

In the Company of Modern Men: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary
Hollywood Comedies

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This thesis titled
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ABSTRACT

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In the Company of Modern Men: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary
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This thesis discusses the increasing visibility of masculine identity in contemporary Hollywood comedies. I examine how shifting developments in economic, societal, cultural, and gender relations impacted the perception of cinematic masculinity. The men, more specifically white and heterosexual, in these films position themselves as victims and, as a result, turn to alternative outlets to ease their frustrations and anxieties. In order to broadly survey the genre of the past two decades, I focus on three consistently popular character tropes in Hollywood comedies: slackers, office workers, and bromantic friendships. All the male characters discussed throughout the thesis are plagued by their innermost anxieties and desires that compromise their gendered identities. However, these films resort to a regressive understanding of masculinity and functions within the dominant heteronormative structures. This thesis demonstrates how Hollywood comedies present a contradictory and multifaceted image of modern masculinity.

DEDICATION

To My Parents

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INTRODUCTION: FILM COMEDY, MASCULINITY, AND HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

A thesis centered on a serious discussion of film comedy appears contradictory. Comedies, as Geoff King notes, are not supposed to be taken seriously and often subject to neglect from scholarly writings and discussions. Yet few genres provoke a response from their audiences quite like comedies. The genre, after all, is one of the most consistently popular genres amongst audiences. Comedies often provide audiences with countless moments of joy and laughter for over a century. But behind every joke, there is some form of truth. Comedies often provoke a reaction, usually in the form of laughter, yet the depictions of often-outlandish events allow audiences to take another look at the world around them. In a larger context, comedies can visually express the problems and struggles of a marginalized or alienated group that often gets overlooked. Comedies have the ability to walk the thin line between mockery and seriousness. More importantly comedies often present and critique some of the most important topical issues facing our society and culture at large.

This thesis concentrates on the representation of masculine identity in contemporary Hollywood comedies, mainly since the 1990s. More broadly, I focus on shifting economic, societal, cultural, and gendered determinants deeply affecting the perception of modern hegemonic men. My work focuses on three major character tropes and figures appearing consistently in recent Hollywood comedies, most notably the slacker, officer worker, and bromantic/homosocial friendship. The men discussed throughout this project are modern in every sense of the word. They tend to be heavily

influenced from second-wave feminism, post-civil rights racial solidarity, and other forms of liberal/progressive ideology. Yet there is something still missing in the lives of these men. Whether that relates to their dissatisfaction with their professional or personal lives, these men look towards other outlets to ease their discomfort. But these men cannot position themselves as marginal subjects if they are still overwhelmingly a dominant group in our culture.

This thesis takes a figural approach to understanding the construction of masculine identity in contemporary Hollywood comedies. I evaluate three distinctive archetypal figures—the slacker, the office worker, and the bromance—and their importance of representation in recent film comedy. All the male subjects throughout the thesis are also characterized by their privileged class, race, and gendered identities: white heterosexual men belonging to the working and middle classes. They are the hegemonic dominant figures both in American society and cinematic representations of men. Male characters selected in each of the three chapters face similar anxieties and societal pressures, primarily through alienation. Male subjects experience alienation from their own personal lifestyle choices (the slacker), professional resentment of white-collar labor (the office worker), or complex homosocial bonding in gendered spaces (the bromantic male).

The stand-up comedian Rodney Dangerfield once famously said “I don’t get no respect.” This phrase can be applied to the academic study of film comedy. As a cinematic genre, comedy gets relatively little attention from film scholars. Yet comedies are consistently the most popular genre in terms of box-office receipts and overall

popularity from audiences. In *A Companion to Film Comedy* (2013), Andrew S. Horton and Joanna E. Rapf broadly note, “people in every nation enjoy laughing ...[and] the box-office in each nation reflects the popularity of comedy.”¹ Comedic films are often inexpensive form of filmmaking yet the studios producing these films rake in big profits. Geoff King believes film comedies are “relatively safe and unthreatening” genre meant for mass appeal.²

Serious discussions of film comedy are largely neglected. Perhaps some writers feel comedy is unworthy of serious analysis and lack an appreciation for comedic art. Geoff King captures the assumptions against studying the genre, “To analyze comedy, the cliché goes, is to destroy it.”³ Many comedies are laughed-off as lightweight pieces with little-to-no substance. In other words, comedies are meant to laugh at but not taken seriously. Comedies are not often admired or revered unlike other genres and trends, which are afforded more attention by film critics and scholars. Andrew S. Horton believes there is a “historical bias” against studying film comedies from a scholarly perspective.⁴ He contends film comedy scholars compile their own definitions and characteristics of the genre and, as a result, the term becomes muddled. He believes film comedies “escaped serious close scrutiny” for one reason: “the comic is enjoyable” and often a pleasurable experience.⁵

¹ Andrew S. Horton and Joanna E. Rapf, “Comic Introduction: ‘Make ‘em Laugh, Make ‘em Laugh.’” In *A Companion to Film Comedy*. Eds. Andrew S. Horton and Joanna E. Rapf. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013: 4.

² Geoff King, *Film Comedy*. London: Wallflower Press, 2002: 1.

³ Ibid, 4.

⁴ Horton (1991), 2.

⁵ Ibid, 2.

Horton's assertion appears correct especially when scholars analyzing film genre, even at the broadest level, exclude comedy. Take, for example, Barry Langford's book *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (2005). He does not devote a single chapter to comedy and only mentions the genre sparingly, usually in passing reference.⁶ He does not explain comedy's absence and this becomes one of the weakest areas of his work.

Despite any discriminations against taking film comedy seriously, the great French film theorist Andre Bazin once remarked "Comedy was in reality the most serious genre in Hollywood, in the sense that it reflected, through the comic mode, the deepest moral and social beliefs of American life."⁷ Bazin argues that the power of comedy films reside in their ability to present images familiar to critics and audiences from their everyday lives and force them to expose their deepest anxieties. Comedic characters often confront problems audiences can identify from their own lives and a sense of universality is central to the genre. Bazin's assertion also lays claim to taking comedy serious as a genre.

The few scholarly works on film and comedy often focus on major comedic actors and directors, most frequently from the classical Hollywood era. Gerald Mast's *The Comic Mind*, the first major scholarly survey on film comedy "...is not a history of film comedy or comedians but a historical survey of the most significant minds."⁸ He, however, contradicts this statement numerous times throughout his book. He approaches film comedy from a universal standpoint. In addition, he writes numerous chapters

⁶ Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

⁷ Andre Bazin, *The Cinema of Cruelty: From Bunuel to Hitchcock*. Trans. Sabine D'Estree. New York: Arcade, 2013: 35.

⁸ Gerald Mast, *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies*. 2 ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979: 20.

focusing solely on major comedic performers and directors mostly from classical Hollywood era. Performers, based on Mast's logic, who exerted some sort of control over their productions—this includes directing, editing, producing and writing screenplays—are the only subjects worthy of substantial analysis.⁹ Henry Jenkins and Kristine Brunovska Karnick critique Mast's subjective selection of performers and directors and argue his book continues the “masterpiece tradition” in 1970s film scholarship.¹⁰ Mast's work boils down to an arbitrarily selected account of major comedic auteurs.

Steve Neale, writing in *Genre and Hollywood* (2000), observes a “significant revival of interest” in comedy from film scholars in the wake of Mast's problematic, but significant, book.¹¹ Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik (1990) update some of Mast's definitions and characteristics of film comedy.¹² Their work, despite its helpfulness at times, ultimately becomes too convoluted and muddled with examples mostly from the classical Hollywood era. Other scholars have tried filling the major gaps from Mast's essentialist account of film comedy history. They focus more on the depictions of race, class, and gender, areas which Mast largely neglects. The anthologies from Horton

⁹ Mast confesses, “The study will predictably neglect those comic performers who exerted little control over how the antics were shot, edited, and scored” (Mast, 20). He writes very little about popular early sound comedic performers including the likes of W.C. Fields, the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy, and Mae West. Taking cue from James Agee's iconic 1948 essay “Comedy's Greatest Era,” Mast spends significant attention to the four major silent comedic performers of that era: Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Harry Langdon. Of the four, Mast devotes the most attention to Chaplin.

¹⁰ Henry Jenkins and Kristine Brunovska Karnick, “Introduction: Golden Eras and Blind Spots: Genre, History and Comedy.” In *Classical Hollywood Comedy*. Eds. Henry Jenkins and Kristine Brunovska Karnick. New York: Routledge, 1995: 4-8. They borrow the term “masterpiece tradition” from Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery who cite Mast as a prime example of a scholar using this selection style in their works (Allen and Gomery, 73-74). For more on the “masterpiece tradition,” see Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery. *Film History: Theory and Practice*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985.

¹¹ Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*. New York: Routledge, 2000: 65.

¹² Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

(1991) and Jenkins and Brunovska Karnick (1995) explicitly position how their works as a response to Mast.

Rick Altman proposes film genres are a historical phenomenon and cannot be thought of as fixed, ahistorical, or even stable. He believes genre theorists have relied too heavily on mythological assumptions and older methodological approaches (e.g., literary and anthropological) to studying film genre. Instead, he argues film genres are effective in the context of a given film's marketing, distribution, production history, and the response from audiences and critics alike. In other words, genres are fluid and a constantly evolving process. Film genres, following Altman's scheme, are created and defined by the film industry (Hollywood studios and company) and recognized by audiences.

Applying Altman's ideas on film genre specifically to comedy, it becomes clear how comedies largely depend on the audience's instant recognition of the genre. Central to Altman's ideas on genre are the marketability of genre and its recognition to audiences. That could stem from a film's marketing campaign, the star personas of its actors, and other factors determining an audience's instant recognition of comedy.

The bromance film, for example, became a popular subgenre in the mid-to-late 2000s, thanks in large part to the emergence of Judd Apatow's films such as *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005) and *Superbad* (Greg Mottola, 2007). Made on relatively low budgets with highly improvised scripts, bromance films, which I focus on in chapter three, center on the "close" bond between heterosexual men that is in many ways is an extension of the buddy film. Bromance films appeal to film studios for many

reasons: they are produced cheaply, star relatively popular actors, and feature homoerotic undertones in the homosocial bonding of the two (or sometimes more) heterosexual men. More importantly, bromance films are marketed as date movies appealing to both men and women, hence the combination of the words “bro” and “romance.” A major contribution to the success of bromance films, which has been a mainstay in recent comedies and continues to be popular, is how the subgenre continues the evolution of the romantic comedy to place emphasis on friendship over the actual romance. Film studios will continue producing bromance films if they still draw strong box-office numbers. Once the popularity of this trend begins to dwindle, studios will stop producing these films and simply move on to next hot trend or subgenre. If there’s an audience, Hollywood will continue producing them, as Hollywood executives and producers follow the money trail.

Geoff King (2002) offers a broad survey of film comedy, akin to Mast, but effectively incorporates more contemporary film examples to the concepts at stake. He takes an alternative approach to understanding the comedy when he argues comedy “probably best understood as a mode rather than a genre.”¹³ Here, King is correct to argue comedy should not be analyzed purely as a genre.

King believes genre films are “difficult to locate as a single or stable generic noun form.”¹⁴ Few comedies, from his perspective, are simply called comedies by critics and audiences. In many cases, a film can be referred as a romantic comedy or an action comedy, but hardly ever as just a comedy. Perhaps King has a point here, but his

¹³ King, 2.

¹⁴ Ibid, 3.

statement can ring false when discussing other genres. Take, for instance, the action/adventure film genre. There are action comedies, action thrillers, and etc. King's idea of a single-noun understanding of genre limits the potential evolution of how comedies develop.

After providing a broad overview of scholarship on comedy films, I want to shift attention to the intersection of masculinity and comedy. This project focuses extensively on the representation of men in modern comedies, an area that has only blossomed in recent years. Sure, there has been scholarship on film comedy as a broad topic, but usually they only account for the major historical figures of the genre such as Chaplin and Keaton. These works often attempt a larger narrative to discuss the genre's history (e.g., Mast), which basically takes an essentialist approach to understand comedy. Some strides were made with anthologies on film comedies beginning in the early 1990s, but they often become muddled with inconsistencies among scholars.

Gender remained a minor topic within the larger framework of scholarship on film comedy. Research on masculinity and film comedy remains scarce, but the number of scholarly essay publications and books on the topic has increased in the last decade or so. Male characters continue to dominate film narratives in American cinema. Timothy Shary correctly states: "men are certainly not an underrepresented minority group, nor are they politically marginalized or disempowered as a whole."¹⁵ Masculinity, as Shary notes, remains well represented in American cinema. In scholarly writings, however, masculinity has rarely ever gotten the same critical attention as to the representation of

¹⁵ Timothy Shary, "Introduction." In *Millennial Masculinity: Men in Contemporary American Cinema*. Ed. Timothy Shary. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012: 1.

women. Only in the last few decades has masculinity received adequate consideration from film scholars.

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), Laura Mulvey wrote the most influential essay on the problematic representation of gender in film.¹⁶ Drawing heavily from psychoanalysis, she convincingly outlined the problematic representation of women in classical Hollywood cinema. Men, according to Mulvey, are the active agents in Hollywood and appear at virtually every aspect of production: acting in front of the camera, as directors and other behind-the-scenes workers, and even the audiences watching the film. More importantly, men are the bearers of the look or the *male gaze*. Men occupy such dominant positions in the institutional and filmmaking practices in Hollywood cinema that the male gaze is virtually inescapable.

Women, on the other hand, are passive agents who do not control their images. They are placed in a disadvantaged position and seemingly impossible escaping the male gaze. Mulvey argues the audience identifies with the heterosexual man for objectifying onscreen female subjects. As a result, women are seen as objects of sexual desire and only appear in films for visual pleasure. The camera fetishizes the female body, thus undervaluing their representation and only representing women in terms of their sexuality. Unlike their male counterparts, women do not often advance film narratives nor do they have much narrative value beyond their image.

