent fantasies, effectively writing the script that Eric Ericson suggested is “to be written” for the young Gen Xers. In that sense, the bromantic male’s failure in work circumvents
being rigidly defined and identified by his occupation; his failure in work is redefined as a success in economic and social adaptability.

This adaptability—understood as the freedom to ‘become’ as opposed to the slavery of ‘being’—is effectively demonstrated by *Role Models*’ Danny and Wheeler. Wheeler’s vitality as he drinks champagne poured over a woman’s breast, and his exclamation “I love this job!” during the work anniversary party contrasts Danny’s somber demeanor as he mumbles, “I hate my life.” Though contrasting, Danny and Wheeler’s attitudes are actually rooted in the same fear of occupational identification. What Danny hates about his job is that it defines him; what Wheeler loves about his job is that it allows him to stave off definition, due in no small part to his ability to hide his physical self in the Minotaur costume. His role as company mascot allows him to find identity outside of his profession whereas the suit-clad Danny has no easy outlet.

Danny’s post-party outburst leads to the loss of Danny and Wheeler’s jobs and possible jail time. The only thing keeping them out of jail is an agreement to perform 30 hours of community service in a Big Brother-esque program called “Sturdy Wings.” The program, which pairs adult “Bigs” with child “Littles,” becomes a showcase for the duo’s immaturity. Just as their resistance to find identity in work maintains their nebulous state, their oppositional attitude to authority marks their persistent adolescent mentality. Such a mentality is demonstrated by their frequent ability to reinterpret the words of other adults—like Sturdy Wings leader Sweeny (Jane Lynch) or Sturdy Wings veteran Martin (A.D. Miles)—into sexual double entendres. Even their need to raise their hand before speaking to Beth (Elizabeth Banks), Danny’s irritated girlfriend and
lawyer, further emphasizes their childlike disposition, and coincides with the bromantic male’s failure to find satisfaction in the adult world, especially in terms of employment.

Speaking more broadly than the specific example of Role Models, what this failing of work perpetuated in the bromantic comedy reveals is an attempt to represent an image of white, American masculinity that maintains some semblance of control over their identity in a cultural system that they fear is marginalizing their ability to do so. The bromantic male, in his slacker-esque adult resistance, seems to employ what Michael Kimmel calls the “wind chill theory of gender politics—it doesn’t matter what the temperature actually is; it matters only how it feels” (Misframing Men 20). For the bromantic male, the adult world and women’s growing presence in the workforce certainly “feels” pretty scary. Therefore, by staving off definition from occupational identification, by enacting male fantasies, and by deliberately opposing authority figures, the bromantic male works to alleviate some of the possibility that they have lost their cultural footing.

Our Bodies, Ourselves: The Problem of the Body

In writing about what she calls “The Big Switch,” Susan Jeffords notes major changes in Hollywood’s representation of heroic masculinity from the hard-bodied 1980s action star to a softer, gentler 1990s leading man. Jeffords points out that the 1990s male protagonists shifted their focus from external concerns of crime and militarism to “improvement of their internal selves: their health, their emotions, their families, and their homes (“The Big Switch” 207-208). Notably, she says of the new 1990s man is the “discovery by the male lead that his body has failed him in some way,
whether through wounds, disease, or programming. The body that he thought was ‘his,’
the body he had been taught to value as fulfilling some version of a masculine heroic
ideal—suddenly that body became transformed into a separate entity that was
betraying the true internal feelings of the man it contained” (“The Big Switch” 201).

A study of commercials aired during the 2010 Super Bowl football game revealed
similar masculine anxieties about the body: “The protruding midsections and flabby
buttocks become signs for insecurity at multiple scales—the nation, the job, the family,
and sexuality... [T]hroughout this group of commercials, the male body acts as the
semitic bedrock on which these messages about the crisis of masculinity rest” (Green
and Van Oort 714). The bromantic male, then, is coded with similar anxiety about his
body not holding up to a masculine ideal, mirroring the 1990s hero’s angst over a body
that “betrays the true internal feelings of the man it contain[s].” The bromantic male’s
body is often too fat, too skinny, too weak, or too hairy. In the case of Funny People
(2009), the bromantic relationship between veteran movie star George Simmons (Adam
Sandler) and struggling comic Ira (Seth Rogen) is centered around George’s diagnosis of
terminal cancer—the apex of a failing, betraying body. In other cases, the betraying
body of the bromantic male is merely assisted by time, causing him to yearn for the lost
body of his youth. In an early scene from Hall Pass, Rick (Owen Wilson) looks through a
photo album with his kids. They see a picture of him, young and muscular, and say,
“Wow, dad, you used to have muscles.” “Well,” he says, “I still got a few.” This very idea
serves as the basis for Hot Tub Time Machine, where four friends are able to relive their
“glory days” of hopeful sexual encounters and young, able bodies through the assistance of time travel.

Importantly, the problem of the body extends to psychological factors about resisting Oedipal adulthood or Lacan’s Symbolic Order. By that, we see adolescent fixation in the bromantic comedy cycle through the lingering presence (in humor and characterization) of the pre-Oedipal stages of psychosexual development. The bromantic male’s fascination with breasts, and the frequent use of scatological humor within the bromantic comedy cycle paints an image of infantile masculinity which still finds libidinal gratification through oral and anal fixations. So much so that these fixations help facilitate the bromantic bonding as demonstrated through a conversation between *Role Models’* Wheeler, and his “little” Ronnie (a young African American boy whose mouth is far bigger than his body, played by Bobb’e J. Thompson):

Wheeler: You know, I have a theory about boobies.
Ronnie: Really?
Wheeler: Oh yeah. You see, there are as many women as there are men in this world.
Ronnie: True dat, true dat.
Wheeler: And every woman has two boobs, for the most part. So there are twice as many boobs as there are men. We're outnumbered and it's overwhelming. We're powerless, and we have to accept it.
Ronnie: I like yo' take on boobies. And I like boobies.

This exchange between Wheeler and Ronny reveals the bonds bromantic males achieve through a shared fascination (and apparently fear) of women’s breasts, but the bonding seems to occur across the bromantic comedy cycle over scatological bodily transgressions as well. “The focus of many gross-out moments,” writes Geoff King in *Film Comedy*, “on activities such as farting and shitting, or on substances such as feces,
urine, and semen displaced to the upper regions, suggests an indulgence of the anal and oral drives described in the Freudian account of pre-Oedipal sexuality” (89).

Yet it is Freud’s third stage of psychosexual development, the phallic stage, to which the bromantic males seem most unhealthily attached. According to Freud, the phallic stage is where the child becomes more aware of the biological differences between male and female, and obsession with the penis comes across as critical to the bromantic male’s construction of masculinity. On one level, the obsession with the penis, and also with the metaphorical phallus, is manifested symbolically through dialogue and action. This is seen in George Simmons’ frequent requests that Ira show him his “big cock” in *Funny People*, characters making suggestive actions with a hot dog in *Role Models*, and Saul (James Franco) sticking his thumb through his zipper in *Pineapple Express* (2008). Even the repeated use of the name Peter in these films possibly reveals some kind of subconscious phallic obsession. On another level, these films rarely shy away from putting the physical penis on full display. In *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, Peter Bretter (Jason Segel) accepts the breakup with his girlfriend fully nude, and Leslie Chow’s introduction in *The Hangover* occurs when he leaps naked from the trunk of a car brandishing a knife (another phallic object). In *Superbad*, Evan describes a childhood obsession with drawing cartoon penises. These drawings then serve as the background images over which the closing credits of the film run. In connecting this obsession back with psychoanalytic terms, John Alberti notes that the bromantic males “resist incorporation into the Symbolic Order, a resistance marked in the bromantic preoccupation with phallic humor and the phallus itself, as in the character Seth’s
childhood obsession with drawing anthropomorphized penises in *Superbad*, literally enacting an attraction to/shame over entering the symbolic order” (39).

The prevalence of the penis in these films works toward hegemonic goals by asserting phallogocentric power through vulnerability. Judd Apatow mentioned in an interview with *Playboy Magazine* that “The penis is a vulnerable area, so it’s good for comedy” (qtd. in Douglas). Saying, “America fears the penis” in a separate interview sparked a new goal, as he went on to say “I’m going to get a penis in every movie I do from now on” (qtd. in WENN). Referencing this interview, and the bromantic comedy’s phallic obsession, Peter Alilunas notes the power in such masculine vulnerability by saying, “This desire to reestablish the penis, when seen alongside the failed masculinity of the men populating Apatow’s films, seems much less about ‘helping’ America get beyond its unfamiliarity with cinematic male bodies than it seems about reasserting the phallic dominance of the men in perhaps the last way possible” (13). That is, for all the vulnerability that comes along with the cinematic representation of the penis, there nevertheless remains the attempted retrieval of dominance. Furthermore, just as in the phallic stage of psychosexual development the child begins to understand the physical differences between male and female, the phallo-bromantic male differentiates himself from the bromantic comedy’s females, who, though they may possess the symbolic phallus, will never possess the physical penis.

