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The Not So Tender Trap: Romantic Comedy and Revolt in the Fifties and Fifty Years Later

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Visual Studies

by

Jenna Weinman

Dissertation Committee:
Associate Professor Kristen Hatch, Chair
Associate Professor Victoria E. Johnson
Associate Professor Lyle Massey

2016

DEDICATION

In Memory of

Alex Doty

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Jenna Weinman

- 2006 B.A. in Communications, Arcadia University
- 2007-2008 Research and Graduate Assistant, American Studies Department and South Side Initiative, Lehigh University
- 2008 M.A. in American Studies, Lehigh University
- 2009-2012 Teaching Assistant, Film and Media Studies Department, University of California, Irvine
- 2011-2012 Summer Teaching Associate, University of California, Irvine
- 2012 Curator, “Romantic Comedy: Couples and Complaints,” UC Irvine Free Summer Film Series, University of California, Irvine
- 2016 Ph.D. in Visual Studies, University of California, Irvine

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Not So Tender Trap: Romantic Comedy and Revolt in the Fifties and Fifty Years Later

By

Jenna Weinman

Doctor of Philosophy in Visual Studies

University of California, Irvine, 2016

Associate Professor Kristen Hatch, Chair

The Hollywood romantic comedies of the 1950s and early 1960s fashioned sex and marriage from the struggle between dapper playboys and prudish career women. In the twenty-first century, the dominant mode of the genre forces a similar heterosexual life narrative through a refigured struggle between immature male slackers and sexually liberated career women. Why would such similar romantic comedy cycles emerge in such distanced and dissimilar contexts? In employing a research based, cultural studies approach to the above question, this dissertation engages the surprising generic and ideological intersections between the midcentury sex comedy and the raunch/romantic comedy hybrid known as the millennial “brom-com,” in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the power struggles informing the dominant intimate culture in the twenty-first century.

Each chapter compares the key representational strategies and thematic conflicts between a sex comedy (e.g. *That Touch of Mink*, *The Tunnel of Love*, *Send Me No Flowers*) and a brom-com (e.g. *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Knocked Up*, *I Love You, Man*), as situated in relation to the films’ respective historical contexts. Such a comparative engagement demonstrates that while the

specific figurations of the immature male, the heterosexual couple, and the broader socio-political landscape may change, the cycles' overlapping thrills, anxieties, and limitations present a similar set of heteronormative expectations rooted in the postwar breadwinner ethic.

In reinventing the sex comedy's flirtations with false liberalism and male regression, the brom-com suggests that such expectations are deeply unsatisfactory. The brom-com's male revolt against these gendered expectations is especially evident in the cycle's celebratory, albeit nervous indulgence in the queer-straight form of male homosocial intimacy popularly known as "bromance"—a prominent yet unnamed phenomenon in the sex comedies. Despite the brom-coms' spirited stagings of revolt, however, the cycle remains curiously resistant to detaching from the patriarchal fantasies of postwar optimism.

INTRODUCTION

I. A Disenchantment

As a reward for her ambition, skills, and conventional beauty, a young woman named Alison accepts an opportunity to work as a correspondent for a nationally recognized entertainment news outlet. In celebration of her sparkling new career, she attends a popular nightclub with her older sister, Debbie, who ends up leaving early in order to attend to her sick children and helpless husband, Pete. Alison, however, decides to stay at the club, where she meets an unkempt but likable man, Ben. After a night of heavy drinking and dancing, the unlikely pair engage in sloppy, unprotected sex.

In the sober light of day, Alison finds herself repulsed by Ben's slovenly appearance, and increasingly consumed with regret during their awkward morning interactions. She learns, for instance, that Ben has never been employed, lives off the government's dime, and spends his days experimenting with drugs and absorbing smut in a flophouse full of equally indolent male housemates. With no intentions of seeing him again, Alison compartmentalizes her shame and focuses intently on her professional endeavors.

It is not long, however, before Alison discovers she is pregnant with Ben's child. Despite her low opinion of his character and lifestyle, as well as the tremendous demands and potential of her new career, she accepts her unwanted pregnancy without deliberation. In an effort to do what she, and the people around her, believe is the "right thing," Alison tracks down the reluctant father of her unborn child. In following the same path as Debbie and Pete, who rushed into marriage after Debbie's accidental pregnancy—a decision that has since consigned them both to a

life of constant misery, boredom, and resentment—Alison and Ben try to force a romantic relationship before the baby is born.

After an explosive argument over Ben’s apathy and irresponsibility, the hopelessly incompatible couple temporarily part ways. During the interim, Ben gets a job for the first time in his life, moves into his own apartment, distances himself from his irresponsible friends, and educates himself about childcare. The couple is hastily reunited when Alison goes into labor. Upon leaving the hospital, they commit to a life together as a family unit.

While it may read as a dark, pre-Roe v. Wade melodrama about a fallen woman and a derelict, the above synopsis actually describes one of the top grossing romantic comedies from 2007: *Knocked Up* (dir. Judd Apatow). As a rather unromantic tale pregnant with anxiety and angst, *Knocked Up* seemed to mark a point of “disenchantment” in the romantic comedy genre. In remarking on this “disenchantment,” *New Yorker* film critic David Denby considered *Knocked Up* as “the end point of a progression from. . .a popped champagne cork to a baby crowning.”¹

Denby also identified *Knocked Up* as a “culminating version” of a steadily developing cycle of male centered, bawdy Hollywood romantic comedies, such as the popular films *Wedding Crashers* and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (both released in 2005), which were sometimes referred to as “rom-coms for boys.”² In an attempt to spruce up the romantic comedy genre’s hackneyed “boy-meets-loses-wins back-girl” formula, this generic trend placed a quirky male or male pack at the center of the narrative action, and slathered the juvenile debauchery and homosocial

¹ David Denby, “A Fine Romance: The New Comedy of the Sexes,” *The New Yorker*, July 23, 2007, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/07/23/a-fine-romance>

² Ibid.

bonding of teen, gross-out, and male-buddy comedies onto a more familiar romantic comedy narrative.

The films initially celebrate these male comedic spaces only to formally renounce as dysfunctional their endearingly vulgar denizens, their irreverent attitudes, and their flirtations with a type of queer-straight male intimacy now pervasively known as “bromance,” once the narrative shifts into traditional rom-com territory. Considering bromance was marketed and received as the most pleasurable feature within these rom-coms for boys, the cycle became known as the “brom-com.”³

While the romantic comedy genre is most fondly associated with the central couple’s achievements of romantic bliss, rapturous sex, and mutual transformation, the ultimate narrative goal and larger ideological function of the brom-com involves uplifting the immature, irresponsible single male from his happy state of arrested development, social irrelevance, and inappropriately close homosocial bonds via a monogamous heterosexual relationship, fatherhood, and work. This emphasis on masculine redemption, however, diminishes the couple’s romantic and erotic fulfillment, as well as the role of the primary heroines. Often reduced to maternal figures, the brom-com heroines are tasked with stimulating and supervising the hero’s reluctant delivery from his perennial immaturity. The tacked-on, often alarmingly reactionary narrative resolutions, however, suggest that the payoffs of this burdensome labor of masculine redemption are, at best, dubious for everyone involved.

Although studio marketing campaigns, popular press reviews, and young adult audiences harped on the exciting new-ness of this hybridization of raunch and romance, and its talent pool

³ “Brom” being short for “bromantic” or “bromance,” which combines the terms “brother” or “bro” (a slang term for male friend) and “romance.”

of quirky masculinities, the narrative aim of forcing romance, commitment, and laughs from what Denby identifies as the “struggle between male infantilism and female ambition” was not exactly innovative in terms of genre.⁴ Nor was this diffuse “male revolt” from patriarchal-capitalist markers of responsible adulthood unique to the new millennium.

For instance, in her 1983 book, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*, journalist Barbara Ehrenreich argues that contemporary male complaints against men’s socially determined responsibilities as husbands, fathers, and workers are rooted in the manifestations of male revolt from the postwar period, out of which the male breadwinner ethic first emerged as a standard for proper manhood.⁵ Indeed, about half a century before the brom-com cycle began delivering stories about how “grown-ups are born,” Hollywood entertained audiences with a cycle of romantic comedies described as “bedroom stories for adults.”⁶ The instabilities, excesses, and complaints found in this short-lived, popular cycle of midcentury sex comedies curiously anticipate those preoccupying the millennial brom-com.

Considering their distanced and dissimilar contexts, the clusters of change separating the two cycles are most evidently mapped on to the character and conflict of the central couple. For instance, most sex comedies, including the famous Doris Day-Rock Hudson extravaganzas *Pillow Talk* (1959) and *Lover Come Back* (1961), fashioned sex and marriage from the vexing struggles between dapper, free-loving playboys and ambitious, sexually discriminating career women, who were afforded little currency in the period’s sexual economy besides their virtue—or

⁴ Denby, “A Fine Romance.”

⁵ Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1983), 1-13.

⁶ The official theatrical trailer for *Knocked Up* pitched the film as a “story about how grown-ups are born,” which speaks to the narrative goals of the brom-com cycle more broadly.

at least a carefully guarded semblance thereof. The couple's long-awaited sexual union was only made possible by the bachelor's last-minute resignation to marriage, breadwinning, and sometimes, imminent fatherhood.

Whereas the sex comedy typically figured male immaturity through the alternative *adult* lifestyle of the playboy bachelor, the brom-com looks to more adolescent and infantile forms of male regression. The most recognizable version of the brom-com hero is a schlubby, clubby slacker with limited interest in professional pursuits or impressing women. When it comes to the heroine, however, not only has her beauty, ambition and self-reliance remained unchanged, but she is no longer bound to the rigid sexual mores of her mid-century predecessors.

While more than half of a century of economic, social, cultural and industrial change separates the sex comedy's heyday and the rise of the millennial brom-com, the two cycles' shared conventions most expressively coalesce around the narrative privileging of the immature male, his homosocial bonds, and his strained trajectory into proper adulthood—the markers of which have ostensibly remained the same, though their exact sequence has become less important. Both the sex comedy and brom-com cycles take pleasure in postponing the immature hero's maturation by indulging in celebratory, albeit palpably nervous forays into the queer-straight conviviality of bromance—a yet unnamed phenomenon in the sex comedies, where queer pairings between a fetching male lead and a neurotic 'second banana' (e.g. Rock Hudson and Tony Randall, respectively) became a popular and troubling narrative fixture.

These curiously mainstream yet thrillingly excessive relationships between purportedly straight men often come across as more sincere and pleasurable than the heterosexual options and the state of maturity those options necessarily impose. Such alternative intimacies and

lifestyles, however, are eventually reframed as aberrant and deeply unsatisfactory. These two romantic comedy cycles, then, are ultimately less interested in the Hollywood romantic comedy's penchant for sentimentality and the redemptive capacities of love and the heterosexual couple, than they are in enforcing acquiescence to similar, socially constructed roles and gendered markers of maturity.

Given that the romantic comedy genre is very much bound to the social mores and intimate culture of its historical moment, why would these similar rom-com cycles emerge in such dissimilar and distanced contexts? In order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the power struggles informing the intersecting categories of gender, sexuality, intimacy, and adulthood in the early twenty-first century, this dissertation employs a research based, cultural studies approach to the above question. The chapters that follow compare the key representational strategies and thematic conflicts within a selection of films from the two cycles, including the sex comedies *That Touch of Mink* (1962), *The Tunnel of Love* (1958), *Send Me No Flowers* (1964), and the brom-coms *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), *Knocked Up* (2007), and *I Love You, Man* (2009), as situated in relation to their respective historical contexts.

Such a comparison demonstrates that in their respective stagings of the male revolt, both cycles give expression to the contradictions long underpinning our intimate culture, such as that between the short-lived thrills of romantic love and the lifelong commitment of marriage, between the genre's feminist impulses and misogynistic sensibilities, as well as the clash between a neoliberal overvaluation of the individual and the unrelenting societal pressure to subscribe to heteronormative coupledness—a privileged “two-as-one unit” which necessarily

demands a certain self-denial.⁷ Although the specific figurations of the immature male, the heterosexual couple, and the broader socio-economic landscape may change, the cycles' overlapping thrills, anxieties, and limitations nevertheless present a similar set of heteronormative expectations rooted in the postwar breadwinner ethic.

Whereas the sex comedy cycle engaged the postwar era's widespread and deeply felt dissatisfaction with the emergence of the breadwinner ethic, the brom-com struggles to adapt a similar doctrine of postwar optimism to a historical context that seems radically incompatible with such hopes and expectations. This comparative project thus takes special interest in the generic and cultural compulsion to endorse (even half-heartedly) awfully elusive intimate ideals and social roles that seem to produce a great deal of pain and disappointment. Cultural theorist Lauren Berlant refers to this "condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" as "cruel optimism."⁸ The brom-com's curious resistance to detaching from the patriarchal fantasies and fears grounded in the postwar breadwinner ethic achieves its cruelest expression in the cycle's reduction of women as symbolic custodians of these attachments.

II. The Romantic Comedy's Awful Truths and White Lies: An Overview

Romantic Comedy as Genre

In order to account for the complexity of meaning the sex comedy and brom-com cycles engaged within their own respective contexts, as well as the ideological value presented by their surprising parallels, "The Not So Tender Trap" primarily engages an extensive, ongoing

⁷ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 171.

⁸ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 24.

conversation about the interplay between the volatile conceptual categories of gender and genre within Hollywood cinema. As mass culture texts which continuously recycle and revamp familiar formulas and spectacles, genre filmmaking marks, as Rick Altman notes in his influential book *Film/Genre*, a “complex situation” comprised of a series of events and patterns at the level of institution, text, reception, and context.⁹ These components interact axiomatically with discourses of gender and sexuality, which are among the most constitutive of individual identity and social experience.

Altman goes on to explain that genre films, like all mass culture texts, “serve what we might call a memorial purpose; that is, they recall a society’s collective experience, by rehearsing the stories, characters and topics that the culture deems important.”¹⁰ Likewise, genre films provide clues as to what subjects, experiences, and so forth that the culture deems less important, aberrant, or invisible. In addition to their legitimation and memorialization of such variable and evolving phenomena, genre films also offer a comparatively limited and enduring set of symbolic solutions to the cultural conflicts upon which their resolution driven narratives are based.

As Marxist political and literary theorist Frederic Jameson argues in his landmark essay, *Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture*, all genre-based mass culture texts engage in a kind of “psychic compromise” by strategically arousing “fantasy content within careful symbolic containment structures which defuse it, gratifying intolerable, unrealizable, properly imperishable desires only to the degree to which they can again be laid to rest.”¹¹ Genre

⁹ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Pub, 1999), 84.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹¹ Frederic Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text* 1 (Winter, 1979): 141.

filmmaking's ability to interpret and mitigate persistent, uncomfortable and indeterminate dissonances thus holds significant ideological value; once absorbed into the social fabric, these repeated solutions contribute to the make-up and evolution of sociohistorical realities.¹²

While the attributes, power, and merit of mass culture texts—as well as various notions about the very “masses” these texts ostensibly engage—have been theorized exhaustively and brilliantly through a kaleidoscope of critical lenses, mass culture is typically conceptualized in opposition to, or in some way beneath, notions of legitimate culture or high art.¹³ All mass culture texts are thus susceptible to discourses of ridicule and dismissal, but they are also subject to processes of aesthetic and ideological hierarchization.

According to Pierre Bourdieu, these judgements about individual or groups of texts often masquerade as judgements about the intended and actual audiences associated with those texts at a given moment.¹⁴ For instance, there is no shortage of scholarly inquiry dedicated to, as German scholar Andreas Huyssen puts it, the persistent “gendering as feminine of that which is devalued” within the discursive regimes of Western patriarchal societies.¹⁵ Though the overwhelming majority of Hollywood romantic comedies have been written, directed, produced, and promoted almost exclusively by white men (as has been and continues to be the case for the majority of all

¹² Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 16.

¹³ See, for example, Tania Modleski, ed., *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Aesthetic Sense as the Sense of Distinction,” in *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Juliet B. Schor et al. (NY: The New Press, 2000), 205.

¹⁵ Andreas Huyssen, “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other,” in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 196. In this essay, Huyssen describes the history of feminizing mass culture, as well as the dominant notions of the “masses” that took hold in the nineteenth century. He notes, for instance, that “[t]he lure of mass culture. . .has traditionally been described as the threat of losing oneself in dreams and delusions and of merely consuming rather than producing.” *Ibid.*, 199.

cultural production), and tend to feature “dual focus” narratives that feature male and female perspectives, the genre is almost always gendered feminine within popular discourse.¹⁶ Non-coincidentally, the romantic comedy’s stubbornly close associations with women’s culture is one of the major reasons why the genre is generally considered and consumed as frothy, frivolous entertainment, or a “guilty” pleasure at best.

In her monograph, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, Tamar Jeffers McDonald explores this habitual, specious gendering of the genre, and concomitantly, its low cultural esteem. Here she defines the romantic comedy as “a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion.”¹⁷ As a persistently and knowingly “light-hearted” form of comedic entertainment, the genre bears an implicit sense of self-deprecation and triviality that impede general audiences from adopting an overly serious or critical stance towards such texts. The rom-com thus purports to speak more to the heart and body than to the mind.

As Berlant argues, all genre films come packaged with the promise of a “certain affective experience” along with their familiar formulas, icons, and other such conventions.¹⁸ In addition to the romantic comedy’s promise of laughter, the genre’s penchant for fanciful sentimentality and romantic optimism may also elicit sorrowful responses and desperate longings, which suggests an embedded element of manipulation or a privileging of emotion over reason. Thus, there is some degree of passive sensitivity required from the viewer in order for these more

¹⁶ Kathrina Glitre, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy: States of the Union, 1934-65* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 15.

¹⁷ Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (London: Wallflower, 2007), 9.

¹⁸ Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 171.

despondent affective expectations to take effect. As it were, these notions of manipulation, sentimentality, and passivity have been routinely gendered feminine, set in opposition to masculine notions of reason, disassociation and restraint.

In addition to these gendered feminine aspects, the genre has long been snubbed for its ostensibly simpleminded, relentlessly predictable narrative formula that—regardless of the tearfulness such narratives potentially evoke—guarantees a comforting, albeit often superficial sense of resolution and plenitude. In this case, the “successful conclusion” mentioned in McDonald’s master definition is the extinguishing of tension—sexual and otherwise—through the implied romantic, erotic, and social union of the heterosexual couple. Granted, the remarkable consistency of the rom-com’s couple meets-breaks up-makes up formula has much less to do with the perceived simplemindedness and deluded fantasies of women’s culture than with the tenacious cultural myths that endorse romantic, monogamous love as a panacea for nearly all personal and social problems, which of course, are always in flux.

Despite its perceived invariabilities, the genre’s remarkable longevity is actually hinged on its ability to engage our culture’s fluctuating attitudes toward gender roles, sexuality, the family, and the larger discursive webs in which these ideologies emerge and function.¹⁹ Though veiled by its internalized and socialized triviality, the romantic comedy genre has, in fact, always been underpinned by rather somber forms of anxiety and injury. More specifically, the romantic comedy genre takes a special interest in the changing social roles of women and the ways in which these changes test patriarchal power within intimate and social scenarios.

¹⁹ Frank Krutnik, “Love Lies: Romantic Fabrication in Contemporary Romantic Comedy,” in *Terms of Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and 1990s*, ed. Peter William Evans et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 16.

Such issues of women's work, desires, and social roles often determine the emergence and fizzling of the romantic comedy's various cycles. A cycle, according to film scholar Leger Grindon, is "a series of similar films produced during a limited period of time, often sparked by a benchmark hit that is imitated, refined, or resisted by those that follow it."²⁰ Though the millennial brom-com does not explicitly or knowingly engage the conventions of the sex comedy cycle, their overlapping thrills and anxieties read as most surprising and significant when considered in relation to the state of women's rights within their respective historical contexts; the sex comedy cycle fizzled out shortly before second wave feminism emerged in the late 1960s, and the brom-com cycle emerged several decades into discourses of "third wave" or "postfeminism."

Considering, then, its comparative nature, this project adopts Berlant's conceptualization of the romantic comedy as a "complaint genre" as a way to focus on the larger, unifying themes at work within these two cycles. In a similar fashion to Jameson, who argues that mass culture texts "cannot manage anxieties about the social order unless they have first revived them and given them some rudimentary expression,"²¹ Berlant's book on women's sentimental culture, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, examines the ways in which the romantic comedy and other feminized genres use the heterosexual love plot to blame individual personalities and flawed ideologies for women's struggles and emotional suffering, all while maintaining "fidelity to the world of distinction and desire that produced such

²⁰ Leger Grindon, *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History, Controversies* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 25.

²¹ Jameson, "Reification and Utopia," 144.

disappointment in the first place.”²² In line with Jameson’s finding that “anxiety and hope are two faces of the same collective consciousness”²³ when it comes to mass culture production, Berlant contends that the love plot remains a site of “disappointment, but not disenchantment” for women, who must at least entertain believing in the transformative myth of romantic love, and, more importantly, heterosexual coupledness, if they hope to achieve a deep and meaningful sense of “okayness.”²⁴

The sex comedy and brom-com cycles, however, are more concerned with male expressions of the complaint than with managing women’s ambivalent attachments to intimate ideals. In investing most aggressively in the failures of masculinity and the heterosexual love plot, both cycles complicate Berlant’s notion of the heterosexual couple as the primary means through which audiences “wish for an unconflicted world.”²⁵ The heterosexual couple thus becomes reframed as a primary means of recognizing more than absorbing or resolving conflict and disappointment within the two romantic comedy cycles in question.

Romantic Comedy, Melodrama, and Middle-ness

The romantic comedy’s strength in the recognition and expression of discontent actually stems from the genre’s melodramatic underpinning. Although the term melodrama is often used to describe a genre of female-oriented films soliciting tearful emotional responses (e.g. “weepies”), melodrama is also a dominant, “leaping” mode of western storytelling, one that

²² Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 2.

²³ Jameson, “Reification and Utopia,” 144.

²⁴ Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

informs multiple film genres.²⁶ Since the mid-seventies shift towards feminist and psychoanalytic film theory, melodrama has been a privileged subject in film studies because of its pervasive nature, as well as its predilection for exploring marginalized subjects (especially women), ordinary life under patriarchal capitalism, and the inarticulable or unconscious tensions informing any number of intimate or social situations. In taking its lead from existing scholarship on film melodrama, this project is interested in the ways romantic comedies struggle to articulate roles and expectations for men, women, and the heterosexual couple, as well as the myriad ways in which these texts siphon off narrative and stylistic excess—that which the films are unable to explicitly present and/or fully understand for whatever external or ideological reasons.

As Berlant, McDonald, and others have pointed out, the romantic comedy is underpinned by many of the same traits that have made film melodrama so ripe for various avenues of critical inquiry, including the love plot, intimate subject matter, strong emotional registers, narrative and stylistic excess, the problematizing of gender roles and expectations, as well as habitual associations with a female audience. However, the romantic comedy also exhibits significant points of departure from its melodramatic base that have opened up spaces for the thrills of bromance and other modes of revolt against the status quo. For instance, Linda Williams and others have noted that in its grand quest to force a visceral moral legibility through tears, melodrama has historically operated through moral polarization.²⁷ Indeed, while melodrama

²⁶ Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 300.

operates, as Peter Brooks notes in his book, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, by the “logic of the excluded middle,”²⁸ the romantic comedy thrives on notions of “middle-ness.”

On the one hand, the concept of middle-ness evokes notions of averageness and normality, which occupy all mass culture texts to some extent. On the other hand, middle-ness implies a potentially radical sense of ambiguity. In regards to the romantic comedy more specifically, middle-ness serves to muddy distinctions between categories of judgement and identity, such as that between villainy and virtue, or maturity and immaturity. The genre also employs middle-ness to explore transgressions within the flexible safety net of the joke and, even more crucially, within the guarantee of the heterosexual couple’s eventual and decidedly happy union. In reveling in their distinctive figurations of male immaturity, the sex comedy and brom-com cycles are especially invested in their narrative middles, and in the witty, eccentric, and attention-stealing secondary characters who linger there.

Judith Roof’s examination of secondary female characters in Hollywood cinema is especially useful in exploring the queer possibilities presented by the sex comedy and brom-com cycles’ narrative middles. In her book *All About Thelma and Eve*, Roof theorizes the narrative middle as an inherently queer space where secondary characters entertain “perverse alternatives of non-marriage, independence, and business success.”²⁹ As Roof explains, “this is not to say that all middle characters necessarily have a . . . queer identity but that their middle position itself is a site of queerness—and that queerness almost always works in a way analogous to the

²⁸ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 18.

²⁹ Judith Roof, *All About Thelma and Eve: Sidekicks and Third Wheels* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 10.

contradictions and ambivalence of the middle.”³⁰ The “perverse alternatives” emerging from the narrative middle frequently haunt the endings’ compulsory endorsements of heteronormativity. This shared penchant for middle-ness thus presents an important avenue for exploring the surprising generic exchanges between the sex comedy and brom-com cycles, as well as the ways in which these films understand heteronormativity as an embedded “sense of rightness” in their different contexts.³¹

Sex in the Romantic Comedy

According to queer theorist Michael Warner, heteronormativity names “a fundamental motor of social organization in the United States”; as such, heteronormativity is produced in almost every aspect of the dominant culture and social life, including sex.³² The sexuality element is particularly crucial here, because sex, along with its absence, are at the very crux of the romantic comedy genre. In the hit sex comedy, *Ask Any Girl* (1959), the sprightly heroine, played by Shirley MacLaine, cleverly sums up this dilemma in a casual remark to her girlfriends: “the problem with sex is that we talk about it too much.” Within the context of the film, this quip emphasizes the character’s frustration with her onerous efforts to preserve “six generations” of family tradition by abstaining from sex until marriage, while desperately trying to (quite literally) sell herself as a wife to an assortment of well-established bachelors. Though *Ask Any Girl* is curiously absent from most existing literature on the romantic comedy, MacLaine’s brushed-off complaint takes on a strikingly reflexive, even quasi-Foucaultian significance when considered in relation to the larger cultural history of the genre.

³⁰ Ibid., 11.

³¹ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*. (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 194.

³² Ibid.

In an oversimplified sense, MacLaine's punchline seems to anticipate a main argument in the first volume of the French philosopher Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, where he disputes the strongly held theoretical belief that sexuality is "repressed," often very consciously so, at institutional, cultural, and individual levels.³³ Though this sweeping "repression hypothesis" is appealing because it implies an utopian possibility of eventual sexual liberation and enlightenment, Foucault argues that sexuality is anything but repressed; rather, networks of power constantly and pervasively work to fetter sex as an object of control, analysis, discipline and categorization.³⁴ According to Foucault, this ubiquitous chatter *about* sex must be considered in relation to other discursive factors, such as "who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, [and] the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said."³⁵

As an equally romanticized and ridiculed participant in the discourse of sex, the romantic comedy has endured a long, and long-winded history of 'talking about' rather than 'showing' the erotic promises and pitfalls of sex and desire. It is, however, precisely the impossible fantasy of sex without complications, discursive and otherwise, that underpins the genre. Indeed, the romantic comedy often demonstrates a willingness to engage the compelling thrills of what Foucault extols as "bodies and pleasures," as well as radical imaginings of psychic, physical, and

³³ According to Foucault, "[i]t may well be that we talk about sex more than anything else; we set our minds to the task; we convince ourselves that we have never said enough on the subject that, through inertia or submissiveness, we conceal from ourselves the blinding evidence, and that what is essential always eludes us, so that we must always start out once again in search of it." Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 33.

³⁴ Linda Williams offers an astute analysis of Foucault's repression hypothesis as it relates to cinematic representations of sexuality in her book, *Screening Sex*. See Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 12-15.

³⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 11.

social forms of existence devoid of sex, its complications, and pleasures.³⁶ These enticing flirtations and fantasies, however, are almost always deflated by the generic and ideological imperatives of heteronormative coupledness, its fruits and labor, and ultimately, the aches of dissatisfaction when its mythic promises are never quite fulfilled. MacLaine's remark thus speaks to the perennial "problem" within and with the romantic comedy genre, as well as to the sprawling, discursive webs of sex and power in which romantic comedies, as a familiar form of mass entertainment, are invariably snagged.

The importance of sexuality as a structuring narrative element, however, is not by any means exclusive to the romantic comedy genre; Laura Mulvey, Richard Dyer, and many other prominent film scholars have argued that male heterosexuality, classical Hollywood narrative cinema, and the cinematic apparatus are intertwined, though not necessarily consciously so.³⁷ For instance, Dyer notes that:

[M]ale sexuality is said to be goal-oriented: seduction and foreplay are merely the means by which one gets to the 'real thing,' an orgasm, the great single climax. Equally, it has been suggested that if one compares the underlying structure of most narratives in western fiction it is about the pursuit of a goal and its attainment, usually through possession. Thus male sexuality is like a story, or stories are like male sexuality. Both keep women in their place.³⁸

Scholars have been grappling with Hollywood cinema's relationship to the patriarchal unconscious and modes of viewing pleasure for decades, especially in regards to genres more likely to explore the knowledge, struggles, and desires of female characters and appeal to female audiences, such as the maternal melodrama or romantic comedy. Since the rom-com is motored

³⁶ Ibid., 157.

³⁷ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18.

³⁸ Richard Dyer, "Male Sexuality in the Media" in *The Sexuality of Men*, ed. Andy Metcalf et al. (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 41.

by intimate matters, its tension has been routinely romanticized as primarily sexual because the withholding of the implied erotic, and almost always legalized, union of the heterosexual couple until the end of the film is popularly recognized and marketed as the genre's symbolic solution and ultimate affective reward for the characters and audiences.

While genre filmmaking is essentially propelled by the promise to release some kind of narrative tension rooted in ongoing anxieties over divisions and imbalances of power, the romantic comedy genre poses a potential challenge to the dominance of male-oriented narrative patterns, as well as the phallogentric model of sexual pleasure upon which they are based. In *Screening Sex*, Linda Williams discusses these phallogentric models through Leo Bersani's concept of the "scratch" and the "itch," which he identifies as the two main modes of sexual pleasure. In drawing from Freud's theories of sexuality, Bersani's notion of the "scratch" refers to a teleological mode of sexual pleasure achieved through the release of tension or excitement, while the "itch" refers to the pleasure generated through the prolonging of such excitement.³⁹

As Williams elaborates, the scratch model has been the "dominant, phallogentric term of much sexology and much cinema." While the scratch "presumes a thrusting and targeting tactility of one erogenous zone on another," the itch implies a more clitoral type of sexual pleasure where excitement extends itself, where desire feeds desire.⁴⁰ According to Williams, "the itch is much less specifically targeted; it is ultimately whatever manages to keep desire in play."⁴¹ In regards to the romantic comedy genre, and the sex comedy and brom-com cycles in particular, the pleasures these films offer are more akin to the itch than they are to the scratch.

³⁹ Williams, *Screening Sex*, 14.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

The final ‘release’ is arguably less pleasurable and satisfying than the transgressions, disequilibrium, and possibilities feeding the tension, sustaining desire, and keeping the couple at odds in the enticing realm of the narrative middle.