Mulvey’s notion of the male gaze has been contested for not allowing men to be seen as objects of erotic desire. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark believe that “any male

¹⁶ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999: 833-44.

performer who has offered up his body to the gaze of the apparatus has clearly forfeited an unassailable masculinity.”¹⁷ They also notice the apparent lack of discourse on the construction of masculine identity and critique feminist scholars for making masculinity “an easy target of attack” and ridicule.¹⁸ Masculinity, if it did become a topic of conversation in film scholarship in the wake of Mulvey’s influential essay, was viewed in a negative context as a source of sadism, narcissism, and fetishism. Men, they assert, are afforded less attention by scholars. They characterize the term “unperturbed monolithic masculinity” describing the lack of interest in male subjectivity in the flux of feminist film scholarship in the decade after the publication of Mulvey’s essay. On the surface, masculinity appears to be a given and hardly afforded the same complications as women. They rightfully conclude: “the male image on the cinema screen is therefore as significant a representational stake as the female.”¹⁹

Similarly, Richard Dyer and Steve Neale questioned Mulvey’s idea that women are exclusive to the male gaze. In “Don’t Look Now,” Dyer focuses on the male pin-up model and how men can be read as objects of sexual desire. He places great emphasis on the eyes of the male models and notices two things: the male models do not look directly at the camera or they look in another direction (away from the camera). Although images of sexualized men are “aimed at women,” the same images also reveal homoerotic desire for the male model.²⁰

¹⁷ Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, “Introduction.” In *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*. Eds. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. New York: Routledge, 1993: 3.

¹⁸ Ibid, 2.

¹⁹ Ibid, 3.

²⁰ Richard Dyer, “Don’t Look Now.” *Screen* (1982) 23.1: 61-73.

Steve Neale in fact uses Mulvey's theoretical framework in order to include heterosexual men as potential objects of the gaze. He does not necessarily disagree with Mulvey's arguments, but he claims that she mistakenly overlooks the potential problems of representing men. He believes heterosexual men are the "structural norm...[that has] been profoundly problematized, rendered, and visible. But it has rarely been discussed and analyzed."²¹ While Mulvey uses the term *objectification*, Neale revises her definitions and applies John Ellis' concept *identification* to masculine subjects. He correctly positions Hollywood cinema as "implicitly male," yet men too can be objects of the gaze.²² In male-orientated films, in Neale's case he draws heavily from the western, a usually violent spectacle and coded looks of eroticism between two men. Such looks, according to Neale, allow readings of homosexuality, voyeurism, and sadomasochism.

Despite Dyer and Neale shedding some light on masculinity, scholarship on masculinity in film studies remains undervalued. Throughout the 1990s, the *crisis of masculinity* discourse saw a major increase throughout the humanities and social sciences. Many works focused on the effects of masculine subjects in the wake of feminism and its influence on academia as a whole. A slew of works analyzing the "crisis of masculinity" were published throughout the 1990s that are worth mentioning. While I do not fully endorse nor agree with the views presented in many books in this canon, they are spotlighted for their influence on male subjectivity extending well into the 21st century.

²¹ Steve Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema." In *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*. Eds. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. New York: Routledge, 1993: 9.

²² *Ibid*, 19.

The crisis of masculinity discourse has frequently been attributed to commercial Hollywood cinema in the 1990s. In 1999 alone, some canonical films that narrativize the supposed crisis of masculinity were released, including *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) and *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999). Various scholars have discussed these films at length arguing each film addresses a shift of masculine representation in modern Hollywood. The central male figures in these films are fragmented, disgruntled, and angry at the world around them.

A number of social and political factors led to a sense of disempowerment for white men, including the increasing number of women entering the workforce, the rise of minority groups holding political office, and the push for gay rights. This has led men to lose their privileged hegemonic cultural status. In response to the weakening of their hegemonic position, Joe Wlodzi asserts: “cultural discourses surrounding ‘white victimization’...have been increasingly prevalent in the United States since the Vietnam War.”²³ His claim that “white victimization” occurs in contemporary America considers how white men view themselves in the wake of a changing landscape in politics, social, and economic developments. In spite of their continued privilege and cultural advantages, the discourse of masculine victimization can be read as a response to the fear of the loss of this position.

White victimization, although not mentioned explicitly, is a consistent theme in Susan Faludi’s turn-of-the-millennium book *Stiffed* (2000). She examines the changing perception of masculinity in post-World War II American society. Using a combination

²³ Joe Wlodzi, “Rape Fantasies: Hollywood and Homophobia.” In *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture*. Ed. Peter Lehman. New York: Routledge, 2001: 76.

of different methodologies she emphasizes the seemingly impossible societal pressures pigeonholed men to adopt uneasy roles. She correlates the “abandonment” of fathers that, in turn, left their sons directionless and without proper father figures.²⁴ Marriage, parenthood, and labor insecurity plagued American men and forced them to conform to a façade of masculine identity. Faludi does explicitly mention that the vast majority of her accounts in *Stiffed* are white, and presumably heterosexual, men. In a sense how can white men be accounted as victims when historically they, by far, are the dominant hegemonic group in the U.S.?

Hamilton Carroll argues that white masculinity should be read as “symptomatic and opportunistic responses” to the rise of domestic multiculturalism and identity politics” in the wake of the civil rights movement.²⁵ Transformations of white masculine identity shifts from a universality to a particularity. Subjects identify more so based on their nationality, sexual orientation, or class standing.²⁶ Instead, white male identity arises from “privilege [which] can be recouped” and redefined.²⁷ The main problem with Carroll’s evaluation of male subjectivity is that they can and are still white, even if they identify with another group.

Chapter one constructs an analysis of one of recent comedy film’s most consistently popular character types: the slacker. Arguably the most intriguing aspect of the slacker is his consistent presence in both commercial and independent film

²⁴ Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*. New York: Harper-Collins, 2000: 37.

²⁵ Hamilton Carroll, *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011: 10.

²⁶ Carroll cites specific examples of the changing vanguard in white masculinity that includes white Irish, white queer, and white trash class.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 6.

productions, particularly since the early 1990s with the release of the appropriately titled film *Slacker* (Richard Linklater, 1991). Slackers often live bohemian lifestyles and reject work in their quest for self-expression in an ever-increasing corporate climate. Linklater's film created a blueprint for both the archetypal figuration of the modern slacker character, but also a distinctive mode of filmmaking for its non-linear storytelling and positive characterization of outsiders on the margins of society. Once the slacker went mainstream in Hollywood cinema, however, the figure became a target for ridicule from other onscreen characters. The slacker becomes the butt of the joke, the person ridiculed for his choices.

Using concepts related to hegemonic masculinity, I argue the slacker's rebellion stems in large part from their privileged backgrounds allowing them to pursue alternative lifestyle choices. Besides Linklater's iconic film, I analyze the placement of the slacker in two distinctively different modes of filmmaking in recent film comedies: Judd Apatow-produced comedies for mainstream studios and Mumblecore, a postmillennial independent film movement emphasizing realist filmmaking techniques and styles. Through close readings of *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, 2007) and *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* (Jay and Mark Duplass, 2011), I argue the presence of the slacker always embodies a sense of privilege ultimately reflecting their heteronormative positions as white, middle-class subjects, no matter how much the slacker rebels.

While chapter one focuses on men who refuse stable employment, chapter two transitions to an analysis of the office worker in film comedies. Many film comedies take place at the workplace, but few offer explicit critique of labor from the middle or working

classes. Using primarily the seminal sociological texts C. Wright Mills' *White Collar* (1951) and William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956) on the effects of office work, I begin by outlining the major foundations of worker alienation in the immediate postwar years. In doing so, I begin with a close reading of *The Apartment* (Billy Wilder, 1960), a film personifying most of the anxieties and angst facing male office workers in the proceeding decades. *The Apartment* also serves a great starting point especially since the film was released immediately after Mills and Whyte's breakthrough works.

The next chapter transitions to the late 1990s, at the height of the "crisis of masculinity" discourse both in Hollywood cinema and academia, and considers the angst from the white-collar male workers in the cult comedy *Office Space* (Mike Judge, 1999). I apply Mills and Whyte's ideas on worker alienation to the central male characters in the film and how they exemplify the characteristics from both sociological thinkers. The film's protagonist Peter embodies many of the characteristics from the previous chapter on the slacker. But unlike slackers, Peter works a miserable dead-end job. He hates his office job and becomes severely depressed affecting his life outside of work. Peter eventually gets the funk out of his system when he adopts a new carefree attitude at the workplace. Much to his uptight boss' chagrin, Peter even gets promoted for simply not caring about his job any longer. *Office Space* utilizes the rejection of work from the usually subservient white-collar workers. I also consider the recent dark comedy *Horrible Bosses* (Seth Gordon, 2011) as an example of white-collar retaliation in the same vein as *Office Space*. *Horrible Bosses*, however, takes a much darker, more disturbing approach to relieving the frustrations of the misused male workers when they articulate a plan to

murder their three terrible bosses. *Horrible Bosses* perhaps goes a step too far when seeking revenge against those with higher power.

Chapter three shifts to an overview of one of the decade's most popular trends in film comedy: the bromance, essentially a modernization of the buddy film. Bromance films borrow many of the traits and characteristics from the romantic comedy. Instead of male-female relationship at the core of a story, bromance films center on homosocial bonding between two heterosexual men. One of the men is characterized as a metrosexual, a heterosexual man who enjoys typically feminine activities and items. Claire Mortimer's concept *melodramatized man* will become particularly helpful when defining the metrosexual's position in bromance films. The other man usually embodies more traditional masculine man.

The man cave, in particular, remains one of the distinguishing features in bromance films where men hang out with one another in separate physical space (e.g., the basement, garage) and relax. Man caves often exclude women from entering the occupied space. Such a space signifies a gendered physical space and I argue the man-cave and its ideological construction are problematic for the division of gender present in many of these films. Hollywood producer and director Judd Apatow is arguably the filmmaker most identifiable with the trend of bromance films that are still popular today. As a result, the films chosen in this chapter are either films directed/produced by Apatow or films heavily influenced by his earlier films. *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005), *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, 2005), and *I Love You, Man* (John Hamberg, 2009) are the primary texts closely analyzed in this chapter.

CHAPTER 1: SLACKERS IN MODERN HOLLYWOOD COMEDIES AND THE
DEFIANCE OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

The slacker remains one of the most visible yet misunderstood figures in contemporary Hollywood comedies, first gaining cinematic visibility in Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (Richard Linklater, 1991). Scholars writing about slackers often face a difficult task when defining the term.²⁸ Most often, slackers are defined as individuals who defy, question, and reject cultural norms and instead desire individual freedom. Most slackers are white, male, and come from middle-class backgrounds.²⁹ They try to get away with doing as little work as possible to survive. Often depicted as lazy buffoons who lack motivation and direction, slackers do not simply rebel against societal norms and traditions such as marriage and consistent employment.

In terms of representation, slackers frequently appear at recessionary economic moments. Linklater's *Slacker* was made at a time when unemployment and other economic determinants deeply oppress working-class subjects. Economist writer Jennifer M. Gardner argues the early 1990s recession in the U.S. was considered "mild" when compared to other economic crises in the wake of the Depression.³⁰ White-collar workers were the most heavily affected by early 1990s recession which, at least according to her analysis of the labor market at the time, marked the first time this group saw a major

²⁸ Jon Radwin, "Generation X and Postmodern Cinema: *Slacker*," *Post Script* 19.2 (Winter, 2000): 34. During both War Worlds, slackers referred to someone who avoided military service or did not contribute to the war effort. For a complete overview of the World War I usage of the term, read Susan Zeiger, "She Didn't Raise Her Boy To Be a Slacker: Motherhood, Conscriptation, and the Culture of the First War." *Feminist Studies* 22.1 (Spring, 1996): 6-39.

²⁹ Slackers are not limited to just men. Two good counterexamples of the female slacker would be the title character in *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007) and the infamous Madonna Pap Smear pusher character in Linklater's *Slacker*.

³⁰ Jennifer M. Gardner, "The 1990-91 Recession: How Bad Was the Labor Market?" *Monthly Labor Review* 117.6 (June, 1994): 3.

downshift in unemployment. She also notes “adult men continued to have the largest percentage rise in unemployment” during the early 1990s recession.³¹

Due to their lack of orthodox ideological principles, slackers challenge the conventions of R.W. Connell’s concept hegemonic masculinity, an idealized standard archetype for men. For Connell, hegemonic masculinity connotes men, usually white and heterosexual, assuming authoritative and powerful positions that suppress women and minority groups.³² For hegemonic masculinity to occur, there must be groups outside the hegemonic matrix to differentiate various ethnic and gendered others. On the surface, slackers would align themselves with hegemonic men due in large part to their similar social and economic statuses. Slackers, however, would consider themselves outside the hegemonic model. They reject any authoritative position involving power, lobbying instead for self-regulation. In short, slackers are not the transgressive characters they claim to occupy.

There are no hegemonic characters in Linklater’s *Slacker* because the hegemonic matrix oppresses the passivity of the characters. *Slacker* appeared at a crossroads moment when the rising critical and commercial popularity of American independent cinema occurred in the wake of *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (Steven Soderbergh, 1989).³³ *Slacker*’s extremely low production costs inspired a slew of filmmakers to make their own films, most notably Kevin Smith’s *Clerks* (Kevin Smith, 1994). Chuck Kleinhans would label Smith following “the filmmaking aspiration” trend that ran rampant in commercial and

³¹ Ibid, 7.

³² R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 77.

³³ Most film scholars agree the rebirth of the American independent film movement occurred when *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* won the 1989 Palm d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival.

independent American cinema after the release of Soderbergh's breakthrough hit.³⁴ Slackers thus convey a generational expression rejecting conformity and traditional norms, but also emerged as a distinct mode of filmmaking.

This chapter critically analyzes the slacker's place in recent comedic film trends, both in terms to commercial Hollywood and independent cinema. In the mid-to-late 2000s, Judd Apatow released a string of commercially successful comedies for major film studios and slackers often occupied the central male figures in these films, most notably *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, 2007) which will be one of the primary films investigated throughout the chapter. Apatow's characterization of the slacker largely follows *Reality Bites* and other post-*Slacker* films for creating flawed, sometimes largely unlikeable male protagonists. Commercial Hollywood filmmakers identify the slacker in these comedies and through the course of the film's narrative, articulate strategies for the slacker to abandon their bohemian lifestyle for something more stable and concrete.

Around the same time Apatow became one of the most critically lauded directors/producers in commercial Hollywood, Mumblecore emerged on the American independent film circuit. Mumblecore filmmakers often utilize low-budget techniques and conventions and looser narrative plots and stories. Most Mumblecore films center on young adults often fresh out of college who have little professional or personal prospects in their immediate future. Mumblecore attempts a return to Linklater's bare bones approach to film narrative and production techniques with the economic recession as the backdrop.

³⁴ Chuck Kleinhans, "Independent Features: Hopes and Dreams." In *The New American Cinema*. Ed. Jon Lewis. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998: 310.