The resistance to enter the Symbolic Order (or Oedipal adulthood), as demonstrated by the bromantic male’s bodily fixations and transgressions, perpetuates this model of white, American masculinity to be perceived as “man-children.”
Greven notes that the bromantic male is “often read as indicative of a new crisis in American masculinity—men who refuse to grow up, get jobs, get out of their parents’ house, get wives, get lives” (“I Love You Brom-Bones” 405). While the public may decry this image as a masculine crisis, the arrested adolescence of the bromantic male actually serves a hegemonic purpose. Just as the problem of work discussed in the previous section allows the bromantic male to hold onto a nebulous identity, the problems of the body allow him to exist in the hyphen between man and child. The man-child then is the ultimate in-between, the perfect nebulous creation to deal with the anxieties and fears surrounding the Symbolic Order. As Geoff King writes, “The Pre-Oedipal has been characterized in various accounts—drawing on and extrapolating from Freud—as a world of fluid, unstructured and unstable possibilities, before the erection of social prohibitions. This is seen as potentially liberating, although less in terms of what it might actually be like to inhabit the Pre-Oedipal realm than through the contrast it appears to offer to the constraints of the adult and/or social arena” (78).

While the bromantic male’s youthful fixations (like toys, pornography, drugs, and games) encourage the man-child label, their physical bodies help seal the deal. In the case of Superbad, where the protagonists are actually adolescents, their physiques play into their understood androgyne where “the excessive sexual and anatomically graphic boasting of the main characters is tempered both by their physical incarnation as androgynous/asexual/childlike, whether in terms of Jonah Hill’s round features and baby-like physique or Michael Cera’s underdeveloped body and large, doe-like eyes” (Alberti 57). For the older man-children, their boyish features perpetuate the same
ambiguity and post-Oedipal anxiety. The less-defined physiques and babyish facial expressions of actors like Will Ferrell, John C Reilly, Vince Vaughn, and Steve Carell land them numerous roles as filmic man-children both in and out of the bromantic comedy cycle. In the case of Paul Rudd, star of many of these bromantic comedies, his own career has been built around his body’s ability to navigate the in-between channels of boy and man, gay and straight, hero or comic foil. As Alberti describes, “Possessed of a boyish version of leading man looks, Rudd first appeared in movies as the aspirational heterosexual love interest in Clueless, even rescuing the character of Cher from a mugger. Since then, his roles often involve using sarcasm and irony to undermine his attractiveness, while playing both gay and straight characters within romantic comedies” (39).

At the pinnacle of man-childhood is another specific character type, the “big baby.” Overweight and rambunctious, the big baby character is often portrayed by Seth Rogen, Jonah Hill, or Zach Galifianakis. Their presence takes man-child to the logical extreme; because of their size they are technically more man, and because of their emotionally stunted immaturity they are also more child. Hall Pass’ big baby, nicknamed Hog Head (Larry Joe Campbell), actually at one point runs across a golf course yelling, “I have to go poo!” In a New York Times article, critics A.O. Scott and Manohla Dargis target the man-child character with adept precision:

Today’s soft, squishy men with their jelly-bellies and superegos built for laughs and high jinks, may not be new, but their resurgent, nay, ballooning presence is food for thought. Some big babies are designed for family viewing, like smiley, sexless Kevin James, neutered and nice, while others, exemplified by Zach Galifianakis, skew edgier, crueler, with beards, R-ratings, mayhem in their hearts and even women in their beds. Maybe these recent tubs of guts exist to reassure
Americans of their own ever-increasing waistlines, are embodiments of the new infantilism or just a recycled familiar type. At the very least, their soft bodies tend to render these characters as sexually unthreatening and cuddly, redefining male sex appeal and shifting the burden of attractiveness entirely onto their usually hot female love interests. Judd Apatow partly built a career on a zaftig variation of what the literary critic Leslie A. Fiedler called the Good Bad Boy, those imps who eventually shed their mischievousness for domesticated normalcy. (AR1)

Scott and Dargis note that this image is not entirely new (think Jackie Gleason or Lou Costello), but the recent resurgence is definitely worthy of note. The modern big baby, then, serves as a symbolic dumping ground for masculinity’s fears and anxieties about the body as well as fears and anxieties about growing up. In that, the big baby functions as the bromantic man-child’s fearful image of his potential self—he is both celebrated for his refusal to grow up, but also derided for his inability to do so.

What keeps the bromantic man-child in a state of arrested adolescence is also what helps him succeed in the narrative. Rather than completely shed his youthful obsessions, the bromantic male is actually encouraged to embrace them, expecting the film’s women to love him for being true to himself. This is seen quite clearly in the relationship between Andy and Trish in *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*. Rather than leave childish things behind, love seems to necessitate a certain amount of childlike freedom. As Saul Austerlitz writes, “Surrounded by frat brothers, Andy is more of a Peter Pan, his toys and his solitude keeping him forever boyish. Andy makes a woeful guy, which eventually makes him an ideal [romantic partner]” (373). This harkens back to another Apatow moment that finds Ben and Pete watching the kids in *Knocked Up*. As the children run around the park, blowing bubbles, Pete says to Ben, “I wish I liked anything as much as they liked bubbles... their smiling faces just point out your inability to enjoy
anything,” suggesting adulthood as the loss of freedoms and enjoyments of childhood.

To get back on track, they have to (re)embrace their inner man-child.

No Sex Please, We’re Skittish: The Problem of Romance

Chapter 1 of this project provided a brief mention of an online article from Screen Junkies that featured a list of tips on how to write a bromance. Written rather playfully, the article nevertheless reveals some of the obvious underlying tendencies across the cycle. Concerning the act of sex, the writer of the article mentions a particular way the bromantic comedy handles hook ups:

There has to be the moment in the movie where our hero hooks up with the girl he has had his eye on. Scratch that. He at least needs to hook-up with some chick. That’s a must. If it is with the girl he wants to be with, great, but the coming together of dude and chick needs to happen. But here’s the important part of the hook-up: it’s rarely sweet, cute, or sexy. It’s usually quite the opposite — proving to us dudes that we’re not crazy and the fumbling around is par for the sex course (please back me up on this). No guy wants to sit and watch some sappy love scene of a dorky dude hooking-up. What we do want to see is a dorky dude bumbling his way through sex — like so many of us have. If there can be boobs showcased during this scene, you have just written a homerun piece of literature. (“How to Write a Bromance”)

This comment, though elementary in its own analysis and perhaps misguided in its definition of “literature,” is still somewhat poignant in its simplicity, citing sexual conquest as a terrifying goal. Here, the bromantic perception of sex seems to take part in a broader shift in erotic representation. As Katie Roiphe writes about literature, the modern younger writers “are so self-conscious, so steeped in a certain kind of liberal education,” (BR9) that “our new batch of young or youngish male novelists are not dreaming up Portnoys or Rabbits. The current sexual style is more childlike; innocence is more fashionable than virility, the cuddle preferable to sex” (BR8).
Just as the failures of work and body have helped infantilize the bromantic male, so too does this failing in sexual relationships highlight the childlike vulnerability of the bromantic male, especially compared to his various female love interests, who are anything but childlike and vulnerable. The sexual failings of the bromantic brethren may take one of a few different forms. In some cases, the men fail at having sex (Superbad, the 40 Year-Old Virgin). In other cases, the problems are a love life that has turned unsatisfying (Hall Pass, The Hangover). Others follow a more typical romantic comedy trajectory where the commitment potential of the male is called into question (I love You, Man, Role Models). While these romantic storylines are not entirely unique, the representation of the bromantic male adds its own touch to the narrative. By that, bromantic male leads, through their homosocial relationships, carefully work to rearticulate their image away from sexual failures to an image of sexual victims.

The image of man-as-victim perpetuated here accentuates the reactionary element of bromantic masculinity, especially in a period of perceived cultural shifts. Michael Kimmel notes that the traditional view of masculinity has been “defined by the drive for power, for domination, for control,” which Kimmel then modifies by saying in his analysis that “manhood is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us, having power or control over us” (Manhood in America 6). If the political “wind chill” is indeed reflective of Rosin’s assertion that “women are beginning to hold the cards,” then the fear of control might be a very real possibility for the modern male. The bromantic vision of masculinity, then, rather than denying the fear of control, embraces the image of victimhood and emphasizes masculine
vulnerability. “The vulnerable, victimized male masculinity in these narratives,” writes Alilunas, “represents less of an ‘accurate’ portrayal of contemporary men than the latest constructed amalgamation designed to elicit cultural support in an era when white male authority finds itself unable to maintain uninterrogated dominance” (14).