The Screwball

Of course, the sexual tease central to the romantic comedy is in part a necessary consequence of the Production Code, a collection of self-regulatory rules that restricted narrative and formal content, and set the moral tone of Hollywood films from 1934 through 1967. Although discussions and representations of sexuality—especially where female sexuality was involved—were often the favorite targets of censorship efforts, “objectionable” material was never entirely eliminated under the code. Rather, this material became more indirect, condemnable, and in certain cases, redeemable.

As a “productive form of power,” the Code became an important force in shaping cultural attitudes towards sex and modes of sexual expression.⁴² Its guidelines were especially intrinsic to the development of the romantic comedy genre; for decades, the Code’s oversight actually secured the genre with an enticing narrative hook and creative challenge pivoting around the withholding of sex. In fact, scholars such as Brian Henderson have argued that the romantic comedy genre not only thrived, but largely depended on, the code’s prohibition against sex between the couple for its very existence.⁴³

This prevailing argument is largely hinged on the screwball cycle of Hollywood romantic comedy, which emerged soon after the Production Code went into effect in 1934. A decade or so

⁴² See Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship & Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 15-17.

⁴³ Brian Henderson, “Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible?,” *Film Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (1978): 11-23.

after the end of World War II, this short-lived cycle would go on to become a favorite, romanticized object of pop-cultural and scholarly nostalgia. The screwball cycle's exceptional historical circumstances did, in fact, bestow these films with a certain chaotic charm and flexibility that was often lost on future romantic comedy trends, which by comparison, tended to downplay female characters and value duty and maturity over playful, witty flirtation and inversions of the "norm." For instance, screwball comedies such as Howard Hawk's *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), embraced the pervasive topsy-turviness of the Great Depression. This film displaced the sexual tension between an aggressive, unconventional heiress (Katherine Hepburn) and the fumbling, prudish hero (Cary Grant) on to rapid exchanges of wit and absurd, slapstick shenanigans that eventually brought the mismatched pair together on more equal grounds of passion, childlike play, and mutual transformation.

One popular variation of the screwball, which philosopher Stanley Cavell dubbed the "comedy of remarriage," shared many of these tropes and sensibilities.⁴⁴ Remarriage comedies such as *The Awful Truth* (1937), for instance, attempted to repair endangered or defunct marriages between two dynamic, conniving personalities through passionate melee, forgiveness, and forgetfulness following accusations of betrayal and emotional abandonment. Though all variations of the screwball cycle took a special interest in unconventional, provocative women who flirted with (and playfully tormented) bashful, inhibited men, most screwball couples were fairly matched in terms of sexual experience or lack thereof. At the very least, men and women were matched in their capacity for desire and joy. Despite the industrial regulations that restricted the representation and discussion of sex at the time, the screwball cycle insisted on the exciting

⁴⁴ Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

importance of sex—one of the few things Americans seemed to be in agreement about during a particularly divisive and desperate time.⁴⁵

Although the screwball cycle had no choice but to invest heavily in the couple's long withheld sexual union, these films were actually quite skeptical of monogamy, the institution of marriage, and maturity. The screwball comedies dared to acknowledge a few unsettlingly resonant "awful truths" masked by the myths of romantic love; such disturbances included the overwhelming likelihood that one's evolving needs and desires could not possibly be fulfilled by one person till the end of time, that women could simply not "have it all" (or at least, all at once) within the established order, that one must continuously labor to keep some sense of romantic love alive, that the monotony of marriage often marked the end of sex and passion, and that there was simply no viable, socially acceptable alternative to this institution. Over the course of nearly a century, these awful truths never disappeared from the romantic comedy genre or from our intimate culture. The very nature of genre, however, insists on finding new ways to mystify or soften the blow of the complaints that continue to haunt individuals and lovers.

The screwball cycle, along with romantic comedies more generally, fizzled out shortly after America's entrance into World War II when studios, along with most comedy directors, turned their attention to the war effort.⁴⁶ After this wartime lull, Hollywood's studio system, as well as the PCA, were facing serious challenges. The House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings of 1947, for instance, purged Hollywood of many promising and productive artists, crew members, and executives; one year later, the Paramount Decision of

⁴⁵ Glitre, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, 25-27.

⁴⁶ Grindon, *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, 38.

1948 ordered major Hollywood studios to relinquish ownership of their theater chains. Studios were not only deprived of a guaranteed exhibition outlet for their pictures, but more and more theaters also began showing foreign films—mostly from European countries—which offered more risqué content as well as comparatively abstract approaches to narrative and form that diverged from the classical Hollywood paradigm. Moreover, television was becoming an increasingly common fixture in American households; this domestic technology offered a constant flow of in-home audiovisual entertainment, information, and the thrills of “liveness.”

As a result of these major shifts in composition and competition, film studios began making fewer, albeit more high budget and spectacular pictures with various gimmicks—including Cinemascope, Panavision, Technicolor, 3D movies—as well as with a so-called “adult” edge.⁴⁷ In order to remain relevant and attract younger audiences, Hollywood filmmakers and executives put pressure on the PCA to loosen its restrictions, especially those regarding sexual content. In regards to the romantic comedy genre more specifically, the genre’s signature withholding of sex until marriage found itself in danger of losing some of the charm it may have held in the not so distant past, or at least, in the popular memory thereof. As the above mentioned sex talk jab from *Ask Any Girl* implies, general audiences were not exactly opposed to more showing and doing with less mumbling and bumbling when it came to s-e-x on screen. It was not until 1953 that the PCA finally adopted a slightly more lenient stance towards sexual content (mainly in terms of speech and narrative) following Otto Preminger’s bold and much publicized decision to release *The Moon Is Blue* without the MPAA seal of approval.

⁴⁷ In analyzing the studios’ challenges in relation to the marketing of midcentury Hollywood melodrama, for instance, Barbara Klinger notes that “[s]tudios thereby made themselves appear as crusaders for the freedom of speech and the right of their audiences to experience mature realistic content.” See Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 39-40.

The Midcentury Sex Comedy

Preminger's cleaned-up film adaptation of the hugely popular stage play set the sex comedy cycle in motion for the next decade. *The Moon Is Blue* followed a rapidly blossoming romance between a militantly chaste, resolute young woman (Maggie McNamara) and an older bachelor (William Holden) with a troubled relationship to his unruly ex-fiancée and her wolfish, irresponsible father (David Niven). After a series of painfully awkward discussions and situations unfolds in his swanky bachelor pad during the course of one rainy evening, the hero experiences a sudden, profound change of heart and proposes marriage to the endearing, calculating heroine he had just met earlier that day.

Though there was certainly a great deal of fuss surrounding its controversial release, many popular audiences agreed that *The Moon Is Blue* was little more than an overblown tease. As a *Variety* reviewer noted, "the plot is an innocuous, even high schoolish affair in its sex play, and though it has the bedroom constantly in mind, the sheets are never ruffled. The finale should find a viewer's morals still as intact as the heroine's professional virginity."⁴⁸ To the dismay of popular audiences, many of the sex comedies that followed *The Moon Is Blue* remained rather disappointingly sexless, despite the newly relaxed PCA regulations. In fact, the sex comedy cycle's conventions actually exacerbated the genre's already turbid relationship with sex, along with those who—for whatever reason—weren't having it.

As is the case in *The Moon Is Blue*, McDonald notes that most sex comedies are structured by the belief that "men and women are perpetually in conflict because nature had set

⁴⁸ "The Moon Is Blue," *Variety*, June 3, 1953, *The Moon Is Blue* File, Herrick.

them up—or society had inspired them—with different goals.”⁴⁹ While sexual fulfillment is a shared goal in the sex comedies, it is actually the “timing and legitimacy” of this goal that divides the sexes.⁵⁰ As the above quoted *Variety* review of *The Moon Is Blue* implies, women in the sex comedies ostensibly desire sex after marriage, or at least within a committed, marriage-bound relationship; men, on the other hand, typically seek casual sexual encounters before, without, or even outside of, marriage.⁵¹

Much like the screwball cycle that preceded it, the sex comedy cycle derives pleasure from seeing the couple fight, manipulate and sabotage one another in the narrative middle, but ultimately views romantic and sexual relationships in a far more cynical light.⁵² While sex may have been something of a common ground for Americans during the social and economic disturbances of the Great Depression, the booming post-war economy and Cold War politics elevated consumerism as a great and ultimate equalizer, one strongly linked to personal happiness, social status, and national security. The so-called freedom to purchase a variety of goods became a prized marker of good citizenship, as well as a defensive strike against the perceived threat of global Communism.

In accordance with this postwar consumerist ideology, along with the stubborn PCA restrictions, representations of sexual desire and acts were often displaced onto consumer goods, costumes, and lavish urban living spaces, such as the sleek, well-equipped bachelor pads—some complete with retractable glitterball lighting and spinning, albeit always untouched pull-out beds.

⁴⁹ McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 38.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 39.

As McDonald goes on to explain, the sex comedies essentially treat romantic relationships between men and women as elaborate, superficial, and manipulative processes of seduction in which sex is, above all, “a commodity to be exchanged.”⁵³

According to Beth Bailey’s analysis of midcentury courtship conventions in her book, *From Front Porch to Backseat*, men and women were in fact encouraged to treat themselves, as well as one another, as “commodities.”⁵⁴ Under this belief system, men learned that the price of sex with a “good girl” was marriage, while sex with a “bad girl” was relatively cheap—maybe even free if no date was expected or required. For women, on the other hand, the price of sex out of wedlock—regardless of partner choice—was their reputation, not to mention the potential added tax of an out of wedlock pregnancy and the bundle of horrors and hardships such a situation would likely involve.⁵⁵ As *The Moon Is Blue*’s shocking utterance of the disparaging term, “professional virgin” would suggest, women were encouraged to use their virtue as currency, and to value men primarily for the material goods and social capital they could make possible.⁵⁶

Despite the promises of sex, sexy stars, sexy sets, and sexy commodities as the main attractions, the sex comedies’ erotic sparkle faded under a gloom of anxiety and messiness when it came to the obligatory marriage toll, and to the narrow version of maturity this toll symbolized

⁵³ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁴ Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 57.

⁵⁵ In addition to the lack of enforced child support legislation at the time, Stephanie Coontz notes that “[t]his was a period when children born out of wedlock had ‘illegitimate’ stamped on their birth certificates and school records.” See Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: From Obedience To Intimacy Or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), 239.

⁵⁶ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 75.

and demanded from men and women. While nearly all sex comedies following *The Moon Is Blue* were chided for such unrelenting, righteous predictability, the most vitriolic remarks were always reserved for the marriage-minded heroines. This resounding tone of disappointment and overwhelmingly misogynistic resentment seemed at odds with the consensus ideology and moral framework of the day, as well as the era's soaring marriage and birth rates, plummeting divorce rates, and a marked drop in the average marrying age.

The sex comedy cycle peaked, in terms of both its prolificacy and popularity, toward the latter end of the "fifties," which family historian Stephanie Coontz identifies as the "golden age" of marriage—a phenomenon that intersected with a short-lived period of postwar prosperity. This truly exceptional period in U.S. history, a "long decade" spanning from approximately 1947-1965, was characterized by a cluster of rapid socio-economic and cultural transformations following the end of World War II, as well as the Korean War (1950-1953).⁵⁷ Crucial among this postwar phenomena was the era's pervasive construction of the suburban-dwelling, white, male breadwinner family as a market, government, and culturally sanctioned ideal. Most popularly epitomized by midcentury television sitcoms such as *Father Knows Best* and *The Donna Reed Show*, this postwar imagining of what Berlant describes as "the good life" has been repeatedly exposed as an intimate, economic, and political fantasy of heterofamilial upward mobility—one powerfully disconnected from many people's lived experiences at the time.⁵⁸

Although this idealized family unit has become the object of misguided nostalgia for "traditional," American family values and gender roles, it is important to note that more families

⁵⁷ Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, 226.

⁵⁸ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1.

than ever before, particularly those headed by white, male G.I. Bill recipients, were in fact able to take advantage of this brief window of postwar prosperity and unprecedented levels of federal assistance in order to achieve some sense of this ideal.⁵⁹ Moreover, the postwar era's consensus ideology actually presented a much needed sense of security and comfort for those who had endured the destabilizing effects of the Great Depression and World War II.⁶⁰ As Coontz explains, the phenomena solidifying the overwhelming consensus around the historically exceptional idea that every person should marry and raise multiple children at a young age—and thus subscribe to the breadwinner ethic, the rigidly structured gender and sexual norms in which it was rooted, as well as the consumerism it made possible—were manifold and formidable but also deeply conflicting for Americans.⁶¹

Similarly, mass culture texts did not uniformly and unconditionally endorse the era's consensus ideology. The sex comedies, for instance, paid lip service to this cultural common sense, especially when it came to the market-driven logic underlying contemporary courtship practices and expectations. However, their excesses, playfulness, complaints, and *adult* stars (who were well beyond the era's average and ideal "marrying age") consistently pushed back against the era's dominant ideological codes regarding gender roles, sexuality, and domesticity. The contemporary anxieties, contradictions, and thrills that these films engaged were most salient and contested at the site of white heterosexual masculinity.

⁵⁹ Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, 228.

⁶⁰ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2.

⁶¹ Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, 240.

Steve Cohan points to a number of prominent factors that contributed to the era's masculinity crisis in his book, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties*. For instance, in tandem with the broadly felt pressures of Cold War and corporate culture, Cohan notes that more specific events such as the publication of the *Kinsey Reports* on male and female sexual behavior in 1948 and 1953, respectively, challenged the long-standing assumption that monogamous heterosexuality was necessarily "normal" sexuality. Moreover, Kinsey's findings exposed the long-standing cultural and scientific dismissal and misunderstandings of female sexuality—particularly women's capacity for sexual pleasure and the psychology and mechanics behind it. These revelations played into the social and psychic pressures men felt to demonstrate a certain degree of sexual prowess and lustfulness, which clashed with the sexually restrictive expectations placed on women, as well as with the breadwinner role men were under enormous pressure to fulfill.⁶²

Playboy magazine, which first debuted in 1953 (the same year as *The Moon Is Blue* controversy) became one of the most prominent symptomatic texts engaging with the opportunities, contradictions and uncertainties shaping postwar manhood. In addition to advising men on ways to use women for their own pleasure and esteem with limited responsibility or remorse, Cohan notes that *Playboy* gave rise, as well as a sense of legitimacy, to an alternative adult lifestyle for white, urban, upper-middle class heterosexual men.⁶³ As the byproduct of postwar prosperity and the concomitant explosion of domestic consumer goods, the playboy

⁶² Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 58.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 268.

mindset and lifestyle rejected the drudgery of breadwinning, questioned the market-driven logic of mainstream courtship conventions, and glamorized the gratifying art of serial seduction.

In the name of attracting women while indulging in one's financial, personal, and psychological independence, the playboy lifestyle actually granted straight men access to the ostensibly feminine and/or queer pleasures of domesticity, and the indulgent consumption of art, design, cuisine, and fashion.⁶⁴ Although all unmarried adults were treated with glaring suspicion during the golden age of marriage, the playboy's curious well-roundedness rendered him an especially disturbing figure. Cohan notes that the playboy bachelor signaled "a fundamental 'immaturity,' 'irresponsibility,' 'insecurity,' and 'latent homosexuality,'" that demanded both "correction and expression."⁶⁵ The sex comedy cycle pivoted around the impossibility of this task; it provided a safe and entertaining outlet for the angst and uncertainty surrounding midcentury masculinity, allowing both men and women to air their grievances.

The sex comedy narratives, however, were often unconvincing in their efforts to coax the playboy into embracing the era's consensus ideology when it came to sex, relationships, and adulthood. This overexposed fascination with the playboy and his reluctance, in conjunction with an exceptional economic and ideological climate that bestowed white men with supreme buying power, tinged the sex comedy cycle with a male leaning one-sidedness that often dominated the shenanigans and character arcs. While the cycle delighted in showcasing the glitzy hedonism of the playboy lifestyle, the obligatory burden of "correction" was mostly placed on the primary heroines.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 58-60, 266-272.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 267-268.

These women were surprisingly more complex and varied than the cycle's portrayal of the playboy, who was predictably handsome, urbane, and professionally successful to the point where he not only earned well beyond the breadwinner salary, but also enjoyed some kind of creative, exciting, or unorthodox career outside of the emasculating, white-collar corporate sphere showcased in films such as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956) and *The Apartment* (1960). Despite the playboy's suspiciously intimate knowledge of women and their desires, however, his usual seduction tactics fail to impress the heroine. Amused as she may be by the playboy's masculine glamour and free spirit, the heroine's self-respect, authenticity, and farsightedness separate her from the dime-a-dozen floozies lining the pages of his little black book and happily coming and going from his sleek bachelor pad.

With occupations ranging from interior designers, advertising executives, secretaries, and model-actresses, the sex comedy heroines were rarely put in a position of desperate need for a man. Even if they fervently aspired to submissive housewifery, these women still proved remarkably self-sufficient across a wide range of working, living, and social situations. Though faced with the likelihood of financial hardship and the social stigma of being labeled an "old maid,"⁶⁶ which at the time could have applied to a woman as young as twenty-one years old, the sex comedy heroines simply refused to settle for a man that did not meet their carefully considered standards, which were very much in line with the expectations set forth in the breadwinner ethic. Men and women, as it turns out, did not necessarily need each other for wages, companionship, social status, or in some cases, even for sex in the sex comedies; there was, however, pressure nonetheless for these characters to realize a deep and meaningful sense of

⁶⁶ Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, 227.

normalcy, which could only be achieved by the family unit and consumption the breadwinner ethic made possible.

Doris Day: Sex Comedy Sweetheart

Indeed, the sex comedy cycle grappled intently with the disconcerting catch-22s inherent in contemporary sexual conventions and social expectations. In so doing, these films expended a great deal of narrative energy on the pressing task of playboy reform, but remained utterly miffed when it came to matters of female sexuality, particularly in regards to unmarried women. The sex comedies thus served up an assortment of confused representations that called attention to the risks associated with pre-pill and pre-marital sex, all while bemoaning the heroine's varying degrees of restraint, and mocking whatever attempts she did make to act on her desires.

Doris Day, one of the era's most popular performers and the sex comedy cycle's favorite sweetheart, provides an ideal case study for exploring the sex comedy heroine's narrative and ideological value within a midcentury context. The sex comedy cycle, in fact, has been studied and defined almost exclusively through a selective lens of two very similar Doris Day-Rock Hudson pictures, *Pillow Talk* and *Lover Come Back*. In focusing on these two films, the limited scholarship on midcentury sex comedy (including McDonald's monograph, as well as Kathrina Glitre's book, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy: States of the Union 1934-1965*) identifies a number of recognizable tropes, including the antagonistic playboy/virgin dichotomy, the importance of masquerade, a hierarchy of knowledge that typically privileges the male character(s), at least one anti-marriage rant, as well as the flagrant display and strategic use of consumables—namely, the sleek bachelor pads and haute couture costumes.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ See Glitre, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, 144-158; See also McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 38-51.

The sex comedy's complaints, compromises, and sexual conflicts, however, were hardly limited to courtship narratives. Day, for instance, starred in several comedies, such as *The Tunnel of Love* (1958), *Send Me No Flowers* (1964), and *The Thrill of It All* (1963), which were motored by sexual conflicts and goals occurring within and outside of marriage. These sex comedy variations, however, are often left out of the conversation because they lack the cycle's most recognizable semantics, namely the trials and thrills of a highly polarized courtship, and a lush, urban milieu. The following chapters thus employ Day as a passkey to fine-tuning and expanding the limited existing knowledge on the sex comedy cycle as a way to strengthen the proposed intersections between these midcentury films and the millennial brom-com cycle.

As mass culture texts and commodities designed to make profit, stars are subject to ongoing processes of encoding and decoding through their performances, publicity, fan culture, and through their own public and private actions. Stars embody and make sense of anxieties, ideas, and fantasies that matter to people, often combining the extraordinary with the ordinary, the ideal with the everyday.⁶⁸ In Day's case, her sex comedy roles brought about the most spectacular popularity and worshipful adoration of her career—a degree of fame made even more exceptional by the fact of her middle-agedness at the time. Day's memorable sex comedy performances, however, stigmatized her in a way that limited her professional growth and legacy, and also fixed her as an object of ridicule and misogynistic contempt within and beyond the films' diegesis.⁶⁹ Despite her impressive record of motley performances and a deeply troubled,

⁶⁸ Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 22.

⁶⁹ Consider, for example, the following blurb from a review of Day's 1963 comedy, *The Thrill of It All*: "In it, as usual, Doris is a slightly nutty, refreshing to look at girl, stunning turned out and relentlessly pursued by wolf packs of panting males through decidedly risqué dialogue and situations. She is subjected, as always, to slapstick indignities—such as the pratfall into a crate of tomatoes. But she gets away with it because of her antiseptic freshness and the fact that she is an uncommonly skilled comedienne." "The Tomato on Top is Doris: That Wolf-Chased Day Girl Scores Again in a Risqué Farce," *Life*, September 27, 1963, *The Thrill of It All* File, Herrick.

not-so-private life sullied by personal tragedies, toxic relationships, divorces, and struggles balancing motherhood with fame, Day's star persona was shellacked with notions of perky wholesomeness and unconditional approachability.⁷⁰

In fact, Day's roles and public persona were and continue to be sweepingly characterized as old-fashioned, virginal, even frigid, and set in stark opposition to another sex comedy actress, fifties icon, and arguably, the most famous woman of the 20th century: Marilyn Monroe. As Grindon, along with many other star studies scholars, has noted, Monroe expressed a natural, spontaneous, fun-loving sexuality combined with untouchable, womanly attractiveness and childlike innocence.⁷¹ Since women in popular representations are rarely granted sensuousness, beauty, intelligence, confidence, money, and autonomy all at once, Monroe's roles and public persona always had to strike a delicate compromise. For instance, Monroe's oozing sexuality ("[Monroe] seems to create the paradox of being a completely dressed nude," noted *Variety's* review of *The Seven Year Itch*) was often contained through some sort of dumb blonde routine, such as a charming gold digger in the musical sex comedy *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) or a divine sexpot completely unaware of her impact on men in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955).⁷²

As one of the most complex and recognizable signs of modern mass culture, there are myriad reasons why Monroe summons adoration and intrigue in life and death. Chiefly among these reasons for Monroe's abiding magnetism, according to Grindon, is her seemingly effortless embodiment of "sex without complications"—an extraordinarily powerful fantasy underpinning

⁷⁰ Consider, for instance, the following excerpt from a 1957 profile in *Photoplay*: "At twenty-three Doris saw herself as a mother who rarely saw her child, as a wife who had miserably failed not once but twice in holding her husbands. Work was not merely the road to success, but an antidote to misery." "Escape to Happiness (Doris Day) Part III," *Photoplay*, June 1957, *Photoplay* Microfilm, Herrick.

⁷¹ Grindon, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, 48-49.

⁷² "The Seven Year Itch," *Variety*, June 3, 1955, *The Seven Year Itch* File, Herrick.

the romantic comedy genre, as well as the better part of twentieth and twenty-first century intimate and popular culture.⁷³ By comparison, Doris Day—much like the sex comedy cycle itself—was all about the “complications.” As such, popular responses to Day’s sex comedy performances and star persona were also deeply conflicted.

As McDonald skillfully argues in her essay on Day’s “fluctuating filmic virginity,” perfunctory and reductive (mis)readings of Day as an uptight “good girl”—i.e. a “professional,” middle-aged virgin—ignore her complex and risqué engagement with the era’s social and sexual mores.⁷⁴ In sex comedy roles ranging from an exceptionally successful, happily single interior designer in *Pillow Talk*, to a Manhattan advertising executive in *Lover Come Back*, and an unemployed forty year-old virgin in *That Touch of Mink*, Day’s characters refuse easy assimilation to the hackneyed labels of virgin, whore, gold-digger, and spinster. Even when playing an unsophisticated, middle-aged virgin in *That Touch of Mink*, for instance, Day’s characters were not necessarily prudish but discriminating.⁷⁵ After all, her sex comedy universe was teeming with overbearing neurotics, sexist executives, grabby teenagers, and scheming wolves.

Nevertheless, Day’s perceived prudishness and obstinance proved an ideal target for the sex comedy’s brand of mockery and scorn. Just as Marilyn Monroe’s stunning beauty and oozing, natural sexuality were necessarily offset by an excessively girlish ditziness or naivety, when traces of Day’s desires did emerge they were contained in a number of coy and cruel ways.

⁷³ Grindon, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, 49.

⁷⁴ Tamar Jeffers McDonald, “Performances of Desire and Inexperience: Doris Day’s Fluctuating Filmic Virginity,” in *Virgin Territory: Representing Sexual Inexperience in Film*, ed. Tamar Jeffers McDonald (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 103-122.

⁷⁵ McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 51.

For instance, her sexuality was often displaced onto elements of the films' luscious mise-en-scène, such as the mink-lined coat that wears down her inhibitions in *That Touch of Mink* or the racially charged fertility goddess statue she prominently displays when redesigning Rock Hudson's bachelor pad in *Pillow Talk*. Moreover, her attempts to act on her desires are always thwarted in the nick of time: she breaks out in hives (*That Touch of Mink*), falls under the embarrassing influence of alcohol (*That Touch of Mink*; *Lover Come Back*), and comes to the shocking realization that the gentle and suspiciously effeminate man she desires is actually the deceitful playboy she loathes in disguise (*Pillow Talk*; *Lover Come Back*).

While Day's sex appeal may have been less conspicuous and tantalizing in comparison to other blonde bombshells of the era, including Monroe's natural sexuality, Kim Novak's mysterious sultriness, or Jayne Mansfield's provocative voluptuousness, her actively manufactured gloss of incorruptible, all-American niceness actually enabled many of Day's comedies to push the boundaries of acceptable taste, as they were defined by other popular media and the weakened Production Code. If pure-as-the-driven-snow Doris Day agreed to a picture, how offensive could it be? On the one hand, Day's pictures were packed with romantic delights, glamorous displays of fashion, and glorified validations of female virtue. On the other hand, however, Day's sex comedies also delivered a great deal of dirty and questionable humor, offense, and disappointment.

As the following chapters reveal, the most scornful and frustrating responses within and beyond the sex comedy's diegesis had to do with the heroine's perceived influence on the playboy bachelor's fate. Regardless of the erotic impulses or opportunities that inevitably come into play in the sex comedies, the heterosexual couple's sexual union is never consummated prior

to the bachelor's surrender to marriage. The hero's epiphany is almost always executed through demonstrations of masculine brawn and a patriarchal sense of rescue. Day, for instance, is hauled off to the marriage bed kicking and shrieking in *Pillow Talk* and *That Touch of Mink*; in *Lover Come Back*, she is carted off to the maternity ward as she renews the marriage vows to the man she never loved or meant to marry in the first place. The playboy was in fact more likely to find himself ensnared in the breadwinning trap not through force or coercive manipulation at the hands of the heroine, but through his own recognition of guilt, shame, and the profound meaninglessness of his alternative lifestyle. These popular films suggest, then, that the sex comedy's most pressing dilemma was not exactly "Will she or won't she?" surrender to the playboy's predatory sexual advances but rather a far less titillating question of "Will he or won't he?" submit to the package of monogamy and domestic entrapment the heroine had unfairly come to depend on or, in the case of Day's characters, symbolically enforce.

Bachelors Beware

This exaggerated fixation on the bachelor's dilemma echoed prominently across publicity materials and popular press reviews at the time. For instance, one poster for *Lover Come Back* features two images of Day yanking at a distressed and impassive Hudson as the text promises "a riotous new twist in the gentle art of persuasion." What is unbeknown to potential viewers, however, is that these featured images are not of Hudson playing a devastatingly beddable bachelor but of his masquerade as an eccentric, impotent misfit with which he hopes to seduce and humiliate Day, his most formidable competitor in the advertising industry. Though the sex comedy cycle privileged the playboy's knowledge, scheming, and the heady happenings of his domestic space, and the heroine typically fell prey to his insults and masquerades, the general

manner in which these films were promoted presented a besieged bachelor at the hands of aggressive, cunning and—in the most rancorous scripting, publicity, and criticism—sadistically prudish women out to bait “the marriage trap.”

This misguided resentment towards women (especially the “good girls”) that underpinned the sex comedy’s diegesis and marketing strategies pulsed throughout 1950s culture.⁷⁶ When taken to its most extreme, this bitterness provoked the irrational, though not uncommon, fear that men were increasingly scared into homosexuality because they were unwilling and unable to meet the demands placed on them by aggressive women.⁷⁷ In its consistent privileging of a particular, male-dominated trio of characters, the sex comedy gestured toward an additional albeit understated quandary for the heroine: on the one hand she threatened to scare the playboy into homosexuality, and on the other hand, she threatened to disrupt his homosocial, and always potentially homoerotic, bonds.

During the Cold War, homosexuality was defined as an illness, as well as a serious threat to national security; non-heterosexual people were thought to be weak, easily swayed, manipulated, and morally corrupt.⁷⁸ While the social and political panic that developed around homosexuality during the Cold War and the severity of the efforts to diagnose and purge this perceived threat cannot be understated, male homosexuality lurched between the marginal and

⁷⁶ In *The Moon Is Blue*, for instance, David Niven plays a lovable, aging wolf who offers the following advice to a besieged bachelor: “Anyone can handle a bad girl, it’s the good girls a man should be warned against.”

⁷⁷ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 105.

⁷⁸ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 94.

⁷⁹ See Cohan, *Masked Men*, xiv-xvi.

the mainstream in the fifties.⁷⁹ The sex comedy's narrative middle, as most enthusiastically and conspicuously represented by the male second banana, openly toyed with this vacillation.

As most prominently featured in Doris Day's three comedies with Rock Hudson and Tony Randall, *Pillow Talk*, *Lover Come Back*, and *Send Me No Flowers*, a nearly identical construction of a neurotic third term circulated within the sex comedy cycle. These memorable characters playfully resisted the era's conventional categories of masculinity; they also blocked and facilitated the heterosexual union while deflecting and accentuating the playboy's never-so-latent homosexuality. In drawing from literary critic Leslie Fiedler's groundbreaking work from 1960, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, which examined the American literary tradition of men rejecting their roles and responsibilities as adults, Ehrenreich argues that the playboy's lifestyle and compulsive heterosexuality were never about eroticism but ultimately about escape from the emasculating demands of breadwinning, and the women who symbolized such drudgery.⁸⁰

Just as close male friendships were among the most prominent and cherished manifestations of the male revolt against maturity in Fiedler's analysis of American literature, the playboy hero's relationship with his male second banana often complements the mode of escape afforded by his lavish lifestyle. The second banana thus presented an alluring and precarious "perverse alternative" for the playboy bachelor—one free from the dreadful risks and pressures that inevitably came from dealing with women but not from the looming suspicions over his homosexuality.

⁸⁰ Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 51.