1.1 Mainstream Slackers and Privilege in *Knocked Up* and *The Hangover*

Knocked Up (Judd Apatow, 2007) centers on slacker Ben Stone (Seth Rogen), a young man aimlessly living his life with no professional or personal ambitions. He lives in a small California ranch with his four male friends and they attempt to design a website devoted to giving the exact times and movements of nude actresses in Hollywood films: *Flesh of the Stars*. In the midst of co-creating the website with his buddies, Ben has a one-night stand with Allison Scott (Katherine Heigl), a career-driven single woman who works for the E! Television networks. Weeks after their encounter, Allison discovers she's pregnant. After much consideration, Allison decides to keep her unborn child and tells Ben that he is the father. But one problem arises: Ben is highly immature and not ready for the responsibilities of fatherhood. He spends most of his days smoking pot, endlessly plays the latest video games, watching a slew of movies, and making ridiculous bets with his buddies. After receiving the news of her pregnancy, Allison and others, most notably her sister Debbie (Leslie Mann), question if Ben can be an adequate father and potential long-term partner.

Ben's inadequacy to become an adult becomes the main narrative problem in *Knocked Up* and that's clearly illustrated in the film's opening scene. The film opens with a one-minute montage featuring Ben and his male friends horsing around in their backyard. They are shown fighting one another with boxing gloves, smoking weed, and having a dancing contest. Accompanied by Ol' Dirty Bastard's highly chauvinist hip-hop song "Shimmy Shimmy Ya" (1995), the montage showcases the men suffering from

arrested development as they leisurely waste their time performing meaningless activities. Apatow uses slow-motion techniques featuring the men boxing one another, ultimately emphasizing their status as immature adults. At one point, Ben is shown giving a “crotch-chop” after winning a boxing match. Similarly, Jason throws one of the men into the filthy, half-filled pool and proceeds to jump in the water himself after the boxing activity. The men then take the already ultra-violent sport to an extreme when Ben lights one of his boxing gloves on fire when he attempts fighting Jonah. The latter surrenders when he jumps in the pool. But are there really any winners in this group of men that’s worth celebrating?

Of the three activities mentioned in the previous paragraph, boxing captures what Judith Butler (1990) calls *gender performativity*, in which subjects shape their gendered roles based on social expectations from others. Gender performativity can then be thought of as a social performance and subjects must act like their biological gender roles. In that sense, gender performance correlates to acting in theatrical productions. Biological perceptions of gender identity are longer satisfactory when determining a person’s identity. Rather, people perform activities that confirm and reinstate their positions as gendered subjects. For instance, when a football player scores a touchdown during a game, he often performs a celebratory dance in rejoice. But who is the audience for the football player’s dance? He performs for the fans in the stadium and the television viewers witnessing the player’s showboating of his masculinity. In their display of gendered roles, masculinity is constantly on display and must be reaffirmed for the audience.

Using the example provided above with the football player, the men in *Knocked Up* aimlessly perform such actions with an audience in their presence. The opening montage displays the men's juvenile behavior or labeled "man-children," a term popularized in the mid-to-late 2000s. In comedies like *Knocked Up*, adult male characters are stuck in an adolescent state-of-mind and refuse to grow up. Although they have a group of friends who are oblivious to such behaviors (since they too often suffer the same fates as their friends), there are other characters that comment and often critique the men's childish antics.

But Ben and the other "man-childs" in *Knocked Up* are allotted the roles of slackers due to their privileged economic and societal roles. They embody Sally Robinson's concept of *identity politics of the dominant*. Akin to Connell's hegemonic masculinity and the emphasis of white power and authority, Robinson's term also invokes "the politics practiced by marginalized groups who understand subjectivity as inevitably grounded in the relation of power that structures a given society."³⁵ Robinson's emphasis on the "invisibility" of white heterosexual and middle-class men extends Connell's term. Robinson argues that "invisibility is a privilege" and rightfully alludes that it can only occur when oppressed groups not only emerge but more importantly challenge the conventions held by dominant groups. Robinson also contends that beginning in the late 1960s that "white men began to be decentered" with the new visibility of women and minorities in the American mass media and culture at large.

³⁵ Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 2.

The men in *Knocked Up* are entrepreneurs who contribute to a pornographic website and do not get paid for their work. In fact, the film largely negates an explanation of the men's financial and economic status except Ben. They frequent trendy bars, restaurants, amusement parks, and other places where they spend money. The men are certainly not earning any income from their website since it has not been uploaded for public consumption. They keep delaying the launch date and want the website to be "perfect" with no errors. Later in the film though, Ben discovers there is already another website with the exact same function as "Flesh of the Stars": "Mr. Skin." Despite such a revelation, the other men continue working on their website and believe their business could pose as a competitive rival.

The men's hesitation to officially launch their website correlates not only to their perfectionism, but also their lack of good work ethic. This becomes quite evident when analyzing Ben. Take for instance, the scene following Allison and Ben's one-night stand. When Allison asks Ben if he has to go to work, he replies "No work today..." and laughs at her assumption. Ben's response speaks volumes about his lack of personal or professional drive to make his life better or even fulfilling. Unlike the highly motivated Allison who is constantly climbing the ranks at *E! Television*, Ben remains in a stagnant position.

But Ben tries to prove his worthiness as a potential father and long-term romantic partner for Allison and her unborn child. In one scene, Ben plays in the backyard with Debbie's young daughter. He gets inside the small playhouse and they proceed to have tea time despite his rather-large body taking up the majority of the space inside the

playhouse. Symbolically, the playhouse represents Ben's struggles with his inner "man-child," the arrested development plaguing his character.

David Greven (2013) labels these "man-children" as *beta males* who defy the expectations of traditional forms of masculinity. He argues beta men are often "physically unconventional looking, out of shape, jobless."³⁶ For Greven, beta males are a contradictory categorization since an overwhelming number of comedies, especially the works of Judd Apatow, feature white hegemonic men as protagonists. He argues these films "leave almost completely unexamined the gender and racial privilege that undergirds the forms of masculinity at their center."³⁷

It is important to Greven's characterization of beta males' "inability to man up" which prolongs their developments as adult men. As "unconventional though beta males may look, what's important is the way they act, and that when they do act, they act like men."³⁸ Greven cites the scene when Ben finally confronts Debbie in the hospital when Allison is finally ready to give birth. When Ben yells and scolds Debbie, she finally likes him for standing up for himself.

Mainstream Hollywood comedies like *Knocked Up* make a point of not only presenting the slacker as comic relief, but also recognize their flaws and ultimately molds them to become alpha males. As a result, most Hollywood comedies featuring the slacker in a central role experience character transformation by the end of these films. *Knocked Up* remains no exception when Allison finally breaks off ties with Ben for his

³⁶ David Greven, "'I Love You, Brom Bones': Beta Male Comedies and American Culture." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 30.1 (2013): 405.

³⁷ Ibid, 406.

³⁸ Ibid, 411.

lackadaisical demeanor and not taking the proper steps to parenthood seriously. Ben eventually leaves the California ranch, gets an office job specializing in computer technology, and even moves in to a one-bedroom apartment. He tries proving he is capable of becoming a provider. Allison ultimately allows him to be present in the child's life, but Ben conforms to hegemonic masculinity.

Another comedy embodying a similar privileged slacker is *The Hangover* (Todd Phillips, 2009). The film centers on three friends Phil (Bradley Cooper), Stu (Ed Helms), and Alan (Zach Galifianakis) who take their best friend Doug (Justin Bartha) on a weekend trip to Las Vegas to celebrate Doug's bachelor party, one last hurrah until Doug's wedding in two days. Things, however, go terribly wrong when the three friends lose Doug after a crazy night full of alcohol, drugs, strippers, and exotic animals. With terrible hangovers and no memory of the night before, the men must retrace their steps so they can find their missing friend and get back in time for the Californian wedding.

"There's something wrong with him," Alan's father Sid (Jeffrey Tambor) confesses to Doug in regards to Alan's odd behavior after the former give his beloved vintage Mercedes car as an early wedding gift. When Sid says this line, Phillips intercuts a shot of Alan playfully kissing the family dog on the driveway while Sid and Doug talk in the garage. Alan's behavior is odd and the other men are clearly aware of that fact. Before the men arrive in Las Vegas, Phil also quips to Doug, they are inside getting snacks for the road trip while Alan pumps gas outside, asking if Alan's "all there mentally?" Doug believes Alan's just an "odd, weird guy" and there's nothing to worry about Alan.

In his mid-to-late 30s, Alan has no job prospects and lives off his upper-class family's trust fund. He still lives with his much older parents at their house, the only central male character who does not have a job, family, or even a wife/girlfriend. He occupies his free time going to functions and events more associated to teenagers, specifically teenage girls, such as attending Jonas Brothers concerts. Alan is definitely different from the other men in the film, both in terms of physical and personality attributes. Physically, Alan is short, stocky, bearded, and not physically fit. He is physically unkempt throughout the majority of the film, sporting shirts a size too small, disheveled hair, and terrible hygiene.

Alan remains a slacker in a conventional sense. When the four buddies are on the roof of Caesar's Palace right before they give the bachelor party festivities, Alan interrupts Phil and gives a speech about Doug's upcoming wedding. "I consider myself a bit of a loner. I tend to think of myself as a one-man wolf pack," says Alan whose written speech, delivered akin to speeches performed by the best man at wedding ceremonies, largely focuses on his budding friendship with the three other men and calls them "part of his wolf pack." The three men seem humbled by Alan's speech until it ends with Alan's quest "looking for strippers and cocaine" and he cuts himself with a knife so the men can "forever be blood brothers." The men disapprove of Alan's suggestion and disgusted by the sheer and utter violence that Alan performs. The men quickly forgive Alan's action and each man has a final alcoholic shot before they embark on a wild night of partying.

Alan does not pose a threat to Connell's hegemony matrix for several reasons. Despite his status as a member of an upper-class family, Alan does not display the

attributes of a hegemonic male subject. Unlike the other three men, Alan does not have a steady employment and instead lives off his parents' trust-fund money. Unlike the other men, Alan does not have a romantic or even a sexual relationship throughout the entire film. Meanwhile the other guys have wives and girlfriends waiting for them in Las Vegas.

Akin to Ben in *Knocked Up*, Alan is the source of the film's comedic humor displaying some of the funniest moments based almost entirely from their immaturity as grown men. They are both not transgressive representations of the slacker figure, at least when compared to Linklater's *Slacker*. Unlike Ben, however, Alan does not experience a complete character transformation, at least in the first *Hangover* film. The actions, more or less, unfold in the *Hangover*. Alan does not have a romantic relationship until *The Hangover: Part III* (Todd Phillips, 2013) in which he meets his kindred spirit Cassie (Melissa McCarthy), a Las Vegas pawn shop owner. In that film, the usually undesirable Alan seduces Cassie when he takes a lollipop from the counter, puts it in his mouth, and proceeds to take it out and put the lollipop in Cassie's mouth. Phil and Stu observe and react in utter disgust and leave the store when the budding couple's actions are too awkward for them to witness.

1.2. Mumblecore, *Jeff*, *Who Lives at Home* and a Possible Return for the Slacker

Knocked Up and *The Hangover* were among the most successful and critically acclaimed Hollywood comedies of the last decade. Both films feature a slacker as one of the central characters at the core of these films. Around the time Apatow and Phillips

made mainstream Hollywood comedies in the mid-to-late 2000s, another comedic trend made waves in the independent film market for its realist approach in the digital filmmaking age: Mumblecore. Often labeled “DIY” (Do It Yourself) filmmaking, Mumblecore filmmakers are often—but not always—outsiders working on the outskirts of Hollywood cinema. Maria San Fillippo (2011) argues that Mumblecore marks a “visible alternative” to more commercially viable productions. Mumblecore films are often low-budgeted, use non-professional actors, improvised dialogue, and shot on-location (usually in the filmmakers’ or crew’s real-life homes and living spaces). These filmmakers also utilize digital filmmaking techniques such as the use of handheld cameras. In short, Mumblecore allows filmmakers an option outside traditional Hollywood to take more experimental and artistic choices in their craft.

When Mumblecore began circulating at various film festivals and other platforms on the independent film scene in the late 2000s, the economic recession of 2008 affected the lives of millions of Americans, thanks most notably to the collapse of the housing market and the plummeting of financial institutions (e.g., banks). Mumblecore can then be read as a reactionary response from independent filmmakers whose films often center on the disenfranchised status of young adults just entering the professional job market. With no job prospects and little hope, many Mumblecore characters sit around and aimlessly wait for a better day that might never come.

Many Mumblecore narratives center on the central characters’ economic distress. Unemployment becomes one of the movement’s focal issues facing the twenty-something adults. Take, for example, Aura (Lena Dunham) who is the protagonist in *Tiny Furniture*

(Lena Dunham, 2010). Originally from New York City, she graduates from a Midwestern liberal arts college with an undergraduate degree in film studies. After returning to her financially well-off mother's apartment in the City, she quickly realizes her newly minted degree does provide many job opportunities. Aura, fearing she lacks direction and motivation in her life, begins working as a waitress in a busy restaurant. Although she does not necessarily need to work (she lives in a multi-million dollar apartment with her mother and younger sister), Aura waitresses for both work experience and hopes for a better job elsewhere. At the same time she begins working at the restaurant, Aura experiences a rocky relationship with her new boyfriend.

Tiny Furniture highlights the anxieties felt by young adults leading seamlessly economic hopeless lives. Aura, however, comes from a privileged background and does not need the waitressing job for financial stability. Unlike other Mumblecore characters Aura is not a slacker since she willingly seeks employment and tries to make the best out of her sluggish professional ambitions.

Unlike the Mumblecore film discussed above, the title character (Jason Segal) in *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* (Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass, 2011) does not have a job nor does he desire for one. He is a 30-year-old stoner who lives in his widowed mother's basement in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He is obsessed with the supernatural film *Signs* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2002), tries finding his destiny and the meaning of life through random experiences he encounters. After smoking pot from his bong in his basement bedroom, Jeff answers a phone call and is mistaken for "Kevin" and Jeff obsessively tries to find the meaning of that name throughout the first-half of the film.

Jeff then goes to the store to buy wood glue and fix the broken door shutter in his house, his mother's sole request that Jeff completes while she goes to work during the day. On the way to the hardware store via a public bus, Jeff sees a young African-American man (Evan Ross) wearing a basketball jersey with the name "Kevin" written on the back. Jeff then follows the man, only to eventually get mugged from one of the man's friends.

After that scene, Jeff randomly encounters his brother Pat (Ed Helms) at a nearby Hooter's and their relationship is strained at best. After the death of their father, the brothers drifted apart from one another and they barely speak to each other. Unlike Jeff, Pat has a stable job and married to Linda (Judy Greer); however, their marriage is on the rocks when Pat suspects his wife committing adultery. The rest of *Jeff* focuses on the two brothers trying to figure out whether Linda does cheat on her husband but also the brothers become close once again, although they are constantly at odds with one another.