The elicitation of support by highlighting the sexual vulnerabilities of the male protagonist against a backdrop of masculinity often synonymous with sexual vulgarity is perhaps most clearly seen in Andy in *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*, who elicits audience and cultural support because he fails to live up to the promiscuous masculine ideals laid out by his male coworkers. In Andy, the problems of sex and body go hand-on-hand. He is routinely, and humorously depicted as having little to no control over his body, such as having an erection for more than four hours despite not taking any pills. The lack of control Andy feels about his body is contrasted with the women in the film who seem to have great control over theirs. Thus, Andy’s lack of sexual conquests stems from the issue of control, and Andy’s lack of control diminishes his image of masculine predation, making him appear more vulnerable and able to garner greater cultural support. Similarly, John (Owen Wilson) and Jeremy (Vince Vaughn) in *Wedding Crashers* seduce female wedding attendees through “the enactment of behavior cynically calculated to appear unpredatory: through crying at the beauty of the service, dancing with the littlest flower girl, or making balloon animals and playing with kids. These performances of emotional good-Joe niceness have been finely calibrated to evoke an aura of difference from the norm, specialness, and marriageability: John and Jeremy are prepared to risk seeming unmanly in the short term because they reap the benefits in
the bedroom” (Jeffers McDonald, “Very Little Wrist Movement” 856). Though the wedding crashers’ vulnerability is carefully calculated, and Andy’s is entirely unintentional, the results, both narratively and culturally, are ultimately the same.

In similar fashion, the narrative trajectory of Role Models allows for the same kind of celebration and success in vulnerability for Danny. Whereas the Sturdy Wings program unites Wheeler with Ronnie, Danny is paired with Augie (Christopher Mintz-Plasse) who Sturdy Wings leader Sweeny is clear to mention is “one of the older kids.” At about fourteen years old, Augie certainly is one of the older kids and he is introduced in the film fighting a make-believe medieval battle on the roof of the Sturdy Wings building. Augie finds only misery at home; his mother comes across as uncaring and his step dad makes no attempt to understand Augie’s interests. The only happiness Augie finds is in LAIRE, which stands for “Live Action Interactive Role-Playing Explorers”—a game that allows him to live out his medieval fantasies with others. An outburst from Danny at one of the LAIRE events gets Augie kicked out of the upcoming Battle Royale, eliminating the one source of happiness from Augie’s life. Of course, the Battle Royale serves as the film’s climactic moment, and an opportunity for Danny to fix things with Augie, Wheeler, and his girlfriend, Beth. To enter the battle, the four male characters enter as a new clan, called “Kiss-My- Anthia,” and enter dressed as the heavy metal band KISS. In the playfulness of the fantasy battle, Danny is able to regain the cultural support that these films suggest comes with embracing infantile modes of adulthood. As Aisenberg suggests, “By Role Models’ end we see that the real purpose of the men’s mentoring kids has nothing to do with learning to grow up and take responsibility, as I’m
sure the filmmaker’s thought, but as a means of keeping the grown men in a state of boy-like juvenile gross-out, which allows their iffy relations to seem ‘normal’” (“Here Come the Bromides”).

In the tradition of the Hollywood romantic comedy, Danny makes his grand speech in the form of a song. Despite still not having a job he now chooses to be happy with his life (which apparently is all Beth ever really wanted) and the two confirm their engagement with the anticipation of the altar and a happily resolved heterosexual coupling. What is clear in these bromantic comedies is that the bromantic males do not actually use these homosocial bonds to learn how to grow up, rather, their weaknesses and vulnerabilities and childlike tendencies are celebrated—changed from masculine failures to new definitions of success wherein they get the beautiful women and the successful romantic relationships.

The infantilization of masculinity in the bromantic comedy reveals a masculinity that, in fearful reaction to an uncertain social landscape where white, heterosexual patriarchal control is no longer free from unexamined normalcy, is desperate to rearticulate the nature of adult masculinity. In its infantilization of the bromantic male, the cycle of films perpetuate a model of masculinity that exists in a nebulous state, where the identity is yet-to-be-determined and the mobility of choice and agency are still very real. In this nebulous state of masculinity, vulnerability is perhaps man’s greatest tool, used to garner cultural support as well as redefine successful masculinity and embrace maturity, “[b]ut this apparent maturity occurs according to their terms.”
They dictate the rules, the methods, and the parameters. In effect, they rig the game” (Alilunas 14).

White, heterosexual men, through the process of infantilization, are given the freedom of choice in the bromantic comedy denied to those that are not white, heterosexual, or men. The promise and fantasy of childhood, narrativized most obviously by LAIRE in *Role Models* is an effort to maintain dominance, but only for the group who already has the ability and social capital to choose that as an effort in the first place. It is quite clearly a more recent interpretation of Susan Jeffords’ “Big Switch,” as she describes, “…the image of the sensitive man calls up, for me, the male person who, while enjoying the position of unbelievable privilege, also has the privilege of gentleness. And this is finally what troubles me most about these films and the cultural arguments they represent: that the transformations undergone by white male characters do nothing to address the consequences of the privileges associated with white U.S. masculinities” (“The Big Switch” 207). By nature of their status as white, heterosexual males, only the bromantic males in the cycle are granted the ability to turn the failings of work, failings of the body, and failings of sex into new images of patriarchal “success.”
“I MAY NEVER LEAVE. I MIGHT JUST STAY IN VEGAS”: THE PATRIARCHAL RETREAT AS HEGEMONIC RITE-OF-PASSAGE

Following her termination from her job in *Reality Bites* (1994), Lelaina (Winona Ryder), perturbed by the hardships of post-college life, says, “Why can’t things just go back to normal at the end of the half hour, like on *The Brady Bunch*?” Her response to being fired relates to what Jonathon Oake calls mainstream media’s tendency to “denigrate Xers for their perverse attachment to fantasy instead of reality,” as he goes on to say that “reality is compared to mediated fantasy and is found to be deficient. A fundamental continuity between reality and mediated fantasy is hinted at, whereby the former emerges as merely a degraded subset of the latter” (93). This moment in *Reality Bites* comes to mind when viewing a scene from Judd Apatow’s *Knocked Up* that finds Ben and Pete drinking beers in a dark, mostly empty saloon. They have each had fights with their respective women and now turn to each other to grumble:

**Ben:** If I wrote out the list of shit Allison doesn’t let me do, like, it would be endless. Don’t smoke pot, don’t have samurai swords in your room, don’t have illegal grow operations in the house. I mean, like, I could go on all fucking day! Have I told her to stop doing anything? Ever? No!

**Pete:** Marriage is like that show *Everybody Loves Raymond*, but it’s not funny. All the problems are the same, but it’s... you know, instead of all the funny, pithy dialogue, everybody’s just really pissed off and tense. Marriage is like an unfunny, tense version of *Everybody Loves Raymond*. But it doesn’t last twenty-two minutes...it lasts forever.

At the heart of both these scenes, for the young Gen Xer in 1994 and for the bromantic males in 2007, is that the reality before them is inferior to their mediated expectations.
For Ben and Pete, the roles and responsibilities of the heteronormative patriarchal structure, the mundanity of monogyny, and the judgment of women deny them the freedom of what they believe to be true masculine expression, insisting that they, as men, are the victims of the dominant ideological structure.

The previous chapters of this project discuss how the bromantic comedy’s images of heterosexual male friendship and infantilized masculinity work toward traditional hegemonic goals of heteronormative male superiority. In this chapter, the image of man-as-victim is taken one step further. The central message of the Hollywood romantic comedy (the power of heteronormative coupling) is called into question, and masculinity is presented as captive of the dominant structure. The monogamous captivity of the heteronormative couple and “traditional” family structure are regularly criticized in these films as either stifling (restricting man’s true nature) or boring (failing to compete with the wild pleasures found in a homosocial setting). With these attitudes about marriage and family at the forefront of the male characters’ minds, the narratives introduce a “bromantic escape”—a retreat from patriarchy that allows the male characters to lick their wounds and question their place within the dominant structure. While the bromantic escape appears to be a way for the men to challenge the conventional attitudes of heteronormativity central to the romantic comedy tradition, the escape, rather, ultimately serves to uphold these attitudes. By that, the homosocial grouping is both the site where the status quo of male dominance is questioned, and also the site where male dominance is rigorously maintained.
The True “Nature” of Man

Such bestial terms mentioned above (like “wild,” “captivity,” and “lick their wounds”) are used purposefully as the bromantic comedy frequently makes mention that man’s true nature is animalistic and fierce. Therefore, despite (or, perhaps, because of) the bromantic male’s image as gentler, more expressive, and more vulnerable (as has been discussed in the previous two chapters), the bromantic comedy makes a special effort to reinforce essentialist notions of gender beneath the male’s more liberal façade. This essentialist ideology stresses that “the construction of male gender requires one's molding into a masculine role, which presupposes autonomy, competition, and aggressiveness, and the suppression of the innate human needs for connectedness, intimacy, and self-disclosure, which have been traditionally devalued as feminine traits” (Philaretau and Allen 1). Even further, the bromantic comedy suggests that failing to release man’s primal urges from time to time only promotes failure elsewhere. A discussion between Sydney Fife and Peter Klaven in I Love You, Man bespeaks this primal ideological emphasis. As the two male characters walk along the Venice Beach boardwalk, they discuss realtor Peter’s difficulty in selling a house owned by actor Lou Ferrigno. Sydney encourages Peter to mold into the masculine role of autonomy, competition and aggressiveness in order to fix his work related problems. In other words, Sydney urges a primal release, as their discussion reveals:

Sydney:  Peter, I am a man, I have an ocean of testosterone flowing through my veins. Society tells us to act civilized, but the truth is we’re animals, and sometimes you got to let it out. Try it.