While references to homosexuality were present in nearly all midcentury adult comedies, the steadily amplified queerness between Hudson and Randall in their three films together had a great deal to do with the puzzling status of Hudson's closeted homosexuality as an open Hollywood secret and the careful construction of his star persona. As the third chapter discusses in greater detail, Hudson's star persona offered a refreshingly "normal," healthy, and nonthreatening model of masculinity in the fifties.⁸¹ In tandem with Day's wholesomeness, Hudson's ostensibly natural, impeccable masculinity (and to a slightly different extent in *That Touch of Mink*, Cary Grant's time-honored epitomization of the Hollywood gentleman) allowed for a *mélange* of queer play, which both necessitated and troubled the last minute heterosexual couplings.

Whatever pleasures and erotic thrills the heterosexual couple's antagonisms and eventual sexual union had presented were not only soured by the aftertaste of duty and compromise but were, to varying extents, haunted by the rousing perversities of the narrative middle. As the following chapters demonstrate, the most insidious and vexing imperative that the sex comedy pains to accept is that such modes of resistance against heteronormative adulthood are necessarily short-lived, frivolous, and far worse than submission for all parties involved. Such submission, however, is all too often the only option women in the sex comedy are given to begin with.

The Sex Comedy's Demise

This glaring, perceived lack of choice when it came to women's bodies, education, earning power, partners, and lifestyle would go on to fuel second wave feminism, the rise of

⁸¹ Richard Meyer, "Rock Hudson's Body," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diane Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991): 265.

which coincided with the sex comedy's demise in the mid 1960s. The cycle was unable to weather the strong and varied forces of change that gripped society after 1965, including the mainstreaming of the birth control pill, the emerging pull of feminist, gay, anti-war, and civil rights activism, and the erosion of the family wage. Most obviously, the tremendous influence of the pill and the gradual, liberal shift in societal attitudes towards sex and the family meant that women—in this case, mostly the white, educated, (upper)middle-class women prevailing within second wave feminism and the romantic comedy genre—no longer had to say “no” to sex outside of marriage.⁸²

Nor did these women necessarily have to or want to say “yes” to marriage. As early as 1963, Betty Friedan's landmark book, *The Feminine Mystique*, named and synthesized the female complaints against the era's domestic ideology, which swirled around midcentury popular culture; well into the 1970s, second wave feminists worked ardently to expose the postwar breadwinner ethic as sexist, stifling, and outmoded. Men, on the other hand, no longer had to spend so much time resisting and ranting against the various pressures and entrapments of marriage as the “cost” of sex plummeted, and the breadwinner salary that had brought a great deal of security, loads of dissatisfaction, and a powerful sense of identity in the postwar years slipped further out of reach. Within and beyond the parameters of heteronormativity, questions and assertions over identity exploded as minority activists struggled for equality and visibility in politics and popular representation.

⁸² The Pill was officially approved by the FDA in 1960; by 1965 it is the most popular form of birth control used by American women. Alexandra Nikolchev, “A Brief History of the Birth Control Pill,” Need to Know on PBS, last modified May 7, 2010, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/need-to-know/health/a-brief-history-of-the-birth-control-pill/480/>

In addition to these larger forces of social and cultural change, the sex comedy could not survive the final dissolution of the Production Code, whose oversight had in large part necessitated the cycle's conventions and zany sensibilities. Once the PCA was finally replaced with the ratings system in 1967, the romantic comedy genre found itself both liberated and tested. These films could now, as McDonald notes, finally display what they had set the mood for and talked about for decades.⁸³ Sex could no longer be taken for granted as the genre's primary source of tension or its final release, and romantic reconciliation, marriage, and pending parenthood seemed a far less titillating, satiating, and light-hearted substitute for sexual conquest. After enduring more than a decade of declining audiences and whining critics, the output of romantic comedies decreased substantially after the sex comedy's demise.

The Self-Reflexive Romantic Comedy

In his 1978 essay, "Romantic Comedy Today: Semi Tough or Impossible?," Brian Henderson argued that the romantic comedy genre was no longer relevant or possible because of the seemingly irrevocable changes that had settled into society.⁸⁴ By the late 1970s, for instance, women could legally prevent and terminate unplanned pregnancies. The number of single-income, male breadwinner households dwindled in the face of extreme inflation, economic strife, and political corruption while more and more women earned living wages.⁸⁵ The rates of divorce, co-habitation, and single parents sky-rocketed. Major cities—the location of choice for the romantic comedy genre—were facing bankruptcy, as well as an alarming upsurge in racial violence and tension, poverty, crime, and decay.

⁸³ McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 59-60.

⁸⁴ Henderson, "Romantic Comedy Today," 19.

⁸⁵ Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, 244.

Nevertheless, a cluster of self-reflexive romantic comedies emerged from the cynical narcissism of the “Me Decade” and the New Hollywood cinema’s grittier, more artful sensibilities.⁸⁶ Films such as *The Graduate* (1967), *Harold and Maude* (1971), *Annie Hall* (1976), and *An Unmarried Woman* (1978) entertained the contemporary realities of pre-marital sex and women’s liberation. These self-reflexive comedies insisted upon the importance of sexual pleasure for both genders, embraced unconventional couples, unglamorous urban landscapes, and even dared to consider the very reasonable and preferable alternatives to marriage for its characters.

McDonald explains that this extremely short-lived cycle demonstrated a heightened sense of self-awareness in regards to the portrayals of romantic and sexual relationships; these films were also very much aware of their statuses as texts existing within a particular genre, within a particular cultural-historical moment, and within a much more expansive history of cultural production. By way of this self-awareness, the self-reflexive comedies often dared to subvert the romantic comedy genre’s signature happy ending by allowing couples to part ways or remain in an uncertain, ambiguous state of affairs. Despite such profound awareness of the impossible expectations attached to cultural notions of romantic love, as well as their own awkward position as texts within a supposedly obsolete genre, the self-reflexive comedies were, as McDonald argues, often unable to radically detach themselves from the myths of ever-lasting love and the heterosexual couple, or at least, from the nostalgia and sentimentality that accompanies these myths and the romantic comedy genre itself.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 61.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

The self-reflexive comedies were also unable to shuck themselves from some of the more sexist tendencies that informed their sex comedy predecessors. McDonald, for instance, observes that portrayals of women in the later 1960s comedies were no more sympathetic or enlightened than films from previous decades because of the feminist movement, which most women did not even support by the early 1970s.⁸⁸ Once women were no longer obligated to refuse sex on and off screen, Hollywood cinema at large appeared to devote less attention to female characters than ever before.⁸⁹ In contrasting these contemporary female roles with the screwball comedy cycle's unconventional heroines, Henderson declared that "there can be no romantic comedy without strong heroines."⁹⁰

Even the handful of self-reflexive romantic comedies, most notably Woody Allen's Oscar-winning *Annie Hall* (1976), which brilliantly interrogated the complex ideology of romantic love, marriage, and the genre itself, not only privileged its narcissistic male lead in terms of narrative, form, and viewer identification, but also maintained a pronounced, nostalgic fidelity to the enduring myths of the heterosexual couple and the possibility of everlasting intimacy in a rapidly changing, disillusioned, and deeply distrusting historical moment. Despite the currents of ideological and representational unburdening facing the genre in the 1970s, the self-reflexive romantic comedy remained invested in the hopes and failures presented by the heterosexual love plot.

⁸⁸ For example, Coontz notes: "As late as 1968 two thirds of women aged fifteen to nineteen, and almost as many aged twenty to twenty-four, still expected to become full-time homemakers." Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 246.

⁸⁹ McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 55-56.

⁹⁰ Henderson, "Romantic Comedy Today," 18.

The Neo-traditional Romantic Comedy

After the self-reflexive comedy's fade-out, a different kind of romantic comedy emerged in the late 1980s, and reigned dominant until the early 2000s. Though this cycle retained the realistic, upper-class urban milieu of the self-reflexive comedies that came before, these films intently ignored, and even repudiated, the self-reflexive comedies' flirtations with ideological and generic defiance. McDonald refers to this enduring cycle as the "neo-traditional" rom-com, though it is more commonly grouped under the umbrella term "chick flick" for its female-centeredness, dramatic and fairy-tale sensibilities, as well as an emphasis on tears.⁹¹ Common elements among neo-traditional romantic comedies include a renewed devotion to the boy-meets-loses-regains girl formula, a vague sense of self-awareness that pays lip service to contemporary doubts over everlasting love, an imprecise nostalgia for old romantic dramas, and a marked unwillingness to entertain the possibility of an open or possibly "unhappy" ending.⁹² As the first romantic comedy cycle to weather the panic and tragedy of the AIDS crisis, as well as the emergence of "post-feminist" rhetoric in the 1980s, these films also share a marked downplaying of sex in comparison to its immediate and distant rom-com predecessors.⁹³

This evident backlash against the ideologies of the self-reflexive comedies, which were informed by second wave feminism, can be viewed as a backlash against the feminist movement itself. Beginning in the 1980s, discourses of postfeminism (sometimes used interchangeably with the term "third wave feminism") emerged in part from dissatisfaction with the second wave's exclusionary and dogmatic practices. Though it remains a contentious term, film scholar Diane

⁹¹ McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 85.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 90-91.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

Negra explains that postfeminism generally refers to a pervasive discourse that presumes feminism is dated, irrelevant, and inapplicable to contemporary popular culture.⁹⁴ Post-feminist discourse often caricatures, distorts, and misunderstands the political and social goals of second wave feminism by painting the movement and its members as anti-sex, anti-romance, anti-man, anti-motherhood, rigid, unattractive, and extremist.⁹⁵ Rather than women's political activism or sexual empowerment, postfeminism emphasizes the importance of achieving liberation and selfhood through lifestyle and consumer choices, which are often rooted in maternalistic and matrimonial models of female subjectivity.

In accordance with this post-feminist framework, McDonald observes that the neo-traditional romantic comedies value intense conversational compatibility between the couple, along with a deep willingness to compromise, over the importance of sexual pleasure. Whereas abstinence until the "right person" comes along is considered mature, romantic, and meaningful in the neo-traditional rom-com, the various kinds of sexual pleasure and behavior exposed and legitimated in the late sixties and early seventies, including pre-marital sex, promiscuity, masturbatory pleasures, non-heterosexual sexual experiences, and rapturously orgasmic sex, come across as dirty, cheap, and immature.⁹⁶ Sexual pleasure and experimentation are rarely framed as acceptable routes to self-discovery or liberation for either gender, as they were in the self-reflexive comedy, *An Unmarried Woman*, for example. Rather, the most erotic moment in Nora Ephron's *When Harry Met Sally* (1989)—one of the most well-known and beloved romantic

⁹⁴ Diane Negra, "Quality Postfeminism? Sex and the Single Girl on HBO," *Genders OnLine Journal*, 39 (2004): p. 2, http://www.iiav.nl/eazines/IAV_606661/IAV_606661_2010_52/g39_negra.html

⁹⁵ Diane Negra, *What A Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2009), 2.

⁹⁶ McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 98.

comedies of all time—is marked by Meg Ryan’s exuberant performance of a faked orgasm in a crowded deli. In *Pretty Woman* (1990), a modern day fairytale about a street prostitute turned billionaire girlfriend, kissing on the mouth displaces sex as the ultimate erotic and romantic act.

Even a film such as *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (1997), which attempts to revive the more radical sensibilities of the self-reflexive cycle that came before it, drops sex from the storyline completely, and couples its cynical heroine with her dapper, gay best friend—an edgy product of the nineties that almost exclusively served as a compensatory, sexless fantasy for single, straight white women.⁹⁷ Most recently, as the second chapter explains, it is not uncommon for millennial incarnations of the neo-traditional cycle to suggest that the most meaningful type of sexuality is reproductive, as most forwardly demonstrated in the landmark millennial brom-com, *Knocked Up*.

III. The Millennial Brom-Com Comedy Influences

Although the neo-traditional romantic comedy has endured in the twenty-first century, its most culturally relevant and commercially successful application lies in the millennial brom-com, which became the dominant mode of the romantic comedy genre by the mid 2000s. As a hybrid between the neo-traditional romantic comedy and the male buddy or teen gross-out comedy, the brom-com cycle has remained rather consistent with the neo-traditional comedy’s tendency to downplay sex and sexual fulfillment as an important and necessary goal for both characters. Undersexed brom-com characters like Andy in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, for instance, are mercilessly teased and made strange, while sex itself is often tainted by deceit, humiliation, boredom, or punishment, and is ultimately positioned as something less exciting and fulfilling

⁹⁷ Ibid., 82.

than a particular set of socially constructed responsibilities.

This rather uneasy attitude towards sexuality clashes with the brom-com cycle's manifest use of raunch, gross-out humor, nudity, and male-centeredness, which are conventions derived from genres not normally associated with the romantic comedy, including film pornography. Parallel to the self-reflexive romantic comedies' emergence in the late 1960s and early 1970s, film pornography exploded in volume, variety, and popularity among men and women alike, who had more access than ever before to theatrical exhibitions of feature-length pornographic films, and eventually, to technology that facilitated viewing and producing pornography in one's own home. Golden-age pornographic films such as *Deep Throat* (1972) and *Boys in the Sand* (1971) mocked the boundaries of acceptable taste, and displayed all the naughty bits (and then some) that the sex comedies only coyly hinted at with mink coats, fertility goddess statues, and prolonged conversations between half-naked playboys and their wide-eyed second bananas. Although the theatrical exhibitions of feature-length pornographic films only became fashionable among sophisticated urban circles for a short period of time in the seventies, the influence of pornography has since maintained a messy, symbiotic, and permanently controversial relationship with popular culture.⁹⁸

Considering the seemingly opposing thrills, sensibilities, cultural esteem, and gendered associations of pornography and romance, however, the romantic comedy genre remained awkwardly resistant to raunch culture's influence for decades. As the genre's most overt and enduring attempt to reconcile these two powerful, ostensibly incompatible modes of intimate

⁹⁸ Laura Kipnis, for instance, has argued that pornography is "simultaneously entirely central and entirely marginal" to western culture. See Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 181.

imaginings, their viewing pleasures, and their imagined (gendered) audiences, the millennial brom-com draws its raunchy sensibilities from several other modes of film comedy primarily motored by male immaturity and efforts to sustain it.

For instance, animal comedies of the 1970s and early 1980s, such as *Animal House* (1978) and *Porky's* (1981), marked one early, successful example of mainstreamed raunch culture. As film scholar William Paul observes in his book *Laughing Screaming*, the animal comedy's sloppy, feckless male packs prioritized male homosocial bonding over heterosexual relationships and upward social mobility. According to Paul, the driving force in animal comedy is quite simply sex—sex that is never romanticized but conflated with a drive for power.⁹⁹ In aggressively seeking sexual conquest, animal comedy enthusiastically embraces the use of “gross out” humor to undermine authority, as well as “to confront things we normally feel compelled to look away from,” thus mirroring pornography’s efforts to mock and offend mainstream and elite taste through explicit visualization, obscene parody, humor, and excess.¹⁰⁰

Teen sex quest films of the early 1980s, such as *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), also shared this aggressive sex drive and vulgar, body-based humor. However, the cultural romanticism around adolescence (boyhood especially) imbued these comedies with a slightly more sentimental and redemptive tone than the animal comedy’s brutish drive for power. In fact, since the 1980s, teen comedies became the most familiar and logical outlet for exploring the sensitive, provocative subject of virginity. As a category and ideological fixture that was once so essential to the romantic comedy, virginity drifted out of the genre after the demise of the PCA,

⁹⁹ William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 31-32.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

the rise of the sexual revolution, and second wave feminism.

McDonald suggests, however, that the teen comedy allowed “filmmakers to return to the production-code era taboo against sex and use it as the motor to drive the plot forward.”¹⁰¹

Lowering the age of the protagonists and focusing on group dynamics not only allowed for greater verisimilitude to the changing sexual landscape, it also provided narratives with a variety of reasons for withholding or thwarting sex, including family pressures, lack of self-confidence, religious and moral codes, and eventually fears of STDs.¹⁰² In light of these obstacles, as well as the incompetence that often comes with lack of experience, sex in the teen comedy is not particularly romantic or earth-shattering. Rather, these films are more likely to expose human sexuality for all its awkwardness, messiness, and disappointment. The teen comedies took special interest in teenage boys who were not only eager to get laid, but to acquire the skills necessary to please a woman, and more importantly, to develop a reputation for sexual prowess.

As film scholar David Greven argues in his essay “Dude, Where’s My Gender?” the boys in these teen comedies (like those in the brom-coms that follow) tend to have more complex life experiences and personal growth than women, whose sexual pleasure could no longer be taken for granted, denied, or completely ignored in a society irrevocably altered by second wave feminism, the parallel rise of pornography, and the ideological wars waged between these two phenomena. Though women in the teen comedies are generally granted some degree of sexual knowledge, power, and strength, Greven argues that these qualities seem to function as little

¹⁰¹ McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 56.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

more than a “consolation prize for their lack of narrative space and energy.”¹⁰³

These teen comedy narratives are hogged by boys who desperately want to achieve sexual maturity, but at the same time dodge and dread the responsibilities, dullness, and sustained intimacy with a woman that adult heterosexual manhood inevitably seems to require. Greven explains that it is precisely by situating their narratives within the fleeting, “primeval forest of teendom, from which boys emerge as men,” that teen comedies such as *American Pie* (1999) and *Dude, Where’s My Car?* (2000) are able to binge on “disorienting, occasionally bracing and shocking forays into socially perverse sexual and gendered territories.”¹⁰⁴

While the ephemerality of teendom continues to serve as a powerful safety net for these transgressions, this type of raunch sensibility and strong fixation on male immaturity began spilling over into adulthood in the 1990s. The Farrelly brothers’ wildly popular buddy comedy, *Dumb and Dumber* (1994), for instance, featured two full-grown, albeit exceptionally stupid and financially strained adult men whose close friendship is tested when they compete for the same married woman’s affection. Beneath all the gross-out humor, however, *Dumb and Dumber* was rather sentimental; there is, for instance, a strong sense of relief and mushiness when the leading pair reconcile and reaffirm their brotherly friendship in the face of extraordinary and dangerous circumstances. Though *Dumb and Dumber* serves as an important precursor to the budding bromances in the millennial brom-com cycle, its refusal to redeem its lead male characters from their immature, idiotic ways through heterosexual relationships or other means would not have withstood the brom-com’s strong romantic comedy influences.

¹⁰³ David Greven, “Dude, Where’s My Gender? Contemporary Teen Comedies and New Forms of American Masculinity,” *Cineaste* 27, no. 3 (Summer, 2002): 21.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

The Farrelly brothers actually turned to the romantic comedy genre for their hugely successful 1999 comedy, *There's Something About Mary* (1999). This raunchy comedy, however, used the charming and cloying elements from rom-com and teen comedy as fodder for outrageous gross out humor—most of which came at the expense of its unfortunate hero. Though most of the narrative action takes place among adults, *There's Something About Mary* nonetheless clings to the safe, “primeval forest of teendom.” The main characters’ ill-fated courtship begins in high school, and their rekindled friendship years later is essentially framed as a continuation of their high school selves and relationship.

There's Something About Mary repeatedly subjects its hero (Ben Stiller), a nervous dork with good intentions and a lifelong crush on a divinely beautiful and good-hearted woman (Cameron Diaz), to cringe-worthy physical pain, psychological damage, and social embarrassment on his ill-advised quest to win her heart. Although the pitiful hero remains foolishly fixed in a high school fantasy of unrequited love, his character is framed as more unlucky than childish or exceptionally stupid, like the buddies from *Dumb and Dumber*. *There's Something About Mary* is ultimately less concerned with redeeming the unfortunate hero’s manhood than it is with mocking personal and cultural attachments to the myths of romantic love and the romantic comedy genre.

Nevertheless, *There's Something About Mary* serves as one of the most important and recognizable precursors to the brom-com cycle. As Greven argues, the explicit discussion and visualization of orgasms, bodily fluids, and mutilated male genitalia in *There's Something About Mary* facilitated “a new openness” about adult male sexuality and the body within the romantic

comedy genre.¹⁰⁵ This perceived sense of generic openness, however, was in fact rather narrow. For as the millennial brom-com demonstrates, the romantic comedy's willingness to play with the pleasures and possibilities of bodies, sex, immaturity, and other forms of social transgression, remained largely hinged on white heterosexual masculinity, its complexity, physicality, growth, and redemption in the decade following *There's Something About Mary*.

Though it may draw its sense of misogynistic and homophobic humor, as well as its gross-out excesses, from other raunchy comedy traditions, the brom-com cycle retains strong ties to the rom-com because the narratives are at least superficially propelled by the redemptive promises of the heteronormative paradigm, including self-improvement, transcendent happiness, financial security, and upstanding citizenship. While the neo-traditional romantic comedy's boy-meet-loses-regains-girl formula, its downplaying of sexual fulfillment, and its perfunctory complaining about intimate culture and gendered expectations structure the brom-com, this contemporary cycle actually shares a strong, unexpected alliance with the midcentury sex comedies.

Unlike the neo-traditional comedy's stress on romantic iconography and its firm insistence on the heterosexual couple's psychological and emotional chemistry, the brom-com actually updates and intensifies the sex comedy's vibe of hopeless incapability between women and men. In reinventing the sex comedy's nervous fixation on male immaturity, the brom-com situates the sexes' incompatibility in relation to the figure of the millennial "boy-man"—the distanced and disinterested cousin of the midcentury playboy. Despite such seemingly irreconcilable differences between the sexes, however, the brom-coms (especially those directed

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 20.

or produced by Judd Apatow) are often very conservative in their insistence that heteronormative coupledness, parenthood, and breadwinning are the only acceptable and truly fulfilling modes of personhood.

The Millennial Masculinity Crisis

While the cultural propensity to frame male immaturity as pathological and hazardous (especially to future generations) has preoccupied discourses of work and family relations since the postwar era, the figurations of male immaturity and the anxieties they engage are historically specific.¹⁰⁶ The mid-century playboy, for instance, may have been considered immature because he rejected the breadwinner role, but he was still self-sustaining, aimed for upward social mobility, and strived for social relevance. In contrast, the most salient model of male immaturity in the first decade of the millennium, which historian Gary Cross has dubbed the modern “boy-man,” is routinely figured as a puerile, basement-dwelling underachiever who strives for perpetual adolescence over social relevance.¹⁰⁷ Similar to the sex comedy’s relationship to the playboy, the brom-com has preoccupied itself with a lovable version of the modern boy-man, his male pack, the perpetual middle-ness of their “treadmill” lifestyles, and the anxieties and thrills they engage.¹⁰⁸ The framework of privilege (read: whiteness) that preconditions such

¹⁰⁶ Ehrenreich, for instance, offers the following description of the widespread fears surrounding male immaturity during the postwar era: “If adult masculinity was indistinguishable from the breadwinner role, then it followed that the man who failed to achieve this role was either not fully adult or not fully masculine. In the schema of male pathology developed by mid-century psychologists, immaturity shaded into infantilism, which was, in turn, a manifestation of unnatural fixation on the mother, and the entire complex of symptomatology reached its clinical climax in the diagnosis of homosexuality.” Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 20.

¹⁰⁷ Gary S. Cross, *Men to Boys: The Making of Modern Immaturity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 2.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

manifestations of retreatism and sustained immaturity, however, are often left conspicuously unexamined.

The surprising echoes between the midcentury sex comedy and millennial brom-com's preoccupation with male immaturity can be explained in part by the ideological tenacity of the postwar breadwinner ethic. Although the family wage suffered a widespread collapse in the 1970s and has grown increasingly unattainable in the bleak economic climate of the twenty-first century, the postwar breadwinner ethic nonetheless continues to influence dominant conceptualizations of male maturity, as well as institutional policy.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, the unfair association of women with this mode of domestic entrapment has proved regrettably persistent, despite drastic shifts in the makeup of American households. For instance, in writing about the beginning of the twenty-first century, Coontz notes that there were more single-person households than those with a married couple and children for the first time in history; of these married households, male breadwinner families only predominated at the bottom and the very top of the income distribution bracket.¹¹⁰

In addition to these important shifts in the family and the family wage, white straight masculinity found itself at the nexus of phenomena that powerfully marked the first decade of the millennium, including a catastrophic terrorist attack, two subsequent and ongoing wars, a zealous re-energizing of the religious right, a resurgence of debates regarding same-sex marriage and the repeal of the U.S. military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, unprecedented levels of

¹⁰⁹ Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, 299-300.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 294.

corporate power and global outsourcing, and an increasingly bifurcated economy that gave way to the financial collapse of 2007.

Unsurprisingly, these phenomena were accompanied by an onslaught of statistics and popular literature, such as journalist Hanna Rosin's provocatively titled 2012 book, *The End of Men: And the Rise of Women*, which set out to prove that men were underperforming in education, the workforce, and the bedroom, as well as falling short of (or simply rejecting) their traditional responsibilities as fathers, partners, and citizens.¹¹¹ As the following chapters reveal, the social panic regarding male immaturity in the twenty-first century is often expressed more in terms of capital and citizenship and less in terms of sexuality. These categories, however, are inextricably linked within the logic of the breadwinner ethic, which, despite its looming extinction, at once remains the elusive conflict and resolution in the brom-com.

While such reports and experiences about the so-called end, or at least the decline, of men are rife with anxiety, frustration, and hurt, the brom-com offers a considerably gentle, endearing portrait of male immaturity, self-deprecation, and underachievement. In fact, unlike their animal or teen comedy predecessors, the men in the brom-com are portrayed as insufficiently aggressive—their threat and appeal instead lies in their very boyish insouciance. In following the tradition of Woody Allen's "nervous romances" during the self-reflexive comedy cycle in the 1970s, this type of fumbling, insecure disposition is often playfully linked to Jewish identity of the most recognizable brom-com stars, including Seth Rogen, Paul Rudd, Jonah Hill, Adam Sandler, and Jason Segel, who frequently marshal their Jewishness as a humorous

¹¹¹ Hanna Rosin, *The End of Men: And the Rise of Women* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012). See also, for example, Kay S. Hymowitz, *Manning Up: How the Rise of Women Has Turned Men into Boys* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

explanation for their failed masculinity and poor luck with women. These references to the characters' Jewish identities serve as a subtle way to mitigate the films' almost exclusive focus on white notions of privilege and problems, along with strikingly conservative, patriarchal-capitalist solutions to these conflicts and complaints. Moreover, such playfully self-deprecating attitudes often lend these boy-men a more charming quality compared to the other types of brutish and eccentric masculinities within their film worlds.

Though the brom-coms are indeed variable in the kinds of quirky situations and characters they present, *Knocked Up* pithily elucidates that the fundamental structure of gender difference the cycle must overcome is not between playboys (or frat boys) and virgins but between funny guys who “don't give a shit” and the serious women who “care” and desperately want, albeit hardly need, men to “care more.” As Greven notes in his analysis of the closely related contemporary teen comedy genre, these heroines are “symbolically powerful and narratively powerless”—positioned as “remote goddesses,” they smugly preside over the reluctant proceedings of masculine redemption.¹¹² In addition to hollowing out its primary heroines, the brom-com relegates strong, outspoken, or promiscuous female characters, such as Leslie Mann's stirring performances in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and *Knocked Up*, to the narrative periphery, where they often present the most lucid articulations of the complaints currently circulating in white, middle-class, heterosexual intimate culture.

For instance, the brom-com is particularly fascinated and frustrated with millennial “hook-up culture,” which refers to a set of practices and attitudes—usually among college aged individuals—that prioritizes mutually satisfying, casual and impersonal sexual encounters over

¹¹² Greven, “Dude, Where's My Gender?,” 18.

romance or relationship building.¹¹³ As the following chapter explains, women are often perceived to have an advantage in millennial hook-up culture; for in contrast to midcentury courtship conventions, women are now more likely to view committed relationships with men as a potential impediment to their professional and personal goals, as opposed to a sought after marker of accomplishment, personal validation, and social security.

The brom-com's trivializing, if not downright vindictive representations of women thus evinces what Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra have called the "post-feminist double-address": popular culture's token acknowledgment of well-assimilated markers of feminism and its simultaneous repudiation of an active, progressive feminist agenda.¹¹⁴ Indeed, the post-feminist sensibility overwhelming the brom-com cycle and, for that matter, twenty-first century popular culture writ large, is at times uncomfortably reminiscent of the consumerist and lifestyle based proto-feminism that informed the sex comedy. On the one hand, the sex comedy heroes were portrayed as unsuspecting or unfortunate victims of the heroine's so-called "tender trap," but they were not necessarily figured as unworthy of the heroine's affections. Brom-coms such as Apatow's *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and *Knocked Up*, on the other hand, frame their immature heroes as petulant underdogs in life and love. In serving up men akin to slobbish, insouciant children, the heroine is obliged to perform as more of a parent than a partner in the brom-com; sex becomes more of a laborious problem than a flirtatious promise; and the so-called "trap" feels more tense than tender.

¹¹³ See Rosin, *The End of Men*, 21-39.

¹¹⁴ Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, "Postfeminism and the Archive for the Future," *Camera Obscura* 21, no. 2 62 (2006): 171.

Yet, the blame in this contemporary cycle falls less on these token, even irrelevant markers of feminism than on the postwar breadwinner ethic's agonizing endurance in the face of economic, ideological, and psychological incongruity. Though the insidious enforcement of these seemingly outmoded expectations affects everyone regardless of gender, mainstream representations have rarely granted women and other minority subjects equal, meaningful access to its preferred modes of escape; most notably, women are restricted access to the supreme luxury of what the character Debbie in *Knocked Up* identifies as "not giving a shit"—a privileged rejection of adult responsibility and judgement reserved almost exclusively for white men in the brom-com cycle. Instead, these subjects find themselves tied up in the emotional, physical, intellectual, and political labor of maintaining attachments to the same good life fantasy.

Bromancing

In the afterbirth of *Knocked Up*, women continue to find themselves pushed to the wayside, reduced to vessels for male uplift, bulldozed into lackluster or dysfunctional relationships, and/or pigeonholed into unduly maternal roles, while bromance flourishes. For instance, more recent brom-coms such as *Superbad* (2007), *Pineapple Express* (2008), *Step Brothers* (2008), *The Hangover* (2009), and *Funny People* (2010) are notably less prescriptive in regards to male immaturity and far more caught up in bromance's escapist pleasures and promises, which are both protected and threatened by the presence of women. Women in the brom-com find their most crucial purpose in serving as third terms in the bromantic relationships between men, which speaks to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's widely influential theorization of the triangulated structure of male homosocial desire. In her book, *Between Men: English Literature*

and Male Homosocial Desire, Sedgwick understands male homosocial relationships as underpinned by an intense homophobia; men use women as a means to express their desire for one another while assuaging their own homosexual panic.¹¹⁵

As Ron Becker argues, the recent media proliferation of bromance and other iterations of queer-straight masculinity has to do with the “straight panic” that emerged during a multicultural shift in the 1990s, when the routine scrutinization of sexual categories forced heterosexual culture to acknowledge its existence and privilege.¹¹⁶ This shift has contributed to an increasingly widespread “post-closet” logic: “the naïve belief that gay men can be out becomes the reassuring assumption that they are out.”¹¹⁷ In light of this far-reaching post-closet logic that Becker describes, queer-straight masculinity is no longer relegated to a sideshow or subtext in the brom-com, and while male second bananas still tend to linger in the middle, they are no longer confined to the role of disposable, neurotic sycophants. Furthermore, in contrast to the sex comedy’s male stars, whose public personas worked to at least superficially deflect suspicions of homosexuality, a number of prominent brom-com actors, such as Paul Rudd, readily exploit their prowess at the juvenile game of “gay chicken”—a contest of sorts in which straight men/boys engage in various degrees of homosexual activity until one of them expresses discomfort—across a number of media platforms.