White privilege is an underlying theme throughout *Jeff*. While the title character follows Kevin via bus transportation, Jeff notices the young man playing basketball with a group of friends, all of whom are also African-Americans. Jeff then joins the men to play basketball and even attempts befriending Kevin after the game. Interestingly, Kevin explicitly mentions Jeff's economic status: "You obviously don't live around here." This line provides a fascinating and crucial difference between both subjects: Jeff clearly embodies the hegemonic subject, according to Connell's terminology. Jeff, who comes from the middle-class suburbs in Baton Rouge, lives in his mother's basement and seems to have never had a job or even a long-term romantic relationship. Kevin, on the other

hand, remains in a submissive role due to his marginalized position as an African-American male living in a lower socioeconomic status.

The camera then cuts back to show the space, clearly a lower socioeconomic neighborhood and one clearly foreign to the naïve Jeff. Kevin asks Jeff if he wants to smoke a joint and the latter takes up his offer. While smoking a joint, Jeff is attacked from behind and mugged by one of the African-American males from the basketball court in the previous scene. When Kevin exits with his friend, he apologizes but moves forward. Kevin's actions present the struggles facing him in order to survive in the wake of the Great Recession. Jeff, on the other hand, can go back and live his conformable life in his mother's basement, seamlessly living the slacker lifestyle without any consequences. Kevin does not enjoy the same privileges.

In a much-later scene in the film, Pat and Jeff have a tender bonding moment sharing similar dreams about their recently deceased father. The two brothers then disagree about who had these dreams first and quickly exceeds to a verbal and physical altercation. After the spat, Pat scolds his brother: "Here's some understanding for you: a job an a car, and a wife and an apartment." Pat's statement, or rather tangent, about his brother does not ring true because Jeff does not want the same things in life. Pat often dismisses his brother, labeling him a "pothead" or simply speaking nonsensical gibberish. In fact, the slacker Jeff ironically says to his selfish brother: "You're drifting through this life with no awareness of how special it is." Jeff clearly displays concerns over his brother's actions and overall demeanor. Drifting, as noted earlier in Linklater's *Slacker*, remains a crucial aspect of comedic slackers. Jeff, like many mumblecore protagonists,

tries to discover his true identity as individual in a chaotic world. However, these central characters have an embedded sense of entitlement due to their privileged social, economic, and racial identities.

1.3 Conclusion

In the case of *Jeff*, the slacker protagonist still faces opposition from others for his lifestyle and ultimately he slightly changes to appease his family. Yet the beatniks in *Slacker* are not shown going through any transformations, mainly because Linklater chooses to only follow them for 3-5 minute segments. Given the short time of the subjects, it would have been impossible for any change to occur so rapidly. At least Mumblecore's slackers are more drawn out character studies, even if they follow commercial Hollywood's instance that the slacker must change and assimilate into adulthood.

Compared to the mainstream comedies from Judd Apatow, *Jeff*, *Who Lives at Home* offers a glimmer hope for a return to Linklater's archetype of the modern-day slacker. Mumblecore films often prefer naturalistic characters and stories that shed light on the problems facing young adults like Jeff. Like Ben in *Knocked Up*, Jeff experiences a character transformation and ultimately breaks free of his arrested development. Jeff, unlike Ben, still have does not have a job and indeed continues to live the slacker lifestyle. *Jeff* ends with the title character having a conversation with his brother inside a taxi while the traffic remains at a standstill. Jeff suddenly leaves the taxi and aimlessly walks down the bridge and eventually jumps overboard to save a family drowning in the

water. Jeff risked his own life, he barely survived when he was unresponsive from the medical personal, and became a local hero. The last scene shows Jeff finally repairing the broken door shutter in his mother's house (the same task she continuously asks him to fix throughout the film). While he fixes the broken object, the television plays in the background describing Jeff's heroism and updating on the conditions of the family he saved. The film's "happy ending" greatly differs from more ambiguous resolutions in Mumblecore films. Jeff's prospects remain bleak although he has found a new sense of purpose in his life.

Maria San Filippo labels *Jeff* a "Studio Mumblecore" production due to the film's \$7.5 million budget at Paramount Vantage, a sub-studio of Paramount Studios specializing in art house film productions.³⁹ Many Mumblecore films were made for a fraction of *Jeff*'s total costs, but the film features mainstream mainstays like Jason Segal, Ed Helms, and Susan Sarandon. Although *Jeff*'s aesthetic and narrative tropes are in-sync with previous Mumblecore films, filmmakers like the Duplass Brothers are migrating to Hollywood and are "managing well under the studio oversight."⁴⁰ Like Linklater, the Duplass Brothers have successfully transitioned to more mainstream projects while not compromising a consistent narrative and aesthetic approach to their films. Even if the Slacker remains the dominant figure in Apatow, Linklater and Duplass' films, this character must not only be identified but ultimately transformed to become better men. Even if the Slacker retaliates to change, they remain privileged subjects due to their

³⁹ San Filippo, 8. Interestingly, San Filippo uses the term "Studio Mumblecore" in relation to the Duplass Brothers' previous film *Cyrus* (Jay and Mark Duplass, 2010). She also lists other directors and actors who transitioned from independent films, aka Mumblecore, to major studio productions including Lena Dunham and Greta Gerwig.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 8.

economically secure backgrounds. No matter how much the Slacker rebels, they are almost always hegemonic subjects with problems that stem from their lack of personal and professional motivation for better lives.

CHAPTER 2: HOW TO SUCCEED IN THE OFFICE WITHOUT REALLY TRYING:
 MASCULINITY AND THE ALIENATION OF WHITE-COLLAR OFFICE
 WORKERS

In the previous chapter, I examined films in which male characters adopted the archetype of the slacker in order to escape conformity and refuse work. This chapter turns attention to the representation of the office worker. In recent Hollywood cinema, the office has become a consistent location for film and television productions.

Latham Hunter argues that office movies became a new trend, or in her words a “genre,” that emerged in Hollywood cinema throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. She discusses a slew of office films from this period including *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher, 1993), *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), and *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999). Office movies instead better resembles a corpus of films rather a unified genre. For one thing, office movies, unlike traditional genres, lack any distinguishing markers associated with a traditional genre. Either way, the appeal of office movies, according to Hunter, is their “instantly recognizable” characters, locations, and stories that largely resemble the work environments of many audience members.⁴¹

Office movies “reflect the position of ‘disempowered’ middle-class white man: the drone of the new corporatized, managerial late capitalist culture.”⁴² All the office movies she discusses take place, at least for major portions of the narratives, inside an office setting. These films exhibit male characters that are ethnically white, work white-collar and blue-collar jobs, and often live in suburban communities. In many office

⁴¹ Latham Hunter, “The Celluoid Cubicle: Regressive Constructions of Masculinity in 1990s Office Movies.” *The Journal of American Culture* 26.1 (March 2003): 75.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 72.

movies like the narrator (Edward Norton) in *Fight Club* or D-Fens (Michael Douglas) in *Falling Down*, the workers are “nameless characters [and thus] are an invitation for men to ‘insert name here’—to see themselves on the screen and read protagonists’ plights as their own.”⁴³ Even if the male characters have names, they fail to stand out in their work environments and given little opportunities to impress their supervisors.

Due to their average physical appearances, central male figures in office movies are “not that attractive,” a characteristic Hunter feels goes against commercial Hollywood cinema’s perceived standards for leading men.⁴⁴ She concludes that these men are not “muscular or particularly attractive” in their physical appearances.⁴⁵ While her claim does not always ring true as in the case of the leading men in *Up in the Air* (Jason Reitman, 2009) and *In Good Company* (Paul Weitz, 2004), she emphasizes the male office worker’s discontent with their professional career that often affects their private life outside the office.

During the same time period of Hunter’s writing, the notion of a “crisis in masculinity” began to blossom in popular (primarily through filmic and televisual representations) and academic discourse. She heavily relies on this discourse for framing the anxieties and frustrations of male office workers in these films. For Hunter, the workspace of the office indicates a “site and/or symptom of a widespread male-specific social affliction.”⁴⁶ The appeal of office movies relate to the trend’s cynical outlook on contemporary labor relations and the tensions arising from this division.

⁴³ Ibid, 77.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 75.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 76.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 72.

Besides *Office Space* (Mike Judge, 1999), which will be discussed at great length throughout this chapter, Hunter hardly mentions any comedic representations of the workspace in office movies. Many of the most popular film and television comedies of the last decade or so have taken place inside an office setting including *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (Adam McKay, 2004), and *The Office* (both American and British versions of the television series). Although the office has been a consistent setting for many recent comedies, the workspace also symbolizes the isolation and alienation felt by white-collar workers. Perhaps no comedic film better captures the angst of office worker alienation and space like the dark romantic comedy *Punch-Drunk Love* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2002). The film centers on Barry (Adam Sandler), a man who owns and operates a novelty bathroom accessories from a large warehouse in California. He tries balancing his chaotic work schedule with his overbearing seven sisters, who constantly harass and torment him at every given moment. Barry has no control over his life and, as a result, becomes an emotionally fragile man who isolates himself from the world around him.

Barry's isolation becomes apparent in the film's establishing shot. Framed as a long shot, Barry sits alone at his cluttered desk and talks to a Healthy Choice customer representative on the telephone about one of the company's current promotions. If Barry buys enough pudding products, he can earn frequent flyer miles and receive a free airline trip. Barry asks a slew of questions in order to clarify the terms and conditions of the promotion. He finds a loophole in the promotion in which he acquires large quantities of pudding products and earns free airfare points. When he hears a strange noise, he ends

the phone call and proceeds to go outside. Upon exiting the darkly lit warehouse, he witnesses a violent car accident and also another car unload and abandon a piano in the middle of the street on a sunny morning. The bizarre incident hardly startles Barry and he proceeds to continue his normal daily routine at the warehouse.

The bare bones set design captures Barry's isolation. He sits alone at his desk and there are no other people or objects in the large open space of the warehouse. The desk has piles of paperwork, files, and other items taking up the space. His desk is also located in the corner of the warehouse, left side of the frame, which suggests he ostracizes himself from the presence of others. Barry is completely closed off from the world around him and desperately seeks solace in his pursuit for a better life. *Punch-Drunk Love's* opening shot manifests the representation of isolated office workers and the negative consequences of the workspace.

This chapter focuses on the construction of male identity in three office movies: *The Apartment* (Billy Wilder, 1960), *Office Space* (Mike Judge, 1999), and *Horrible Bosses* (Seth Gordon, 2011). Although these films take place at different historical moments, they all capture the alienation felt from overworked, underappreciated workers who cannot and will not take it anymore. Each film depicts male characters on the verge of breakdowns, thanks almost entirely to their hostile work environments, and they must find a solution on their own for a better office environment. More importantly, all three films feature male subjects who are alienated from their work environments and, as a result, deeply affects private lives outside the office.

2.1 The Key to Success in the Office: *The Apartment* and Postwar White-Collar Alienation

In the postwar years, many Hollywood productions depict the professional and personal struggles of white-collar workers. In such narratives, the man comes home from fighting in World War II and seemingly conforms back to normality once again occupying the roles of father, husband, and most importantly the primary financial provider. These men find white-collar work to financially support their families. In the vast majority of Hollywood films in this period, the central male characters are white, middle-class, and usually live in suburban communities with their families. But then why do these white-collar men experience a crisis moment in their seemingly normative lives? The central male subjects' desire for advancement in their career, ultimately affecting their roles in their households.

Steven Cohan's notion of the *breadwinner ethic* argues that white-collar men are hegemonic subjects who try "legitimizing the hegemony of the professional-managerial class."⁴⁷ Male breadwinners often "stage a crisis for his home life that calls his manhood in question," stemming from their discontent in their professional and/or private lives.⁴⁸ Hegemonic men take their privileged status for granted, in the sense they are dominant figures in the postwar work force so they can hardly identify themselves as victims. All three of the films Cohen uses as examples—*Pitfall* (Andre de Toth, 1948), *The Seven-Year Itch* (Billy Wilder, 1955) and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Nunnally Johnson, 1956)—not only depict the postwar anxieties facing white-collar working men, but all

⁴⁷ Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997: 38.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 39.

three films feature male characters working in offices. Insurance agencies, advertisement firms, and television network offices are the sites of masculine discontent with their jobs and more often their sexual hang-ups.

The distinguishing symbol for the breadwinning ethic is the gray flannel suit worn by these men representing their white-collar labor. Cohan observes that the “middle-class breadwinner, that typical American Male who had traded in his 1940s khaki regulation uniform for a 1950s gray flannel one.”⁴⁹ In essence, male breadwinners are wearing the same uniform, just for different purposes. Male breadwinners adopted the “national character” of the hegemonic masculine subjects in 1950s Hollywood cinema.⁵⁰

At the same time Hollywood films were tackling issues centered on the plights of white and blue collar identity, many seminal sociological works were published focusing on white-collar labor and its effects on workers—David Reisman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), William H. Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956), and C. Wright Mills’ *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (1951)—all shed light on the growing disconnect between white-collar workers and their troubled workspace. The white-collar worker shifted from the American self-made man to settling for complicity and financial security for their families.

Although all three works are significant contributions to the identity of white-collar workers, Mills’ work will be particularly emphasized, mainly due to his explicit writings on the alienation of white-collar workers. Besides the other aforementioned

⁴⁹ Ibid, 38.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 38.

texts, Mills is also the most critical of white-collar labor and advocates giving workers the ability to express their individuality, something white-collar labor usually dismisses.

Mills discusses the notion of success in postwar labor relations: “Success ‘in America has been a widespread fact, an engaging image, a driving image, and a way of life. In the middle of the twentieth century, it has become less widespread as fact, more confused as image, often dubious as motive, and soured as a way of life.’”⁵¹ In other words, many white-collar workers believe they will prosper in their quest for professional successes and goals. By the 1950s, however, many white-collar workers sought after stable jobs over their own eternal happiness. As a result, white-collar workers became disillusioned from their work environment and settled for professional mediocrity, no matter how much potential the worker might possess.

During this period, a shift occurred in representations of the office worker in Hollywood cinema: the men’s alienation and discontent for their work environments became so unbearable, they had to find alternative ways for professional success at their jobs. One surefire example occurs in *The Apartment* (Billy Wilder, 1960) and the film’s central male character C.C. Baxter.

In *The Apartment*, C.C. “Bud” Baxter (Jack Lemmon) works at a New York City insurance company as a low-level agent.⁵² Although he has worked at his company for several years, Baxter has not yet received a promotion. In a large open space full of

⁵¹ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*. Rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002: 259.