Peter:  I’m not going to start screaming in the middle of the Venice boardwalk.
The two men then find a secluded spot underneath the boardwalk where Peter lets out a faint, forced attempt at a scream. Sydney responds by saying “That was, that was really good. Now, gently remove your tampon and try again.” Sydney’s words—which not only equate weakness with the female body, but also promote essentialist masculine notions—are accentuated by the presence of Lou Ferrigno in the film’s narrative. Ferrigno, a professional body builder and actor, is most famous for playing the titular character in CBS’ *The Incredible Hulk* (1978-1982). In the show, The Hulk serves as the Mr. Hyde-type to Bruce Banner’s Dr. Jekyll, and the large, muscular monster is only released when Banner becomes angry. Whether intentional on the part of the filmmakers or not, Ferrigno’s presence in *I Love You, Man* provides a metaphorical reflection of the notions of gender described by Sydney to Peter.

In the first installment of *The Hangover* franchise, while on the roof of Caesar’s Palace, Alan makes a rather awkward toast to the group shortly before the “wolf pack” (the animalistic term Alan applies to the group) inadvertently drinks their blackout-inducing roofie cocktails. Alan’s toast concludes with the lines, “Four of us wolves, running around the desert together, looking for strippers and cocaine.” His words here add a predatory quality to the already animalistic understanding of essentialist masculinity. One of the many criticisms of *The Hangover* films, especially the first and second installments, is how the predatory nature of essentialized masculinity promotes rape humor in the film. As Terri Carney writes in *Bright Lights Film Journal*, “*The Hangover* makes a joke out of date rape by compelling us to laugh at the madcap antics of men on roofies, at the cameo appearance of convicted rapist Mike Tyson, and at the
cardboard women characters as shrews, sluts, and sirens. A symbolic dismissal of date rape through calculated, cheap laughs clears the way for Phillips' bottomless nostalgia for sharply defined gender roles” (“Still Hungover”). The rape imagery and humor is magnified and takes on more homophobic implications in *The Hangover Part II*, when it is revealed that, in another drug-induced forgotten night, Stu was “fucked” by a “Thai lady-boy.” While not every film in the bromantic comedy cycle promotes rape culture as does *The Hangover* films, the assumed nature of man-as predator and the anxiety produced when one fails to live up to that assumed essential trait can be seen elsewhere. For example, when *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*’s Jay (Romany Malco) is teaching virgin Andy how to behave in a dance club, he informs him, “All you got to do is use your instincts. How do you think a lion knows to tackle a gazelle? It’s written, it's a code written in his DNA, says, ‘Tackle the gazelle.’ And believe it or not, in every man there's a code written that says, ‘Tackle drunk bitches.’”

Envy for those characters who seem able to live up to these so-called essential masculine paradigms causes anxiety and grief for the bromantic males who are not able to do so. In the case of the bromantic comedy, that envy is most generally directed to the bachelor. As A.O Scott and Manohla Dargis write, “In comedies, the Bachelor is desired by women who want him and by men who yearn to have what he has, namely women who are neither wives nor girlfriends” (AR1). The bachelor, such as *I Love You, Man*’s Sydney, *Role Models*’ Wheeler, *The Change-Up*’s Mitch Planko (Ryan Reynolds), represents a man who is free to express the assumed essential masculine qualities of predatory promiscuity, without the restrictions placed on him by a heteronormative
relationship. “To be the husband…is to be henpecked and undersexed, but also to be protected from dangerous libidinal desires,” write Scott and Dargis of the comedic husband paradigm, who go on to say, “Oddly, being a father, which is, technically, the result of heterosexual you-know-what, and therefore, symbolically, proof of manhood, is looked at in movies as a state of emasculation” (AR1).

Bros Before Hoes

Emasculation, in the sense of the bromantic comedy, is understood as being denied the ability to express essentialist, animalistic notions of masculinity as discussed above. In the bromantic comedy, the male dialogue, narrative structure, and female characterizations place responsibility for the bromantic male’s emasculation on the shoulders of women. Referring more specifically to the work of Todd Phillips (director of The Hangover films), Peter Alilunas writes, “Yet these films do not blame such vulnerabilities on a vague or neutral force, rather they assign it quite forcefully to women… The result, as these films make continually clear, is a need to connect the containment of those women to the potential for a successful ‘manhood’” (13).

We have now used the term “containment” in two different senses. Masculinity appears to be contained by the dominant patriarchal structures, and women are contained by the bromantic comedy for the recuperation of successful masculinity. With women being such a source of anguish, judgment, and emasculation for the bromantic male, it should come as no surprise that the films are commonly criticized for their misogynistic humor. Even articles that praise these films for more “enlightened” images of masculinity must mention the misogynistic humor, noting, “rather than use the
epithet ‘fag’ to indicate heterosexual dominance, however, the common insult boys hurl at boys in *Superbad* is ‘pussy.’ While this may be a politically correct attempt to avoid insulting homosexuals, insulting women, apparently, is still culturally permitted” (Bulman and McCants 69). Additionally, film reviews saying “*The Hangover*: It might be misogynist, but it’s still the American comedy of the year” note that despite commercial success, *The Hangover* is still guilty of sexist humor (Tookey). This misogynistic tendency includes not just the dialogue of the male characters, who routinely equate weakness and lack of empowerment with femininity (a male character is told to not “let the door hit you in the vagina on the way out” after he leaves a fantasy baseball draft to be with his wife), but also the roles that women occupy within the narratives. As Joseph Aisenberg writes, “Though women are of course greatly desired objects in these movies, they represent an unknowable threat to the men’s group cohesion. Thus most of the females in them, with a couple of exceptions, are either screeching bitches, bosomy sluts, blonde idiots, oversexed grandmas or self-obsessed professionals” (“Here Come the Bromides”).

In January of 2008, Katherine Heigl, who plays Allison in Judd Apatow’s *Knocked Up*, was vocal in an interview for *Vanity Fair* about her criticism of the way females are represented in the bromantic comedy. “‘It was a little sexist,’ she says. ‘It paints the women as shrews, as humorless and uptight, and it paints the men as lovable, goofy, fun-loving guys. It exaggerated the characters, and I had a hard time with it, on some days’” (qtd. in Bennetts). Her comments, though aimed specifically at her character in *Knocked Up*, also ring true for Apatow’s first feature film as writer, director, and
producer, *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*. In *Virgin*, most of the women are equated with physical violence against the men. “[Andy’s] mother and Paula (Jane Lynch) intimidated him with their superior authority and body size. The drunk girl (Leslie Mann) aggressively manhandled him...Beth (Elizabeth Banks) physically beats Andy, states her desire to sleep with him, but then ignores him” (Patterson “Do You Know How I Know You’re Gay?”).

Even with all the disparagement of Apatow’s female characters, critics of misogynistic representation often find more faults in Todd Phillip’s films. As Adam Sternbergh writes in the *New York Times Magazine*, “Apatow’s boys are usually fringe geeks or happy outcasts (comedy nerds, career stoners), while Phillips’s characters are unhappy, neutered or denatured adults: dentists, stereo salesmen, sad-sack husbands and henpecked clods. In Apatow, the enemy is adulthood, which ruins life; in Phillips, the enemy is women, who ruin men” (48). An examination of the few female roles in Phillips’ *The Hangover* reveals quite effectively the problems of representation in the bromantic comedy. While each member of the wolf pack, sans Alan, has a romantic partner, not one relationship is represented in any kind of positive fashion. As Richard Corliss writes for *Time* magazine: “The women in The Hangover, with the fleeting exception of Heather Graham, who plays a hooker with a baby, are creatures either to ignore or flee from. Phil's wife makes no impression, Doug's bride-to-be is a briefly seen figure of increasing anxiety and Stu's longtime girlfriend is a shrew from Shrewsville” (“The Hangover”). Perhaps the worst female representation is Stu’s girlfriend Melissa who emasculates Stu so much that he feels compelled to lie to her about the location of
the bachelor party. Her status as emasculating, power-holding shrew is taken to the extreme in the final scene when, back from the Vegas misadventures, Stu breaks up with her. Her response is to say, “Suck my dick!” indicating a fleeting grasp on the metaphorical phallus over Stu who has apparently “grown a pair” on his Las Vegas getaway. Stu’s breakup with Melissa is referred to in an early scene in *The Hangover Part II*, when Phil shouts at Stu, “Take Vegas out of the equation and you would have married a cunt!”