While straight male performers, like Rudd, and their followers may indeed feel more liberated to “play gay” and perhaps live out a desire to recapture a boyish homosocial closeness

¹¹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 25-27.

¹¹⁶ Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 4.

¹¹⁷ Ron Becker, “Post-Closet Television,” *Flow* 7.3 (2007), <http://flowtv.org/2007/11/post-closet-television/>.

of middle school locker rooms or summer camp, the post-closet thrills explored within the brom-com and across twenty-first century popular culture remain grounded in homophobia.

Considering the homophobic and misogynistic humor, the routine degradation of token gay characters, and the last minute, tacked-on heteronormative resolutions streaked through the brom-com cycle, there is good reason to believe that much like the wave of gay-themed network television programming that preceded it in the 1990s, the brom-com speaks to the current state of heterosexuality and its desires more than it likely ever will concern itself with gay America.¹¹⁸

Paul Rudd: Brom-com Sweetheart

While it is thus tempting to dismiss the brom-com cycle's frenzied, indulgent bromances as a bunch of privileged, schlubby straight white guys vying for the bizarre bragging rights as gay chicken champions, brom-com regular Paul Rudd actually offers a compelling starting point for exploring the phenomena's deeper ideological and historical significance. Indeed, as a 2009 profile piece in the *New York Times* noted, the "unassuming" star's career has "summed up the charms and contradictions of modern masculinity."¹¹⁹ As an iconic popular culture figure of the "straight panic" ridden nineties, Rudd is often remembered for his performance as a sensitive, charming, openly gay school teacher in the romantic comedy *Object of My Affection* (1998), where he mainly serves to fill the emotional, social, and psychological voids of a single, pregnant woman (Jennifer Aniston). A decade after what was then considered a rather bold, risky performance for a little-known actor, the prolific Paul Rudd has become one of the most distinguished, conventionally attractive, and "bromanticized" players within the brom-com talent

¹¹⁸ Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, 5.

¹¹⁹ Dennis Lim, "Isn't He Bromantic?," *New York Times*, March 12, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/15/movies/15lim.html?_r=0

pool. More specifically, Rudd serves as a crucial figure within what the popular press has dubbed “Apatown”—Judd Apatow’s rigidly square universe of arrested development, bromance, vulgarity, and a close-knit circle of goofy personalities.

Just as Doris Day is at the heart of the sex comedy cycle, Rudd appears in each of three brom-coms—*The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Knocked Up*, and *I Love You, Man*—selected for close textual analysis in the following chapters because his exceptionally varied and complex performances, as well as their extra-textual responses, are not only particularly pertinent to their contemporary moment, but also speak to the foundational character types and concerns from the midcentury sex comedy.

Similar to Day, Rudd is typically marketed as extraordinarily accessible and appealing to men and women. Rudd, in fact, often brings a much needed tinge of female friendliness and understanding to the brom-com narratives, which sometimes offsets the cycle’s more dismaying post and anti-feminist impulses. In a sense, Rudd’s seemingly unrelenting appeal and affective rewards, like the brom-com themselves, appear to lie in the very “middle-ness” of his characters and star persona. His charming, relaxed, everyman ordinariness and leading man good looks frequently complement and compete with his zany second banana sensibilities and his confounding, albeit markedly non-threatening (bromo)sexuality. Rudd’s brom-com performances and star persona thus offer an important starting point for considering the queer possibilities afforded by the cycle, which not only “challenge and confuse” ostensibly stable categories of gender and sexuality, but also clue us into the sense of lack within these intimate worlds.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Alex Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xvii.

Granted, commercially driven genre films, along with their signature star performers, cannot be expected to radically critique or dismantle the heteronormative paradigms that so fundamentally structure our political and intimate culture at any given moment. However, exploring the unlikely relationship between the millennial brom-com cycle and its sex comedy predecessors presents one possible way to reconsider our modern notions of maturity, intimacy, and citizenship, as well as the potentials and limitations of the heterosexual couple. For as Ehrenreich insists, we cannot remain attached “to a world where maturity meant ‘settling,’ often in stifled desperation, for a life perceived as a role.”¹²¹

IV. Methodology

Considering the comparative nature of this project, along with the inherently multivalent nature of film genre as a process comprised of text, institution, reception, and context, the following chapters approach their selected objects through a cultural studies perspective. As Victoria Johnson summarizes in her book, *Heartland TV*, a cultural studies method conceptualizes popular culture as a key site in the imagination, struggle over, reiteration, and social production of prevailing cultural ‘common sense.’¹²² Along with feminist, queer, and critical race theory, cultural studies views popular representation as constitutive of ideology and power relations. According to these approaches, popular texts, like genre films, emerge and function within a web of historically specific power networks and processes of encoding and

¹²¹ Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 182.

¹²² Victoria E. Johnson, *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 12.

decoding. Such endless variables insist that texts must always engage a multiplicity of meanings and (dis)pleasures not necessarily inherent in the object or fixed.¹²³

This dissertation employs two landmark cultural histories of midcentury media, Steven Cohan's *Masked Men*, and Lynn Spigel's *Make Room for TV*, as its primary methodological models. Both Cohan and Spigel position their objects, popular Hollywood films from the 1950s and the domestic emergence of television, respectively, in relation to the complex processes of white, middle-class consensus ideology in mid-century America. More specifically, these projects focus on the ways gender and family ideals were imagined, reinforced, and problematized by said popular media and media institutions. In taking its lead from Spigel and Cohan, "The Not So Tender Trap" constructs what Spigel describes as a "patchwork" understanding of historically specific discursive webs and popular culture imaginaries by situating close textual analysis of specific films and their broader generic conventions in relation to a critical engagement with relevant extra-textual discourses from various popular press and industrial sources.¹²⁴

A critical engagement with these primary sources, including film and star publicity materials (e.g. movie posters, film trailers, fan articles, publicity stills), mainstream film reviews and responses, Production Code Administration documents, and various production materials, such as scripts and audience surveys, locates these film cycles within their historical moment and genre tradition, as well as within the ongoing conversations shaping the disciplines of film studies, cultural studies, and visual studies. For instance, PCA documents and other production

¹²³ See, for example, Stuart Hall's "Introduction" and "The Work of Representation," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 1-59.

¹²⁴ Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 187.

materials, such as focus group responses, reveal some of the challenges and limitations these two film cycles, as romantic comedies, face in addressing subjects such as female sexuality, unmarried people, infidelity, homosexuality, unexpected pregnancy, infertility, and divorce—themes that bear closer associations to film melodrama or remain more or less unacknowledged in mainstream representations.

The following chapters thus situate close textual analyses of particular films in relation to their production and marketing materials to get a better sense of the dominant ideological frameworks in place and the ways these films were packaged, sold, and consumed. In addition to the array of pleasures and complaints these films engaged, such primary and extra-textual sources provide pieces of information about the audiences who watched them, and about the ways in which these audiences were imagined: white, middle-class, not necessarily “grown up,” and *not necessarily* heterosexual. Whereas the sex comedy’s sumptuous sets, fashions, and eroticized representations of its male stars (e.g. Rock Hudson, Cary Grant) likely attracted gay male audiences during the fifties,¹²⁵ the brom-coms are explicitly marketed as date movies for heterosexual couples, or in the case of *I Love You, Man*, to straight guys hoping to someday “share a box of popcorn” at the movies with their straight male friends.¹²⁶

Research suggests that general audience responses to these respective cycles bear striking resemblances; the most enthusiastic praise is reserved for the films’ temporary repudiation and defiance of common cultural values and gender expectations, while the most acerbic complaints

¹²⁵ The sex comedies delivered lush representations of the New York design world, which as Meyer notes, “furnished one of the few professional areas in which gay men could work without closeting their sexual identities” in the fifties. See Meyer, *Outlaw Representation*, 99.

¹²⁶ In the official press book for *I Love You, Man*, for example, director John Hamburg is quoted as saying “maybe guys will be more open to going to the movies together, sharing a box of popcorn, and just hanging out.” “*I Love You, Man*,” Dreamworks Press Book, *I Love You Man* File, Herrick.

coalesce around the tacked-on heteronormative resolutions and the acquiescence of the immature male to similar markers of maturity and codes of normative masculinity. Research also reveals that the PCA's preoccupation with downplaying or eliminating traces of female sexuality in the sex comedy echoes within the millennial brom-com's self-regulating narratives and publicity, decades after the Code's demise. Furthermore, just as the PCA and popular press reviewers remained curiously unconcerned with the queer overtures between Rock Hudson and Tony Randall in sex comedies such as *Pillow Talk*, *Lover Come Back*, and *Send Me No Flowers* (1964), these intense, albeit playful male homosocial friendships have become the most prominent and pleasurable fixture of the brom-com cycle, even as gay panic, straight panic, and heteronormative privilege abound within and outside of these film texts.

In addition to marketing materials and popular press film reviews, other materials focusing on the films' stars, such as interviews and profiles, provide yet another important thread in this patchwork cultural history. The chapters that follow thus consider the discourse surrounding key figures in both film cycles, including Doris Day, Rock Hudson, Judd Apatow, Paul Rudd, Seth Rogen, and Leslie Mann, as such information relates to the cycles' engagement with the contradictions informing their respective intimate cultures. Studying the processes of stardom in relation to the millennial brom-com becomes especially rich and complicated given the increasingly "synthetic" nature of contemporary stardom, which involves a "convergence and co-dependence" of media forms.¹²⁷ Rudd and other brom-com regulars, for instance, are able to extend the queer antics of the brom-com's narrative middles beyond the tacked-on heteronormative resolutions and across a broad spectrum of media platforms, including live

¹²⁷ Victoria E. Johnson, "Jennifer Aniston and Tina Fey: Girls with Glasses," in *Shining in Shadows: Movies Stars of the 2000s*, ed. Murray Pomerance (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 51.

television gigs such as *Saturday Night Live* and various online comedy channels. A patchwork approach to the sex comedy and brom-com cycles thus demands an engagement with these various primary sources because they provide critical, historical nuances that are not immediately accessible in the film texts themselves, as well as insight into the larger ideological questions and parallels under review.

V. Chapter Breakdown

The following chapters are organized according to particular thematic conflicts exchanged between the two cycles, each of which demands an engagement with the issues of (mostly male) immaturity, middle-class domesticity, heterosexuality, and whiteness. In providing a close textual and cultural studies analysis of one film from each cycle, these individual chapters flesh out the cultural and ideological significance of a particular meta similarity, as well as the important differences in generic convention and cultural context that are most relevant to the process under investigation.

This breakdown embraces the particularly provocative, inherently queer middle-ness of the romantic comedy as theorized by Roof. In addition to foregrounding middle-aged characters, whose age is often cause for some concern, each chapter is essentially structured around particular themes of middle-ness whereby patriarchal power is both undermined and reinforced in its translation to the heterosexual love plot.

For instance, the first chapter focuses on themes of virginity and celibacy, which are typically considered temporary states that signal both maturity and immaturity, and serve as objects of humiliation and reverence, of desire and repulsion. The second chapter focuses on themes of marriage and reproduction, whereby marriage is figured as a perpetual state of day-to-

day middle-ness between love and death. In terms of reproduction, the child and/or fetus has been theorized as a “becoming” that is both powerless and powerful; the immature heroes in these selected films are also compared to children—as “becomings” in their own right—forced to grow into proper adulthood, for which there is actually no reliable and attainable model.¹²⁸ The third chapter concerns itself with bromance, which is a complex phenomenon caught between categories of straight and queer, mature and immature, hostility and love, mainstream and marginal, homosocial and homoerotic, and adolescence and adulthood.

In regards to shared themes of middle-ness, these chapters focus on notions of ambivalence; the romantic comedy has endured as a genre because of its ability to manage ambivalent feelings that are otherwise too painful to acknowledge or process. As the textual analyses within each chapter demonstrate, there is a great deal of ambivalence surrounding virginity and sex, marriage and parenthood, and bromance. In a sense, the ambivalent feelings attached to these individual themes are all linked to a general sense of ambivalence towards our mostly unchanging cultural definitions of adulthood.

Each chapter is also organized around a shared textual labor: sex, reproduction/marriage, and bromance, respectively. These modes of textual labor essentially amount to a struggle to find wholeness outside of or without the heteronormative “two-as-one” paragon. While these films futilely labor to find ways for their characters to experience sex and intimacy without complications or compromise, these three chapters are also interested in more radical, queer fantasies of sexlessness and the complications therein. They speak to fantasies about being

¹²⁸ In her book, *Figurations*, Castañeda theorizes the “conceptualization of the child as a potentiality rather than an actuality, a becoming rather than a being: an entity in the making.” Claudia Castañeda, *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 1-2.

fulfilled and experiencing love and purpose through unconventional means such as celibacy, adoption, single-motherhood, and bromance, all of which take place outside of a sexual partnership.

Finally, the chapters are unified by themes of white male victimization. The films under review feature playboys under siege from marriage-minded women; husbands deprived of sex and opportunities to cultivate a more rugged masculinity; men dealing with the stresses and demands of sexual reproduction and fatherhood; and men struggling with the intimate labor of male homosocial bonding, which is constantly threatened by the lurking possibility of homoeroticism, scrutiny from women, and a much larger sense of societal disapproval.

Chapter One: Virgin Islands

In employing *That Touch of Mink* (1962) and *The 40 Year-Old Virgin* (2005) as its primary case studies, this chapter takes a special interest in the appeal and function of the virgin, as it is exchanged between the two cycles. This chapter explores the historically and culturally specific sexual economies and courtship rituals, gendered figurations of sexual (in)experience, as well as notions of maturity and immaturity that function within the sex comedy and brom-com. It analyzes the structuring antagonisms between the heterosexual couple(s), the domesticating processes leading up to and resulting from this heterosexual union, and possible alternatives. While on the one hand, Doris Day's performance of virginity in *That Touch of Mink* more or less conforms to the logic of the market driven sexual economy in the long decade of the 1950s and Steve Carell's character takes male infantilism to absurd extremes in *40 Year-Old Virgin*, both figurations of the virgin engage historically specific as well as overlapping anxieties regarding gender, sexuality, and maturity.

Chapter Two: Balls and Chains

This chapter explores the various conflicts and complaints that arise during the intertwined processes of marriage and reproduction. What happens to sex, desire, and intimacy after the heterosexual couple has settled down, or when a child becomes a factor in the relationship? Both the sex comedy and brom-com cycles took interest in notions of proper and improper reproduction, the shared trope of reluctant or resistant father figures, and the use of the pregnancy as a vehicle for masculine redemption. The two case studies in question, *The Tunnel of Love* (1958) and *Knocked Up* (2007), feature narratives that revolve around unintentional, out-of-wedlock pregnancies (imagined and actual, respectively) and the stress these situations exert on the parties involved.

Chapter Three: Second Bananas and Gay Chicken

In focusing on the inherently queer middle-ness of the romantic comedy, this chapter foregrounds the escapist and increasingly erotic thrills that bromance affords within these two cycles and their disparate historical contexts. The two case studies for this chapter, *Send Me No Flowers* (1964) and *I Love You, Man* (2009) prioritize the queer bonding between self-identified straight men over the committed heterosexual couples, as well as close female partnerships. While *Send Me No Flowers*, the third and final installment of the Doris Day-Rock Hudson-Tony Randall romps features a male pairing that is indeed sincere and intimate, the queer antics between Hudson and Randall boast a kind of excessive, historically specific silliness that does not translate to the relationship between Paul Rudd and Jason Segel in *I Love You, Man*, whose love and commitment are essentially consecrated—in a traditional wedding setting, no less—in the film's final scene.

CHAPTER ONE: VIRGIN ISLANDS

After decades of comfortable solitude and celibacy, Andy Stitzer (Steve Carell), the mild-mannered titular character in Judd Apatow's *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), suddenly finds himself dizzy with sexual panic. He's distracted by the ample cleavage on passers-by and splayed across newsstands; he's assaulted by the base spectacle of dogs enthusiastically humping in the park; and he's practically stalked by a city bus displaying a hyper-erotic advertisement for a fragrance called "Eruption," whose caption aggressively insists: "you know you want it." Even the private, un-penetrated world of Andy's apartment, a meticulously organized treasure-trove of collectible action figures, games, and other boyhood trinkets, no longer guarantees solace or escape; repressed memories of his humiliating sexual failures with women now keep Andy anxious and awake in his outer-space themed bedsheets. With a pack of perverted albeit well-intentioned coworkers guiding him along this unsought sexual quest, Andy suffers through invasive life changes, bodily mutilation, psychological torment, horrendous embarrassments, and at least one life-threatening situation before he is finally placed with the proper woman and context for his long past due deflowering.

As the obnoxious high-concept title alone would suggest, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* was marketed as a fresh comedy for its singular hero, preposterous premise, and novel combination of raunchy comedy, male buddy antics, and chick-flick sentimentality. Co-written by Apatow and Carell, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* marked Apatow's directorial debut, as well as Carell's first leading role following a number of well-received, minor comedic parts in popular comedies such as the Apatow produced *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (2004). With its hot, up-and-coming talent and a well-manufactured aura of newness, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* achieved a great

deal of commercial success; it also became a paragon for the millennial brom-com cycle and the Apatovian comedy empire more specifically. Despite all the hype regarding its freshness, however, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* drew its purportedly new-fashioned combination of smut and heart from a number of sources, including the brutish frat-pack sensibilities of the animal comedy tradition (e.g. *Animal House*), the awkward, body-based and cautiously romanticized sex quests of more recent teen comedies like *American Pie*, along with *There's Something About Mary's* celebrated elements of outrageous raunch, self-conscious schmaltz, and a timorous, thoroughly humiliated hero.

Beneath this dirty potpourri of male-centric debauchery and camaraderie, however, were the conventions and reactionary ideological tendencies of the neo-traditional romantic comedy, which had remained the dominant form of the genre for two decades. While *The 40-Year-Old Virgin's* neo-traditional base and tone was immediately obvious to most critics and popular audiences, Andy's essential fears and frustrations as a virgin forced to navigate a rigorous and absurdly dysfunctional sphere of adult sexuality actually recall a much older Hollywood romantic comedy tradition of flustered, sometimes hallucinatory, and usually much younger female virgins, whose dizzying distress was most prominently explored within the mid-century sex comedy cycle.

When set during the always exceptionally brief stages of courtship, sex comedies such as *The Moon Is Blue* (1953), *The Tender Trap* (1955), *Ask Any Girl* (1959), *Sunday in New York* (1963), and *That Touch of Mink* (1962) repeatedly placed their sexually inexperienced or reserved heroines in impossible situations. These women labored to maintain socially acceptable levels of independence, sexual restraint and permissiveness while trying to hold the attention of

happy bachelors, who were reluctant to subscribe to marriage and its myriad attendant obligations. Although *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* takes Andy's childlike sensibilities, naïveté and humiliation to bizarre extremes, his abnormally enduring virginity, extreme frustration with contemporary sexual mores, and white-wedding fate are most reminiscent of Doris Day's character in *That Touch of Mink*.

Day, who also happened to be around forty years old at the time of her performance, plays Cathy Timberlake, a zealously virtuous and discerning small-town woman. Like most sex comedy dames, Cathy struggles to find a decent job and man in Manhattan without lowering her standards or compromising her reputation. Cathy almost immediately finds herself pitted against Philip Shayne, a much older and equally uncompromising millionaire bachelor played by the gray-haired and languorous, yet still remarkably beddable rom-com icon Cary Grant.

When Philip treats Cathy to an extravagant, all-expense-paid romp in Bermuda with no intentions of long term commitment or marriage, she constantly worries about what the other hotel guests might think of their relationship, and her morals more specifically. Similar to Andy's hysterical episode described above, Cathy's paranoia prompts a series of hallucinations that transform the couple's pool rafts, horse carriage, and hotel elevator into a menacingly pristine four-post bed. Her building anxiety later takes on physical manifestations when the pressure to share a bed out of wedlock causes her face to break out into an unsightly rash. The embarrassing incident leaves Philip to sleep on the couch with an unsavory glass of hot milk and butter, and needless to say, brings their romantic getaway to an awkward and abrupt end.

While Cathy embarks on her middle-age sex quest during the early stirrings of the sexual revolution, second wave feminism, and the decline of the Hollywood studio system, and Andy is

squarely situated in the distant aftermath thereof, both characters hail from eras where the idea of a forty year old virgin was generally considered weird, unfortunate and embarrassing. On the one hand, Cathy and Andy find themselves accordingly tormented and made strange by their sexual inexperience. On the other hand, both films obsessively guard their respective protagonists' adult virginity as they navigate frustrating, patriarchal sexual economies. Regardless of their true desires, Cathy and Andy are only able to shed their adult virginity within the context of a male breadwinner marriage. Cathy and Andy's extreme and peculiar circumstances may not have made much sense, on a reflective level, within their respective eras, generic traditions, or film worlds, but their characters nonetheless resonated with contemporary audiences because of the fears, fascinations, and uncertainties their excessively guarded sexual innocence allowed them to engage. In addition to turning otherwise perfectly functional adults into hysterical basket-cases, what are the various stakes involved in giving, taking, and perhaps most radically—as Cathy and Andy demonstrate—keeping one's virginity?

Courtship Economies

Unlike *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, which flagrantly exploits the insecure middle-agedness of its characters, *That Touch of Mink* attempts to downplay matters of age despite its visibly seasoned protagonists, which added another level of absurdity to Cathy's characterization as an adult virgin. While *That Touch of Mink* tried to distract from Day's age with girlish fashions and accessories, lens gels and diffusers, there was no denying the fact that forty was nearly twice the average marrying age for women, who were increasingly likely to experiment with sex before marriage (and thus *well before* middle age) as the early throbs of the sexual revolution gradually

intensified. Though the postwar golden age of marriage and baby-making may have been heading into its twilight, its ideological hold remained strong throughout the early sixties.

Under the crushing influence of Cold War conformist culture and the breadwinner ethic, dominant courtship practices at the time operated on a market-driven logic that inflated the “price” of sex while ideas about sex and sexiness saturated mainstream culture and productions of knowledge. In the face of such pervasive titillation, men were expected to “pay” for exclusive sexual access to women through marriage. Women, on the other hand, were allotted little currency in this courtship market besides a precarious degree of sexual permissiveness. As Rock Hudson explains to a young Sandra Dee in the sex comedy *Come September* (1961), “when you go shopping in a market, you don’t buy anything that’s been handled too much.” Although women may have found themselves reduced to an idea of manhandled produce through the lens of this courtship economy, men were often viewed as commodities of less importance than the material goods and social capital they would make possible through breadwinning.¹²⁹ Or, as Debbie Reynolds less than gently reminds Glenn Ford in a lesser known sex comedy, *It Started with a Kiss* (1959), “a woman looks for a nice set of things to marry.”

Pillowed in cultural consensus, this system of beliefs and practices produced record numbers of marriages, children, single-family homes, televisions, station wagons, as well as prescription tranquilizers. As the sex comedies repeatedly demonstrated, such relentless efforts to commodify and inflate the cost of sex always potentially cheapened its affective and carnal value, and set men and women up for a great deal of resentment, misunderstanding, and disappointment.

¹²⁹ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Backseat*, 75.

Although the breadwinner ethic and midcentury courtship conventions may have figuratively cheapened (heterosexual) sex while jacking up the price of female virginity, the overall cost of sex gradually plummeted in light of the intersecting forces of change that gripped society in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including the sexual revolution, second wave feminism, and the sharp decline of the breadwinner salary, which continues to nudge closer to extinction in the twenty-first century. As a purportedly non-committal and egalitarian sexual economy, the ultimate goal of millennial hook-up culture is mutually satisfying, safe, non-reproductive (and not necessarily heterosexual) sex with no fuss, hard feelings, forced conversational connections or obligatory follow-ups.¹³⁰

At first glance, the nature of contemporary hook-up culture seems like a midcentury playboy's fantasy come true. This system would have expanded the selection of available "broads" beyond the small crop of exotic foreigners with continental minds and vaginas. More importantly, it would have also eliminated the ostensibly unavoidable burdens of women's emotional clinginess and flighty, guilt-ridden expectations of commitment. In figuring the dreadful burdens of responsibility and conformity the breadwinner had yoked to heterosexual intimacy, "good girls" routinely tormented, even infuriated playboys in sex comedies like *That Touch of Mink*, *The Tender Trap*, and *Sunday in New York*.

For all its drawbacks, however, the art and thrill of seduction was a major defining force in midcentury courtship conventions, the sex comedy cycle, and the playboy lifestyle. The glamorized image of the playboy bachelor in the sex comedies, along with popular magazines such as *Playboy* and *Esquire*, was interesting and *interested*. He had to maintain a workable

¹³⁰ See Rosin, *The End of Men*, 17-46.

knowledge and appreciation of art, cuisine, fashion, design, theater, movies, music, and other suspiciously feminine and/or queer interests in order to make dazzling conversation (and if all went well, whoopie) with a variety of women, as well as to achieve a sense of superior sophistication over his dull breadwinner counterparts. Though it was far more common to watch men fail rather than succeed at seducing women in the sex comedies, seduction was nevertheless unequivocally gendered male and heterosexual. Seduction was considered a masculine feat, and failing to seduce a woman (or being seduced by someone else) was considered insufficiently masculine, and failed masculinity came dangerously close to sliding into homosexuality.

Though millennial hook-up culture reprocesses these same fears of failed masculinity, its codes and conventions altered seduction in ways that would leave the midcentury playboy dumbfounded, and at a desperate loss for purpose. Hook-up culture not only values convenience and lasciviousness over the art of conversation or the possibilities of intellectual connection, but women are no longer socially obligated or frightened into saying “no.” In the decades after second wave feminism, most adult women do not expect or necessarily want a man’s hand in marriage, his emotional commitment, or his phone number after having sex or even getting “knocked up.” In fact, as recent trends in the romantic comedy genre and popular journalism suggest, it is not uncommon for twenty-first century women to find themselves dreading and dodging the very neediness, leeching, and entrapment that men have long tried to revolt against.¹³¹ The brom-com, however, avoids engaging the more explicitly feminist possibilities presented by millennial hook-up culture; women are no longer burdened with preserving their

¹³¹ Ibid., 266.

virtue, but still find themselves carrying the same symbolic weight as their sex comedy predecessors.

Virgin' on the Edge of a Nervous Breakdown

Despite the non-committal and guilt-free promises of hook-up culture, Andy's inexperience puts him at a certain disadvantage. In this sexual economy virginity is usually considered more poisonous than prized currency. The idea of "losing" or "taking" one's virginity not only involves the potential risk of confronting the unpleasant emotional and moral complications that hook-up culture aims to extinguish, but inexperience is also associated with regrettable, unsatisfying sex, which undermines the very purpose and egalitarian ideal of the hook-up. Unlike Cathy, Andy is unable to parlay his adult virginity into a "profession," or into any recognizable form of currency in millennial hook-up culture, where sex is "bargain basement cheap," and virginity—regardless of age or gender—is comparatively worthless.¹³²

Male virginity, however, has always been rather abstract and negligible in comparison to female virginity, which has endured a long, varied history of commodification and regulation under patriarchal systems. While male virginity remained largely resistant to commodification during the two historical periods in question, healthy, 'red-blooded' heterosexual men from both eras were expected to have a certain degree of sexual knowledge and experience under their belts before climbing into the marriage bed—or in Andy's case, any number of beds, backseats, or bathroom stalls. Indeed, in a world where pornography is more or less mainstream, where sex is hardly reserved for the endangered institution of heterosexual marriage, and where decades worth of social change, advances in reproductive technologies, and broad economic shifts have

¹³² Ibid., 39.

allowed women to control their bodies, to ‘fuck like men,’ and to pursue their own living wage, Andy finds himself at a level of sexual disadvantage so severe that he chooses to close himself off from women and intimacy all together.

Though their respective situations may come across as rather extraordinary and excruciatingly awkward, the phenomena of not getting laid—for whatever reason—is a dilemma hardly exclusive to borderline celibate characters like Andy and Cathy within the history of the romantic comedy. As Celestino Deleyto reminds us, the rom-com’s narrative structure and mise-en-scène are primarily motivated by unfulfilled sexual desire and sustained tension; sex most often serves as the genre’s “structuring absence.”¹³³ Therefore, the long-awaited emotional, erotic, and almost always heterosexual union marks the end of the narrative action, which more often than not leaves the erotic release up to the viewer’s imagination (for better or worse).

Sex, as it were, also happens to serve as the structuring absence for virginal characters like Andy and Cathy, whose identity, experiences, and relationships are primarily defined by their sexual voids. As such, romantic comedy virgins tend to find themselves at the center of attention and uncomfortably out of place, often set in cruel and absurd opposition to others and the world around them—be it mainstream culture or any number of aberrant deviations therefrom. For instance, Andy and Cathy’s sexual inexperience renders them strange, pathetic, somewhat pathological, and agonizingly self-conscious on the one hand; on the other hand, this inexperience actually grants these characters a unique, even superior sense of security, gratification, and self-knowledge over their more sexually experienced or eager counterparts.¹³⁴

¹³³ Celestino Deleyto, “The New Road to Sexual Ecstasy: Virginité and Genre in *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*,” in *Virgin Territory: Representing Sexual Inexperience in Film*, ed. Tamar Jeffers McDonald (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 256.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 259-260.

Indeed, within the loony worlds of *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and *That Touch of Mink*, as well as within their respective generic cycles more broadly, virginity functions as both an asset and liability, as well as an object of mockery and protection, desire and repulsion, pity and envy. Most provocatively, virginity troubles the nebulous social categories of maturity and immaturity, youth and adulthood, which are particularly important to the sex comedy and brom-com cycles.

Given the romantic comedy's strong and sustained pull towards notions of absence, compulsive heterosexuality, and the sexual tease (the "itch"), ideas about virginity have provided a most essential, reliable source of stability and calamity within the genre.¹³⁵ The concept of virginity, however, has always been a hotbed of extreme contradictions within and beyond narrative cinema. In her introduction to *Virgin Territory*, McDonald affirms that virginity is ideologically and creatively challenging for narrative cinema because it is a salient social construction that also happens to be "invisible." In popular representations, McDonald notes that virginity is habitually gendered feminine, and often imagined as an almost exclusively heterosexual state marked by a lack of experience with penetrative, genital intercourse.¹³⁶ In addition to joining forces with the powerfully "invisible" social categories of heterosexuality and whiteness, dominant cultural imaginings of virginity are also yolked to elusive categories of time.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Refer to Williams' discussion of the "scratch" and the "itch," in *Screening Sex*, 14.

¹³⁶ Tamar Jeffers McDonald, introduction to *Virgin Territory: Representing Sexual Inexperience in Film*, ed. Tamar Jeffers McDonald (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 2.