⁵² Despite referring to himself as Bud via voiceover narration at the start of *The Apartment*, no characters call him Bud. Instead characters simply call him Baxter. The managers call him “buddy boy” which appears to be more of a sign of disrespect. If anything, the male managers emasculate Baxter and refuse to take him seriously, especially considering he receives a backdoor promotion.

insurance agents, he does not stand out from his colleagues. Desperate to climb the corporate ladder, Baxter makes a compromise with his four male managers: they can use Baxter's apartment so they can have extramarital affairs and sexual liaisons. Baxter gives his bosses the key to his apartment, symbolizing his gateway to a big promotion at the office. Everything goes well for Baxter when the managers write positive reports about Baxter's performance at the office. The fabricated reports give Baxter's name a boost at the office and he meets with the company's director of operations Jeff Sheldrake (Fred MacMurray) for an interview: Baxter's desired promotion seems to become a reality. Sheldrake questions the integrity of the reports, especially when Baxter cannot answer what makes him stand out from his colleagues. Instead of canning Baxter's perceived promotion, Sheldrake makes a compromise: he also wants to use Baxter's apartment to host an extramarital affair with the company's elevator operator Fran Kubelik (Shirley MacLaine). Unbeknownst to Sheldrake and Kubelik, Baxter is deeply infatuated with her. Although Baxter receives the promotions at the office (he even gets promoted to second director of the company, ranked right under Sheldrake), none of that matters when he cannot get the woman he desires. Baxter now faces a major dilemma: getting the woman of his dreams or keeping the corporate job he always wanted.

Despite Baxter's eagerness to climb the corporate ladder, he does not exactly embody Cohen's model of the breadwinner ethic. His bosses in his performance review describe Baxter as a "loyal, resourceful, and cooperative" employee. In a nutshell, the report describes Baxter very well: he is likeable, witty, and non-threatening. Baxter is an office worker who receives numerous promotions from his supervisors yet he barely

stands out from the crowded office. Even his unnamed co-worker who sits next to Baxter at the beginning of the film seems dumbfounded by the latter's promotions. The unnamed coworker claims to have worked at the insurance twice as long as Baxter and has received little attention from upper management.

The majority of the scenes in *The Apartment* take place at the office. Baxter can be identified as a character living in a state of isolation, especially considering Wilder's placement of Baxter in various shots throughout *The Apartment*. Alexandre Trauner, the art director who worked on *The Apartment*, observes Wilder purposely wanted "to make a film about a man all alone in the crowd, to express his solitude in every situation."⁵³ Even when he works at his desk and there are crowds of people surround him, Baxter is still an isolated figure and he barely knows his coworkers.

Office desks are lined up in countless rows that represent "time-specific, geographically fixed, and task orientated" work.⁵⁴ The desks appear smaller and smaller when shown in long shots of the office workspace. Ian Brookes equates the clerical work of the workers at their desk to the production assembly lines at factory, similarly to Ford production models.⁵⁵ Baxter works at his desk and appears at the center of the frame. Working punctiliously, Baxter types away on his typewriter and rows of desks and people surround him. Trauner remarks the goal of the office workspace is "the bigger the set, the

⁵³ Alexander Trauner, *Alexander Trauner: Decors de cinema*. Trans. Jean-Pierre Berthome. Paris: Jade-Flammarion, 1988: 152.

⁵⁴ Christopher Budd, "The Office: 1950 to the Present." In *Workspaces: Design and Contemporary Work Styles*. Eds. Paola Antonelli and Terence Riley. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002: 26.

⁵⁵ For more on *The Apartment* as a narrative critique of postwar corporate labor in the Fordist tradition, read. Ian Brookes, "The Eye of Power: Postwar Fordism and the Panoptic Corporation in *The Apartment*." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 37.4 (August 2009): 150-160.

smaller the man appears,” thus further supporting the notion of Baxter’s isolation.⁵⁶

Baxter’s placement in this shot reinforces Trauner’s comments that this “makes him an absolutely insignificant insurance clerk, lost in the immensity of an office full of identical employers.”⁵⁷

Time also becomes an important factor in the daily office duties for Baxter.

Wilder includes several shots of the clock on the wall, equating working in the office to a prison sentence. Even when Baxter talks via voiceover narration at the beginning of the film, he mentions the importance of time in the workforce. Not just any formation of time: regimented time where deadlines must be reached by the end of workdays. All of the workers’ desks are nearly identical: a telephone, typewriter, pen, and notepad. The items are the bare essentials for employees completing their work duties and no space to personalize their space.

Christopher Budd believes Baxter “lack(s)...individual expression...in stark contrast to the privilege and distinction of the corporate elite.”⁵⁸ When evaluating the offices of upper-management, they work in their own rooms separate from the herds of insurance office drones. Mr. Shelldrake and other executives at the agency are given their own personal offices and allowed to personalize their workspace. Baxter, before the big promotion near the end of the film, and his lower-level co-workers are not given the same privileges and must settle for rows of depersonalized desks.

A close analysis of *The Apartment* allows us to understand not only the origins of white-collar office work that also correlated to the sociological literature written in the

⁵⁶ Budd, 152.

⁵⁷ Trauner, 152.

⁵⁸ Budd, 26.

same decade as the film's original release. Baxter's desperation for a higher standing at his office and his over-eagerness allows others to take advantage of him: mainly his bosses. Baxter's promotion does not stem from him "standing out" amongst his peers, even if anything he is an average employee at best. Rather, his success comes from his backdoor deals with his bosses for the usage of his apartment. This bargaining affords Baxter a room at the top with the other executives, but he realize near the end of the film that his own happiness triumphs over his professional ambitions.

2.2 Uncomfortably Numb: *Office Space* and White-Collar Frustration

While *The Apartment* takes place in New York City, more recent depictions of white-collar office work usually take place in suburban communities and small towns. Perhaps this relates to Latham Hunter's notion that office movies indicate a "site and/or symptom of a widespread male-specific social affliction."⁵⁹ The appeal of office movies, at least to Hunter, relate to the trend's cynical outlook on contemporary labor relations.

In *Office Space* (Mike Judge, 1999), Peter Gibbons works as an entry-level programmer at Initech, a computer programming company, and absolutely hates every aspect of his job: from his overbearing managers critiquing him for minute errors in the daily reports to his pestering co-workers telling nonsensical stories and jokes. Peter loathes his job so much that he loses the will to care about anything in his professional or personal life. At the suggestion of his girlfriend, Peter goes to a hypnotherapy session and experiences a much-needed rejuvenation but at the expense of the hypnotherapist who dies after suffering a heart attack while Peter is put under a spell. Peter begins a character

⁵⁹ Hunter, 72.

transformation and quickly adopts a carefree demeanor: he only goes to work when he pleases and finally works up the courage to ask a waitress for a date. Peter's metamorphosis works to his advantage: he receives a promotion at Initech, but he realizes his only two friends in the office Michael Bolton (David Herman) and Samir Nagheenanajar (Ajay Naidu) will be fired during the company's downsizing. The three men then hatch a scheme releasing a computer virus on the company's payroll system that will deposit fractions of pennies to a undisclosed bank account (for which they will control and monitor). Over time, the bank account will incur the men hundreds of thousands of dollars. Things, however, go very wrong when the virus gives the men a lump sum of \$300,000 and they fear of getting caught by their superiors.

Prior to Peter's metamorphosis, he opens up to the hypnotherapist at the session and explains his discontent with work: "So I was sitting in my cubicle today, and I realized ever since I started working, every single day of my life has been worse than the day before it. So that means every single day that you see me, that's the worse day of my life." Peter clearly hates his white-collar office job and tries finding an alternative to cure his disenfranchisement with his career. There is no easy fix for Peter's anxieties that will get the funk out of his system. He only experiences a transformation when the hypnotherapist suffers a heart attack and dies. Peter remains seated in his chair despite the fact there are other patients present and immediately try aiding the hypnotherapist.

Besides Peter, Milton Waddams (Stephen Root) embodies the frustration of an alienated office worker in *Office Space*. Milton's screen time is rather limited, he only appears onscreen for maybe 10 minutes total in the entire film, yet he remains a crucial

figure in terms of understanding the plights and politics of the office work environment. Judge's original version of *Office Space*, stemming from a series of animated short films from the early 1990s, actually placed Milton as the central figure and even named the series after that character.⁶⁰ In fact, Milton appears on the promotional posters and home-video covers of *Office Space*.

Milton is first shown onscreen waiting at an undisclosed bus stop with other patrons in a long shot. The camera then pans to a medium shot featuring Milton sitting alone on the bench with his briefcase, brown lunch bag, and oversized coffee thermos. He mumbles to himself, in a very quiet manner, that he cannot be late to work again or he'll be "summarily dismissed" by his employer. All alone in the frame and talking to himself, this brief sequence illustrates that nobody really pays much attention to Milton. His dialogue is barely audible and requires multiple times to actually understand what he's saying. Milton's disheveled physical appearance becomes painfully obvious. Sporting thick glasses, unkempt hair, and even a stained tie, Milton does not care much about his physical appearance. Milton constantly mumbles anecdotes to himself and nobody seems to listen to him. In fact, Milton hardly communicates with other employees at the office.

Nobody really interacts with Milton throughout *Office Space*, except in the few occasions when they demean or scold him for his actions in the workspace. Take Bill's

⁶⁰ The premise for *Office Space* dates back to a series of animated short films directed by Mike Judge in the early 1990s. The crudely drawn animation became a signature characteristic in Judge's later animated shows *Beavis and Butt-Head* (1993-1997) and *King of the Hill* (1997-2010). The short films, entitled *Milton*, circulated on television channels, most notably NBC's *Saturday Night Live* (1975-Present) and MTV's *Liquid Television* (1991-1994). The character Milton from *Office Space* serves as the central figure in these short films about the trials and tribulations of white-collar office work. Milton interacts with Bill Lumbergh who makes the former's life a living hell at the office: demanding Milton to relocate his desk, taking his red stapler. Most of the stories in the short films actually appear in the live-action version. Stephen Root, the actor who portrays Milton in *Office Space*, provided the voice work for the character.

birthday party at the office as an example. The employees unenthusiastically sing “Happy Birthday” to their boss, almost to the point they sound robotic. Most of the employees look either bored or have their arms crossed. Nobody wants to be at the party, they’re forced to attend by their boss. One of the female workers cuts several pieces of the birthday cake and proceeds to pass the pieces to each of the employees. When they pass the cake, Milton stops and tries claiming a piece of cake for him.

Nina, the annoying red-haired secretary from earlier in the film, scolds Milton for being “greedy,” claiming that he should “pass it along” so everybody gets a piece of the cake. Milton claims he did not receive a piece of cake at the previous office birthday party and believe it’s only fair for him to take a piece. Nina tells him to “pass it” and he submits to her request. After Nina’s line, Judge intercuts Milton’s rant about the injustice occurring here to the female co-worker slicing even fewer pieces of cake from the plate. After realizing that everybody but him has a piece of cake, Milton claims once again that he “could set the building on fire.”

When the managers and consultants decide which employees are fired, they label most them “useless” and easily expandable. Described by one of the men as that “squirrely-looking guy who mumbles a lot,” Milton barely leaves a lasting impression on the committee. Besides maybe Bill, the other men have no idea of Milton’s existence at Initech. They only know Milton by his lack of communication skills and awkward demeanor. The consultants reveal there is no record of Milton working at Initech as an employee. They then explain Milton was actually fired five years ago but his supervisor never told him. Milton keeps receiving paychecks from his employer due to a computer

glitch from the payroll department. Upon discovering Milton's lack of employment at Initech, the consultants notify the payroll department and they fixed the glitch. But the problem is not solved quite yet: the men do not know how to approach Milton's firing. The two consultants advise the office managers to not tell Milton about his firing and the problem will "work itself out naturally" once he stops receiving paychecks. They further claim, "We always like to avoid confrontation whenever possible. The problem is solved from your end."

After the corporate consultants interview various employees on their job performance, they stand in front of Milton's cubicle talking to the office's regional manager Bill. He whispers Milton is "not working out" and mumbles inaudible words to the consultants. The men proceed to laugh and look at Milton, clearly he is the butt of their joke. Bill says nothing related to Milton's job performance that warrants the criticisms against Milton. The camera cuts back-and-forth to shots of Milton's increasingly red face in a close-up shot to an extreme close-up of Bill's lips.

Milton, now located at the cubicle furthest away from the other employees, now must relocate his office down to the basement. He also informs Bill about not receiving a paycheck and Bill simply tells him to talk to the payroll department about that issue. In a later scene, Milton's desk is now located in the basement. Located behind him are various gray electrical boxes, one even has a red sticker reading "DANGER: high voltage," Bill visits Milton in his new workspace. Bill cuts the lights out on Milton, leaving Milton to say this is "the last straw."

Milton finally gets revenge on the office manager who torments him by setting the office on fire, all stemming from Bill taking Milton's beloved red stapler earlier in the film. Throughout *Office Space*, Milton mumbles to himself about committing an arsonist act if his superiors continue to demean him. Well, Milton does enact retribution against Bill for years of snobbish comments and petty actions. Milton walks away from the scene of the crime when the flames of fire engulf the office building, ultimately tearing the building down. There appears to be no consequences for Milton's action and runs away to a tropical resort in the film's final sequence. Milton complains about receiving the wrong alcoholic drink and the overabundance of salt in the drink to the waiter who basically ignores Milton's request. Milton continues talking, even after the waiter leaves the diegetic space, about not only going to another resort, but also threatens to "set the place on fire," akin to his office-burning spectacle in the previous scene. Milton's final threat on the island confirms his willingness to perform illegal activities if he's pushed too far.

With the office now completely burned away, all of the paperwork, files, and other important documents are forever lost. More importantly, the letter Peter wrote to Bill regarding the former's involvement in the undisclosed payroll scam is also a victim of the fire, much to Peter's relief.

2.3 Conclusion

In *Horrible Bosses* (Seth Gordon, 2011), three friends each work in terrible work environments and loathe their bosses and virtually everything about their white-collar jobs. "I guess we'll be miserable for the rest of our lives? That's the deal?" says Kurt

(Jason Sudeikis), one of the friends at the bar when the men are complaining about their hostile work environments. Afraid that they have become “spineless losers,” in Kurt’s own words, the men scheme a very dark plan to murder their bosses. Inspired by episodes of *Law & Order*, the men seriously believe they can devise the “perfect murder.” They initially want to hire a hit man, but that does not work out well. So the men agree to kill each other’s bosses and they will be no connections between them. The perfect murder, of course, does not go as planned and trouble follow these gullible men.