This examination of *The Hangover* women is not to say that all women are represented so poorly within bromantic comedies, though it is indicative of the cycle’s broad trends. Films like *I Love You, Man* and *Hall Pass* at least give some agency and screen time to their women. After all, *I Love You, Man’s* Zooey actually encourages her fiancée Peter to find male friendships, believing that his doing so will make him happy. Peter’s willingness to follow this encouragement is not because Zooey is a “ball buster” like Melissa in *The Hangover* or because his romantic relationship is disintegrating. Rather, he seeks a male friend believing it will help him be the kind of man who will be good in a marriage. In *Hall Pass*, which involves two wives giving their husbands a weeklong break (a “hall pass”) from marriage, the story becomes almost as much about the women as the men. However, even in the rare bromantic comedy films that do not represent females as either loathsome caricatures or ineffectual place-fillers, the women in these films still serve to deny the expression of essentialist masculinity, to censor manhood. Even the ever-encouraging Zooey in *I Love You, Man* alerts Peter of the “weirdness” of his lack of male friends when he overhears her chatting with her
female friends. “Honestly,” she says, “I think his best friend is his mom.” Because their very existence (in the narrative and the bromantic males’ lives), whether malicious or not, encourages the perception of containment, the traditional patriarchal setting is no longer considered a safe environment for masculine expression and articulation of gender anxiety. Therefore, the bromantic comedy involves an escape, a retreat from the patriarchal structure and the judgmental presence of women. In this way, the bromantic comedy seems to provide a whitewashed reaffirmation of literary critic Leslie Fiedler’s assertion that the interracial male friendships found across many American novels provided a site of male escape from women, the home, and domestic duties, to “escape the mothers of the world, who are wholly committed to respectable codes of piety and success” (352).

Fantasy of Escape

The anxieties associated with failed masculinity—the perception of losing one’s upper hand in the patriarchal structure or failing to live up to masculine ideals—motivate the bonding moments of the bromantic comedy. “The touchy feely brotherhood bonding can at times resemble 1970s feminist consciousness raising groups,” say Scott and Dargis, who qualify their statement by saying, “except with guys sitting around yammering about their lives and relationships (or lack thereof) while passing around a bong instead of a speculum” (AR1). This image of men working out their relationship issues through the close intimacy of the bromance against the backdrop of intemperate desires (like smoking weed, chugging beers, ingesting mushrooms, gambling, playing video games, and watching strippers) allows for the
exclusion of women and the celebration of uncontained masculinity and socially transgressive behavior. Even the bromantic bonds are somewhat transgressive as David Greven writes, “While [bromantic comedies] generally are ‘marriage comedies,’ ensuring the progression of their protagonists to a properly married state, they also provide some challenges to this enduring model of male development... several Beta Male films depict men as cleaving—transgressively, in that to do so they defy their wives—to their male friends beyond marriage” (“I Love You Brom Bones” 406).

In this sense, the bromance functions as a kind of modern men’s movement that allows the bromantic male to explore masculinity free from female judgment. Discussing men’s movements of the 1990s (just another in a long line of male attempts at female exclusion and self-empowerment), Michael Kimmel and Michael Kaufman write:

Dozens of therapists and "mytho-poetic" journeymen currently offer workshops, retreats and seminars to facilitate their "gender journey," to "heal their father wounds" so that they may retrieve the "inner king," the "warrior within," or the "wildman." And hundreds of thousands of men have heeded the call of the wildman, embraced this new masculinity, and become weekend warriors... The men's movement assumes a deep, essential manhood, and its retrieval is the solution. Manhood is seen as a deeply seated essence, an ingrained quality awaiting activation in the social world. Intrinsic to every man, manhood is transhistorical and culturally universal. (4)

Perhaps here is another reason that part of the bonding that occurs between Sydney and Peter in *I Love You, Man* happens while “jamming” to the song “Tom Sawyer” made famous by the rock band Rush. The song, obviously invoking the image of Mark Twain’s titular character, deals with masculinity, adolescence, and society, with lyrics like “No, his mind is not for rent/To any god or government/Always hopeful, yet discontent/He knows changes aren't permanent/But change is.” While other bonding moments in
bromantic comedies do not rely on professional therapists and preplanned workshops to facilitate their gender journey as described by Kimmel and Kaufman, they nevertheless do rely on a resurfacing of essentialist understandings of gender.

The “ingrained quality” that Kimmel describes as “awaiting activation in the social world” is activated in the bromantic comedy through the bonding moments that occur in the patriarchal escape. While many of these films feature an actual journey into the wild—be it the forests of Washington State in *Without a Paddle* or the glitzy, manufactured wilds of Las Vegas in *The Hangover* and *Knocked Up*—most bromantic males achieve their “gender journeys” just below the surface of everyday civilization. Just as man’s animalistic nature is considered to exist underneath the civilized façade of the bromantic male’s demeanor, the safe places for male bonding and escape can also exist underneath the civilized façade of the bromantic male’s environment. After hours, *The 40-Year Old Virgin*’s Smart Tech electronics store is transformed into the guys’ poker palace. Dark and smoke-filled, it becomes the place where Andy’s virginity is revealed to the group, and his gender journey begins with the help of his male coworkers-turned-friends. In *Knocked Up*, Ben and his stoner buddies live together in an ordinary suburban house, which serves as both a place where Ben can articulate his male anxiety at the prospect of being a father and also where the males can smoke weed and discuss movie nude scenes. For Sydney in *I Love You, Man*, his safe place is located in his own backyard. His “man-cave” is a dimly lit garage that houses multiple television sets, musical instruments, and even a jerk-off station.
When Peter asks Sydney what he says to women who see his garage, Sydney responds, “This is the man-cave, there’s no women allowed in here. I got a jerk-off station for God’s sake.” Like bromance, man-cave is a portmanteau that has grown considerably in usage in the last five years. Understood as a room in or near the house designed exclusively for masculine tastes, the man-cave phenomenon has inspired businesses aimed at man-cave decoration (McKeough D6), books on man-cave celebration (Wilser and Yost), and websites, such as “The Official Man Cave Site” which offers man-cave forums and guides and features the tagline “Taking Back the World One Man Cave at a Time!” On one hand, “man-cave” invokes the use of “man” as discussed in Chapter 2, a prefix that works to save aspects of the bromantic relationship that might slip into something other than heterosexual and masculine. The “cave,” however, also implies darkness, seclusion, and a return to primordial, essentialist masculine urges, and any non-male who enters disrupts the masculine sovereignty of the safe place. This depiction of Neanderthal-like masculinity accentuates the wildness of masculinity by turning any new observer of the man-cave, like Peter when he first sees Sydney’s guesthouse, into a makeshift anthropologist of bromantic masculinity. The “ethnographic observer figure” writes David Greven, “is exemplified by Knocked Up’s Katherine Heigl and her outsider perspective on Seth Rogen’s private homosocial realm. Adding to the tropes of exoticism and anthropological scrutiny, this male group world is represented as emblematic of arrested development—a primitive throwback disrupted by the presence of the modern woman” (“I Love You Brom Bones” 407).
While *The Hangover* does not have a dark garage or house to serve as man-cave, the film does turn to the liminal spaces of Las Vegas (strip clubs, the desert, rooftops) to offer the wolf pack a patriarchal escape in their “gender journey.” In his review of the film, A.O. Scott writes that *The Hangover* “is much more panicked by the idea of heterosexuality, from whose terrors and traps the whole Vegas adventure is an escape. The city itself is not a place of sin but rather, for Stu, Phil and Alan, an Eden of the narcissistic, infantile id” (C10). This concept of Las Vegas as “Eden” and the homosocial realms as utopian escapes work in these films to contrast the containment by women with the freedom of wild, playful masculinity. The homosocial retreat articulates what Geoff King calls the “politics of play.” The façade of civilized masculinity is stripped away as an insincere covering for “essential” gender expression. Connecting the issue of escape to the concept of infantilized masculinity discussed in the previous chapter, Geoff King continues, “What is asserted by many of these films is the existence and value of an essentially primary and ‘natural’ realm of human existence. Social roles and structures may be seen as necessary or unavoidable, but they are often viewed as essentially secondary and prone to corruption. The childish comic figure is celebrated as one capable of seeing or breaking through what is characterized as a veneer of social conventions based on dishonesty and hypocrisy” (87). In that way, the retreats, like the Las Vegas getaway, work to invert the social norms in favor of essentialist notions that work for what Robert Walser calls “exscription”—the “total denial of gender anxieties through the articulation of fantastic worlds without women” (110).
True exscription, of course, would ultimately deny the bromantic males the opportunity to regain their patriarchal roles, and would also eliminate the potential for heterosexual conquests—a motivation for nearly all bromantic males. Therefore, rather than completely eject women, the bromantic escapes serve to facilitate the retrieval of the ‘inner king,’ to use Kimmel’s term. In Alilunas’ words, “The apparent double-bind in which these men situate themselves (they sexually desire the same women they must exclude) creates the potential for the loss of male autonomy that might occur were these men to cede some authority to the women in the construction of equal relationships... Thus the containment through exclusion can be seen as part of a process to ‘have’ masculinity” (5). In this sense, the bromantic escape becomes what David Greven refers to as the “dugout where the boys catch their breath in the game of heterosexual conquest” (“Dude Where’s My Gender” 16).