¹³⁷ Heterosexuality is a major organizing principle that can also be considered "invisible;" it cannot be proven through any visible fact of the body, and even more importantly, it is generally taken for granted as a natural, "normal" state of just being human. See Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 192. Though perhaps more visible than heterosexuality, whiteness is also powerfully associated with western, patriarchal constructions of virginity; whiteness, according to Richard Dyer, is an immediately recognizable and widely used signifier of purity, cleanliness, godliness, innocence, beauty, and femininity within popular representation as well as the real, lived world. See Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 9-10.

Regardless of gender, sexual orientation, or whether it is “given” or “taken,” virginity is most often considered an impermanent state shed somewhere between the culturally determined boundaries of youth and adolescence, or adolescence and adulthood. The discourse of virginity, then, is predominantly a discourse of loss. As the following analyses of *That Touch of Mink* and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* demonstrate, the timing of this loss is a well-established subject of ritual, representation, controversy and control, but its prolonged preservation is no less contentious or scrutinized, particularly when it comes to matters of intention. Indeed, as David Denby remarks in regards to Andy’s plight in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*: “the only thing a forty-year old virgin needs more than sex is to be left alone.”¹³⁸

Significantly, Andy and Cathy’s abiding virginity is not entirely circumstantial. While Cathy is clearly waiting to cash in her virginity card in exchange for the social and financial security of marriage, and Andy has practically opted out of any and all sex scenes, both characters intentionally withhold sex for purposes of self-preservation. This element of purpose, when taken into consideration with their advanced age, actually nudges Andy’s and Cathy’s virginity closer to the very unfamiliar fringe territory of celibacy—a self-willed refraining from sex, and by extension, the myriad concomitant risks, responsibilities and returns so fundamental to their contemporary worlds. Both Andy and Cathy’s flirtations with celibacy offer an important point of entry for queer alternatives to the heteronormative life narrative, as dictated by the breadwinner ethic.

As a powerful magnet for ambivalence and contradiction, the concept of virginity (and more specifically, its preservation) is imbued with an indeterminateness that potentially

¹³⁸ David Denby, “Partners,” *New Yorker*; September 12, 2005, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/09/12/partners-7>

challenges oppositional organizing practices and ways of thinking, especially when it comes to questions of what it means to be a man or a woman, a heterosexual couple, as well as an adult. While *That Touch of Mink* and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* take advantage of the romantic comedy genre's flexible and forgiving middle-ness to play with the potential thrills and transgressions presented by their exceptional lead characters, their narratives inevitably and, rather self-consciously, find themselves bogged down by the narrow version of adulthood that heterosexual coupledness continues to symbolize and demand within the genre and the dominant ideological imagination.

In laying the groundwork—or rather, setting the “marriage trap”—for the remaining chapters to explore the labor, desires, and complaints that fester post-consummation, the following close readings suggest that the protection of each character's virginity is not necessarily motivated by moral imperatives or the pressures of cultural consensus. Rather, the heavy-handed sexual tease that occurs in these films (along with their respective cycles), is implicitly driven by the ephemerality of bachelorhood, and a deep-seated longing to safeguard the transitory middle-ness in which this fanciful lifestyle of unattachment can only temporarily thrive.

“Desecrating Everything the Minute Men Fought For” in *That Touch of Mink*

By exploiting its bankable stars, gratuitous displays of high fashion and design, as well as a mild controversy over its “homo gag,” *That Touch of Mink* was one of the last sex comedies to enjoy considerable commercial success upon its release in the summer of 1962.¹³⁹ At the time, the sex comedy cycle was struggling to maintain some sense of relevance in the stirring tides of social activism and industrial change, especially given impending doom of the PCA and the Hollywood studio system. Though *That Touch of Mink* actually received a fairly warm reception from critics and audiences, one disappointed reviewer described the film as “juvenile, unsophisticated, and uninventive, although full of nostalgic echoes from earlier, and much better, films.”¹⁴⁰ The type of “adult sophisticated” comedy of the late 1950s that Doris Day, Rock Hudson, and writer Stanley Shapiro helped define with sex comedies such as *Pillow Talk* and *Lover Come Back* had already become an object of nostalgia—a gem belonging to an ostensibly simpler, classier, yet not so distant past. In working within the context of a crumbling studio system and aiming to please increasingly jaded audiences, *That Touch of Mink* exaggerated the cycle’s most recognizable conventions, and flavored them with twists and excess that played heavily on Day and Grant’s star discourses.

Crucial among these familiar sex comedy elements was the playboy/virgin dichotomy mediated by one or more second banana figures, the lush “mise-en-scènes of desire” in which these battles were waged, along with the austere treaty of settling that ultimately decided them.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ “Homo Gag In ‘A Touch of Mink’ Draws Plenty of Divided Opinion,” *Variety*, February 21, 1962, *That Touch of Mink* File, Herrick.

¹⁴⁰ Richard Whitehall, “*That Touch of Mink*,” *Films and Filming*, June 1962, *That Touch of Mink* File, Herrick.

¹⁴¹ Deleyto, “The New Road to Sexual Ecstasy,” 255.

Like the “earlier, much better” sex comedies, however, *That Touch of Mink* remained at a sorry loss for alternatives or answers to the cycle’s broken record of discontent, particularly when it came to the taxing questions of ‘when’ and ‘for how much’ that surrounded sex in these films. More specifically, the sex comedy’s negotiations with the pleasures and risks involved in pre-pill, pre-marital sex unraveled around the persistent and pervasive problem of female sexuality, its value, regulation, and lack thereof. By the time of *That Touch of Mink*’s release, this familiar sex comedy routine of mocking and resenting women for their acts of restraint and permissiveness took on a more sordid and irksome vibe as the PCA regulations and cultural attitudes towards pre-marital sex grew slightly more relaxed. As the same negative review of *That Touch of Mink* lamented, “. . .the liberalization [of the Code] has failed to produce an honest American sex comedy. Instead, it appears to have encouraged film-makers into even lower bows to virtue’s face, while making even more sniggering gestures behind her back.”¹⁴²

Doris Day’s Professional Virginit

Following her dazzling performances in *Pillow Talk* and *Lover Come Back*, which were both based entirely on a playboy’s elaborate, deceitful attempts to anger-bang her composed career woman characters, Doris Day had proven a well-suited target for this sort of sniggering both on and off screen. As *That Touch of Mink*’s surprising commercial success attested, Day’s special receptivity to the sex comedy’s modes of social, physical, and psychic humiliation, along with the laboriously contrived and unshakeable discourse of “professional virginit” that informed her on and off screen personas, attracted a great deal of popular interest, even as the cycle was losing its social relevance and appeal. This manufactured and widely accepted notion

¹⁴² “*That Touch of Mink*,” *Show*, July, 1962, *That Touch of Mink* File, Herrick.

that Day was a professional virgin who played professional virgins (a commodity selling a commodity) undermined the varied and powerful complexity of her roles and public persona; it also exposed her to a great deal of ridicule and misogynistic contempt.¹⁴³ These reductive and ambivalent treatments of Day's star persona and her performances, however, had less to do with Day and more to do with the ambivalent feelings surrounding female virginity, its high price-tag, and the dubious pay-offs.

In contrast to her glamorous career woman roles in *Pillow Talk* and *Lover Come Back*, Day's role in *That Touch of Mink* was a spin-off of the professional virgin type that had first gained attention nearly a decade prior with Maggie McNamara's "militantly virtuous" character in *The Moon Is Blue*. McNamara's performance was followed by a number of carbon copy virgins such as Debbie Reynolds' character in *The Tender Trap* (1955). Described by one critic as being "bent on marriage with a singleness of purpose that is absolutely terrifying," Reynolds positions Frank Sinatra as a handsome accessory in a model display of her fantasy living room, and makes good on her threat to "make a *man*" out of him—by which she means a breadwinner husband and father.¹⁴⁴ Years later in *Ask Any Girl*, a desperately-seeking-marriage Shirley MacLaine uses contemporary merchandising research and strategies to package herself as a sex-kitten cum homemaker extraordinaire—i.e. the perfect prospective wife—for an oblivious wolf and his much older, gentlemanly bachelor brother. MacLaine's smart, methodical approach gave the

¹⁴³ As *Time* magazine's review of the film noted, "[writer Stanley Shapiro] stands to make a great deal more money out of the heroine's virginity than any virgin ever has." "That Touch of Mink," *Time*, July 6, 1962, *That Touch of Mink* File, Herrick. Another critic complained, "[i]f this was intended to be a sexual suspense comedy, the producers defeated their own purpose by hiring Miss Day, a girl whose reputation must never fall under a cloud." "That Touch of Mink," *Show*.

¹⁴⁴ William K. Zinsser. "The Tender Trap," *New York Herald Tribune*, November 11, 1955, *The Tender Trap* File, Herrick.

film a bit of an edge with contemporary audiences. As a May 23, 1959 review in *Cue* magazine noted:

In addition to being very funny, *Ask Any Girl* is also quite educational. For watching how another gal sights, tracks, and finally brings down a man in full flight is undoubtedly instructive to both sexes: helpful to one, and warning to the other. However, as long as the grim hunt remains safely on-screen, viewers, secure from pursuit in their theater seats, will find it a grand entertainment.¹⁴⁵

Virgins, especially small-town virgins trying to make their way in a big city, had been making bachelors nervous for quite some time, and continued to do so well into the sex comedy cycle's twilight. For instance, in *Sunday in New York* (1963), Rod Taylor becomes furious with Jane Fonda for not revealing her virginity until their heavy-petting is well underway. In a dismaying attempt at gender role swapping, Taylor's anger implies feelings of victimization; he feels as if he is being taken advantage of both sexually and morally in a way that is far more familiar to the sex comedy heroine. Taking a woman's virginity outside of matrimony, when the price of sex was so high, implied a stressful combination of responsibility, guilt, and worst of all, a potentially clingy and/or pregnant woman.

These mixed messages, anxieties, and resentments, of course, circulated beyond the film diegesis and often found their way into popular fan magazines like *Photoplay*, which frequently asked popular Hollywood stars about their thoughts on women, sex, and relationships. For instance, in an article bluntly titled "He'll Hate You in the Morning," the television and film actor Brett Halsey offered this puzzling, hateful gem for the overwhelmingly female *Photoplay* readership the same year *That Touch of Mink* was released:

Do you know what I mean when I say 'professional virgin?' Every man has met her at least once, and most men dislike her. Men respect a genuinely nice girl and are proud to

¹⁴⁵ "Ask Any Girl," *Cue*, May 23, 1959, *Ask Any Girl* File, Herrick.

take her out. But the girl who wears her virtue like a neon sign is a little ridiculous. The worst kind is the girl who looks and acts approachable--then takes mortal offense if she is approached. She invites a man to make advances, and if he does, she freezes him with an outraged 'Sir, I'll have you know I'm a lady.' Then she tells her friends he is a cad and a lecher. Not quite so bad, but in the same class, is the girl who obviously thinks all men are evil creatures on the prowl for pure young girls (of whom she is the purest of the lot). But she expects her date to try and kiss her. She's insulted if he does or if he doesn't. What do I do with a girl like that? I know that I, for one, will hate her in the morning--so I leave her alone at night.¹⁴⁶

Whether professional or situational, militant or unassuming, sex comedy heroines found themselves caught in similar catch-22s. Day's character in *That Touch of Mink*, for instance, is far less methodical and obsessive than her much younger predecessors, and more insecure about her virginity and its value; unlike *Ask Any Girl*, most critics agreed that *That Touch of Mink* was devoid of any educational or instructional value (other than the theatrical trailer's instruction for audiences to "just sit there and laugh"). Nevertheless, Day's character finds herself implicated in these "grim" proceedings and caught between the familiar, ambivalent pulls of reverence and resentment, humiliation and empowerment both within and beyond the diegesis.

Day's unassuming sexuality in her sex comedy roles attested to the inescapability of these pressures and attitudes, and the impossible intimate expectations placed on women, regardless of their intent or resolve. In flirting with the glowing potential of social independence, uncompromised self-love, business success, and same-sex friendships, Day's characters were uniquely resistant to the era's imposing doctrine of settling, and to the flagrant commodification of sex (as opposed to the act of sex itself). In entertaining the possibility that a woman (an old maid, at that) could, in fact, be content without a man or sex, Day's characters found themselves exposed to more sordid forms objectification, sexual harassment, and humiliation precisely

¹⁴⁶ "He'll Hate You in the Morning (Hollywood Men)," *Photoplay*, June 1962, p. 62, *Photoplay* Microfilm, Herrick.

because they stirred up such deep-seated, intertwined and enduring fears over female independence and sexuality.

Love at First Splash

For instance, Cathy finds herself beaten down within the first five minutes of *That Touch of Mink*. She's splattered with mud from a speeding limousine, and sexually harassed by a slime-ball known as Beasley (John Astin)—a clerk at the unemployment office who threatens to withhold her unemployment check if she refuses to sleep with him. While the film certainly takes a mean-spirited delight in these initial instances of humiliation, it ultimately reframes them as blessings in disguise. As it turns out, being splattered with mud and sexually harassed by an easily duped creep become Cathy's tickets to a Cinderella-like wet-dream of lavish commodities, luxurious travel accommodations, marriage, sex, and motherhood—all of which she somehow managed to avoid despite her effortless, irresistible attractiveness and charm.

On the one hand, the film's immediate emphasis on Cathy's head-turning beauty and composure distracts from her old maid status, but it also raises questions about why she hasn't cashed in on her charm. How has she managed to maintain such an impressively independent lifestyle in spite of the extreme social pressure to marry and settle down as soon as it was legally possible? It turns out that in addition to her good looks, she possesses a rather quick-witted, fiery sense of self-defense. She manages to outsmart Beasley by feigning a floozy-like willingness to cooperate with his sleazy shakedown, but it is not long before she finds herself presented with a far more glamorous and tempting proposal from Philip Shayne, a man who is not so easily refused.

After drenching her in mud, Philip sends his neurotic assistant, Roger (Gig Young), to deliver a half-assed apology and monetary reparations on his behalf. As an indirect way of expressing his own anger and resentment towards Philip's power and influence over others, Roger convinces Cathy to throw the money in Philip's face for his insensitive and presumptuous handling of the situation. However, once Cathy and Philip make eye-contact in his office, the cheesy love-at-first-sight music cues. Cathy's furious defenses shut down, presumably in response to a preconceived notion that angry, defensive women rarely attract millionaires, let alone millionaires who look like Cary Grant. Cathy, then, immediately takes the blame for standing on the street corner, and Philip offers to pay for an expedited, in-house dry cleaning job while she waits.

Although their relationship is initiated by a spark of antagonism, the playboy/virgin relationship in *That Touch of Mink* is structured a bit differently than those from previous sex comedies. Unlike Day and Hudson in *Pillow Talk* and *Lover Come Back*, for instance, Cathy and Philip are not embroiled in competition over a party phone line, social popularity, or business success, and neither character spends the majority of the narrative action in an elaborate disguise with the cruelest of intentions. Rather, Cathy and Philip fall for one another instantly; they are also comparatively honest about their intentions and expectations, and try to work out their differences politely over a series of extravagant, painfully awkward dates. As their relationship develops, the small-town, marriage-minded, sexually inexperienced Cathy finds herself scrambling to find non-sexual ways to prove to this extraordinarily wealthy, powerful, seductive gentleman that she is indeed a "woman," and not a childish "unsophisticated rustic" from a place called Upper Sandusky. The tension between these two characters, then, is mainly characterized

by their differing attitudes towards not only *when* sex should occur, but at what cost. In mapping and mocking the intersections between the era's sexual and consumer driven economies, *That Touch of Mink* asks, is there anything money (or mink) cannot or should not buy?

Cary Grant's Problematic Playboy

Like Cary Grant himself, Philip is one of the last quintessential playboys of the sex comedy cycle and the long decade of the fifties. While Rock Hudson remains the most distinguished leading man of the sex comedy cycle, both stars were viewed as icons of American manhood, charm, and sex appeal on and offscreen. At the same time, however, their performances and private relationships invited varying degrees of suspicion over their sexual orientations. Grant, for instance, crafted a particular version of elegant, continental, and always a bit playful masculinity throughout his prolific film career and public persona—the nature of which was most famously caricatured by a cross-dressing Tony Curtis playing a sexually inhibited yachtsman in *Some Like it Hot* (1959). As *Photoplay's* guide to bachelors described him in an 1960 article, Grant's name had:

. . . come to stand for sophistication in our time. All over the civilized world, the twentieth century woman knows that even if she can never be sure what he'll do next, it will always, somehow, turn out to be the *right* thing. Even if he should decide, at a formal affair, to take a dip, fully clothed, he'd still come out of it with both cutaway and dignity impeccably dry. The secret is rumored to have something to do with the science of hypnosis (he's an avid follower), but what it really has everything to do with is Charm....the grander the better.¹⁴⁷

As this fan piece suggests, and as Cohan's analysis of his stardom confirms, Grant was known for eternal youthfulness, Americanness, heterosexual attractiveness, bachelorhood, and elegance. In reality, however, Grant was British, most likely bi-sexual, and a secret cross-dresser. By the

¹⁴⁷ "A Leap Year Guide to 8 Types of Bachelors," *Photoplay*, March, 1960, *Photoplay* Microfilm, Herrick.

time of *That Touch of Mink's* release, he was also gray-haired, middle-aged, very recently divorced, and a known LSD enthusiast.¹⁴⁸

Although he was still considered the most handsome movie star of 1962, there was a sad, yet hopeful pitifulness attached to his star persona after he officially separated from his second wife in 1958. As one fan piece put it, “He had come full circle in his life and now finds himself at familiar crossroads where he stands as lonely as the man he played in that midwest cornfield in the movie *North by Northwest*. A man just waiting. Just waiting for his life to be fulfilled by the one right woman.”¹⁴⁹ *That Touch of Mink* took special interest in toying with this notion of a man “just waiting” and its unsettling subtext: one could choose to achieve fulfillment through marriage or wait to die alone in a desolate cornfield. In mocking the rigid expectations of the breadwinner ethic, *That Touch of Mink* took pleasure in considering the outrageous possibility that living and dying alone might be preferable to dealing with the demands and insecurities of a stubborn middle-aged virgin from Upper Sandusky—or any one woman, for that matter.

As with Hudson, the ambiguous nature of Grant’s star persona allowed *That Touch of Mink* to explore a complex array of pleasures and anxieties through oscillating gestures of revolt and reassurance. While Hudson’s romantic comedy roles emphasized the power of his superb physique, masculine brawn, youthful handsomeness, and spirited sexual intelligence, Grant’s more distinguished, elegant playboy in *That Touch of Mink* primarily uses capital as a means of seduction and power. Both versions of the playboy felt entitled to their independence, and carved out their own middle ground between breadwinning and dying alone. While Grant’s supreme

¹⁴⁸ Cohan, *Masked Men*, 27.

¹⁴⁹ “Confidential File (Cary Grant),” *Photoplay*, April, 1960, *Photoplay* Microfilm, Herrick.

buying power made for more sustainable and glamorous means of escape, this aspect of his playboy persona also presented unique challenges.

While sex comedy playboys were almost always well-off financially, the nature of Philip's capital and labor sets him apart from the rest. The playboy characters in *Pillow Talk*, *Lover Come Back*, and *The Tender Trap*, for instance, were successful, self-made American men, assumed to have benefitted from postwar prosperity. Their careers were more flexible and creative than the standard, dull corporate job—the type of soulless day-to-day grind memorably depicted in the 1960 comedy-drama *The Apartment*. In *Lover Come Back*, for instance, Hudson is a successful advertising executive, but his job mostly consists of boozing and womanizing with his clients. His boss and second banana, played by Tony Randall, is a divorced neurotic who recently inherited the advertising agency and a tremendous amount of wealth from his father. Randall perceives his wealthy and privileged upbringing as a severe disadvantage in a society that holds self-made, bootstrap-yanking men like Hudson in such high esteem. In addition to his impressive professional skills and success, Randall also attributes Hudson's comparatively robust masculinity and sex appeal to his poor upbringing, which Hudson admits left him no choice but to play with girls' bodies because his parents could not afford toys. As Philip clearly demonstrates, however, the thought and practice of equating women with toys—or any number of commodities, for that matter—most certainly transcended class boundaries.

This recurring complaint among the cycle's male second bananas suggests that overcoming economic hardship was a prerequisite to realizing the era's idealized version of masculinity, which was firmly rooted in the tenets of postwar bootstrap ideology. Roger, for instance, complains that he is so well compensated for his various “services” that his ample earnings have

deprived him of any “*real* problems,” and by extension, real manhood. While Philip may be a generous and successful employer, there is nothing in *That Touch of Mink* to suggest that Philip is a self-made man. Moreover, Philip is not involved in any kind of artistic, cosmopolitan production or services. Rather, he is a powerful name in some kind of global capitalist enterprise. While his masculinity and Americanness is rendered suspect through his ostensibly inherited wealth, dandy-like elegance, and suspiciously familiar relationship with Roger, Philip offsets these suspicions with his limitless purchasing power and a charming knack for acquisition and world domination.

Untapped Resources

For instance, while Cathy is waiting for her dry-cleaning, Philip calls her into an all white male board meeting, and asks for her advice on how to persuade a stubborn business owner to sell his company. In what is perhaps an unknowing nod to the gradual shift towards the increasingly woman-dominated global economy that values so-called “feminine” traits of communication, teamwork, empathy, and other such “people skills” in the twenty-first century, Cathy recites an anecdote about her aunt’s refusal to accept an impersonal marriage proposal.¹⁵⁰ She then suggests that these executives call the business owner directly and have an actual, honest conversation about the acquisition.

Connie’s suggestion—as well as the very possibility that a woman could possess any kind of business savvy or non-sexual value whatsoever—takes the men in this board room by surprise. Philip, in fact, is so impressed with Cathy’s ingenuity that he insists she accompany him to his talk at the United Nations, where he once again solicits her advice. Just before delivering a

¹⁵⁰ Rosin, *The End of Men*, 64.

glowing speech that eloquently twists the exploitations of Western imperialism into a noble, altruistic cause, Philip pauses to ask Cathy, “What do you think about tapping the unused natural resources in third world countries?” She immediately replies, “I think they should be tapped” with a flirty confidence that suggests the third world isn’t the only thing that could use some “tapping” from this powerful, handsome millionaire.

While romantic comedies are generally uninterested in overt political discussions, world affairs, or almost anything happening outside of the white Manhattan upperclass, the sex comedy cycle routinely fetishized exotic or non-white props, locales, and peoples as a way to safely acknowledge sexuality and desire. Fetishism, as Stuart Hall explains, “takes us into the realm where fantasy intervenes in representation; to the level where what is shown or seen, in representation, can only be understood in relation to what cannot be seen, what cannot be shown. . .[it] involves the substitution of an object for some dangerous and powerful but forbidden force.”¹⁵¹ For instance, in *Pillow Talk*, both Day and Hudson’s characters share a strange, special connection with blackness. In her role as an interior designer, Day is closely associated with a tribal fertility goddess statue. She prominently displays this racially and sexually charged prop in the gaudy bachelor pad she designs for Hudson, where they eventually end up having sex and conceiving their first born.¹⁵² Also in *Pillow Talk*, both characters appear to share a mysterious, special relationship with a black female lounge singer, whose musical performance facilitates their first kiss. Considering that the Production Code barred explicit discussion or representations of sex, white sexuality was often displaced onto signs of blackness or primitiveness, which

¹⁵¹ Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the Other,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 266.

¹⁵² In *Pillow Talk*’s encore, *Lover Come Back*, Hudson’s busy bachelor pad is fittingly adorned with tribal figurines.

Western societies have long associated with a lack of sexual restraint. Blackness, however, has been most closely aligned with Western ideas about white female sexuality because both are considered mysterious and always on the verge of being out of control—hence Freud’s infamous description of female sexuality as the “dark continent.”¹⁵³

Indeed, there was certainly no shortage of efforts in the sex comedies to tame, control, and shield against the perilous unknowability of white female sexuality. While actual black characters or people of color rarely made an appearance in these films, exoticized locales and ambiguously white foreign women often tempted and tempered sexual desire and tension. Foreign lands, along with their women, were considered far more arousing, forgiving, and permissive than anything America had to offer.¹⁵⁴ While the sex comedy playboys never seem to have much trouble luring attractive, desiring women up to their pads with no strings attached, there is a tendency to code these narratively inconsequential women as vaguely European or foreign in some way. These exoticized, “other” women appealed to the playboys because they ostensibly did not subscribe to the market and marriage driven conventional wisdom and expectations placed on the white, middle-class, Northeastern or Midwestern sex comedy heroines. Foreign broads were both alluring and easily disposable, providing the sex comedy

¹⁵³ According to Mary Ann Doane, “Freud’s use of the term ‘dark continent’ to signify female sexuality is a recurrent theme in feminist theory. The phrase transforms female sexuality into an unexplored territory, an enigmatic, unknowable place concealed from the theoretical gaze and hence the epistemological power of the psychoanalyst. Femininity confounds knowledge while male sexuality is its stable guarantee.” Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 209.

¹⁵⁴ For example, in the 1961 sex comedy, *Bachelor in Paradise*, Bob Hope stars as a successful playboy writer who travels the world and writes memoirs/anthropological accounts of how women of different nations “make love;” he’s disappointed and repulsed, however, when he’s ordered to write a book on the desires of women of American suburbia, who unlike foreign women, tend to kill the mood with annoying things such as needs, thoughts, feelings, children, and housework.

with a sealable outlet for some kinky play before the unambiguously white, heteronormative couple was finally established.¹⁵⁵

As a globe-trotting connoisseur of sex, women, cuisine, and opulence, Philip finds himself out of touch with Cathy's Upper Sandusky values, which fit squarely within the dominant ideological consensus at the time. Though he is considerably older and less of a party animal than most of his fellow sex comedy playboys, Phillip is, in a sense, even more immature than the others because he prefers conducting his personal and intimate business whilst jet-setting, sailing, and hotel hopping, rather than within a permanent, beautifully appointed bachelor pad. This shocking rejection of home signals a significant departure from the era's strong ideological investments in domesticity, as well as the era's codes of acceptable alternative masculinities.¹⁵⁶

While this lack of a stable, domestic space has shielded Phillip from commitment, intimacy, and female intrusion, the fact that he is in the process of constructing a custom penthouse apartment hints that he may finally consider settling down and growing up. In an intimate gesture, Philip gives an elated Cathy a tour of the site, and proposes that she accompany him on an all-expense paid, indefinitely long, world-traveling adventure—with the possibility of cohabitating in his apartment upon its completion. Cathy immediately and most embarrassingly misinterprets this as a marriage proposal, which Philip firmly denies. Clearly shocked and confused by his untoward albeit tempting offer, Cathy decides to talk things over with her

¹⁵⁵ Rock Hudson's films with Gina Lollobrigida set outside the United States, including *Strange Bedfellows* (1965), and *Come September* (1961), were exceptions. Gina's wild Italian sexuality and spirit had to be tamed in a manner that satisfied American values before she could sleep with Hudson.

¹⁵⁶ Cohan notes that "[d]omesticity pervaded the entire culture as the standard of normality, not just the middle class, resulting in a new definition of the family's role that crossed social divisions, and it extended to men as well as women." Cohan, *Masked Men*, 50.

spinster roommate, Connie (Audrey Meadows), with whom she shares an unusually close, sisterly bond that is almost exclusively reserved for male relationships in the sex comedy cycle.

Pinchers and Spinsters

In harsh contrast to Philip's extravagant playboy lifestyle and Andy's tranquil, toy-filled bachelorhood in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, Connie lives out her single days as a snarky cafeteria worker with a spray-can dye job, cruddy rental apartment, and no romantic or sexual prospects of her own to speak of. Like most female comic seconds, Connie is compensated for her homeliness and lousy circumstances with a remarkable lucidity and stinging wit. As she explains: "when you're my age and not married, you either philosophize or get arrested." Indeed, while the notion of an unmarried woman always implies some kind of threat or burden to the patriarchal social order in mainstream representation, Connie's character mainly serves as an obligatory signpost of the embittered, unglamorous spinsterhood that looms over Cathy's not-so-distant future.

Connie also delivers the most vexing complaints and insights throughout the film. While the theatrical trailer may contemptuously reduce her character to little more than "the frustrated guardian" of Cathy's virtue, Connie is actually less concerned with protecting Cathy's sexual innocence than she is with helping her understand a number of painful, cynical truths that often only emerge through repeated heartbreak and disappointment. For instance, Connie tries unsuccessfully to convince Cathy that Philip's proposal and intentions are on the same moral plane as any lowlife "pincher" on the subway train. According to Connie, money and handsomeness are all too often the only things that separate sleazy unemployment office clerks like Beasley from "gentlemen" like Philip, and that all too often the only real choices women have in the sex comedy and the real, lived world are between different kinds of

“pinchers,” and between living out one’s days as “an honest old maid” or “a happy liar.”

While Connie’s snidely delivered words of wisdom fall on deaf or incompetent ears within the diegesis, popular audiences’ enthusiastic embrace of her character imply a general sense of affinity and appreciation for her cynical worldview.¹⁵⁷ Philip and Roger are also given the opportunity to express frustration with the era’s courtship conventions. Both men, for instance, are deeply conflicted over the appropriateness of the Bermuda invitation; they wonder whether or not Cathy’s Upper-Sandusky upbringing could have possibly prepared her for the kind of hanky-panky this trip would entail. In echoing contemporary anxieties over the value of female virginity, Roger and Philip shed light on the uncomfortable question of whether or not women—or rather, the doctrine of settling they represented—were necessarily worth the combat, horrors and disruption of World War II.¹⁵⁸ As Roger exclaims: “taking a woman like that to Bermuda desecrates everything the minute-men fought for!”

Damned if they did, damned if they didn’t, female virgins remained at once central to and impossible to place within the sex-saturated fifties and the zany sex comedy universe, especially when relocated to the sensual, dream-like paradise of colonized Bermuda. Rather than melting away the inhibitions, reservations, and stubbornness that keep Cathy and Philip from jumping each other’s bones on American soil, however, this would-be luxuriant, liberating sex-cation

¹⁵⁷ Whitehall argues, for instance, that “the real joy of the piece is Audrey Meadow’s [sic] as the heroine’s cynical room-mate, making opportunities where very few exist, and walking away with every scene in which she appears. . .” Whitehall, “*That Touch of Mink*.”

¹⁵⁸ As Coontz notes, the war was often justified in the name of “protecting women,” but when men returned to a seemingly irreversible disturbance of gender roles and the societal pressure to conform to the suffocating corporate, breadwinning, suburban lifestyle, there was question as to whether or not the women had been worth the fight. See Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 61.

ends up being a testament to the psychic and physical stronghold of the breadwinner ethic, as well as the limitations of what money can buy.