Nick Hendricks (Jason Bateman), one of the friends, works at a financial firm for 8 years and actively seeks a promotion in his company. Nick’s boss David Harken (Kevin Spacey) constantly belittles Nick for mundane actions such as arriving to work two minutes late via security cameras and accepting Harken’s request for a beer in the morning time. Nick is ultimately denied his promotion by Harken, who gives himself a pay raise and bigger office.

Before Nick and his friends comprise their murderous plan, he daydreams a revenge fantasy that involves a violent attack on Harken. Immediately after hearing Harken give himself the promotion, Nick fantasizes an elaborate attack on his despised boss when he violently attacks him. Nick throws Harken across the office and lands on desks, papers, and virtually anything standing in the latter’s way. Nick becomes so enraged that he throws Harken out of the window and the boss lands on a parking signage post. Harken plummets to his demise and shouts, “that’s the best you got?” and the other employees applaud Nick’s violent actions. Nick then awakens from his daydream and goes about the rest of his workday.

Nick's revenge fantasy can also be compared to *Office Space's* infamous attack on the much-hated office printer. Throughout the film, Peter, Michael, and Samir all have issues with the printer that makes their jobs even more unbearable. After years of paper jams and error messages, the men take the printer out of the work environment to an undisclosed field and throw it on the ground. Shot in slow motion, the men continuously hit the printer with baseball bats and proceed to stomp the device with their feet. The men, still dressed in their office attire, destroy every bit of the printer in order to vent out their frustrations of their white-collar labor.

While *Horrible Bosses'* revenge fantasy appears more clear-cut, there is a high level of ambiguity if the destruction of the printer actually happens in *Office Space*. Was the action a fixture of Peter and his coworkers' imagination? Judge's usage of slow motion allows us to not necessarily empathize with his characters but mainly to display the ridiculousness of corporate culture. The printer is a symbol for the men's hatred of their white-collar office jobs and how they have systematically resented their marginal roles in their company.

Throughout this chapter, I articulated different ways that office workers feel alienated from their workspaces. Their supervisors, peers, and even loved ones that they repress their anxieties until they cannot take it anymore. Similarly, these men desire a better working environment for their jobs, but often offer little solutions. While slackers desire to drop out of society and sometimes even the films they are featured, office workers strategize different ways of trying to make the workplace a more tolerable environment and continue living their meager white-collar lives.

CHAPTER 3: A ROOM OF MAN'S OWN: THE MAN-CAVE AND THE
CONSTRUCTION OF MALE IDENTITY IN RECENT BROMANCE FILMS

The previous chapter ended with a discussion of *Horrible Bosses* and the film's depiction of the alienation felt by white-collar workers. The three friends are so fed up with their jobs they devise a murderous ploy against their much-hated bosses in hopes of better employment opportunities and an overall better work environment. Although the film was framed within the parameters of comedy's intervention with white-collar office workers, *Horrible Bosses* also follows one of the decade's most popular comedic trends: the bromance.

At the turn of the new century, romantic comedies were in a static position. Deleyto fears romantic comedies will "become nothing more than picturesque museum pieces—to be admired but not believed."⁶¹ Tamar Jeffords McDonald (2007) similarly concludes, "The genre itself is waiting for a new impetus which will renew its energies and lead it in more interesting directions."⁶² Romantic comedies needed some life support in order to remain relevant and profitable.

The answer to Deleyto and McDonald's worries: the bromance. A fusion of the romantic comedy and a modernization of the buddy film, bromances center on friendships between heterosexual men. Using narrative and aesthetic tropes associated with romantic comedies, bromance film narratives often feature a sense of ambiguity in terms of depicting the male subjects' friendship. Beginning around the mid-2000s with

⁶¹ Celestino Deleyto, "Between Friends: Love and Friendship in Contemporary Hollywood Romantic Comedies." *Screen* 44.2 (Summer 2003): 171.

⁶² Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*. London: Wallflower Press, 2007, 17.

the release of films like *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005) and *Talladega Nights* (Adam McKay, 2006), bromance films centered on “...an emotionally intense bond between presumably straight males who demonstrate an openness to intimacy that they neither regard, acknowledge, avow, nor express sexually.”⁶³ These films placed friendships at the core of romantic comedy narratives, even more so than the romantic unions depicted.

This chapter not only explores the emergence of bromance films throughout the last decade of Hollywood comedies, but more importantly analyze one of the subgenre’s obvious markers: the man-cave. A physical space devoted for male activity, the man-cave symbolizes a man’s need to claim a space of his own in a house or apartment. I want to further explore what’s at stake in terms of defining the man-cave and also discussing the problematic features when gender-specified spaces.

3.1 Buddies before Bros: A Brief Overview of Buddy Films

Writing about buddy films in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, Robin Wood argues homosocial male characters defy the “dominant ideology” expected in American men: getting married, starting a family, and claiming a physical home of their own.⁶⁴ He recognizes a shift in the narrative representation of male friendships in Hollywood filmmaking occurring in 1969 with the release of three seminal films: *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1969), *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), and *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969). All three films feature male

⁶³ Michael DeAngelis, *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television*. Ed. Michael DeAngelis. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014: 1.

⁶⁴ Wood, 203.

buddies where an “emotion center” allow the men a closer bond together.⁶⁵ Instead of conforming to societal norms, these men take on the role of journeymen in which they set out goals to achieve and live life on their own terms.

All three films also underscore a “crisis in ideological confidence,” especially when historically contextualizing the films against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, civil rights, and women’s liberation.⁶⁶ In Woodian terms, the homosocial male characters defy “normality” by rejecting heteronormative ideology. As a result, the male buddies in these films are social outcasts on the margins of our culture. The death of one (or both) of the men is a common narrative trend in male buddy films of this era.

Wood argues these films feature seemingly heterosexual men expressing repressed homosexual feelings for each other. He points to the lack of substantial female characters in these films and how they merely appear as sexual objects to the male buddies. If women are not sexually attracted to the men, they are portrayed in an “extremely demeaning” manner. In other words, the presence of women confirms the heterosexual identity of the male buddies. Wood’s analysis of the buddy film’s problematic relationship to female characters remains intact in modern bromance films.

Michael DeAngelis, in the introduction to his recently published anthology on bromance films and television shows, takes notice of Wood’s characterization of the male characters’ lack of a physical home. He argues these men lack “any domestic grounding or anchor point whatsoever.”⁶⁷ Surprisingly, DeAngelis only cites the films mentioned in Wood’s essay as examples and does not acknowledge the presence of man-caves in

⁶⁵ Wood, 204.

⁶⁶ Wood, 204.

⁶⁷ DeAngelis, 9.

modern bromance subgenres. Instead DeAngelis analyzes the presence of domestic spaces and how these spaces are only shown sparingly. These scenes are rushed so the narratives can quickly shift to the blooming bromance between the homosocial male characters.

DeAngelis believes the relationship to domestic spaces marks the “most prominent contrast” between buddy and bromance films, he refuses an account of the man-cave as part of the domestic space. Although most of the films discussed in this chapter feature single men and how they occupy the physical spaces of their homes, one cannot deny man-caves are present in several Hollywood films of the last decade.

3.2 Bachelor Pads and *Playboy* Culture as a Precursor for the Man-Cave

This section provides a brief overview of the 1950s bachelor pad, which serves as a precursor for the man-cave in many ways. Although *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959) predates the emergence of the buddy film by nearly a decade, the film sheds light on many issues and themes that will become prevalent in more recent comedies discussed later this chapter.

In 1956, *Playboy* magazine published a highly influential article describing an in-depth account of the ideal bachelor pad for single men. The magazine conjures a fantastical space designed specially for swinging bachelors who use their apartments to seduce women and other sexual liaisons. The magazine believes men inherently desire a space reserved for themselves: “a man yearns for quarters of his own. More than a place

to hang his hat, a man dreams of his own domain, a place that is exclusively his.”⁶⁸ Men, according to *Playboy*, should not be tied down to a single woman or start a family and embrace living the single life. Without a spouse at home maintaining the upkeep of the apartment, men are then expected to perform domestic responsibilities in their apartments. *Playboy* accounts for the bachelor cooking the perfect Sunday dinner, ways to clean the apartment, and express interest in the apartment’s interior design. Although these activities would be considered “unmanly,” the bachelor undertakes the role in their desire for domestic freedom and a place for entertaining guests. *Playboy* even provides a blueprint for the ideal bachelor penthouse or apartment, down to the smallest details, measurements, and recommended items for decoration.

Around the same time *Playboy* began publishing its essays on the ideal bachelor apartment, Hollywood film depictions of the male-gendered living spaces became more visible and evidently inspired by the magazine’s ideology surrounding the bachelor pad. Some notable examples include *The Tender Trap* (Charles Walters, 1955) and *Come Blow Your Horn* (Bud Yorkin, 1963). However, the most notable film embodying *Playboy*’s ideological assumptions of the bachelor pad is *Pillow Talk*. The film not only captures the carefree spirit of late 1950s bachelorhood but also the implied immaturity associated with the lifestyle.

In *Pillow Talk*, Brad (Rock Hudson) is a successful songwriter and single bachelor who pens songs for Broadway musicals in New York City. He enjoys his bachelor lifestyle and sleeps with a slew of women, only to never call them again. He

⁶⁸ “Playboy’s Penthouse Apartment.” In *The Gender and Consumer Reader*. Ed. Jennifer Scanlon. New York: New York University Press, 2000: 94.

often lures women to his apartment and promises to sing a song written specifically for them. Through a montage of clips showing various women standing near Brad's piano, he sings the same song and replaces a lyric to include a given's woman name. He purposely changes the name so he can seduce them.

Brad's sexual activities occur on the first floor of his apartment, which *Playboy* would label his *active zone* reserved for "fun and partying." Most of the activities are designed for the bachelor Brad seducing women. With the snap of his fingers, Brad can transform a regular sofa to an automatic bed, lock the front door, and play jazz music on the record player. The sofa bed is not, of course, used for sleep but rather a place for sexual activity. The second floor of Brad's bachelor pad is where Brad spends time alone and relaxes, his *quiet zone* for "relaxation and sleep." Brad's usage of his apartment points to a major contradiction: why does he need a separation of his bedroom on the second floor from the sexual activities occurring on the first floor? Very few scenes in *Pillow Talk* take place on the second floor of Brad's apartment. A spiral staircase leading to the second floor remains visible in virtually all of the shots inside Brad's apartment on the ground floor.

In a conversation with his best friend Jonathan (Tony Randall), Brad justifies why he remains a bachelor. Brad compares himself to a "tree" who will "get cut down" and "thrown in the river" if he embarks on a committed relationship. Jonathan's response implies his friend's immaturity for Brad's unwillingness to settle down: "That's what it means to be adult. A wife, a family, a house. A mature man wants those responsibilities." Brad believes if he gets married, a part of his bachelor persona will be forever lost.

Comparing himself to a tree, Brad only highlights the fragileness of bachelorhood. The constraints and expectations of marriage suffocate Brad and other bachelors to the point they will not give marriage a fighting chance. Jonathan, on the other hand, associates his friend's lifestyle to immaturity. Married and divorced three times, Jonathan believes in the façade of married life correlating to a man's happiness.⁶⁹ Brad's lifestyle has no "responsibilities" nor does he desire any racial compromises.

While the 1950s bachelor pad serves as a precursor for the contemporary man cave, there are some vital differences when comparing both spaces. The bachelor often plays a dual role, playing both the carefree bachelor and completing domestic duties within the household. The bachelor desires and encourages women to enter his apartment so he can seduce them. In man caves, however, women are often forbidden from entering the privileged space because men want to escape their spouses. The bachelor wants to seduce women inside his apartment but also yearns for his own leisurely time: the quiet zone inside his apartment. The man cave only desires a quiet zone so they can relax without the presence of women. Either way, both the bachelor pad and man cave are fantastical male spaces, allowing insecure men an avenue to curb their anxieties regarding marriage.

3.3 Under the Limelight: Melodramatized Men in Bromance Films

After establishing a working definition of bromance films and the precursors of the subgenre, I will address to different variations of masculinity represented in bromance

⁶⁹ For a more in-depth reading on *Pillow Talk* and 1950s bachelor culture, see Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

films. This section discusses the concept of the melodramatized man and how that term can be applied to two popular bromance films from the previous decade: *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005) and *I Love You, Man* (John Hamberg, 2009).

In *The Unruly Woman* (1995), Kathleen Rowe coined the term melodramatized man to describe male characters' melodramatic traits and tendencies in post-classical Hollywood romantic comedies. The genre, according to her, "is both more skeptical about love and more sentimental about its victims. It also privileges the subjectivity of its male hero over that of the female."⁷⁰ For Rowe, leading male characters are allowed more narrative agency, but at the same time they challenge traditional gender norms. Men in these films are more openly sensitive and emotional, a stark contrast to traditional leading men from past decades. She continues: "the formerly chastised male hero is sentimentalized for his sufferings in love."⁷¹ Rowe uses the neo-traditional romantic comedies *Moonstruck* (Norman Jewison, 1987) and *Sleepless in Seattle* (Nora Ephron, 1993) as indicative of the changing vanguard of male representations. Both films feature widowed men who hesitate starting new romantic relationships. Rather the sensitive guy gets the girl since he now cares about her feelings too.

Scholars have applied Rowe's melodramatized man concept to bromance films, most notably in the work of Claire Mortimer. In her broad survey of the romantic comedy genre, Mortimer attempts extending Rowe's term in order to comprehend the changing landscape of masculinity in post-classical romantic comedies. Although Mortimer's

⁷⁰ Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995: 192.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 192.

analysis offers little insight, she places more attention on the feminization of male characters.

One film showcasing the feminization of male characters is *I Love You, Man* (John Hamberg, 2009) highlighting the Rowe and Mortimer's melodramatized man. The film centers on Peter (Paul Rudd) who seems to have everything going his way: a high paying job as a real estate agent and he's marrying his fiancé Zooney (Rashida Jones), the girl of his dreams. There's just one problem: Peter has no male friends and lacks a best man for his upcoming wedding. Peter goes a series of "man-dates," all of whom end disastrously. At one of his open-house showings, Peter meets Sydney (Jason Segal), a freelance investor, and the two men instantly become friends. They jam out to the music of Rush, drink beer, and talk about their romantic past conquests and encounters. Peter eventually asks Sydney to be his best man, unbeknownst to the former about Peter lacking any male friends, and he accepts. While their budding bromance occurs, Zooney feels neglected and questions the new man Peter has become.