Return to Patriarchy

With the need to regain patriarchal control, and the desire for heterosexual conquest, the absolute exclusion of women is problematized. For one thing, women’s presence is inherently necessary for the perceived desire of their containment to be understood as desirable. Also, the hegemonic motivations of masculinity are rendered useless if there is no group with which to negotiate. Therefore, while the bromantic escapes do function as a way to contain or exclude women, it is the men who are actually policed. While the containment of women is revealed to be important to the group cohesion and the overcoming of victimizing judgment, the bromance is really less about the problems of women and more about the roles of men. This concept informs
Alberti’s chapter on the bromance as he discusses the cycle of films and their tackling of male identity. In his chapter, he discusses how males question their possible obsolescence within the heteronormative romance as well as, on a more self-reflexive level, masculinity’s possible obsolescence in the heteronormative romantic comedy genre. Responding to this as an internal conflict for the men, Alberti says “although many bromances feature a version of the traditional ‘battle of the sexes,’ this conflict operates less as an argument between women and men or a complaint of women against men than as an internal struggle of the male characters with their understanding of their identities and roles as men” (29).

Alberti also discusses how the bromantic comedy’s “obsession with male narrative function is itself a sign of anxiety over the genres of male performance” (43). The bromantic escape, then, is precisely the place where “anxiety over the genres of male performance” can be reflected upon. In this sense, The Hangover is exemplary of the concept of male reflection as the narrative ties the act of recall over a forgotten night to the act of recalling the bromantic males’ masculine roles. Following the wolf pack’s rooftop toast, a time-lapse sequence over the Las Vegas skyline indicates to the film’s audience that an entire night has passed. The film then cuts to the inside of the hotel suite that finds the men of the wolf pack passed out amidst the mess of a wild night. There is burned furniture, a live chicken, bottles, clothing, even a tiger—all things that allude to a night of carnivalesque debauchery. The only thing missing from this bachelor party is the groom-to-be, Doug (Justin Bartha). The wolf pack’s inability to
remember the night’s events turns them into bromantic detectives, following clues in order to find their lost friend.

As Leslie Harbridge notes, it is the group’s attempt to recall the events of the forgotten night that most encourages the bromantic bonding. “Phillips’ *The Hangover,*” writes Harbridge, “concentrates on the fall-out; the aftermath wherein the men’s inability to recall any of the previous night’s antics render them particularly awkward and paranoid around one another. As I note here, it is in this space of (though sometimes hazy, hungover) reflection that the men, ultimately, may find themselves most at ease with one another. If the primary acts of shared drunkenness and debauchery facilitate only facile, ‘superficial interaction’ it is, in the end, as a result of the secondary acts of recall that the most tangible opportunities for male bonding may present themselves” (8). Of course, the act of recall and bonding serves two purposes for the group—it helps them find their lost friend (he was stuck on the hotel’s roof) and it encourages them to reflect on their roles as men (with those awful women discussed above).

The act of reflection by *The Hangover’s* wolf pack serves to reaffirm the central drives of the romantic comedy and its screwball relatives. It must not be forgotten that for all the marriage-bashing, misogynistic ranting, and transgressive male behaviors that occur in the film, the group is working to save a wedding, and the film closes in a somewhat typical romantic comedy fashion. As Harbridge writes, “*The Hangover,* then, would seem to enact the psychological (and, often, physical) transformation common to the road movie and, further, like its screwball predecessors may be ultimately
conservative: in reuniting the lost groom with an implausibly naïve and forgiving bride, the backlash of *The Hangover* seems to be double backed upon” (9). Harbridge goes on in her essay to say that the conservative message of the film is undermined by the “liminal spaces” of the film, namely the DVD extra features and the closing credit montage of still images from the night in question. However, though these aspects, including the non-linear narrative structure, do reject a purely simple interpretation of the film, the patriarchal heteronormative couple is still the treasure whose preservation is understood as essential. In this way, the bromantic comedy carries with it the same notions of social belonging, identity and heteronormative authority so central to the romantic comedy, which “even when it attempts to depart from tradition, is ultimately about citizenship: who has the right to expect full integration into the nation, and how that expectation depends upon the expression of normalized desire through the vehicle of heterosexual marriage or at least heterosexual union” (Moddelmog 170-171). Such is even reflected in *The Hangover Part II* and the casting of Mason Lee. As Terri Carney writes, “I found it intriguing that Ang Lee's son Mason landed a main role in this film. Could it be merely a coincidence that the latest member of the Wolfpack happens to be the son of the director of *Brokeback Mountain*, a film that took the quintessential figure of American masculinity, the cowboy, and queered him? Perhaps Todd Phillips saw a chance to right that wrong by toughening up the young Lee with a night of uninhibited, drug-induced debauchery, which, according to Phillips' filmography, is the gateway to reconnection with some primal, old-school masculinity” ("Still Hungover").
Elizabeth Chen writes in the *Texas Journal of Women and the Law* about the legal and social implications of real-life bromances, saying, “bromances reinforce gender hierarchy, bolster marriage as the governing archetypal relationship, and normalize homophobia” (259). While the bromantic escapes of the cinema, whether a trip to Vegas or a jam session in the man-cave, are understood as the male’s attempt to disrupt the stifling conditions of the status quo, the bonding moments ultimately facilitate the status quo’s return. Where these films could critique the perceived universality of patriarchal heteronormative romance, the bromantic comedy, rather, merely finds new ways to uphold it. In that sense as well, they follow in romantic comedy’s path, as Ewan Kirkland writes, “the problematization of matrimonial union and lasting relationships within the contemporary romantic comedies, either through absence or irony, might not indicate an erosion of heterosexuality’s centrality, but rather a shift in the source of heterosexuality’s hegemonic validation as the primary model of sexual relationships” (9). Here too, just as *The Hangover* functions to uphold marriage and heterosexual unions, the other bromantic comedies feature similar motivations. The *40 Year-Old Virgin, I Love You, Man*, and *Wedding Crashers* all end in weddings for the male protagonists and *Role Models, Knocked Up*, and *Hall Pass* end with reconciled heterosexual couples. Even *Superbad*, the teenage bromance, ends with Seth and Evan coupling off with teenage girls in a shopping mall (is there a better location that encapsulates the dominant ideology of white patriarchal capitalism than a shopping mall?). As Geoff King writes, “”[T]he celebration of ‘regressive’ forms of play also participates in broader social, cultural and ideological discourses that tend to have
conservative or reactionary implications. Crazy, anarchic, pre-Oedipal or childlike behavior might be celebrated in some cases as a way of questioning or attacking particular social structures or institutions, of one variety or another...but it can easily slip into a more general advocation of the primacy of a realm of ‘nature’—the innocent pre-social or a-social—that has the effect of presenting as natural or inevitable social structures or relationships that are the outcome of particular (and therefore contingent and potentially changeable) social or historical processes” (92).

Masculinity in these films “is much less about achieving a quest, denying femininity, overcoming obstacles, or becoming a hero than it is about finding escape routes and places where white male masculinity can recuperate and celebrate its insecurities and failures without incessant female judgment and evaluation. This adherence to narrative conclusions in which the men find ‘success’ suggests that, underneath the overt plotlines detailing men’s ‘crises’ of where and how to fit within a culture that no longer accepts them, the standard cinematic fantasy still exists in which men regain lost power and authority” (Alilunas 13). In that sense, the bromantic escape comes across as disingenuous on at least two accounts. First, the very need to escape, the repression placed on these men by the stifling conditions of patriarchal normativity and the judgment by women appears to be “a fictional invention, of course, designed specifically in some cases to create the opportunity for pleasurable entertainment based on that deemed to be transgressive within only these limited confines” (92). Second, the “tender insights” gained by the bromantic males are rarely so tender. Rather than return to civilization with a greater sense of gender equality, tolerance, and
understanding, the men merely return with more essentialist notions of gender and sexuality and greater desire to regain patriarchal control—the loss of which led to the desire to escape in the first place. Returning to Kimmel and Kaufman’s comments about the mytho-poetic men’s movements, they write, “We need more Ironing Johns, not more Iron Johns” (8).