Saying “Yes”

After much tossing and turning, Cathy finally decides to accept Philip’s offer to accompany him on the trip. However, the nature and tone of her telephone acceptance is primarily motivated by pride and spite for Philip’s assumption that she would turn him down, rather than burning desire to sleep with a dashing millionaire in a tropical paradise. After she makes her decision, a man named Leonard, one of the many minor queer characters sprinkled throughout Day’s sex comedies, arrives at her door. Leonard explains that he was hired by the Philip Shayne camp to “coordinate” Cathy in preparation for her trip—or in other words, to make her appear more pleasing to Philip’s lavish taste and possessive gaze.

In a sumptuous Bergdorf Goodman fashion show that anticipates the famous Rodeo Drive shopping spree from the similarly premised nineties rom-com *Pretty Woman* (another beloved rich guy buys poor girl story—except instead of a small-town, unemployed virgin, the heroine is a drug-free, safe-sex practicing Los Angeles prostitute with a heart of gold), a starry-eyed Cathy gleefully previews the haute couture masquerade of femininity she’ll be performing for Philip, for others, and most provocatively, for herself in Bermuda. On the one hand, Cathy’s hypnotic giddiness during the fashion show suggests that she willfully and eagerly participates in the processes of her own objectification. Indeed, the consensus ideology at the time gave women little choice but to view and present themselves as merchandise for men, as a means of accumulating actual merchandise from men.¹⁵⁹ On the other hand, Cathy is taking a kind of

¹⁵⁹ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Backseat*, 74-76.

narcissistic pleasure in identifying with and performing femininity as masquerade, implying a potentially subversive act of distancing between woman and image, which have been traditionally theorized as indistinguishable.¹⁶⁰

It is no coincidence that Cathy's excitement climaxes at the sight of the titular mink-lined coat, though the "touch" of it summons a great deal of psychological and interpersonal conflict. As a recurring device in the sex comedy cycle, mink coats provide a heavy-handed means of displacing female sexuality onto the *mise-en-scène*, linking sexuality to consumerism and capital, and exposing the elaborate performativity of gender. As Glitre explains:

These mink coats operate as complex signs. . . loaded not only with connotations of luxury, wealth, and extravagance, but also symbolic associations with female sexuality: fur as tactile, sensual, something to be 'stroked'. . . Part of the spectacle of Cathy's mink coat is achieved by having interchangeable overcoats of black, emerald, scarlet, and cream, with the fur lining the coat. . . keeping the fur on the 'inside' suggests a kind of discreet sexual modest (not frigidity). The coat also maintains a level of ambiguity—"Is she or isn't she?"¹⁶¹

As Philip's most overblown attempt to buy Cathy's sexual affections, and to mold her into his ideal image of woman, this touch of mink both stimulates Cathy's fiercest instincts towards self-preservation and soothes them away.

Saying "No"

While in Bermuda, however, Cathy spends most of her time cloaked not so much in mink, but in a fog of anxiety and hallucination. She constantly worries about the specter of the single

¹⁶⁰ See Doane's theorization of woman and image in *Femmes Fatales*, 8-13. In focusing on the emergence of "women's films" in the 1940s, Doane also explores the "tautological nature of the woman's role as consumer: she is the subject of a transaction in which her own commodification is ultimately the object," adding that "[t]he cinematic image for the woman is both shop window and mirror, the one simply a means of access to the other. The mirror/window takes on then the aspect of a trap whereby her subjectivity becomes synonymous with her objectification." *Ibid.*, 30, 33.

¹⁶¹ Glitre, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, 150.

four-post bed that awaits her, as well as the judgements from strangers. After exhausting all the sunshine and non-sexual entertainment Bermuda has to offer, the couple retire to their suite. In one of the most unsettling, awkward seduction scenes in film comedy, Philip begins kissing Cathy's bare neck and shoulders. By the stunned, horrified look on her face—which was plastered all over many of the film's publicity materials—his caresses send nothing but panic down her spine.

In a last-ditch attempt to ward off his advances, Cathy squirms away and spouts some nonsense about her uncle being a “socialist,” in hopes that her vague association with Cold War dissidence will render her un-fuckable to this man of great political power and prestige. Considering the extreme paranoia and pressure to conform that defined Cold War culture, the idea that Cathy would rather risk her Americanness than lower the price of her virginity speaks to the vexing desperation women faced under this market-driven courtship economy. Upon this remark, a stupefied and blue-balled Philip decides to take a gentleman's constitutional in order to give Cathy some time to collect herself.

Following Philip's mopey march of disappointment, the film's narrative and tone subtly twists the kind of playboy predation demonstrated in the last scene (and freeze-framed onto posters and press books) into a rather sympathetic, albeit distorted take on male victimhood.¹⁶² As it turns out, Cathy is not the only woman in Bermuda paralyzed in fear from a man's sexual advances, and Philip is not the only blue-balled reject moping around the premises. When Philip takes a seat at the empty hotel pool, a young newlywed man nervously inquires whether or not

¹⁶² The original title for the film, “Not Tonight, Catherine,” which was rejected by the PCA censors for its suggestiveness, implied that the male lead was rejecting the woman's sexual advances. Geoffrey Shurlock, “Letter to Margaret Ann Young,” July 26, 1961, *That Touch of Mink* MPAA File, Herrick.

two hours is an appropriate amount of time for his wife to “feel secure” before they consummate their nuptials. Apparently, marriage itself is not enough to soothe the intense anxiety and shame over their sexuality that “good girls” like Cathy internalized under the era’s rigid social codes. Philip offers the chap some gentlemanly reassurance and returns to his hotel suite hoping to find a more “secure,” and horny Cathy.

Instead, he is greeted at the door by the hotel doctor, who explains that Cathy has suddenly come down with a condition quite common among married women, and that she is not to be disturbed. While Philip is clearly frustrated with the news, the doctor sympathizes with Cathy’s embarrassing and uncomfortable plight, explaining that women are bound to suffer this type of somatic reaction because “western culture only gives them one semester of home economics” in preparation for marriage, which apparently does not guarantee men a lifetime of free, sexual access after all.

Cathy’s hives, however, are more than an unsightly manifestation of her extreme anxiety over sexual performance and losing her virtue. As Glitre argues, the rash is also “a somatic expression of her resistance to being commodified and her inability to become that other kind of woman”¹⁶³—the kind of woman bought and “tapped” like the natural resources in Philip’s third world countries. Glitre’s reading was lost on popular press reviewers, such as crotchety *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther, who interpreted Cathy’s hives as “a psychosomatic reaction to the likelihood of being nice.”¹⁶⁴ Once again, this peek into the zeitgeist reveals the impossible expectations placed on women; on the one hand, being “nice” meant putting out for the man who

¹⁶³ Glitre, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy* 150.

¹⁶⁴ Bosley Crowther, “*That Touch of Mink*,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1962, *That Touch of Mink* File, Herrick.

paid for the date, and on the other hand, “nice” girls withheld sex until marriage. Men, however, were considered “nice” as long as they were willing to spend the cash.

Though Philip’s lavish “generosity” and polite restraint may be veiled in an air of class and gentlemanliness, the film nevertheless exposes a very ugly, brutish side to these costly games between men and women. For instance, after facing sexual rejection once again, Philip finds himself back at the hotel pool playing cards with a heavy-set bookie who admittedly beats his wife for avoiding sex. In playing on Grant’s trademarked manner, as well as intertextual knowledge of his previous woman-punching characters in films like *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) and *Notorious* (1946), Philip sympathizes with the bookie’s situation, and jokingly implies that he has also thrown a few punches. Audiences, however, are led to understand that Philip is not the violent type; brute force seems beneath him, much like pinching girls on the subway.

Earlier in the film, for instance, viewers learn that Philip is a most generous supporter of an organization that houses and assists unwed mothers—so generous in fact, that even the two older female representatives who mistake Cathy for one of his victims feel he is entitled to “use the facilities.” Though their motives could hardly be described as altruistic, let alone feminist, *Playboy* magazine (and its founder Hugh Hefner) is sometimes credited with encouraging its readers to support women’s rights to sexual expression (as long as it adhered to *Playboy* standards of sexiness), and access to birth control and abortion—a bundle of human and reproductive rights that remain deeply conflicting for Americans. Though the social issue of unwed motherhood was, of course, no laughing matter in midcentury America, and rarely even found its way into most mainstream film melodramas, this grotesquely patriarchal notion of

sexual entitlement was echoed in sex comedy film reviews and popular fan literature for young women at the time.¹⁶⁵

For example, Crowther's scathing review of the film (and of Day's character in particular) actually compared the film to Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita*:

They are alike in that both of them (now, get this!) make elaborately sadistic sport of the familiar disposition of women—or, rather females—to be cruel towards men. The vicious little tease in *Lolita*. . .fairly treats the poor fellow who adores her with icy dispassion and disdain. And Doris Day is really almost as heartless toward Cary Grant in *That Touch of Mink*.¹⁶⁶

Crowther goes on to add, “Miss Day, in her way, is quite as nasty to the utterly beguiling Mr. Grant when he offers everything a man can offer—except the honor of being his wife. . .she indignantly and stuffily refuses to be available.”¹⁶⁷ Aside from this review's misogynistic, hateful overtones, and its ignorance of the serious risks women had to negotiate if they engaged in premarital sex at the time, one of the things that the sex comedy cycle made very clear was that women did not *enjoy* withholding sex for marriage. Nor did they take pleasure in thwarting the advances of wolves, who seemed to appear in just about every social and professional setting.

That Touch of Booze

The practice and expectation of having to say “no,” regardless of one's true desires, was a miserable drag for these energetic sex comedy women, who were constantly being tempted and taunted in mind, body, and soul. For instance, after her body and mind battles Philip's sexual advances in Bermuda, Cathy returns to Manhattan in an unshakable state of agony and shame.

¹⁶⁵ The experience of unwed mothers was sometimes explored in “Poverty Row” films during this time period. See, for example, Ida Lupino's *Not Wanted* (1949).

¹⁶⁶ Crowther, “*That Touch of Mink*.”

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

She tries to convince herself, as well as Connie, that she simply must go back to Bermuda and “prove” to Philip that she’s a “woman,” even though Connie tries to convince her that presenting him with her “birth certificate” would be much easier. As this brief snippet of girl talk suggests, the sex comedy openly engaged and exaggerated difficult questions of performance and essentialism when it came to one’s gender and maturity level. What did it mean to act like a mature woman?

While women in the sex comedy may have been considered more mature than the playboys because they at least aspired to marriage—the cornerstone of adulthood at the time—they also signaled a problematic immaturity because of their sexual inexperience. Indeed, in addition to its cruel and misguided misogyny, the above excerpt from Crowther’s review of the film makes an unexplained distinction between “women” and “females;” he also, at one point, refers to Cathy’s character as a “little girl,” despite her obvious old-maid status and self-sufficiency.¹⁶⁸ This confusion echoed in popular magazines such as *Photoplay*, which frequently quoted male celebrities who spewed nothing but impossibly vague, contradictory messages about how a woman should think, act, look, feel, and treat a man.¹⁶⁹

In a January, 1958 *Photoplay* article fittingly titled “What is a Woman?” real-life and on-screen playboy Frank Sinatra divides “broad” into eight dehumanizing, “simple” categories: “Mouse,” “Tomato,” “Beetle,” “Quim,” “Twist and Twirl,” “the Gasser,” “the Barn Burner,” and “the Mish Mash,” with the tomato being the one to avoid because “she’s a broad who’s ripe for

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ The following statement from actor George Hamilton, for example, reveals some of the unreasonable attitudes and expectations that informed the sex comedy’s conflicts and contemporary courtship conventions: “It’s sad that so many women today have become completely self-reliant. It’s unnatural. It’s probably our own fault—but no man wants to be reminded that he has abdicated from the role nature cast him in. . . I’m still a man and will act like one. And when I’m with a girl I want her to act like a woman.” “He’ll Hate You in the Morning (Hollywood Men),” *Photoplay*, p. 62.

marriage.” Sinatra’s best advice for “tomatoes” looking to get hitched: “Don't give him a loaf of bread, but on the other hand, don't throw him only a few crumbs.”¹⁷⁰ Men, apparently, wanted everything and nothing from women; they wanted to feel desperately needed and to be left alone, they wanted a “girl” who could act like a “woman,” a virgin and a whore, a bimbo and a brain, a square and a hedonist, a servant and goddess, a partner and punching bag. Women, however, were conditioned to want a comparatively uniform, well-defined, and synergetic package of marriage, motherhood, domesticity, and consumption from men; they were also, however, expected to keep these aspirations to themselves.

It is no wonder, then, that Cathy finds herself caught in a tizzy of confusion and shame when she tries to come up with a way to prove to Philip that she is, in fact, a woman and not a childish hillbilly. Assuming she is doomed to a lifetime of shame no matter what plan she decides on, Cathy finally convinces herself that the best, most mature, “womanly” thing to do in this situation is to call Philip (who happens to be on a date with an Italian rebound), book a flight to Bermuda and the same hotel suite, and become so black-out drunk that she is unable to give consent, participate in, or recall the experience of losing her virginity. As was a relatively common trend among major and minor female characters in the sex comedies, Cathy’s budding erotic and romantic desires are overcome by a Victorian-like fear and repulsion of sex, or rather, the idea that sex was something men were entitled to “take” and enjoy, while women merely “gave” and tolerated it in exchange for material and/or social securities.

¹⁷⁰ As Sinatra elaborates, “[a] Mouse is a cuddly broad. A Beetle is a flashy broad. One who makes with sharp clothes. A Quim is a loose broad, one who's easy to pick up. A Twist and Twirl is a broad who likes to dance. Of course, I suppose, everybody's heard of the word Gasser. Well, in broadville talk that means a dame who's a real looker, a knockout. . . Now, take the Barn-Burner—that's a broad with real polish and class. Who wouldn't dig her the most? As for the Mish Mash, she's a broad who's all mixed up.” “What is a Woman,” *Photoplay*, January, 1958, *Photoplay* Microfilm, Herrick.

Cathy thus books the Bermuda booty-call in response to her intense feelings of guilt, shame, and spite, rather than love and desire. For all the impossible expectations and contradictory messages that may have cultivated her fearful, deleterious mindset and motivated her actions, one thing most real world and sex comedy playboys could in fact agree on was that women should—at the very least—remain somewhat conscious for the “taking.” Philip appears visibly shocked and agitated by Cathy’s inebriated state, as well as a tad repulsed by her intention to render herself nearly comatose in preparation for his lovemaking. Although Cathy is in a particularly vulnerable and compromised position, the film encourages audiences to sympathize with Philip, who ditched a hot date and hopped a plane to Bermuda only to find himself thrust into the position of caretaker when Cathy stupidly falls several stories from the hotel window.

Getting Together

While Cathy often comes across as foolish and annoying because of her small town naiveté, she never resorts to militant nagging or coercive manipulation in the battle of the sexes. After her botched attempt at seduction, Cathy initially insists on returning her new wardrobe and repaying Philip for the travel and lodging expenses, but she soon realizes that being kept and adored by a powerful, handsome, filthy rich man is preferable to a lifetime of menial office labor and fighting off “pinchers” everywhere she goes. Like most sex comedy heroes, Philip eventually comes to his own realization that a life built around the unobtainable and incompatible fantasies of a perfect woman and a perfectly whole ego is meaningless and unsustainable. Since these epiphanies were, to some unspoken extent, motivated by social and psychic forms of homophobia (as Cohan reminds us, the playboy’s prolonged singleness signaled

a not so “latent homosexuality”), such a weighty epiphany was typically proven through demonstrations of masculine brawn and elaborate, last-minute acts of rescue in the sex comedies.¹⁷¹ These glorified stagings of male heroism, however, often required a bit of conspiring and playful nudging from the heroine and second bananas.

Cathy decides to accept Roger’s help in devising a plan to expedite Philip’s passionate capitulation to the commitments and lifestyle he once took such pleasure in evading. Roger masterminds an elaborate scheme based on his curiously intimate knowledge of Philip’s desires and behaviors, insisting that their best strategy is to threaten Philip’s pride, which is grounded in his ability to stake claims on women and tap their resources. Cathy reluctantly agrees to Roger’s suggestion to make Beasley an unknowing conspirator in this ridiculously elaborate and incredibly risky operation. She tells Beasley that she would like to take him up on his seduction offer, and proposes that they drive to a trashy motel in the especially trashy town of Atlantic City, New Jersey (although, for most sex comedies, any town outside of Manhattan would have been considered sufficiently base and unlivable).

Meanwhile, Roger tells Philip that Cathy has made a terrible, dangerous decision to lose her virginity to a lecherous unemployment office clerk. Draped only in a single bath towel wrapped around his waist, Philip immediately hails a cab and begins to chase after the woman who has basically given him nothing but blue-balls and aggravation. Though he somehow manages to look dignified half-naked, flailing around on a street corner, this otherwise routine, sexualized peek at the lead male star’s body emphasizes a crucial moment of vulnerability and humiliation for Philip’s character. As he officially approaches his impending submission to

¹⁷¹ Cohan, *Masked Men*, 268.

Cathy's convictions, he finds his gentlemanly self reduced to a panicked, manipulated, unclothed object on display—a position far more familiar to women in the history of narrative cinema and visual culture, as well as in everyday life.¹⁷² As Philip is obliviously strung along by Roger and Cathy's intricate scheme, a series of silly misunderstandings and obstacles ensue.

Philip finally finds Cathy—distraught with panic over Beasley's advances—in a phone booth. He throws her over his shoulder and carts her away in a heroic he-man style that contrasts awkwardly with his suspiciously debonair gentlemanliness, but redeems his previous state of undress and disarray. Most importantly, the physical nature of this last-minute rescue sequence proves Philip's capacity for masculine brawn, particularly the American brand associated with Rock Hudson's idealized masculinity. As Cathy squirms and blabbers about being inhibited, mentally unstable, and worst of all, not cut out for motherhood, Philip marches on and effectively saves Cathy from Beasley's vulgarity, from Connie's miserable spinsterhood, and from her own stubborn sense of self-preservation.

The following scene catches up with the reconciled couple on their honeymoon in Bermuda. After the same doctor is seen leaving the hotel suite, it is revealed that Philip's impeccably beautiful face broken out with a bad case of the sex hives. In yet another nod to the acute sense of incompatibility between the sexes under the unreasonable pressures of the breadwinner ethic, a carbuncled Philip explains that if Cathy breaks out when they're not married, and he breaks out when they are, they “may never get together.” As Glitre and McDonald observe, the sex comedies spend most of their narrative action and *mise-en-scène* emphasizing the seemingly irreconcilable differences between the central couple, as well as the

¹⁷² See Mulvey's canonical essay on the male gaze, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

ways in which they differ from the supporting characters. There are moments such as this honeymoon scene, however, which suggest that men and women may have at least some common ground in terms of their desires and anxieties.¹⁷³

Cathy and Philip, for instance, are similarly wired because they are both deeply invested in their social and psychological independence and in maintaining clear, guiltless consciences. Just as Cathy's boner-shrinking breakout is a hysterical reaction to her crippling fear of not only a particularly frightening, misogynistic idea of sex, but of becoming a commodity paid for in mink instead of legal paperwork, Philip's boner-suppressing breakout is a hysterical reaction to his fears of accepting the emasculating burden of the breadwinner ethic—the fear of being reduced to a commodity that makes the Cold War fantasy of endless consumption, and the myriad empty promises thereof, possible. Moreover, Cathy and Philip dread the sense of indebtedness and loss of self that necessarily accompanies coupledness, and the excruciating stress that inevitably accompanies the realization that they have no other choice.

Considering, however, the sex comedy's affinity for the narrative middle and its rousing mishmash of transgression and candor, the possibility of Cathy and Philip "never getting together" does not seem entirely disappointing or tragic for the characters or the audiences. The most pleasurable elements of the film, after all, involve keeping these two stubborn head-turners apart. Hives and entrapment, however, apparently outweigh the risks associated with the alternative lifestyles, behaviors, and attitudes proposed by the narrative middle, which the cultural consensus condemned as suspiciously deviant, immature, and worst of all, potentially homosexual.

¹⁷³ See Glitre, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, 154.

Cathy thus proceeds to assure Philip that his unsightliness is nothing a “girl from Upper Sandusky” can’t handle, hinting at the possibility that she may be more experienced than she has let on. For the first time in the course of their relationship, Cathy appears sexually confident, excited, and in control of the situation while Philip finds himself in another vulnerable, submissive position with a nervousness typically reserved for new brides on their wedding night (at least according to the hotel doctor). Though *That Touch of Mink* finally puts an end to its over-the-top, unrelenting sexual tease by melting away Cathy’s virginal inhibition, the thrills and pleasures promised by Cathy’s cocksure sexual awakening and the couple’s erotic union are effectively subordinated to reproduction and motherhood; once Philip cracks open the door to his bedroom, the scene fades out to a baby’s face in a carriage.

That Touch of Mink’s final scene self-consciously undermines the familial, heteronormative bliss between Cathy and Philip through an over-the-top homosexual gag involving an ongoing misunderstanding between Roger and his confused psychoanalyst, Dr. Gruber (Alan Hewitt), who for the better part of the narrative, is under the mistaken impression that Roger and Philip have been carrying out an illicit, homosexual affair. When Dr. Gruber sees Roger alone with their baby in the park, he is lead to believe that the two men have somehow produced a child, a shocking discovery that prompts him to return to Vienna for further study. Although references to homosexuality were strictly forbidden by the Production Code, and the social and political panic that developed around homosexuality during the Cold War cannot be understated, the sex comedy frequently employed queer sideshows and dirty jokes such as this as a way to detract

from the sudden, and often unconvincing heteronormative resolutions.¹⁷⁴

While these queer male pairings were never intended as a viable alternative to the status quo, they did not allow the heteronormative resolutions to materialize comfortably.¹⁷⁵ As the following chapter explains in greater detail, marriage and fatherhood was not only a false guarantee of a lifetime of unlimited sexual access for men, it was also insufficient proof that the playboy had totally abandoned his former lifestyle, behavior, and attitudes, thus leaving him vulnerable to lingering suspicions of homosexuality.

¹⁷⁴ In fact, a collection of response cards from special audience focus groups testing the acceptability of the homosexual subplot revealed that the majority of men and women, both young and old, enjoyed the queer antics—some even citing it as their favorite part of the film. “*That Touch of Mink*: Preview #1,” January 26, 1962, *That Touch of Mink* MPAA File, Herrick; “*That Touch of Mink*: Preview #2,” January 27, 1962, *That Touch of Mink* MPAA File, Herrick.

¹⁷⁵ See Cohan’s close reading of *Pillow Talk*’s coda in *Masked Men*, 293-295.

“Putting the Pussy on a Pedestal” in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*

Similar to the way the sex comedy’s relentless preservation of female virginity was less about protecting women and their ‘value’ than it was about keeping playboy bachelors away from the domestic entrapment represented by women, the narrative’s extreme efforts to protect the hero’s virginity in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* primarily serve to safeguard the blissful, female-free state of arrested development in which he happily carries on. As one of the first and most influential films of the brom-com cycle, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* crafts a dirty, sentimental, and often downright absurd portrait of sustained male immaturity through its unconventional virgin hero, Andy. Though aggressively marketed as an ideal date movie for straight audiences because of its combination of raunch and romance, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* abandons the romantic comedy’s typical dual focus approach in favor of an intimate, almost anthropological portrait of Andy and his futile struggle to be “left alone”—just like Cathy Timberlake and the midcentury playboys before him.¹⁷⁶

Even before his quest for sex and proper adulthood commences, Andy appears to be struggling with some conflicting desires. In what would become the first sign of Andy’s contradictory version of manhood, as well as the first in a long line of Apatovian penis jokes, Andy starts his day by sleepily stumbling into the bathroom with a pronounced, awkward erection. Though Richard Dyer reminds us that male sexuality and the penis repeatedly evoke one another, Andy’s impressive, pajama-draped manhood is mocked as a source of inconvenience—something good for little more than making it ridiculously difficult for him to

¹⁷⁶ “Universal Pictures reported the R-rated film attracted an audience that was 54% female and an equal share to younger than 30, according to theater exit surveys.” R. Kinsey Lowe, “*Virgin, Eye*, Top Box Office,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 2005, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* File, Herrick.

urinate.¹⁷⁷ From the get-go, then, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* not only questions Andy's manhood, but also pokes fun at the burdens and absurdity of manhood in general.

While Apatow has been quoted saying "America fears the penis, and that's something I'm going to help them get over," this organ of obsession in the brom-com is always obscured and/or de-eroticized; it is made safe through scrutiny, laughter, or the comfortable distance of the end credit sequences (e.g. the montage of penis cartoons featured in the end credits of Apatow's 2007 film, *Superbad*).¹⁷⁸ As *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and other brom-coms reveal, the cycle's nervous penis fascination at once speaks to the underlying homoerotic and homophobic tensions in this cycle, as well as to the continuously reimagined and refigured forms of anxiety around the definition, entitlements, and value of white heterosexual masculinity. Though Dyer explains that "humor can touch on male fears about the inability to live up what penises claim for them and can endorse female derision about the patriarchal overestimation of the penis," these comedic efforts to undermine and ridicule male heterosexuality are always, in some sense, an underhanded celebration or affirmation of the phallus.¹⁷⁹ Reluctantly, Andy must learn to "live up" to and appreciate what his white penis claims for him, which paradoxically demands a tremendous loss of autonomy, as well as the relinquishing of boyhood pleasures that the film ultimately deems incompatible with proper phallic adulthood.

Considering the film's title alone, one reasonably expects a certain degree of immaturity from Andy's character, as virginity and bachelorhood are still generally considered temporary states that eventually give way to a heterofamilial model of adulthood. In the film's opening

¹⁷⁷ Dyer, "Male Sexuality in the Media," 29.

¹⁷⁸ "The New Establishment 2008," *Vanity Fair*, Oct 2008, Judd Apatow File, Herrick.

¹⁷⁹ Dyer, "Male Sexuality in the Media," 33.

scene, however, the iconography typically associated with the millennial “boy-man” lifestyle is surprisingly absent from the initial tour of Andy’s tidy, sun-bathed apartment. His abode resembles more of a neatly kept child’s playroom than a bachelor pad or dorm room, except that many of his toys appear to be collector’s items which, much like Andy, have never been played with or removed from their original packaging. Andy also exhibits a surprisingly adult-like self-sufficiency in his morning routine; before securing his bike helmet and riding to his low-level retail job at a big box electronics store, he makes time for light physical exercise, personal hygiene, a balanced, homemade breakfast, and some polite small talk with the elderly couple next door.

The immediate contrast between the *mise-en-scène* of boyhood in Andy’s apartment and his adult-like self-sufficiency, between his extreme solitariness and his congenial social interactions, and between his palpable lack of sex and imposing erection presents audiences with a unique cluster of extreme contradictions, as well as a vague nostalgic longing for a simpler time. As one critic observes, Andy has “the clean-cut appearance and niceness of a character from a 1950s sitcom.”¹⁸⁰ While some critics interpreted Andy’s bachelorhood as pathetic, or as a sad case of “acute loneliness,” most reviews remarked on the astounding sense of satisfaction Andy seemed to derive from his peculiar mode of bachelorhood.¹⁸¹ Andy may lead a celibate and nearly friendless existence, but one could hardly deny that he appears quite comfortable with his independent lifestyle, personal space, and lack of investment in anything beyond his own day-to-day pleasures.

¹⁸⁰ Cosmo Landesman, “Love Bites,” *The Sunday Times*, September 4, 2005, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* File, Herrick.

¹⁸¹ Scott Foundas, “Sex and the Pocket Protector,” *LA Weekly*, August 19-25, 2005, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* File, Herrick.

Indeed, one need not look further than the film's official poster for a glimpse of Andy's perplexing, boy-scoutish euphoria before adulthood is thrust upon him. As *New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis observes, the image of Andy, "gazing rapturously into the distance," against an orange glow "conveys an almost incomprehensible happiness—as if the Beav had grown up and achieved beatitude, rather than a house, a wife and 2.5 kids."¹⁸² As Deleyto puts it most precisely, what this poster captures is the "carefree happiness of a man who does not have to deal with the worries and anxieties of heterosexual relationships."¹⁸³

The Louts

Much like Day's single, successful career woman characters in *Pillow Talk* and *Lover Come Back*, however, Andy fails to convince those around him that it's possible to be perfectly content without sleeping with someone.¹⁸⁴ While the sex comedy's prudish women spent a lot of time and energy convincing wolfish playboys (and sometimes horny maids), that they did not, in fact, have any "bedroom problems" to speak of, the motoring source of conflict in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* does not lie between Andy and his eventual love interest, Trish (Catherine Keener)—a sexy grandma and small business owner with a curiously saint-like sexual restraint—but between Andy and his male coworkers. Sex, as it turns out, is only part of Andy's journey to proper manhood. *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* devotes considerable narrative space to Andy learning how to interact, bond, and form homosocial relationships with men, only to have him eventually

¹⁸² Manohla Dargis, "Losing His Innocence, Not a Minute Too Soon," *New York Times*, August 19, 2005, *40-Year-Old Virgin* File, Herrick.

¹⁸³ Deleyto, "The New Road to Sexual Ecstasy," 259.

¹⁸⁴ In *Pillow Talk*, for instance, Day's salty, alcoholic housekeeper (played by Thelma Ritter), criticizes her lack of sex; during their phone conversations, Hudson purposefully flusters Day when she insists that there's nothing in her bedroom that "bothers her."

distance himself from these relationships in order to accept the responsibilities of marriage, fatherhood, and breadwinning.

Most of the film's humor, in fact, comes from the exaggerated contrast between Andy, his male co-workers, and other secondary characters who tend to view him as some combination of strange, sad, and creepy. Indeed, the film essentially offers Andy's preserved virginity as the only explanation for his mediocre job, lack of friends, juvenile hobbies, social awkwardness, and in certain cases, downright stupidity (he tries, for example, to pull a condom over his foot in preparation to have sex with Trish on the first date). Though Andy's virginity has evolved into an unofficially celibate lifestyle that requires a certain degree of withdrawal, apathy, and regression, the film nonetheless upholds him as more mature and decent than his perverted, unstable male coworkers: Cal (Seth Rogen), David (Paul Rudd), Jay (Romany Malco), and a fringe member of the group, Mooj (Gerry Bednob). For instance, a brief sampling of back-room small talk between Andy and Cal implies that Andy's Friday night making an elaborate egg salad sandwich from scratch is admirable compared to Cal's evening in Mexico watching a woman have sex with a horse.