Writing Peter in *I Love You, Man*, Mortimer notes the film is "careful to make absolutely clear its central characters are not gay, but makes a concerted effort to engage with masculine identity. We see Peter as naturally happier around women, choosing to stay at home and tantalizing refreshments for his fiancé's friends rather than indulge in more masculine rituals."⁷² In the film's opening scenes, Peter enjoys activities more associated with women such his interest in fashion, cooking, and reality television. Mortimer's insights on Peter characterize him as a metrosexual man who appears less

⁷² Claire Mortimer, *Romantic Comedy*. New York: Routledge, 2010: 136.

masculine than the other men in the film.⁷³ It seems, however, essentialist to characterize Peter as less masculine based purely on his interests and hobbies.

Peter, either way, does not embody the traditional aspects of a masculine character. He seems out of place when interacting with other men who possess alpha male characteristics, most notably Zooey's best friend's husband Barry (Jon Favreau). Early in the film, Peter desperately tries befriending Barry and his inner-circle of male friends when the latter hosts a poker game. Desperately seeking male companionship, Peter speaks awkwardly and tries way too hard to be likeable around the other men. He comes across too strong in a last-ditch effort to impress the men with bizarre jokes and stories. Peter even vomits on Barry after consuming too much beer in a drinking contest. Peter just does not "fit in" with the other alpha men.

Like Peter in *I Love You, Man*, Andy (Steve Carrell) in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005) also displays certain features of the melodramatized man. The latter film focuses on Andy who works a local electronics store and appears to live a seemingly normal life. A group of male co-workers attempt to befriend shy Andy and invite him to their weekly poker night. During the game, Andy reveals that he is still a virgin at the age of 40, which shocks the other men, so much that they try to help Andy lose his virginity.

Andy's virginity does not appear to bother him at all. Andy's virginity instead appears to bother his co-workers. As a result, the co-workers refuse to celebrate his

⁷³ English journalist Mark Simpson first coined the term *metrosexual* in 1994 and later popularized U.S. mass media throughout the 2000s. Simpson's original definition of metrosexual accounts for heterosexual single men who enjoy their roles as consumers. He characterizes the metrosexual's preference for fashion, trendy bars, and state-of-the-art gyms.

celibacy and often humiliate him, both intentionally and unintentionally throughout the film, at any given opportunity. For example, the men constantly crack jokes about Andy's virginity. Societal pressure from his peers force Andy to confront his stagnant sexuality. After Andy's co-workers arrange disastrously embarrassing dates, Andy meets Trish (Catherine Keener), a woman who works at a local Ebay store and mother of two children. Andy conceals his virginal status from Trish when their relationship progresses.

Walter Benjamin's concept of the collector contributes to a better understanding of Andy as a melodramatized man, especially when analyzing Andy's apartment. Benjamin associates the collector's obsessive personality traits harboring back to their past: "This or any other procedure is merely a dam against the spring tide of memories which surges toward any collector as he contemplates his possessions. Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories."⁷⁴ More specifically, Andy's collecting of vintage toys stems from his childhood and the nostalgia surrounding those memories, leaving a considerable impact on him as an adult who still actively collects and seeks those objects.

In a sense, Andy's one-bedroom apartment can read as one large man-cave. His apartment is a mismatch of items: a mummy cardboard stand-in, a drum set, exercise equipment, science fiction posters and memorabilia and a gaming chair. Andy's possessions embody a teenage boy as opposed to an adult man. In addition, he has a large collection of rare collectable, mostly boxed but some opened, action figures occupying much of his living space.

⁷⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library." In *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1967: 60.

When characters ask Andy about his toy collection, they often question why an adult man would still possess such items. Andy's explanations are almost-always related to his childhood. If a character even tries touching his valuable collection, Andy immediately scolds them and emphasizes its rarity and expensive price value. In one scene, David (Paul Rudd), one of Andy's co-workers, gives Andy a large box of pornographic videotapes and magazines at the latter's apartment. David gives Andy the pornographic material for Andy to explore his sexuality. Andy initially refuses David's "gift," but Andy ultimately accepts so David can stop pestering him.

Beyond constantly scolding Andy for his virginity, David does not appear to understand Andy's large toy collection. Instead of collecting valuable toys, David believes Andy should take up a new hobby: masturbation. David even compares Andy's stagnant sexuality to one of the latter's toys: "You're wound up. You're like one of those action figures all hermetically sealed in your box. You gotta play..." By comparing Andy to one of his toys, David believes Andy is a melodramatized male subject for not having sex. In fact, David and his other co-workers constantly poke fun of Andy and constantly tease him about his virginity. David also believes masturbation will curb Andy's anxieties surrounding sex. David, however, believes masturbation and other sexual activities are normal for adult men.

An irony appears in the film: David gives Andy the box of pornographic materials in order for Andy to ease his sexual tensions and anxieties; however, David's insistence on self-pleasure confirms his own sexual hang-ups. The film quickly reveals the sexual dysfunctions of the other men too: Jay's troubled marriage (his wife sleeps with another

man), David's restraining order for stalking an ex-girlfriend, and Cal's preference for one-night stands over long-term relationships. They are so fixated on Andy losing his virginity that they are blinded by their own romantic problems. Andy's relationship with Trish succeeds in large part because he wants a deeper connection than just sex. The men view sex as the central activity that matters and nothing more. Andy, if anything, does the opposite of his co-workers' demands: starting a long-term relationship as opposed to a random bar hookup.

Andy, however, hastily scolds David for touching one of his toys: "Don't take it out! Sorry, it loses its value if you take it of it's packaging." For Andy, the toys in his collection are meant to be admired but never actually to be played. The exchange between Andy and David are clearly meant for laughs and also not so subtly discusses masturbation. Yet Andy keeps himself busy, not through releasing his repressed sexual feelings and desires via masturbation, by collecting and preserving valuable action figures and toys, playing video games, and other activities. As a result, there is no urgency from Andy to develop his sexuality.

In Benjaminian terms, the value of Andy's toy collection balances on "disorder and order." Andy's imaginary "magic encyclopedia" determines the authenticity of the toys he collects. His constantly reminds other characters to "not compromise the integrity of the box" which further confirms his obsessive demeanor as a collector. For Andy, the vintage toy collection is priceless and no value can sway him away from selling his collection. It's only when Andy begins dating Trish that he begins to let go of these items via her Ebay store. Andy begins selling his beloved toys, but they are highly profitable.

The film suggests he no longer needs his toys because sex will now become his new hobby or leisurely activity.

After having sex for the first time on their honeymoon, Trish asks Andy if he enjoyed it but he answers her question to the tune of the song “The Age of Aquarius” from the musical *Hair*. The film ends with the rest of the cast dancing and singing the song at the wedding ceremony. Andy, in fact, never explicitly answers Trish’s question and the film resorts to an over-the-top musical performance to end the film. If anything, Andy’s insecurities regarding marriage and sex remain the same, thus he is still a melodramatized male subject and there is still some doubt whether Andy transforms from a nervous virgin to a confident sexual partner.

The 40-Year-Old Virgin’s final sequence is in stark contrast to *I Love You, Man*, both films end with a wedding, which is a very common narrative trope in bromance films. In the latter film, Peter does not remain a melodramatized man after reuniting with his new best friend Sydney and the two rekindle their budding friendship on Peter’s wedding day. Plus Peter marries Zooey, but that action is left in the background to the men’s bromantic reunion.

Andy and Peter are considered melodramatized from their peers and both films are about others trying to fix two men whose lives are hardly problematic. Both men display hardly any problematic personality features, yet they are stigmatized for not abiding traditional heteronormative constructs of male identity: the neglect of having regular or even casual sex or the inability to maintain any male friends. Bromance films tend to emphasize one problematic area of otherwise untroubled men, in order to

highlight something fundamentally missing in their lives. But these two films do not consider what if Andy remained a virgin or Peter still lacked any male friends. Both films force the men to confront what they lack and then continue their existence, presumably happier by the end of these films. They are stigmatized but also forced to conform to larger, more widely accepted virtues of what constitutes masculinity in our heteronormative culture, even if it goes against the men's commands.

3.4 Man-Caves and the Construction of the Modern Man

The previous section tried to articulate how melodramatized men interact with other men in predominantly male gendered spaces and the problems that arise from it. In this section, I discuss the usage of space in man-caves in bromance films and how that reflects the men who occupy these spaces. I also focus on how outsiders, especially women, react to the ideological constructs of the man-cave.

Sydney's (Jason Segal) man cave in *I Love You, Man* embodies the epitome of male gendered space and remains arguably the most famous man cave in bromance comedies. Unlike Peter, who was previously discussed at great length, Sydney is a carefree bachelor who actively engages in meaningless one-night stands and vicariously invests in different business opportunities and ventures. When entering Sydney's man-cave, in the ranch's detached garage, one notices how he decorates and uses the space: various musical instruments (mostly guitars and a drum set) and various music posters and memorabilia of the progressive rock band Rush immediately captures our attention. Unlike Andy's apartment in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, Sydney boasts to have frequent

male friends hanging out in his man-cave. The incorporation of multi-player activities such as the band set confirms Sydney's encouragement to entertain his friends within the allotted space.⁷⁵ More so than *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, Sydney's man-cave encourages male bonding practices to take place and the men discusses a wide range of topics in that space.

Sydney's man-cave also captures a similar attitude to *Playboy's* notion of how male gendered spaces like bachelor pad should reflect the man using the space: "A man's home is not only his castle, it is or should be, the outward reflection of his inner self—a comfortable, livable, and yet exciting expression of the person is and the life he leads."⁷⁶ Just as *Playboy* advocated men to occupy and maintain the bachelor lifestyle so they can bed various women, Sydney unapologetically discusses his sexual conquests to Peter in the man-cave. Sydney's brazen sexual actions allow Peter to open up about his frustrations about his sex life with Zooey while occupying the man-cave. In a sense, the man-cave is a safe haven for the men who can confide secrets and desires to one another without any consequences.

Sydney is more open about his sexuality than Andy or even Peter. Sydney proudly shows off his "jerk off station," a place where he masturbates in the comfort of his man-cave. While Andy's apartment is clean and organized, Sydney's man-cave is completely the opposite: messy and completely disorganized. Although Sydney does not explicitly characterize himself as untidy, there is a moment when Peter finds a used condom on one

⁷⁵ Although Cal and David play video games at Andy's apartment at one point in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, Andy only has one gaming chair in the living room. Andy is labeled as a loner quite early in the film and he plays a video game in his gaming chair alone in a flashback sequence highlighting the banality of Andy's existence outside of work.

⁷⁶ *Playboy*, 97.

of the couches in Sydney's man-cave, much to Peter's dismay. Sydney's implied laziness is further confirmed when he justifies using condoms while masturbating: "there's no cleanup involved." By Sydney's own admission, he is untidy in his space and really does not seem to care. When Peter asks if women are allowed inside the man-cave, Sydney responds: "Pete, this is a man-cave. There's no women allowed in here. I got a jerk off station for God's sake." Not surprisingly women are barred from entering the man-cave, although hardly gives any reason why this space should evict them in the first place. Clearly women are not welcomed in the secluded space known as the man-cave, although it seems contradictory since women are the main topic of discussion in Sydney's man-cave.⁷⁷

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "triangularization" narrative concept becomes incredibly helpful in relation to bromance films.⁷⁸ Particularly Sedgwick's emphasis on another person (usually a woman) blocking the homosocial bonding experience allows a better understanding of an outsider's perspective. Take *I Love You, Man*, a film embodying Sedgwick's term because Zoey is the outsider directly observing the budding bromance between her fiancé Peter and Sydney. Remember, she encourages Peter to go on "man-dates" earlier in the film in order to find a suitable best man for his upcoming wedding. What worries Zoey is the sheer fact that Peter embodies the "perfect boyfriend/fiancé"; however, one problem arises: he has no male friends. When she joins Peter and Sydney at the Rush concert, the two men jam to the music together and having

⁷⁷ At one point in the film, Peter sees a woman exiting the front door of Sydney's ranch. After the woman leaves his property, Sydney tells Peter he bedded her and they go to the man-cave. The woman leaving Sydney's ranch is the only time viewers see Sydney inside his house.

⁷⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985: 2.

a great time. Zoey seems to be out-of-place in the context of the concert and clearly appears annoyed by the two men's behavior.

After the concert Zoey seems discontent with Sydney and believes he's molding Peter to be a "different" guy, not the man she had known. Her relationship with Peter is in jeopardy, ultimately reaching a crisis moment: choosing his friend Sydney or her. Ultimately Peter chooses Zoey and temporarily breaks ties with Sydney. Although the two men reunite at Peter's wedding and Sydney is rightfully the best man, the "triangularization" concept helps understand Zoey's angst and frustration the bromance causes her.

Knocked Up (Judd Apatow, 2007) is another comedy that presents a problematic representation of the man-cave. Although the film features Ben and his friend's secluded ranch where homosocial bonding takes place, I want to focus on Pete (Paul Rudd), a secondary character who is married to Allison's (Katherine Heigl) sister Debbie (Leslie Mann). Although Pete and Debbie are married with children, he desperately wants to escape family life at any given moment. Pete's job as a music producer allows him to spend considerable amounts of time away from his chaotic family, much to Pete's delight as he and his wife constantly bicker at one another. Even the mismatched couple Ben and Allison notices Pete and Debbie's verbal spats that stem from their differing parenting concerns and methods.

After constantly leaving late at night for several weeks, Debbie suspects her husband is having an affair. Debbie becomes so paranoid that she installs software on his computer so she track and monitor Pete's emails and browsing history. Upon her

investigation and great concern, Debbie eventually discovers Pete participates in a fantasy baseball league with his friends at an undisclosed house. When Debbie enters the room occupied a large group of men, one of them says “We said no wives,” thus discouraging women from the male-specified spaces.

Pete avoided telling his wife about his hobby so he can seek solace away from the family.⁷⁹ In short, Pete claims he “needed to get away” from them so he can keep his sanity in check. Unlike Peter’s fiancé Zooey in *I Love You, Man*, Debbie discourages Pete from having male friends having without her acknowledgment. Part of Pete and Debbie’s marital problems stem from their constant miscommunication. Unlike Andy and Sydney, Pete is a married man; however, the man cave he occupies is not a space of his own.

Similar to Debbie’s reaction of the man-cave, female spouses are skeptical when entering the male-specified space. When Trish finally enters Andy’s apartment and discovers pornographic material among other obscenities (e.g., a replica of a vagina from the doctor’s office earlier in the film and possible date-rape pills), she believes he is a “sexual deviant.” She remains oblivious that Andy is still a virgin and he is too embarrassed and self-conscious to admit that to her. After she cross-examines Andy, he tells her “I love you” and Trish storms out of his apartment because she thinks he is a “serial killer.”⁸⁰ None of the possessions Trish points out actually belong to Andy, but

⁷⁹ Pete, ironically, is the only man in the group to wear baseball-related attire at the fantasy baseball meeting: he wears a Baltimore Orioles jersey and baseball cap.