Writing about the buddy films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Robin Wood says:

What happens when that normality collapses? What happens, specifically, within a cinema made by men and primarily for men? It produces male protagonists, identification figures for the male audience, the efficient socialization of whose sexuality can no longer be a given. The characters themselves are, of course, without exception social outcasts, voluntary dropouts; frequently criminals, they have placed themselves outside the pressures of patriarchy, which are all that stand in the way of the recognition and acceptance of constitutional bisexuality. They are also the protagonists of films made within an overwhelmingly patriarchal industry; hence they must finally be definitively separated, preferably by death. (230)

Here we see major similarities and major differences between rebellious buddies of the 1960s and 1970s cinema and the bromantic males of recent comedies. Whereas the escape from patriarchal pressures could only be resolved in the buddy narratives by the protagonists’ deaths, the modern bromantic males are allowed to return. The bromantic male comes back, subdues his emasculating girlfriend, gets the love of his life (back), and reasserts his position as man of the patriarchal house.
In the conclusion to his chapter on bromantic comedies, John Alberti writes that “the logic of generic self-consciousness and self-critique” in the bromantic comedy “believes readings of them as simply reactionary or regressive” (43). Alberti is right to conclude that the image of the bromantic male is rife with “progressive” potential as the representation of the bifurcated male hero and the close homosocial relationships he experiences can possibly work to queer (make strange) homosocial bonding as well as queer traditional attitudes concerning gender performance in the Hollywood-produced romantic comedy. Even further, the fact that masculine performance and the anxieties associated get any kind of cinematic attention whatsoever reveals at least some gains made in the field of gender studies. This project, however, reveals that any “progressive” potential attached to the image of masculinity in the bromantic comedy cycle is limited, if not completely eliminated, by a failure to challenge the traditional hegemonic motives of male domination and a failure to clearly critique the central drives of the Hollywood romantic comedy. By analyzing three interrelated components of the bromantic male (homosocial intimacy, infantilization, and disillusionment with patriarchy), this study has revealed that beneath a façade of liberal motivation, the bromantic comedy cycle is guilty of perpetuating the ideologies it is trying (or pretending) to critique. In similar fashion to Susan Faludi’s understanding of the feminist backlash, the cultural gains made concerning gender, sexuality, and race are doubled
back upon in a cycle of films that appeal to regressive modes of misogyny, homophobia, and racism still present in Hollywood filmmaking.

At the core of the bromantic comedy cycle is a “crisis” that can only originate from an already-situated place of privilege. For a cycle of films that appears to offer up an image of modern, white, American masculinity that critically engages with the subject of masculine gender performance and homosocial endeavors, it fails to live up to these aspirations. Such is superbly summarized by David Greven:

For all of the apparently deeply worrisome messages they convey about the current state of American manhood, unable to man up, leave home, develop lucrative careers, and start families of their own, Beta Male comedies offer a fairly cohesive portrait of an American masculinity comfortably inhabiting its privileges, privileges that include the right to be misogynistic, racist, and homophobic. The deep anxieties in them which can be traced back to classic American literature make them resonant, but not, for the most part, terribly illuminating. The anxieties that shape them only impel their ideological efforts to maintain, however fractured, an ultimately coherent and sustainable image of hetero-masculine, white identity. For all of their metatextual, ironic self-consciousness, the films remain as fundamentally estranged from self-knowledge as the hapless but ultimately victorious men at their center. (“I Love You, Brom-Bones” 418)

The bromantic male, then, with his increased dependence on homosocial intimacy, infantilized characterization, and paradoxical response to the patriarchal structure, is absolutely worth studying and critiquing. If, for nothing else, this study should illuminate the image of masculinity perpetuated by the bromantic comedy as a product of the latest “masculine crisis” that fearfully reacts to a changing cultural and economic landscape in a socially regressive and reactionary manner—a manner that carries with it the same hegemonic motivations of white, heteronormative, patriarchal domination from which Hollywood seems so unable to break away.
A Bro-gressive Hope

With that in mind, the question then gets raised: if the bromantic comedy, and the image of the bromantic male therein, merely upholds the status quo rather than adequately critiques it, is there room for bromantic sensibilities to work to challenge the positions of privilege and hegemonic motives this project has shed light upon? This discussion can be greatly assisted by the analysis and comparison of *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007) and *Humpday* (2009). These two films, while both rife with the bromantic conventions of the cycle, offer unique takes on the masculine crises of their bromantic counterparts. Situated within different realms of the American film industry, and carrying with them different cinematic ambitions, *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* and *Humpday* still provide similar social motivations that can contribute to the greater discussion of masculinity and the bromantic comedy.

*I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* differs from the typical bromantic comedy discussed in this project in a number of ways. First, it is marketed as an Adam Sandler vehicle and is therefore subject to the generic expectations associated with his films, all produced under his Happy-Madison banner. Not the least of these generic expectations is the PG-13 rating, which, unlike the R-rating of the majority of previously discussed bromantic comedies, allows for greater audience and family-viewing potential. Second, the male protagonists in this film, Chuck (Adam Sandler) and Larry (Kevin James), are not nearly as “beta” as the bros that typically fill an Apatow bromantic comedy. Chuck and Larry are more traditionally masculinized in part by their thick Brooklyn accents as well as their occupations as New York fire fighters. Chuck is even hypermasculinized, as
he is more prone to objectify and bed multiple women and enjoys his status as “Mr. February” in the FDNY calendar. Larry, on the other hand, more closely resembles a friendlier version of the bromantic comedy’s big baby character. By nature of his size and his role of widower and father, he is effectively neutered in the narrative in a way that most bromantic males are not. Third, and most importantly, the social issues of homosexuality and marriage equality are not subliminal factors as they are in the typical bromantic comedy. Rather, issues surrounding gay marriage and civil unions are the focus of the narrative in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*.

Fearing his possible death, Larry worries of the financial problems his children might face should his job as fire fighter leave them orphaned. In an attempt to manipulate the city’s legal system concerning homosexual civil unions, Larry convinces Chuck (who “owes him” for saving his life) to enter into a fake marriage for the sake of his children’s financial future. The trajectory of the narrative strongly resembles a queer reimagining of 1986’s *Soul Man*—a film that features an upper class white male securing a full scholarship to Harvard Law School by posing as an African American. At the heart of each of these “message comedies” is the liberal lesson about the true hardships of minority status. Just like Mark Watson (C Thomas Howell) in *Soul Man* gets an “insider’s view” of racial discrimination, Chuck and Larry’s new perspective plays into the film’s message of tolerance and respect. Chuck and Larry’s posing as a gay couple leads them to find problems with a city official determined to expose them as frauds; problems at work as their fellow fire fighters fear that their perceived homosexuality will affect their ability on the job; and problems romantically as Chuck is unable to consummate the
love he finds in Alex McDonough (Jessica Biel), the lawyer who is assisting them on their civil union case. In typical Hollywood fashion, these problems are all neatly resolved in a manner complicit with the dominant ideology of white, patriarchal capitalism. Chuck and Larry escape prosecution for their fraud by agreeing to assist in AIDS research funding. The fellow firemen accept that homosexuals are just as capable at fighting fires as heterosexuals, and Chuck and Larry’s union encouraged another firefighter (Ving Rhames) to come out himself. Even Chuck’s romantic problems are resolved by the end of the film. Chuck’s domestication through living with Larry and his kids, and the newfound tolerance achieved from being labeled “queer,” turn Chuck into an ideal romantic partner for Alex, and the film concludes with their coupling.

Even with the liberal message of tolerance, the film remains committed to misogynistic stereotypes and sexist humor typical of the bromantic comedy. The film features many moments of female degradation. After Chuck demeans a female doctor in horribly offensive fashion, a later scene finds her engaging in a scene of group sex with Chuck and nearly a dozen scantily clad Asian females. Additionally, Happy-Madison regular and Saturday Night Live (NBC 1975-) alum Rob Schneider fills the role of wedding chaplain in crudely offensive Orientalist fashion (similar to Ken Jeong’s performance as Leslie Chow in The Hangover franchise). Such moments render the climactic scenes, when Chuck and Larry inform a crowd that the epithet “faggot” is hurtful, like the terms “kike” or “fat,” to feel motivated by tolerance, though still disingenuous. Furthermore, like the bromantic comedy, the central drives of the Hollywood romantic comedy are uncritically maintained. The happy ending of both a
heterosexual and homosexual romantic union helps reaffirm heteronormativity in the film and keeps “Chuck and Larry anchored within the dominant structures of white patriarchal heterosexuality” (Benshoff 209).

It would be short sighted, however, to discard I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry for these problems outright. As Benshoff writes, “while the film was felt by many audiences to be offensive—for its racism, its sexism, its very premise that pokes fun at a real civil rights issue—the film nonetheless makes available to its viewers (who probably wouldn’t be caught dead at a screening of Brokeback Mountain) a liberal critique of homophobia” (210). Echoing that sentiment is critic Gary Thompson who writes, "I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry will not make a run for the Oscar like Brokeback Mountain. But it may actually do more to combat some forms of bigotry, for the simple reason that it will draw from the sort of demographic that wouldn't go to a gay cowboy movie at the point of a Winchester” (“Wanting it Both Ways”).