After years of being ignored at work and spending his Friday nights making sandwiches alone, Andy is randomly bulldozed into filling an empty space at a late night poker game with his coworkers, which marks his awkward entrance into the tricky world of male bonding. The game, however, soon devolves into a raunchy roundtable discussion of the gang's weird and triumphant sexual experiences, as well as their bitter resentment against current and former girlfriends. As Deleyto notes, the gang displays a marked and troubling "lack of interest in anything but women's bodies and the pleasure they, and above all the pleasure that *talking about them*, can

give.”¹⁸⁵ Indeed, this poker table serves up quite the melange of loutishness—a mode of immature masculinity and revolt that erupted across popular culture platforms in the first decade of the twenty-first century and helped define the Apatovian brom-com. As *LA Times* writer Neil Gabler explains, loutishness is a form of passive-aggressive empowerment and revenge “against what some men see as the indignities feminism has forced upon them—indignities that have been exacerbated by economic hardship.”¹⁸⁶

Although *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* was released two years before the financial collapse of 2007, anxieties about the recession and its disproportionate impact on middle and working class men were already pulsating in the brom-com. For instance, Andy and his bitter coworkers just so happen to work for a woman, Paula (Jane Lynch), whose authority and self-assurance both intimidates and repulses them. Even though her interests and personality seem to mesh well with the pack’s dynamics—i.e. she smokes weed, fucks ‘like a guy,’ and makes fun of Andy’s virginity—her male employees do not and never will respect her as a boss, even if they happen to like her as a person. The gang’s relationship with Paula, especially compared to the other women in their lives, speaks to the ambivalence underpinning loutishness, which as Gabler elaborates, is not categorically anti-woman:

So much of loutishness is narcissistic and infantile—again, proudly so. So much of it is gleefully wallowing in irresponsibility, in a lack of maturity, in self-gratification and a general indifference to other people. This may be the real male nirvana, and it suggests that the ubiquitous culture of loutishness speaks to something less obvious and perhaps more interesting than anti-feminism. It speaks to a widespread desire not to have to be men at all.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Deleyto, “The New Road to Sexual Ecstasy,” 263.

¹⁸⁶ Neal Gabler, “Day of the Lout,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/13/entertainment/la-ca-louts-20110213>

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

This desire to forgo what their penises claim for them—with the major exception of misogynistic yammering and a broad disregard for women—speaks to a deep dissatisfaction with what it means to be a man in the twenty-first century. Not only have our dominant ideas about adult manhood remained relatively steady since the postwar era, certain economic and social conditions have made it increasingly difficult for men to live up to the breadwinner ethic—an unwieldy bind most conveniently blamed on the perceived “rise of women.” There has always, however, been a great deal of dissatisfaction with the breadwinner model of manhood rooted in an unrelenting fantasy of postwar optimism and economic growth. For instance, midcentury playboys rarely had to worry about being out-earned and out-performed by a woman in the workplace (even Day’s exceptionally successful and accomplished characters in *Pillow Talk* and *Lover Come Back* were assumed to give up their careers to focus on marriage, motherhood, and homemaking), but many men considered breadwinning an emasculating burden nonetheless.¹⁸⁸

As reflected in the brom-com’s hallowing out of its heroines, women are still figured as the omens and overlords of mature manhood, even though they are far less dependent on men for financial security. In fact, more women like Paula are finding themselves in high demand, and in some sectors, high positions of power in the current global economy, as traditionally masculine values of brawn and rugged individualism are becoming less vital and desirable than values that have traditionally skewed feminine, such as teamwork, empathy, communication, and flexibility (as Cathy demonstrates in the board room meeting in *That Touch of Mink*, for example).¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ Indeed, Ehrenreich argues that the “collapse of the breadwinner ethic had begun well before the revival of feminism and stemmed from dissatisfactions every bit as deep, if not as idealistically expressed, as those that motivated our founding ‘second wave feminists.’” Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 12. See also May, *Homeward Bound*, 177.

¹⁸⁹ See Rosin, *The End of Men*, 117-118.

Granted, these gendered shifts in the economy are not wholly empowering for women; the workplace not only remains generally unfriendly and deeply dissatisfying to men and women alike (especially parents), but women are often expected to bring home the bacon *and* perform the majority of childcare duties *and* keep the homestead running smoothly.¹⁹⁰ Though the male revolt, in its current mode of loutishness, is still rooted in misogyny, men are not so much envious and spiteful of women's educational achievements and upward mobility (because who really wants all that responsibility?) as they are frustrated with the inflexible expectations for what it means to be a man.

The Big Reveal

At the poker table, Andy remains mute as Cal speaks about women as if they are stupid, shallow sex objects, David dismisses them as emasculating she-devils, and Jay paints himself as an unabashed philanderer and borderline sexual predator. Andy's lack of contributions to the roundtable of loutishness renders his masculinity dangerously suspect. When the bros pressure Andy to join the conversation, he makes a brutally awkward, improvised attempt to riff on the misogynistic and foul nature of the previous stories. The gang, however, abruptly cuts him off after he likens the feel of a woman's breasts to "bags of sand." After Andy's regrettable gaff, the gang starts speculating and demanding answers for why he is so ignorant of women, their bodies, and their evil ways.

Andy's reluctant revelation that he is, in fact, a forty year-old virgin brings more relief than shock to the table. His exceptional strangeness suddenly "makes sense" to the gang, and they admit they had long suspected Andy was either a gay man and/or a serial murderer. Indeed, the

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 15.

category of homosexuality is routinely mashed up with varying degrees and types of perversion, violence, sickness, anti-social behavior, and immaturity in Hollywood cinema and popular culture.¹⁹¹ The categories of homosexuality and criminality that the gang associates with Andy's consciously maintained adult virginity have a tendency to disturb mainstream sensibilities because they are perceived as anti-reproductive, and therefore potentially negate what queer theorist Lee Edelman identifies as an obsessive allegiance to "reproductive futurism" to which western culture subscribes.¹⁹² While Andy's adult virginity may "make sense" to the other characters because it supposedly explains his creepiness, his virginity also makes some sense—to a far lesser degree—from a cultural standpoint.¹⁹³

40 Year-Old Virgin was released during a revival of pro-abstinence and anti-choice spirit and legislation supported by the Bush administration.¹⁹⁴ This pro-abstinence discourse, however, was overwhelmingly directed towards heterosexual teens and young adults; it was also firmly rooted in Christian theology, a patriarchal guardianship of white womanhood, and the cult of futurity. Young people—especially women—were expected to withhold from penetrative sex in

¹⁹¹ For instance, after accusing Andy of being gay, Jay attempts to fudge acceptance of homosexuality by claiming he knows men who have sex with other men "in jail"—a brief but telling quip that plays on such dismaying cultural associations with homosexuality, criminality, and violence.

¹⁹² In his polemic, *No Future*, Edelman explains reproductive futurism as "terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations." Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

¹⁹³ As one British critic remarked: "This is a curious premise for an American comedy. After all, it's the land of the free and the home of the abstinence vow, where many teenagers pledge to be celibate until marriage." Landesman, "Love Bites."

¹⁹⁴ See, for example, Heather D. Boonstra, "Advocates Call for a New Approach After the Era of 'Abstinence-Only' Sex Education," *Guttmacher Policy Review* 12.1 (2009): 6-11. Adult virginity also attracted some celebrity attention in the early 2000s; self-proclaimed virgin celebrities such as Britney Spears and Jessica Simpson, for instance, professed their commitment to remain virgins until marriage. See, for example, Susan Dominus, "The Way We Live Now: 1-21-01; Abstinence Minded," *New York Times Magazine*, January 21, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/01/21/magazine/the-way-we-live-now-1-21-01-abstinence-minded.html>

exchange for the untenable promise of one day marrying and procreating with “the right one,” preferably well before middle-age. While older, male virgins like Andy rarely received this kind of visibility and public applause, Andy is essentially held to the same expectations put forth in this conservative, pro-abstinence discourse.¹⁹⁵ Andy, however, marks an especially odd case because there are no discernible moral philosophies or severe disabilities informing his willed withholding from penetrative sex.

Although Andy has sublimated his sexual needs and desires into a comfortably controlled, sustainable lifestyle of celibate solitude and an untouched horde of childhood trinkets, the film eventually chalks up some blame by foraying into flashbacks of Andy’s nightmarish sexual past. As the flashbacks into his teenage sexual disasters reveal, women react dramatically and impatiently to Andy’s erotic incompetence, and even cause him bodily harm. His extreme, boyish ticklishness, for instance, leaves one woman with a bloody nose, one woman belittles him for not knowing how to remove a bra, and one overly-eager partner unintentionally mauls his member with her braces. These episodes imply that unskilled and unforgiving women may be to blame for Andy’s sexual void and incompetence, and by extension, his mediocre job, lack of friends, and peculiar mode of arrested development. Or, as Jay’s loutish interpretation of the situation concludes, Andy has not been able to shed his virginity and achieve manhood because he has “put the pussy on a pedestal.”

¹⁹⁵ Even *40 Year-Old Virgin*’s success failed to bring much attention to this obscure demographic, with the exception of a puff piece in *People* magazine about a handful of adult virgins, their overwhelmingly religious reasoning, and their discontent with *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*’s premise, and with Andy’s characterization as an odd nerd in particular (despite the film’s sentimental turn and deeply conservative embrace of Andy’s virginity and wholesomeness). Bob Meadows, “40...and Still a Virgin,” *People*, August 29, 2005, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* File, Herrick.

The Pedestal

According to the gang's interpretation of events, Andy has allowed women to scare and shame him into sexual and social seclusion. While Andy has ostensibly elevated female sexuality to an intimidating, unattainable force of which he views himself unworthy and incapable of satisfying, he doesn't hold a grudge against women. In fact, unlike the louts in this film, he insists that he "respects" women so much that he "stays away from them completely." Andy's radical avoidance of women in the name of respect is thus framed as more problematic in the loutish sense than in a sexual sense; what the gang (and the film) objects to is not so much Andy's virginity, but that his dismissal of women is couched in respectfulness as opposed to misogynistic revulsion. For Andy, however, the 'pussy' is not so much on a 'pedestal' as it is put away out of sight and out of mind—no easy feat in an age where pornography is now considered mainstream.¹⁹⁶

What is even more radical than Andy's avoidance and ignorance of women's bodies and how to please them, is that he does not even pleasure his own body, which he treats with the same kind of bewildering restraint as his toy collection. Just as Andy has no intentions to profit from his perfectly preserved vintage toy collection (that is, until Trish puts the pressure on him to do so), or to wait for the right moment or playmate to come along before enjoying the toys in the manner they were intended, Andy's prolonged celibacy is not rewards-driven; nor are his pleasure mechanisms release-driven. Unlike even the most resolutely virginal characters from the

¹⁹⁶ *New Yorker* journalist Ariel Levy discusses the cultural ubiquity of pornography in her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs*. Among the many examples throughout her book, Levy discusses how stripper poles have become fashionable, Oprah-approved workout devices, sex toy parties are a common alternative to traditional bridal showers, "leaked" sex-tapes are cause for celebrity, and porn sensation Jenna Jameson's memoir, *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star*, tops the bestseller list. Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 26, 18.

sex comedy cycle, who may have abstained from penetrative intercourse but engaged in other physical acts of affection or, at the very least, hinted at their itching desire to make love with a real or imagined “right” person, Andy has sublimated the “itch” into perpetual restraint and futile accumulation.

In rightly suspecting that Andy is not only abstaining from sexual intercourse, but living in total celibacy, David loans him his entire pornography collection; he even includes a special compilation of his favorite “boner jams” in hopes that it will provide Andy with a means to experience arousal and pleasure without having to deal with women, their expectations, and judgement. The homoerotic subtext at work here speaks to a more pressing failure of Andy’s masculinity, which has to do with his lack of male friendships. When Andy agrees to dabble in masturbation he is more concerned with pleasing and fitting into the male pack than he is with achieving his own carnal pleasure. As if it were some kind of fateful ritual, Andy lights candles, turns around the framed pictures of family members, slides into his glow-in-the-dark sheets, hits “play,” and prepares to find release in another man’s sexual fantasies. However, Andy’s vision of a female porn star floating in space, whispering sexy-nothingness, is abruptly hijacked by his own voice possessing the woman, which kills his erection and cuts the night short.

Despite being a nearly universal and commonplace practice in human sexuality, masturbation is routinely coded as an “anti-reproductive” and “non-adult” (hence its importance to the teen comedy) activity, one that is “presented as at best comic, often pathetic, and at worst a sign of criminal insanity.”¹⁹⁷ As gender studies scholar Hugo Schwyzer summarizes, major

¹⁹⁷ Greg Tuck, “Orgasmic (Teenage) Virgins: Masturbation and Virginity in Contemporary American Cinema,” in *Virgin Territory: Representing Sexual Inexperience in Film*, ed. Tamar Jeffers McDonald (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 160, 169.

religious traditions have long framed masturbation as sinful, especially for men, because the act involves wasting one's precious life force. Though these same religious authorities generally failed to acknowledge women's desire or ability to pleasure themselves sexually, the secularized objection to masturbation that gained momentum in the nineteenth century became hinged on fears of women's growing political and economic power.¹⁹⁸ Medical and moral voices of the time linked female masturbation to various pathologies and fears that women's sexual self-sufficiency would inevitably lead to independence and empowerment in other areas.¹⁹⁹ These nineteenth century concerns about female masturbation leading to empowerment were thus accompanied by parallel anxieties that masturbation would weaken men, making them more dependent on women for pleasure, and therefore, more likely to be dominated by these newly self-sufficient women.²⁰⁰

The pathologizing and domino-like nineteenth century fears surrounding female sexuality are reinvented in both the sex comedy and millennial brom-com cycles, where sexually aggressive or self-pleasuring women are regularly written off as undesirable (or in the sex comedies, un-American), sick, and/or eventually contained within a monogamous heterosexual coupling. In *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, for instance, the gang tries to set Andy up with a horny bookstore clerk, Beth (Elizabeth Banks), who not so subtly hints to Andy that she enjoys masturbating. Although Andy is eventually "rescued" by the gang before any sexual contact occurs, he awkwardly watches Beth "warm up" for him by masturbating with a shower-head. Beth's enthusiastic self-pleasuring terrifies Andy, who is not only being outperformed sexually

¹⁹⁸ Hugo Schwyzer, "Masturbation is at the Root of the Culture Wars," *The Atlantic*, May 22, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/05/masturbation-is-at-the-root-of-the-culture-wars/276110/>

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

by an innocuous piece of bathroom hardware, but has presumably never experienced this kind of erotic pleasure for himself.

This particular scene also happened to receive the most complaints from test audiences. America may indeed, as Apatow believes, “fear the penis,” but this fear still dwindles in comparison to the sheer terror generated by the spectacle and enigma of female sexuality, its demands, and ecstasy. These objections prompted the studio to replace frames of Beth’s ecstasy with Andy’s uncomfortable utterance, “wow, this is graphic,” which left audiences to imagine the most titillating naughty bits for themselves.²⁰¹ It is not long, however, before Cal steps in to take over for Andy; a swap that at least somewhat quells the scene’s heightened anxiety, which plays on a broadly felt cultural pressure for men to make women achieve this level of corporeal bliss with their “tool” alone.

It is this very idea of self-pleasure, whether in body or fantasy, that has come to the forefront of religious and cultural objections to masturbation, regardless of gender. As Schwyzer argues, there is a persistent and broadly felt shame surrounding masturbation rooted in the idea that the fundamental sexual unit should always be more than one person—that sexual pleasure is not, in fact, “something that first and foremost, belongs to us as individuals.”²⁰² Perhaps then, there is something even more radical and disturbing about Andy’s avoidance and failure to achieve self arousal. During the botched masturbation sequence, the invasion of Andy’s own voice on to his fantasy image of the female porn star implies a kind of radical, infantile narcissism that has allowed Andy to linger not only in a state of sexual latency and social

²⁰¹ “By adding the quick line of dialogue, which was not part of the Thousand Oaks test but was included in the Sherman Oaks preview, complaints about the scene disappeared.” John Horn, “Keeping *Virgin* Funny, But With Its Pants On,” *LA Times*, August, 14, 2005, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* File, Herrick.

²⁰² Schwyzer, “Masturbation.”

immaturity, but in an illusion of Imaginary wholeness existing beyond the lack that necessitates desire, and beyond the cultural constructions of what it means to be and belong.

Andy's inability to lose himself in a fantasy of and achieve arousal from a woman in this bizarre masturbation sequence touches on Edelman's concept of "*sinthomosexuality*," which names a radical mode of queerness rooted in the negativity of the death drive.²⁰³ Despite his kind, childlike nature, Andy's celibacy and intense introversion lend him a surprising kinship with dark *sinthomosexual* characters, such as Scrooge from *A Christmas Carol*—a man without a spouse, without children, and without a desire or drive to invest in his or his culture's future. According to Edelman's analysis, Scrooge is figured as perverse because he presents the threat of the un-attached older male whose sexual orientation is consequently suspect, but mostly because he has no tangible attachment to the future; rather, his desires or jouissance resonate outside of this imagined space.²⁰⁴ Although the narrative's grand effort to preserve Andy's virginity and high functioning state of arrested development is eventually commandeered by the reactionary 'true love waits' cliché, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* remains cautiously invested in Andy's flirtations with *sinthomosexuality*.

You Know How I Know You're Gay?

The 40-Year-Old Virgin nervously attempts to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for Andy's unsuspecting *sinthomosexuality* through David, who shares a warm and admiring relationship with Andy. In fact, one of the most sentimental romantic comedy-esque moments in the film occurs when Andy tells David that their first one-on-one chat was "kind of nice." The

²⁰³ See Edelman's second chapter, titled "*Sinthomosexuality*," in *No Future*, 33-66.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 41-50.

timid warmth of the line's delivery implies that David may very well be the first person Andy has truly connected with in his adult life. As the most sensitive and emotionally turmoiled guy in the pack, David shows genuine care and concern about Andy's feelings and desires. In addition to lending out his porn collection, David attempts to empathize with Andy's shameful sexual past by divulging details about his own romantic and sexual failures with an unfaithful ex-girlfriend, Amy (Mindy Kaling). David frequently reminisces—much to the other guys' disgust—about “making love” and “sharing the same heart” with Amy, whom he also bitterly refers to as a “whore” and an “immature bitch who blows everybody.”

Unlike Andy, who has achieved a peaceful disinterest in women, or even Cal and Jay, who manage to objectify *and* dismiss them, David is unable to repress or sublimate the resentment, needs, and frustration yoked to his intimate and professional relationships with the opposite sex; he is generally unable to enjoy life, harbors the most vicious contempt for Paula's authority, and eventually suffers a psychological, pants-dropping breakdown at work. David is the most troubled because he actually wants women for something more than just sex—he wants to experience “a relationship, love, laughing, cuddling, and all that shit.” He yearns for the ephemeral tinge of wholeness that manifests only through the idea of “sharing” oneself. As Berlant reminds us, “sex threatens composure, but offers a holding environment too. . . both confirming and interfering with patterns of self-intelligibility,” particularly when ideas of personhood are contradictorily cemented to coupledness and reproduction.²⁰⁵

Andy's celibacy and sublimation of sexual desire has ostensibly cushioned him from the kind of self-disassembling that the sex act both demands and futilely attempts to overcome. But

²⁰⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 146.

the film consistently dampens the more complex, radical promises and threats of Andy's queerness with a loutish murk of trite homophobia and misogynistic contempt. David, for instance, concludes that the only possible explanation for Andy's curiously youthful handsomeness, mild-mannered composure, and extraordinary sense of contentment is that he hasn't allowed a "she-devil" to "suck the life-force out of him." While the other male characters, along with most mainstream critics, understand the short-sighted appeal of Andy's self-policed zone of adolescent wonder and solitary pleasures—one free from women, and by extension, compromise, responsibility, and judgement—David is the only one willing to take Andy's lead on banning women from occupying and manipulating his body. David's decision to go celibate is motivated by his own resentment against women, but also out of an unspoken desire to reach a deeper connection with Andy. Though derided by the other characters and glossed in comedic absurdity, David's rash decision is actually in accord with Gabler's understanding of the millennial lout. For "in a world of unrelenting pressures and of threatening sexual equality," men don't even want sex— "men just want to be boys."²⁰⁶ And boys, as it turns out, "just want each other."²⁰⁷

This interdependence between male immaturity and the queer-straight nature of bromance is concentrated in the oft-quoted and curiously self-implicating "you know how I know you're gay" sequence. In this scene, Cal and David are hanging out in Andy's playroom, engrossed in a violent video game, trying to kill each other's avatars. As they perform aggressive, masturbatory motions on their joystick controllers, Cal fudges David's declaration of celibacy into a coming-

²⁰⁶ Gabler, "Day of the Lout."

²⁰⁷ According to Greven's analysis of the recent teen comedy cycle, "boys just want each other—females represent an alien mystery that threatens to disrupt the boys' bonds." Greven, "Dude Where's My Gender?," 16.

out announcement. In conflating the act of “not sleeping with women” with homosexuality, Cal and David fling banal accusations of homosexuality back and forth. During this exchange, “gay” functions as an umbrella term for anything silly, lame, or vaguely feminine, such as “liking the band Coldplay,” to making “spinach artichoke dip in a bread bowl.” There are, however, other remarks such as “because you’re gay and you can tell who other gay people are?” Such responses to the “gay” question imply a simultaneous longing for and a hostile disavowal of homosexuality. This exchange thus establishes the core contradiction that is continuously repeated and refigured throughout the millennial brom-com cycle.

Just as the sexual tension in the “you know how I know you’re gay” sequence eventually comes to a violent, gruesome climax with Cal’s avatar decapitating David’s avatar and throwing his head at his body, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* eventually subjects its hero to various forms of physical and psychological violence associated with millennial hook-up culture and adulthood. While Andy’s numerous threats to futurity are the most memorable and pleasurable aspects of *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, they are hastily overpowered by fatigued romantic comedy conventions; Andy can only be reconciled to culture through a sentimental induction into a heterofamilial structure and the breadwinner ethic. Before Andy’s formal consecration into this particular version of adulthood, however, the film must first thoroughly demonstrate that any alternatives to his white wedding arrangement are dysfunctional, unsatisfying, and even dangerous—regardless of how pleasurable they may be for audiences to witness.

Hooking Up

Most of these alternatives are explored within the wild terrain of twenty-first century hook-up culture, an ostensibly egalitarian sexual economy for men and women where sex is stripped of

the risks, joys, and burdens of communion, emotion, and as it would often seem, sobriety. While Andy's circumstances are indeed exceptional, the gang's aggressive, half-baked efforts to 'make a man' out of Andy actually expose a much broader, deeply felt sense of male insecurity pervading contemporary hook-up culture. This unruly territory proves, for these men at least, even more exhausting and emasculating than the comparative monotony of monogamy.

Indeed, over the past three decades or so, raunch culture, feminism, economic hardship, and other cultural phenomena have compressed the pressures on heterosexual men to achieve a certain level of sex appeal and prowess. It is thus unsurprising that male insecurities in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* are heavily concentrated on uninhibited, pleasure seeking women and the daunting task of satisfying or taming them. This type of male performance anxiety is most immediately familiar to recent teen comedies, but the brom-com's adult take on these sexual challenges is less concerned with the routine questions of how to talk to and sexually satisfy women than with more troubling, encompassing questions of male relevance and power.

Despite the strong sense that the contemporary culture's emphasis on the no-strings attached hook-up seems to privilege a long-standing cultural construction of male heterosexuality as promiscuous and emotionally detached, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* marks one of the brom-com's first attempts to acknowledge that hook-up culture may possibly favor the needs and desires of women over the hearts and cocks of men, as Rosin argues in *The End Of Men*.²⁰⁸ From early on in the cycle, men in the brom-com have struggled with feelings of sexual inadequacy as much as fears of entrapment—as irrational and unfounded as they may be. Early brom-coms such as *Wedding Crashers* and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, for instance, seemed very

²⁰⁸ Rosin, *The End of Men*, 21-22.

much aware of their heroes' inferiority and irrelevance in their interactions with women; broad strokes of loutishness serve to conceal whatever hurt and distress they may have been experiencing, as well as to mitigate the sexual and social threats presented by women who inhabit the hook-up world.²⁰⁹ Considering the staggering, intentional mediocrity of the brom-com heroes, the staggeringly low standards of its heroines, and a staggering sense of incompatibility between the them, one cannot help but wonder if men have anything to offer women, or if they should have any reason to care in the first place.

This sense of injury goes mostly unexplained in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, but finds its most comfortable, palatable translation in loutish apathy and camaraderie, as well as in a strong sense of sympathetic identification with Andy in his limited number of interactions with the women. For instance, when Cal schools Andy in his own lazy pick-up artistry before setting him up with Beth in the bookstore, he advises Andy to keep the conversation vapid and extremely one-sided; Cal's experience has proven that all women are hopelessly self-absorbed and have no interest in anything men have to say—a dismaying, but generally sound observation and piece of advice within the Apatovian universe. In effortlessly twisting his perceived unimportance into a pick-up strategy, Andy successfully captures Beth's interest and boosts his own confidence; he simply redirects everything she says into a mundane question (do *you* like to “*do it yourself?*”). While

²⁰⁹ In *Wedding Crashers*, for instance, Jeremy (Vince Vaughan) is under the impression that he has just deflowered a powerful politician's daughter, Gloria (Isla Fischer), whom he refers to as a “stage-five clinger.” Jeremy spends most of the film trying to avoid the sex-crazed Gloria, only to find out that her virginity and psychotic behavior was an elaborate masquerade that she performs in order to attract men. Gloria's unruly, even violent sexuality is eventually contained in her marriage to Jeremy, but the nature of her performance and its implied success rate suggests that even the most commitment-phobic men desperately need to feel wanted, to feel worthy of being stalked and “clung” to—even if this means enduring an aggressive hand-job under the dinner table while in the company of powerful and suspicious strangers. Although *Wedding Crashers* initially revels in a spirited, twenty-first century revival of manipulative, alarmingly sexist playboy era seduction routines, the heroes come to realize that their deceitful tactics will fail with the right woman, who will knowingly or unknowingly seduce *them* into accepting the commitments they had desperately tried to avoid.

the threat of Beth's sexuality is mitigated by rendering her character dim-witted, narcissistic, and "sick," it's clear that she intently uses hook-up culture to satisfy her desires for kink and variety without wasting much time on men she otherwise has little use for or interest in (that is, until she is officially coupled off with Cal just in time for Andy's wedding).

Aside from a few post-feminist nods to women's sexual empowerment, *40 Year-Old-Virgin* remains overwhelmed with anxiety over men's uncertain role and returns within these economic and intimate landscapes. Indeed, the gang's collective and individual efforts to make a man out of Andy are primarily motivated by a deep-seated fear and resentment over what they experience as an inescapable fog of women's judgement and disapproval that hangs over hook-up culture, as well as monogamous coupledness. In spreading their high fever of insecurity to Andy's once tranquil and controlled psychic and physical spaces, the gang's efforts to prep Andy for his first hook-up mainly consist of transforming his body and domestic space into a tabula rasa of sorts—a strategy that suggests women are attracted to 'blank slates' because they want a man they can mold into their ideal image.

For instance, prior to Andy's first official date, the gang strips Andy's bachelor pad completely bare because they fear its peculiar, childlike contents will lead Trish to believe that Andy is a serial murderer. They also assume that if Andy's date goes well, Trish will inevitably invade, alter, and dominate the space anyway—just as the midcentury playboys had feared in the sex comedies. The gang also attempts to make Andy's body more bare—a physical expectation that is typically placed on women. As his so-called friends look on, Andy endures a painful, botched chest-waxing job (resulting in a look that only the sick, masturbating nymphomaniac Beth can appreciate). In any case, the gang assumes that Andy's first sexual experience is going

to be an ego-crushing disaster, regardless of his pick-up lines, apartment, or chest-hair situation. They therefore set out to find Andy an easily accessible and forgettable hook-up so that he can gain some much needed release, practice, and confidence before he sleeps with Trish.

Once rendered thoroughly vulnerable and insecure, Andy is released into an intimidating and sordid nightclub version of adult hook-up culture, with Jay as his primary guide. As a man who regularly cheats on his girlfriend without any repercussions or hard feelings, Jay's expertise and behavior exposes the more toxic, sleazy, and misogynistic aspects of hook-up culture that receive far more attention from mainstream journalism than the potentially feminist aspects touted by Rosin, and vaguely personified through characters like Beth or Paula. Jay, for instance, first instructs Andy in the fine art of ogling women's bodies without having one's scrutinizing look noticed or returned. Jay hopes that the gaze will trigger Andy's natural, masculine instinct to "tackle" sure bets like "drunk bitches" and "hood rats," adding that "it's more important that she's drunk than hot." While Jay's vile advice does succeed in hooking Andy up with Nicky (Leslie Mann), a beautiful, inebriated, and severely depressed woman from a bachelorette party, their night together ends in a most unsexy, dangerous disaster.

When the two exit the club with intentions to spend the night together, Nicky agrees to "suck it up" and drive home (despite her court-ordered breathalyzer), since Andy only knows how to operate a bicycle. Once again, viewer identification is cemented with the understandably nervous Andy, whose life (not just his virginity) is now in the incapable hands of a drunk, emotionally unstable, and sexually available woman. Nicky erratically swerves through traffic; her slurred hip-hop performance gives way to impassioned shrieking about her insecurities ("AM I PRETTY?!" she yells) before she crashes the car. In a cheap, desperate attempt to distract from

the film's questionable making light of something as harrowing as drunk driving, Nicky proceeds to projectile vomit in Andy's face. As a consolation, she listlessly consents that she'll still have sex with him "if he wants."

Mann's secondary character performances are often charged with bringing an unsettling candor and hurt to the brom-com cycle's body-based and verbal vulgarity. As an especially psychotic, easily disposable "club rat," Nicky's narratively inconsequential character functions as an ideological receptacle for a great deal of fear and hurt surrounding women's place in the hook-up culture. Though the film privileges male-oriented anxieties about women's sexual empowerment by foregrounding Andy's thoroughly horrified and victimized state during their interactions, Nicky's character also sheds light on concerns relating to women's safety, subjectivity, and sexual expression within the context of hook-up and raunch culture.²¹⁰

There is no shortage of popular journalism that suggests, for instance, that casual sex is not necessarily satisfying for women, and that women are more likely than men to feel obliged to avail themselves sexually in order to complete the hook-up (as Nicky's mumbled line of guilty consent would suggest).²¹¹ These insidious assumptions about women's sexual permissiveness that underpin hook-up culture inevitably work their way into the brom-com, where they dampen whatever feelings of guilt or wrong-doing men might experience while living up to what their phallic power claims for them.

²¹⁰ In *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, Levy argues that women are often encouraged to act as willing participants in their own sexual objectification by performing a narrow, cartoonish version of female sexuality derived from heterosexual pornography conventions. While women may feel more liberated to express their sexuality within these culturally sanctioned and commercially driven parameters, their efforts do not necessarily result in more sex, pleasure, confidence. Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, 93.

²¹¹ See, for example, Natalie Kitroeff, "In Hookups, Inequality Still Reigns," *New York Times*, November 11, 2013, <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/11/women-find-orgasms-elusive-in-hookups/>

Jay and Racial Tokenism

Not all men, however, are entitled to the same power and privilege within the discourse of the brom-com. In fact, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* is one of the only films in the brom-com cycle to consider the issue of race within the broader cultural celebrations of loutishness and bromance, and within ongoing cultural and political projects to legitimate narratives of white male victimhood in an epoch flushed with talk of “posts,” “multis,” political correctness, and a damaging “man-cession.” Though its regulating processes of hierarchy and exclusion are always adapting to historically specific challenges, Dyer reminds us that whiteness remains the axiom that resolutely (and often invisibly) determines what is normal, as well as what is “normally deviant.”²¹² Whiteness, in other words, confers the supreme validation and privilege of being just human.²¹³ In emerging from the teen comedy’s preoccupation with male packs and their attempts to recapture a lost “amorphousness” of adolescent boyhood, the brom-com’s narratives and humor also rest upon an unexamined, albeit vigilantly regulated privilege of whiteness. In line with Greven’s analysis of millennial teen comedies, white male friendships within the brom-com cycle operate as “a self-contained realm, ruthlessly policing the intrusion of any foreign element, racial or sexual.”²¹⁴

Significantly, Jay is one of the few black characters with a membership to the male pack and a recognizable character arc within the brom-com cycle—not to mention within the longer histories of the romantic comedy and teen comedy genres, where male immaturity and retreatism

²¹² Dyer, *White*, 12.