⁸⁰ Earlier in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, Cal also confesses that he thought Andy was a serial killer due to the latter’s robotic personality, serious demeanor, and quietness.

rather his dimwitted co-workers obsessed with Andy losing his virginity, so he nevertheless confesses his virginal status after a climatic bike crash.

The film ends with their wedding which signifies two things: the end of his celibacy but also Andy moving out his apartment. Trish lives in a large suburban house with her two children and even as their relationship progressed, Andy spends far more time at her house than his apartment. As noted earlier in the chapter, Andy's apartment is the space where he kept his science-fiction memorabilia, rare and collectable action figures, and other items. Andy's marriage equates to the death of his man-cave, aka his apartment, and finally breaks away to become a conformed family man.

Only Sydney's man-cave remains intact at the end of *I Love You, Man*. Unlike *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* or *Knocked Up*, no woman enters Sydney's man-cave nor is there any moment that anticipates such an action to occur. In fact, Sydney does not have a character metamorphosis unlike other men who occupy the man-cave. Instead Peter changes after spending ample amounts of time with Sydney and they both remain friends.

3.5 Conclusion

Man-caves are perhaps the most obvious site for male bonding in bromance films, especially given their overwhelming appearance in these films. However, man-caves are without their limitations and problems. For one thing, these men need their man-caves to escape their daily problems (whether that be family or work related) and often avoid dealing with their issues directly. Andy, Sydney, and Pete all suffer a bad case of arrested development because they revert back to their childhood at any given opportunity. Often

their man-caves are retreats from the chaos in their lives. Andy's action figures/science-fiction memorabilia, Sydney's jerk-off char/rock band set, and Pete's baseball fantasy attire all correlate to their desire to return to adolescence.

Of the three characters, only Sydney remains the same because he is content with his carefree life as a bachelor. He does not take part in a committed relationship, often signals a character change. Pete remains married and goes back to his mundane family life. Andy marries Trish, thus breaking away from his virginal status. Marriage (and/or family life) often signifies the death of male adolescence and innocence in these bromance films.

EPILOGUE: IS THIS THE END OF MAN-CAVES AS WE KNOW IT?

Has the man-cave reached its zenith in bromance films? The previous chapter discussed the importance of man-caves in the bromance subgenre of the previous decade. Most bromance films place emphasis on homosocial male bonding narratives and the implied immaturity of their male subjects. The man-cave allows male subjects an exclusive space to unwind and forget their professional and personal troubles. But the man-cave is a problematic space embodying larger ideological issues related to contemporary masculine identity of the mostly-white subjects. No film better captures the self-destruction of male subjectivity in male-gendered space than *This is the End* (Evan Goldberg and Seth Rogen, 2013), a recent apocalyptic comedy where the vast majority of the action takes place at the fictional home of actor James Franco.

This is the End begins with actor Seth Rogen picking up friend and fellow actor Jay Baruchel at the airport where the two friends indulge on fast food and talk about their current movie and television projects. After spending an afternoon getting high and playing video games on Rogen's new 3-D television, Seth tells Jay they will attend a house-warming party at James Franco's Los Angeles mansion. Jay, who now lives in Canada and detests L.A. culture, does not want to go to the party since he will hardly know anybody. Seth pressures his friend to attend the party so he can make new friends and Jay begrudgingly agrees. The two friends observe the wild party at Franco's house including an assortment of alcohol, illicit drugs, and sexual promiscuities enjoyed by the guests. These actions make Jay feel uncomfortable and out-of-touch with the other partygoers, so he and Seth go to the local convenience store for cigarettes. While inside

the store, the two men witness a earthquake-like rupture from the ground but with one bizarre twist: beams of blue light come down and carry certain individuals up to the sky.

Shocked by what they see, the two men believe something's amiss and race back to Franco's party to alert the guests. L.A. quickly turns into a city of utter chaos with cars crashing into buildings and fellow drivers and pedestrians. The men warn the guests inside the house about the actions occurring outside and nobody believes them. When the ground begins shaking inside the house, all the guests retreat outside and are shocked by the various firestorms terrorizing the city. Things get even worse when Franco's front lawn turns into a giant bottomless pit where most of the partygoers plummet to their deaths. After this incident, the only known survivors are Seth, Jay, James, Jonah Hill, Craig Robinson, and Danny McBride, all of whom are famous comedians and actors appearing in each other's films. Set against the violent and fiery apocalyptic outside, the men are secluded in Franco's mansion. They must ration the little food and supplies they have and wait for rescuers, if any will come at all. Judgment day is upon the men and they must find a way to survive without killing each other first.

A major component of the film's appeal resides in the meta-references to the ensemble cast's star personas. They play exaggerated versions of themselves and heavily embellish those traits featured in the film's performances. They are not playing themselves per se, but rather the characters most associated to their comedic careers identifiable to audiences. For example, Seth Rogen plays a heavily embellished version of the stoner archetype made famous in films including *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, 2007) and *Pineapple Express* (David Gordon Green, 2008). The fine line between reality

and fiction are blurred even in *This is the End*'s opening scene. Seth waits inside the airport for his friend outside the boarding gate and tabloid reporters ask him to perform his infamous stoner laugh from the aforementioned films.

Given almost the entire film takes place inside James Franco's house, his property can be read as one large man-cave. A single bachelor living the L.A. high life, James tells Seth and Jay he "designed" his new house and "this place is like a piece of me." The house is equipped with the latest state-of-the-art devices including iPads on the wall. If we take James at his word, the house is a shrine of the actor's life and career across different medias including film and art. He displays various paintings, statues, and sculptures handcrafted by the actor himself. The artwork is almost impossible to escape inside the world when virtually every shot in the film features at least one form of James' art. Large open space on the first floor allows the countless number of guests present inside the house when the party begins. James' open flooring plan harbors back to the rise of bachelor pads in the previous chapter's discussion of *Pillow Talk* and how those 1950s and 1960s films deeply influenced the modern perception of man-caves.

This is the End quickly becomes one long exercise in male homosocial bonding. The men are forced to occupy one unified space for survival given the fiery outside forces keeping them inside the house. They use their time together talking about the ups and downs of their careers, performing nonsensical actions and jokes on each other, and even film a mock trailer for the fictional *Pineapple Express 2* with ridiculous special effects and over-the-top performances. Given their celebrity statuses, the men believe disaster relief services will rescue them from the hellish conditions in L.A. They are

delusional for thinking these services will cater to their urgent needs when the entire city is in flames. Although they drive each other crazy, they still obviously care with one another. They are, after all, friends with one another, so in that sense they confide secrets and anxieties as a group. Nobody can understand the men better than their small group.

The film also addresses one of the bromance subgenre's most problematic narrative elements: the treatment of women. It is important to mention the lack of women in the men's small communal group after the apocalypse begins in L.A. Besides cameo appearances from pop singer Rihanna and actress/comedian Mindy Kaling, the presence of women in the film is almost non-existent outside Emma Watson's cameo appearance. In fact, none of the women are portrayed positively in the film, especially the two aforementioned women. Kaling mentions to the partygoers that she wants to have sex with actor Michael Cera and references his work on the television show *Arrested Development* (Fox, 2003-2006) when he was still a teenager.

Rihanna, on the other hand, becomes an object of sexual desire for cocaine-snorting Michael Cera who slaps the pop singer's buttocks. When he performs this action, she slaps him in the face and scolds him, but the situation mirrors the pop singer's prior problems with domestic violence from her former boyfriend and singer Chris Brown. She is also made an object of sexual desire when Craig Robinson sings the song "Take Your Panties Off" dedicated to the pop singer. Unlike Cera's forceful approach, Rihanna is surrounded by many partygoers and even sings a few verses to the impromptu song, much to the applause of the guests who sing along. It is a more playful setting and not one to be taken seriously, as opposed to her interaction with Cera where there were

relatively few people present. Women in the man-cave setting are portrayed as objects of sexual desire and hardly anything more.

Emma Watson becomes the only female character with any substance appearing in *This is the End*. After the men deny a wanderer entry to James' house for knowing any members of their group, Emma Watson busts the front door wide open with an axe. She initially frightens the men but they immediately allow her inside the house since she was a guest earlier in the film. Stuck in a "drainpipe for days," Watson appears shocked the men are still alive after the attack and believes a zombie invasion—and not the apocalypse like Jay predicts—has held L.A. hostage. She then occupies one of the many guest bedrooms in the house after the horrific experiences she describes to the men.

Outside the guest bedroom, the men discuss Watson as a new member of their small communal circle. They jokingly talk about Watson's British heritage implying her tolerance for "bad food" and her success as Hermione in the *Harry Potter* film franchise and how they are all fans of those films. The conversation, however, quickly becomes disturbing when Jay warns the men not to give her a "bad vibe." The other men, appearing dumbfounded with Jay's statement, demand a further elaboration and Jay explicitly mentions the possibility one of them might sexually assault Watson. They scold Jay for saying such a loaded statement, especially when Watson is only a few feet away inside the guest bedroom. The tight framing of the men in this scene parallels with their conversation about possible sexual violence erupting in the wake of Watson's presence.

While the action above occurs, a shot of Watson inside the bedroom overhearing their conversation as the men's voices are increasingly escalated. She storms of the room

with her axe in hand, confronting the men about their questionable banter, and starts swinging the axe at the men in self-defense. When Seth tries reassuring Watson she mistaken the men's actions and they were "just joking," she hits him with the axe handle resulting in a bloody nose. Furious at the men for their behavior, she demands all the food and drink supplies in the house. The men reluctantly refuse caving to her demands and want a chance explaining this misunderstanding. To add further insult to injury, Watson takes a swing at Franco's penis-shaped statue located in the living room. She chops off the top of the penis, signifying the object as a phallic symbol of the male dominance in the household. She cuts the men down a peg, metaphorically speaking, in this powerful gesture. Watson clearly is not "joking" around with the other men anymore and must take action for her own safety. The men ultimately surrender to her demands. She gets the hell out of the house and retreats back to the hellish conditions of the outside world.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, women are often not allowed inside man-caves. The space is reserved exclusively for male-gendered activities and most of the time the men go out of their ways to exclude the presence of women. Although most of the conversations in bromance films are dominated by discussions of girlfriends, wives, and the men's sexual fantasies and escapades. Craig Robinson's shirt reads "Take Your Panties Off," just like the song he sang earlier in the film, so the possibility of sexual assault of Watson can be understandable.

But *This is the End* poses a different scenario for the presence of women in man-caves. Unlike Trish in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005) or Debbie in *Knocked Up*, Watson does not critique the objects or activities taking place inside the

man-cave. Rather, Watson retreats to Franco's mansion for her own safety and the presumption that the others are already dead. Watson, although she appeared earlier in the film at the party before the apocalypse, forces her way inside Franco's mansion in a very aggressive manner: breaking the front door with an axe. She exhibits a highly masculine action when she performs this action and ultimately serves as a contrast to the pervasive dominance of men in the house. Her destruction of the penis statue, among other objects, feeds into the men's own worst fears regarding the problematic presence of women in men's private spaces. She is scared and, as a result, emasculates the men for discussing possible rape scenarios. She poses a threat to their masculine identities simply from occupying the space in the first place.

The problem with man-caves in bromance films, especially as portrayed in *This is the End*, lies in the characterization of female characters. *This is the End* ultimately contends women are not welcomed inside the man-cave and if they do occupy the male-gendered space, they either ridicule the existence of male-gendered space or objected to sexual desire. Katherine Heigl, the lead actress in *Knocked Up*, openly criticized Apatow's representation in his film for its chauvinist portrayal of female characters. In a 2007 interview with *Vanity Fair*, she felt the film felt "a little sexist. It paints the women as shrews, as humorless and uptight, and it paints the men as loveable, goofy, fun-loving guys...I had a hard time with it, on some days. I'm playing such a bitch; why is she being such a killjoy?"⁸¹ Women in these films tend to be objectified as "killjoys" as Heigl puts it, temporarily halting the men's bonding experience. While the men in these films are

⁸¹ "Katherine Heigl Talks About Marriage, Marriage Ploys, and Why She Thinks *Knocked Up* Is Sexist." *Vanityfair.com*, Last Modified January 1, 2008, <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2000/01/katherine-heigl200801>.

carefree and likable, women are often characterized as shrill and distant. She believes the women are too serious and humorless compared to the immature, goofy men in the film.

These films portray women as villainous shrews who not understand the need for men occupying independent physical spaces to claim as their own. Women have little narrative agency beyond these narrow scopes of gendered subjectivity from the other men, especially in the presence of the male-dominated man-caves. As illustrated in *This is the End* and other bromance films, women pose a threat to the anxieties and fears facing male subjects and men and leaving the latter feeling victimized, when anything can be further from the truth.

As this thesis has aimed to illustrate, recent comedic images of masculinity are multifaceted. Filmic representations of masculinity are no longer straightforward or essentialist, but rather an increasingly contested notion what constitutes male identity. Each year, new books, anthologies, and essays chronicle the ever-changing perception of masculinity and its relation to film comedy. Men are no longer second bananas and have received more scholarly attention now than ever before.

Male characters in recent Hollywood comedies often suppress their anxieties and desires, in fear they might be exposed as vulnerable and weak. The presentation of comedic characters' masculinities are often ambiguous, in the sense men are constantly balancing their identities as masculine subjects while also embodying some troubling problem or situation affecting them. Although the problem of victimization varies in each film throughout this project, most male characters deal with problems related to either their lack of professional opportunities or stale personal lives. As a result, the men

identify as outsiders who are marginalized in large part to their nonconformity and defiance of established social order.

The men discussed throughout this project, however, are afforded certain privileges, mainly for their identification as white and heterosexual subjects, which they take for granted. They are still hegemonic subjects, no matter how they perceive themselves, since white heterosexual men are the dominant form of gender representation in Hollywood cinema. If the men feel alienated or victimized from their surroundings, it stems more from their insecurities as masculine subjects. Whether men hate their white-collar jobs, desire to drop of society, or seek solace in close homosocial bondings, they all remain in a privileged position and resort to great lengths achieving their goals.

Comedy, more than any other genre, allows us to both laugh and critique the world we live in. Although Hollywood films have made great strides to represent non-hegemonic ethnicities and culture in recent years, white heterosexual men continue to occupy the vast majority of film roles in mainstream comedies. Unlike more drastic actions and measures are taken, mainstream Hollywood comedies will perpetuate the perception of masculinity in our heteronormative culture. Hopefully this thesis allowed a platform for a serious consideration of comedic representations related to the anxieties and problems of modern masculine identity.

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