Humpday, part of its own indie-genre “mumblecore,” could not be more different in style from the slick, bigger-budget Sandler comedy. Understood more as a network of like-minded filmmakers than an intentional effort, mumblecore emphasizes characters over settings and is often identified by the mostly-improvised dialogue that makes the plots of these films seem more free-floating. Mumblecore filmmakers—including Jay and Mark Duplass, Andrew Bujalski, and Lynn Shelton—explore newfound cinematic agency in working with newer, cheaper film technologies. “Mumblecore’s micro-budgeted minimalist aesthetic, localized D.I.Y generative methods, and distinctly unpolished idiom actively resists both Hollywood’s model of packaging...as well as
recent American independent cinema’s reliance on heartwarming quirkiness featuring star power working for scale. Exploiting digital technology and electronic culture...mumblecore signals its pared-down production mode and heightened naturalism through its branding as an economical and authentic restorative fit for an era of recession and proactive citizenship” (San Filippo 2). Such focus on new technology and smaller budgets also signals, for mumblecore, increased attention on “authentic” representation. Mumblecore, according to Andrew Bujalski, grew out “of his frustration with the failure of mainstream movies to speak to the circumstances of his life, even those films that purport to be about his peer group” (O’Sullivan T31). Such a focus connects mumblecore to the bromantic comedy cycle, as both groups of films “are about men and women awkwardly poised between the habits and trappings of youth and the responsibilities of adulthood” (Haglund “The Apatow-Mumblecore Connection”).

_Humpday_ follows reunited college best friends, Ben (Mark Duplass) and Andrew (Joshua Leonard), as they navigate the trickiness of their friendship. That trickiness, such a staple of the bromantic comedy, is taken to the next level when, at a party, the two men agree to participate in the “ultimate art project.” The art project involves the two straight men having sex on film for the upcoming “Hump! Film Festival.” Wanting to commit to their image of cool freethinkers, Ben and Andrew agree to go all the way. “It’s not gay; it’s beyond gay. It’s not porn; it’s art.” The remainder of the film concerns the possible fulfillment of this promise and how it might affect not only their friendship, but also Ben’s marriage. When the night arrives, the two men meet at a hotel room with
video camera in hand. The scene lasts for several minutes as the two men go into a lengthy discussion about this sexual possibility. Their discomfort at the prospect is both visible—the two men have trouble getting naked in front of each other—and spoken—they have to “count down” before kissing each other. For all the talk, the men are unable to consummate the agreement. They get dressed and Ben leaves the hotel room while Andrew stays to watch what they had recorded.

The prospect of *Humpday*’s premise raised a lot of hopes for critics that considered the bromantic comedy cycle a little too “safe” in its relationship to homosexuality. As Collin Carmen writes in *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, “without spoiling the surprise, it’s safe to say that *Humpday* and its companions are redefining friendship onscreen at the precise time in American history when other political and cultural developments are redefining marriage. Could this be Hollywood’s very own form of foreplay, of breaking the rules of friendship before tackling those associated with love and marriage and finally going all the way?” (50). For the most part, critics were impressed with *Humpday*’s ability to target the trickiness of friendship in a way that typical bromantic comedies only allude to. “With x-ray vision,” writes Stephen Holden, “this serious indie comedy, written and directed by Lynn Shelton, sees through its male characters’ macho pretensions to contemplate the underlying forces hard-wired into men’s psyches in a homophobic culture” (C8). *Humpday* works because it rejects the utopian liberal idea seen in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* while also raising serious questions about homosocial and homosexual possibilities that the Hollywood bromantic comedy seems to not allow. The close homosocial bond between Ben and
Andrew, in more clearly articulating and exploring homosexual desire and anxiety, is still revealed to be a tricky subject, but the care with which *Humpday* explores this bond offers for a more critical reading of male friendship. “‘In general,’ says the director, Lynn Shelton, ‘straight men are really invested in being assured they’re straight. There seems to be anxiety about that. But I’ve seen these relationships in my life, men in love with each other, the man crushes, what does that mean?’” (qtd. in Setoodeh). Due in no small part to its indie status, *Humpday* is able to explore these questions and also finds itself freer from the homophobic and misogynist trappings of its Hollywood counterparts.

While neither film discussed in this comparison offers a perfect representation of masculinity that fully resists the dominant ideology, they both offer some glimmers of hope to the bromantic comedy cycle. For all its shortcomings, *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* at least addresses some real social issues, and *Humpday* also points to the viability of independent cinema to explore issues with more care and precision than can Hollywood. This hope is also seen in some of the mainstream crossover appeal of the mumblecore movement with films like *Cyrus* (2010) and *Jeff Who Lives at Home* (2011) experiencing some mainstream success. Optimistically, perhaps the growing presence of D.I.Y filmmakers and the increased attention to social issues in Hollywood can contribute to a greater potential in filmmaking to critique, rather than maintain, the status quo.
Where to go from Here

As the analysis and comparison of *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* and *Humpday* reveal, the films of the bromantic comedy cycle have a long way to go if the cinematic and cultural landscapes hope to achieve progressive, egalitarian goals. While the purpose of this project has been to shed light on these shortcomings, and contribute to the critical quest of challenging dominant assumptions, it is also the recognition of this project that the discussion requires further insights, voices, and perspectives. Therefore, it is sincerely hoped that the work done here encourages and elicits more analysis of American cinema’s ideological assumptions more broadly and the bromantic comedy’s image of masculinity more specifically.

As such, an important subject that could open up greater potential for critical inquiry revolves around the representation and status of women in these films. Just like the female characters within the bromantic comedy cycle, women do not receive the attention they deserve in this project partially out of the focus on masculinity, but also because of limits in perspective. Feminist critical analysis of these films would add to the discussion of the cycle in ways that a study focused on masculine representation does not. To do so would contribute to Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra’s call that “…where once the job of the feminist critic was to pinpoint the fissures in cinematic texts, many of the products of popular culture these days are openly contradictory. Yet we would assert that the contrivances of such films strongly suggest that postfeminist fictions by definition end up unfinished. Indeed, they require feminism to finish them, to truly wrestle with the problems of gender inequality and misogyny that they acknowledge,"
but cannot resolve” (172-173). More than merely studying women within the bromantic comedy, there is research to be done concerning elements of the bromantic comedy used in more female-centric films. By this, I am referring to recent films like *Bridesmaids* (2011) and *The Heat* (2013), which place emphasis on female friendships while maintaining a bromantic comedy aesthetic and humor.

Furthermore, a more critical exploration of the bromantic comedy’s relationship to race and ethnicity would help with the understanding of gender performance and multiple masculinities. As this project has identified the image of the bromantic male as a model of white, American masculinity, it has revealed the bromantic comedy’s hegemonic assumptions about the invisibility of whiteness, as described by Richard Dyer. By that, this hegemonic assumption asserts that the images of the bromantic male, and the crises of his masculinity, are dependent upon his status of white privilege. Therefore, the issue of race was addressed in this project only so far as it contributed to these assumptions. Not only would this project suggest a need for more films that explore the issue of race, masculinity, and homosociality in a critical fashion, but it also suggests that the films discussed are in need of more in-depth analysis concerning race and the construction of American masculinities.

Not wholly unrelated to the issues of race and gender, this study also points to the need to explore the issues surrounding bromance in television. It should come as no surprise that television serves as a huge repository for shows foregrounding close male friendships, and several shows even explore biracial bromances. Shows like *Scrubs* (NBC 2001-2009, ABC 2009-2010), *Psyche* (USA 2006-), and *Community* (NBC 2009-) center
much of their serial narrative aspects on the close friendships between multi-racial male leads. Comedic shows like The League (FX 2009-), Entourage (HBO 2004-2011), How I Met Your Mother (CBS 2005-), and Men of a Certain Age (TNT 2009-2011) all explore issues surrounding homosocial bonds and the format of television offers greater narrative allowances than does the standard Hollywood feature film. Studying bromance and television would fill in a lot of the gaps that this project, by focusing on American films, has missed. To do so would greatly contribute to the broader discussion of masculine representation and the construction of gender in mainstream media.

The discussion of images of white American masculinity, as they are represented in the modern bromantic comedy, has, unfortunately, been met in this project with a rather pessimistic tone for masculinity, friendship, and for comedy. This project is not to suggest that white masculinity can never be represented in a manner that is free of misogyny, racism and homophobia. The brief discussion of I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry and Humpday should reveal that films that queer the issue of homosociality and critique the status of white, heteronormative patriarchy are possible, even if the current bromantic comedies fail to do so. Questions surrounding identity, with gender performance and representation being some of the most discussed issues, are chiefly important to the field of cultural studies, and progression towards equality is only possible if the work to challenge dominant assumptions and essentialist notions continues. In that vein, two aspects of the bromantic comedy and facets of cultural existence—friendship and humor—can be wielded in the hegemonic struggle in such a way that the value of each might become lost. Friendship is essential in life for human
support, and humor has the ability to challenge our perspective and relationship to
dominant assumptions. Unfortunately, as it stands, Hollywood is using both to maintain
the dominant ideology of heteronormative male dominance.
APPENDIX

LIST OF BROMANTIC COMEDY FILMS


This is the End. Dir. Evan Goldberg, Seth Rogen. Perf. James Franco, Jonah Hill. 2013


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