²¹³ Indeed, Dyer argues that “[a]s long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people.” Ibid., 1.

²¹⁴ Greven, “Dude, Where’s My Gender?,” 16.

is a privilege almost exclusively reserved for white middle-class characters. Though Jay has achieved inclusion and acceptance within this “normally” dysfunctional group of white boy-men, the film constantly reminds the viewer of the racial hierarchy at play, and the flimsiness of Jay’s tokened inclusion. For instance, two East Asian co-workers, Mooj and Haziz (Shelley Malil), are repeatedly excluded from the group. Mooj’s character in particular is rendered especially unworthy of the group’s acceptance; he is old, obnoxious, and speaks with a heavy accent. In an effort to set himself apart from them, Jay is complicit in the group’s exclusion of these two non-white characters.²¹⁵

Jay, however, also struggles to reconcile his desire for white acceptance with maintaining meaningful ties to his black identity. The everyday psychic duress that Jay experiences under this compulsory investment in whiteness is revealed in a brief, inconsequential scene when Jay gets into a heated altercation with a black customer. In what is perhaps the most straightforward engagement with issues of race in the brom-com cycle to date, the customer questions Jay’s loyalties when he refuses to give him a discount. Jay aggressively defends his position, and the unruly customer is ejected from the premises, effectively sparing the white people in the store (as well as white audiences) any significant feelings of discomfort or alarm. Though *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* pays lip service to the social and psychic difficulties Jay’s character experiences as a black man within the brom-com’s whitewashed world, the brom-com cycle is far more concerned with addressing the victimization and redemption of white manhood, which remains both supremely powerful and supremely vulnerable in a twenty-first century context.

²¹⁵ As George Lipsitz writes in his book, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, “[t]he power of whiteness depended not only on white hegemony over separate racialized groups, but also on manipulating racial outsiders to fight against one another, to compete with each other for white approval, and to see the rewards and privileges of whiteness for themselves at the expense of other racialized populations.” George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 3.

While Jay's relatively complex character certainly seems far removed from the sex comedy's crass displacement of white female sexuality on to non-white people and exoticized places and objects, such seemingly outmoded fears and attitudes about racial difference are continuously refigured throughout popular culture. For instance, in reserving the most misogynistic attitudes and sordid behavior for Jay, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* taps into a long and painful western tradition of stereotyping black men as sex-crazed, thus effectively reducing them to the fact of their bodies. As Stuart Hall reminds us, these conscious stereotypes are always a coverup for a "deeper, more troubling fantasy—that blacks are really super-men, better endowed than whites, and sexually insatiable."²¹⁶ In a similar fashion to the female characters described above, the film employs several tactics to neutralize the threat of Jay's self-described sexual prowess, as well as to remedy his immaturity and irresponsibility—the symptoms of which are rendered even more alarming when processed through the ugly social stigmas inevitably tethered to Jay's blackness.

In reserving the most outrageous expressions of vulgarity and reckless behaviors for Jay, the film also subjects his character to the most sudden, emasculating, and near-totalizing rehabilitation from these immature transgressions. For example, Jay eventually admits to Andy that his exuberant philandering is essentially joyless; his behavior is merely a means of distraction from his deep, unbearable insecurities as a man. Once his girlfriend, Jill (Erica Vittina Phillips), discovers she is pregnant with Jay's child, he instantly renounces his club-rat ways and enthusiastically embraces impending fatherhood, monogamy, and mature adulthood. Despite

²¹⁶ Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," 263.

Jay's enthusiastic efforts, however, he still has trouble pleasing Jill and earning her trust and approval.

In one especially disturbing and critical scene, Jill confronts Jay over a speed-dating notecard, which he tries to pass off as Andy's. Jill reads off each filthy, misogynistic comment, line by line, while Jay stands by fearfully, eyeing Andy in a desperate plea for solidarity. While Jill's most obvious purpose is that of effectively emasculating Jay and kick-starting his reform, her character also unexpectedly serves as a means of helping Andy grow from a timid, virgin boy-man into more of an assertive 'man's man.' When Andy senses Jay's fearful desperation, he transforms from a mild-mannered observer into a confrontational, disrespectful jerk. Andy's indignant counters to Jill's questioning escalates to the point where he tells Jay to "keep his ho on a leash." Though Jill and Jay are equally stunned by the rude remark, the line ultimately convinces Jill that the unsuspecting Andy is indeed capable of the base thoughts and behavior suggested by the speed-dating card, and she leaves more satisfied than offended. Thus, in bullying a pregnant, justifiably upset black woman, Andy learns the valuable lessons of the vulgar adage, "bros before hos," as well as the loutish act of balancing a healthy desire for women's bodies with hateful contempt for their personhood and expectations.

Playing the V Card

While these may be the most important lessons in manhood within the world of the brom-com, Andy must also progress through the romantic comedy version of how to be a man. After persuading her to purchase a combination VCR/DVD player—an already outmoded piece of technology, which like Andy, is out of step with the times—Andy unwittingly scores Trish's phone number, as well as a significant promotion from Paula. He eventually works up the courage to

arrange their first date, where he soon discovers that despite her featherweight figure and breezy disposition, Trish carries some considerably weighty baggage. As with most brom-com heroines, the details of Trish's past and inner life are left considerably vague; their conversations imply that she became pregnant as a teenager, endured a sexless and emotionally abusive marriage, and is now a self-supporting single mother and grandmother with a woefully strained relationship with her teenage daughter, Marla (Kat Dennings), who rudely interrupts their first attempt at having sex.

Though their first date goes well enough for Andy to end up in Trish's bedroom, this is also where he becomes shockingly aware of some of the major things he must deal with if he wants to form a relationship, or even have sex with her. After some serious heavy-petting, Marla barges into their bedroom and screeches about how unfair it is that her mother is "allowed" to have sex while she is not "allowed" to have sex or use birth control. Though it is tempting to dismiss Marla's complaint as obnoxious teenage whining, this idea of *permission* speaks to more pervasive efforts to control female sexuality, as well as to the ways in which women internalize these methods of monitoring. Marla's remarks, for instance, not only call attention to the fact that she feels as if she does not own or control her own body, they also point out that Trish—despite her unique life experience and seemingly modern mindset—is curiously adherent to conservative, unfounded beliefs about female sexuality that have dominated conventional wisdom and popular representation for decades (e.g. that mothers are not supposed to be fuckable, teenage girls are not supposed to be sexualized).

While Trish is relatively removed from the sordidness and chaos of hook-up culture, she is not exempt from the film's tireless efforts to curb the always potential threat of female

sexuality. Trish not only refuses to acknowledge Marla's sexuality and her reasonable requests for birth control, but she also places unnecessary restrictions on her own sexual fulfillment. For instance, when Trish and Andy meet again after the shock and humiliation of their first date wears off, she makes an odd suggestion that they abstain from sex for at least twenty dates in order to get to know one another. While Andy is elated with her proposal because it relieves a tremendous amount of pressure and extends the time he has left to enjoy his chosen lifestyle, he soon learns that dealing with women in non-sexual ways can be equally as flummoxing and incompatible as sex within his isolated world.

Andy, for instance, is hastily and uncomfortably thrust into an adoptive father role when Trish asks him to accompany Marla to the free clinic for a sex education seminar. Keeping with the brom-com's tendency to hollow out its female characters and diminish their relationships with other women, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* undermines Trish's efficacy as a mother and sabotages her relationship with her daughter in order to accelerate Andy's maturation as a husband and father figure. The painfully awkward seminar provides yet another opportunity to undermine motherhood and expressions of female sexuality; the group consists entirely of father-child couples and a pro-abstinence female instructor, who teaches the group about various ways to express intimacy and fulfillment without having sexual intercourse. Despite the awkwardness involved in the very set-up and unfolding of their forced interaction at the seminar, Andy makes a bold attempt to connect with Marla by admitting his own virginity.

Marla's desire to have premarital sex, as well as her resentment against Trish, is completely eliminated from the narrative once Andy assumes the role of sympathetic father-figure—one with pro-abstinence family values to boot. During his courtship with Trish, Andy also

ditches his bicycle for a driver's license, and even agrees with Trish's suggestion to sell his toys and start his own electronics store with the profits. Although Andy appears content with his new accomplishments, confidence, and way of life, he eventually breaks down under the pressure to fully commit to the breadwinner ethic in mind, body, labor, and lifestyle. During a particularly loaded moment just shy of their twentieth date, Trish passionately initiates sex with Andy as he gingerly prepares the remainder of his collectible toys for shipment. When Trish accidentally knocks over a box of toys as she sexily slinks closer, Andy snaps at her clumsy disregard for their preciousness. As Andy storms off, Trish defensively exclaims that she was just trying to help him "grow up a little."

This glaringly symbolic melding of Andy's celibacy with his unopened toys suggests that his frenzied panic is not necessarily over matters of sex, but what inevitably becomes lost in the act of sex and other forms of coupling. Within the context of the film and the brom-com cycle more broadly, this direct connection between Andy's celibacy and his toy collection speaks to the loss of a romanticized, hermetic white adolescence and the male bonding it nurtured. In more specific regards to Andy's exceptional character, however, these linked treasures and the anxiety over their preservation laments for the sense of wholeness he managed to achieve through radical modes of self-control and inattention to the formidable influences of reproductive futurism. "Do you realize how difficult it was not to play with them?" he exclaims (prompting viewer flashbacks of his inability to "play" with himself). Just as his toys will lose all of their monetary value once the integrity of their meticulously preserved packaging is compromised, Andy understands that he will also suffer a significant loss of self-worth when his defenses collapse under the weight of obligation and the irresistible, deluding promises of being normal.

Eruption

After his explosive argument with Trish and a terrifying intimate encounter with Beth , Andy speeds off on his bicycle and crashes through an advertisement for “Eruption”—the same hyper-sexual perfume advertisement that had taunted him earlier in the film. Trish witnesses Andy’s violent crash and rushes to his side, where she assumes the role of a nurturing caretaker as Andy works through a major epiphany. As he lay incapacitated and thoroughly humiliated, Andy admits to Trish that he is a virgin, and that he has been “saving” himself for her all along. Perhaps purely out of relief that he is not, in fact, a rapist/murderer as she had suspected just moments ago, Trish earnestly affirms that his virginity is “a good thing.” She then goes on to reassure him that when they do finally have sex, it will undoubtedly be good sex because they “love each other.”

Trish and Andy’s sappy regurgitation of the same PCA-mandated morals that could hardly soothe the erotic tension and wearisome ideological discrepancies between the sexes in the midcentury sex comedies feels comically out of step with contemporary sexual mores—perhaps even more so than Andy’s virginity. As with the sex comedy couples that preceded them, “loving each other” is not a good enough reason for Trish and Andy to have sex, pleasurable or otherwise; Andy must first prove his ability as a father figure and breadwinner, learn the value and limitations of male camaraderie, and have a proper, expensive wedding before he can finally lose his virginity. When Andy and Trish do finally consummate their marriage, Andy also proves himself a capable lover. Though a title card reveals that their first attempt to have sex lasted for one minute, a second title card indicates that he performed for “two hours.” Afterwards, Trish appears limp and pacified while Andy wears a self-satisfied grin.

This all-inclusive consummation of Andy's marriage and manhood is quickly eclipsed by a bizarre closing sequence, which begins with Andy gazing directly into the camera and singing "Aquarius" from the musical *Hair*. The unexpected instance of direct address abruptly removes the viewer from the diegesis, effectively calling attention to the absurdly conservative, tacked-on ending, and summoning the male-dominated silliness of the narrative middle. In this particular closing sequence, the reformed members of Andy's dysfunctional male pack perform an exuberant, costumed rendition of "Aquarius" in lush open spaces. This splattering of the narrative middle's bromantic excess onto a closing credit sequence allows the brom-com to undermine the tacked-on heteronormative endings from a safe position beyond the diegesis, similar to the way *That Touch of Mink* and *Pillow Talk* toyed with the heterosexual couple by fading out to epilogues featuring homosexual male pregnancy gags.

On the one hand, the closing sequence overpowers the deeply conservative heteronormative ending by overindulging in the thrills of the narrative middle. On the other hand, the song "Aquarius" is, if nothing else, a celebration of perfect timing, which affirms the message that sex is only pleasurable and worthy of such flamboyant conviviality under certain circumstances—in this case, within the context of heterosexual marriage. Above all else, however, this sequence is a celebration for and by men and their entitlements. As the musical sequence cuts back to Andy and Trish basking in the afterglow, Trish remains languidly unaware of the camera as it focuses on Andy's direct gaze and self-satisfied smugness for the final frames. Countered by the knowingness and reflexivity of his gaze, this sense of conceit and conquest is rendered ambiguous. It is the smugness of a man who has finally accepted what his penis claims

for him: a set of dubious expectations and entitlements perpetuated by a besieged patriarchal power system.

CHAPTER TWO: BALLS AND CHAINS

As the ambiguous closures from *That Touch of Mink* and *40 Year-Old Virgin* demonstrate, the romantic comedy's so-called happy endings sometimes hint at the "uninevitability of happiness" for the heterosexual couple.²¹⁷ Indeed, as Virginia Wexman reminds us, the romantic comedy genre pivots on a contradiction between "the cultural myth of romantic love as an all-consuming passion that is by its nature short-lived and its status in the modern world as the cornerstone of lifelong monogamous marriage."²¹⁸ On occasion, the genre shifts its gaze away from the fireworks of courtship and towards the excruciatingly familiar, yet always somewhat mysterious sphere of married life or long-term romantic relationships. The motivational question in these films is not "Will these two people hook up?" but a far more cringe-worthy question of "What happened to us?"²¹⁹

While the romantic comedy remains one of Hollywood's most enduring genres because of its capacity to recognize and absorb social change, the genre displays staggering thematic and ideological consistencies when it comes to its treatments of marriage, its day-to-day drudgery, dysfunction, and the deep-seated comforts that come with not being veritably alone. Even from its earliest days, the romantic comedy understood marriage as a painfully imperfect institution. For example, Ernst Lubitsch's pre-Code elegant comedy about a whimsical love triangle between a rich heiress and two professional thieves, *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), achingly albeit gracefully suggested that "marriage is a beautiful mistake two people make together." Though its

²¹⁷ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 151.

²¹⁸ Virginia Wright Wexman, *Creating The Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 8.

²¹⁹ Jeanine Basinger, *I Do and I Don't: A History of Marriage in the Movies* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2013), 42.

expression has varied in acumen and charm, the romantic comedy genre's stance on marriage and monogamy has retained this compulsorily optimistic melancholia.

Shortly after the Production Code went into effect in 1934, comedies of new love, such as *It Happened One Night* (1934), gave way to comedies of remarriage and reaffirmation in the later 1930s and early 1940s, which presented audiences with a more financially secure couple whose intimate struggles were generally unburdened by class antagonisms. While the Production Code forbade portrayals of sexual relationships between unmarried people, films could at least suggest a sexual relationship between a married couple. Marriage, as Basinger notes, "allowed movies to deny love and still confirm it, to indicate sex but never show it, and to say marriage was hell but we should all want and respect it."²²⁰

As David Shumway also argues, comedies of remarriage worked to strengthen the fragile, transitory link between romantic love and the institution of marriage. By situating love, merriment, and arousal outside of marriage until the very final frames, comedies such as *The Awful Truth*, *His Girl Friday*, and *The Philadelphia Story* insisted that marriage was in need of ratification, especially when it came to the private and public roles of women.²²¹ A related cluster of screwball era marriage movies, which Glitre refers to as "career woman comedies," tapped into fears surrounding the unprecedented number of women joining the wartime labor force, and the reasonable possibility that these women would want to keep working once the war was over.²²² The classic Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy vehicles *Woman of the Year*

²²⁰ Basinger, *I Do and I Don't*, 31.

²²¹ David R. Shumway, "Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage," *Cinema Journal* 30, no. 4 (1991): 9.

²²² Glitre, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, 29.

(1942) and *Adam's Rib* (1949), for instance, dared to suggest that strong, sharp-tongued, pants-wearing women with powerful positions and skill-sets typically coded as masculine were vibrantly attractive, insofar as they eventually resigned to more submissive positions in the home.²²³ Though these screwball comedy spin-offs offered audiences a taste of sex and a desperately needed release of frustration and disappointment, their narratives were ultimately unable to follow through with a viable reimagining or alternative to marriage.

Still, the screwball treatments of marriage did boast a certain sexual energy, metropolitan glamour, and a special willingness to embrace chaos that was often lost on postwar marriage comedies. As Jeanine Basinger notes in her book on marriage movies, *I Do and I Don't*, the postwar marriage movie “was designed to reinforce ‘American’ values (the ones we’d all been fighting for), stress togetherness in the home, ennobled family responsibilities, and celebrate the sheer glory of the ordinary over the glamorous. It was designed to bring things back to normal.”²²⁴ This cultural pressure to return to an imaginary “normal” hung over the romantic comedy genre during the postwar era’s intersecting golden ages of marriage, capitalism, and television, where the condensed serial programming provided a more suitable outlet than feature films for exploring the perpetual middle-ness of marriage stories.²²⁵

Unlike cinema, television was situated in the home; its rhythm, scheduling, and content

²²³ At the end of *Woman of the Year*, for example, the glamorous and powerful Hepburn finds herself bumbling around the kitchen in a fur coat as she struggles to make waffles for her husband and come to terms with her withdrawal from a prestigious career and public life. See Glitre’s discussion of career woman comedies in, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, 29-33.

²²⁴ Basinger, *I Do and I Don't*, 282.

²²⁵ As Basinger explains: “Marriage had no story arc. It just went on, day after day, month after month, year after year. Marriage took time, and movies had no time to give it.” *Ibid.*, xx.

evolved to work with the household “flow” of multitasking and distraction.²²⁶ Television programming thus adapted to and reinforced the era’s rigidly defined gender roles and family composition, but also engaged the widespread dissatisfaction with these idealized domestic arrangements—especially when it came to the plight of the American housewife.²²⁷ The popular fifties sitcom, *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), for instance, focused on a housewife who was constantly trying to escape and rework her role as a wife and mother; as Patricia Mellencamp argues, Lucy (Lucille Ball) “endured marriage and housewifery by transforming them into vaudeville: costumed performances and rehearsals which made staying home frustrating, yet tolerable.”²²⁸ Most episodes revolved around Lucy’s elaborate scheming; with the help of her married best friend and neighbor, Lucy sought fame, fulfillment, and the approval of her show-business husband, Ricky (Desi Arnaz), by exploring opportunities to perform outside the home.²²⁹ *I Love Lucy*’s brand of comedy, according to Mellencamp, “replaced anger, if not rage, with pleasure,” and called attention to the “difficult problems of women’s simulated liberation through comic containment.”²³⁰

This comic containment, whereby a female comic’s “abrasive edges” were smoothed by

²²⁶ Rick Altman, for instance, theorizes Raymond Williams’ notion of American broadcasting as a “flow” of messages, sights, and sounds in relation to “a parallel notion of household flow.” See Rick Altman, “Television/Sound,” in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 40.

²²⁷ In *Make Room for TV*, Spigel describes how television programming “continually addressed women as housewives and presented them with a notion of spectatorship that was inextricably intertwined with their useful labor at home,” where “work is never done.” Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 75, 98.

²²⁸ Patricia Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy,” in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 87.

²²⁹ As May notes, “for men, work was often a source of stress, while the home was a source of relative solace. For women, the situation was often the reverse: employment or community work alleviated some of the pressures of full-time homemaking.” May, *Homeward Bound*, 185.

²³⁰ Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud,” 94.

“embedding their wild physical humor in domestic scenarios” was especially crucial when it came to televisual representations of pregnancy and motherhood—the very domains wherein the worries and wonders of female sexuality have been given the safest expression in the first place.²³¹ Significantly, *I Love Lucy* not only starred a real-life married (and interracial, no less!) couple, but also dared to break long-standing taboos on reproductive representation by incorporating Ball’s actual pregnancy into the show.²³² While baby-making may have been new to American television, the cultural investment in childrearing had already taken on “almost mythic proportions” during the postwar baby boom.²³³ This “baby-boom ideology” spanned demographic groups and found expression in politics, conventional wisdom, collective and individual aspirations, popular culture, and fan culture. As May explains, “children were a ‘defense—an impregnable bulwark’ against the terrors of the age. For the nation, the next generation symbolized hope for the future.”²³⁴ As “the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity,” writes Edelman, “that child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmic beneficiary of every political intervention.”²³⁵

Despite the enormous cultural, political, and personal investments in this figuration of “the child,” there were still lingering taboos when it came to matters of reproduction in postwar movies and television. The word “pregnant,” for instance, was not spoken in a Hollywood film until *The Moon Is Blue* in 1953, and visibly pregnant women were still rarely shown on

²³¹ Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 153.

²³² With scripts supervised by a minister, priest, and a rabbi, Lucy’s real, nine month baby was “simulated in a seven week TV gestation and electronically delivered” in January, 1953 as 44 million Americans watched.” Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud,” 88.

²³³ May, *Homeward Bound*, 135.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 135-136.

²³⁵ Edelman, *No Future*, 3.

screen.²³⁶ The romantic comedy genre in particular shied away from topics of pregnancy, childrearing, and married life, which served as fodder for family melodramas, social problem films, and “Poverty Row” or “B” pictures.²³⁷ Though heterosexual courtship narratives remained the dominant mode of the romantic comedy genre, the less “romantic” and glamorous facts of marriage, homemaking, and childrearing informed a number of postwar comedies, such as *We’re Not Married* (1952), *Phffft* (1954), *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), *The Facts of Life* (1960), *Boys’ Night Out* (1962), *The Thrill of It All* (1963), *Move Over Darling* (1963), *Send Me No Flowers* (1964), and *Strange Bedfellows* (1965). These films offered light-hearted takes on the inevitable difficulties of monogamy (including the childrearing that often accompanied it), as well as the fleeting comfort of compulsory confessions and reconciliations. Though children were sometimes used as “facilitators” of marital stress in these films, they were, above all, considered “sacred cows” that trumped the sanctity of matrimony, which was often playfully challenged by fantasized or attempted infidelity, as well as a woman’s success outside of the home.²³⁸

There was one overlooked comedy in particular, however, that dared to make light of infidelity, and even more shockingly, infertility and the mechanics of conception. In *The Tunnel of Love* (1958) Doris Day desperately wants a child, but her constant fussing with ovulation charts, temperature-taking, doctor appointments, and sex scheduling exhausts her less than enthusiastic husband, played by Richard Widmark. After going on a bender to escape the pressure, he spends most of the film worrying that he may have impregnated their sexy adoption

²³⁶ As Basinger observes, “[a] woman became pregnant. A baby was born. Or a woman who was pregnant stood around briefly in a well-cut maternity frock, flat tummied, with no apparent bump on her front, and someone had to tell us she was ‘expecting.’” Basinger, *I Do and I Don’t*, 286.

²³⁷ See, for example, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), *Rebecca* (1940), *Not Wanted* (1949).

²³⁸ Basinger, *I Do and I Don’t*, 183.

agent (Gia Scala). The situation becomes messier as his philandering neighbor (Gig Young), and his extremely fertile wife (Alison Fraser) become involved in the cover-up and misunderstanding, respectively. As the brief synopsis and lengthy trail of strongly-worded PCA revisions and objections suggests, *The Tunnel of Love* was bursting with anxieties over marriage, breadwinning, baby-making, and suburban life.

On the one hand, family building was a treasured expression of civic values, one that embodied postwar ideals of “abundance, progress, and productivity.”²³⁹ On a more personal level, however, conceiving and raising children was a respectable, but not necessarily effective means of compensating for the disappointments and voids men and women felt in other aspects of their lives. Although men, women, and movie stars alike were under tremendous pressure to conform to the era’s baby-boom ideology, Hollywood comedies such as *The Tunnel of Love* mostly concerned themselves with the doubts and dissatisfactions of men, as well as their fantasies and strategies of revolt against the responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood, which were dictated by the breadwinner ethic.

While sizable families were “an indication of a man’s potency and ability to provide,” and fatherhood afforded men a sense of control and authority lacking in most corporate and blue collar working environments, this role was also routinely associated with feelings of entrapment, defeat, and symbolic castration—especially within postwar romantic comedies.²⁴⁰ For instance, in the classic sex comedy *Pillow Talk* (1959), Rock Hudson’s playboy character bemoans the ultimate fate of nearly all romantic comedy heroes (including Widmark’s in *The Tunnel of Love*),

²³⁹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 160.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 159.

in one of the most vivid, castration-fearing diatribes of the era:

Before marriage, a man is like a tree in the forest, he stands there, independent, an entity unto himself. Then he's cut down, his branches are cut off, he's stripped of his bark and thrown into the river with the rest of the logs. Then this tree is taken to the mill. And when it comes out, it's no longer a tree. It's the vanity table, the breakfast nook, the baby crib and the newspaper that lines the family garbage can.

Hudson's second banana, played by Tony Randall, replies, "That's what it means to be an adult.

A wife, a family, a home. A mature man wants those responsibilities." In the postwar years,

marriage was quite literally the only acceptable way of achieving mature adulthood on and off

screen. "Viable alternatives to the prevailing family norm," as May confirms, "were virtually

unavailable."²⁴¹ Rather than experiment with alternatives once the postwar breadwinner ethic

began to disintegrate in the mid to late 1960s and early 1970s, Hollywood seemed to take a break

from marriage all together.

As Basinger notes, marriage movies practically disappeared in the 1970s as divorce rates sky-rocketed, the birthrate dropped, the economy tanked, and audiences grew younger, with the heaviest attendance coming from teenage boys. At the same time, young, white male college students dominated New Hollywood filmmaking, whose subjects and ideas focused on masculine despair, political intrigue, and blockbuster thrills more so than the annals of married life.²⁴² It was not until the late 1990s and early 2000s when romantic comedies, including *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *The Wedding Singer* (1998), *Runaway Bride* (1999), *The Wedding Planner* (2001), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), *Wedding Crashers* (2005), began using the white wedding event—and its attendant extravagant consumerism masquerading as romance—as

²⁴¹ Ibid., 15.

²⁴² Basinger, *I Do and I Don't*, 318.

the main selling point. Since, as Basinger observes, Americans could have “sex, children, and cohabitation” without marriage, “films elevated the event and made it the main point: the Big Wedding in which [one] could have the decorations, the food, the booze, and the outfits without having to be bored by marriage problems.”²⁴³

McDonald argues that this wedding-centered marketing strategy exposed the romantic comedy’s anxious denial over its continued obsolescence by stressing the dead certainty of the heterosexual couple’s union.²⁴⁴ Indeed, the institution of marriage had changed a great deal both on paper and in people’s lived experiences between the long decade of the fifties and the revival of marriage themes in rom-coms from the mid-nineties and new millennium. As even the most cursory overview of the institution reveals, marriage is no longer exclusively heterosexual in many Western countries, and the family wage upon which the entire breadwinner ethic was built has all but evaporated from what remains of the American middle class. Moreover, U.S. divorce rates remain as high as they were in the seventies;²⁴⁵ single parent households have more than tripled in the U.S. since 1960;²⁴⁶ and more than half of births to American women under thirty occur outside marriage.²⁴⁷ Yet, the romantic comedy’s understanding of the boring “marriage problems” Basinger refers to still resemble those from the long decade of the fifties, particularly when it comes to the male perspective.

²⁴³ Ibid., 334-335.

²⁴⁴ McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 90-91.

²⁴⁵ Rosin, *The End of Men*, 49.

²⁴⁶ Aparna Mathur, Hao Fu, and Peter Hansen, “The Mysterious and Alarming Rise of Single Parenthood in America,” *The Atlantic*, September 3, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/09/the-mysterious-and-alarming-rise-of-single-parenthood-in-america/279203/>

²⁴⁷ Jason DeParle and Sabrina Tavernise, “For Women Under 30, Most Births Occur Outside Marriage,” *New York Times*, February 17, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/18/us/for-women-under-30-most-births-occur-outside-marriage.html>

According to Rosin's research on marriage trends in the twenty-first century, prominent studies "show that married men are happier, healthier, and live longer than their single counterparts"; and contrary to what decades of bachelor culture would have one believe, married men also "report more sexual satisfaction."²⁴⁸ Yet, forty-eight years after Rock Hudson's anti-marriage rant in *Pillow Talk*, Paul Rudd's character in *Knocked Up* (2007) delivers an unsettlingly similar account of marriage from an insider's perspective. Rudd likens his experience of marriage and fatherhood to a contemporary television sitcom about a white, middle-class husband and father perpetually downtrodden by the constant bickering, guilt trips, and conflicting expectations from his wife, children, meddling parents, and brother:

Marriage is like that show *Everybody Loves Raymond*, but it's not funny. All the problems are the same, but instead of all the funny, pithy dialogue, everybody's just really pissed off and tense. Marriage is like an unfunny, tense version of *Everybody Loves Raymond*. But it doesn't last 22 minutes. It lasts forever.

As the on point *Everybody Loves Raymond* reference attests, the subject of marriage remains mostly confined to the daily, domesticated rhythms of television in the new millennium. When it comes to Hollywood feature films, marriage is still generally confined to the background for a "laugh, or a heart tug, or warning," which as Basinger notes, keeps the subject familiar but also at a distance.²⁴⁹ *Knocked Up*, for instance, features marriage in a more traditional sense because the married characters, Pete (Paul Rudd) and Debbie (Leslie Mann), ultimately serve as knowing, foul-mouthed harbingers that haunt the main characters' present and future while providing uneasy audiences with an outlet for frustration and comic relief. Since Debbie and Pete's marriage is not the thematic focal point, *Knocked Up* is not exactly a

²⁴⁸ Rosin, *The End of Men*, 68.

²⁴⁹ Basinger, *I Do and I Don't*, 75.

“marriage movie.” As David Denby notes, however, *Knocked Up* nonetheless “offers a marriage plot that could not be more wary of marriage.”²⁵⁰

In focusing on a schlubby boy-man’s struggle to prove himself a suitable partner and father after he carelessly impregnates a stunning and successful woman, *Knocked Up* serves as symptomatic deliberation on the social and psychic reinforcement of intimate expectations that no longer necessarily rest on the eroding bedrock of heterosexual marriage in the twenty-first century. Most specifically, *Knocked Up* reacts to a major, gradual shift in cultural attitudes towards marriage, which is no longer considered the exclusive gateway to adulthood for men and (especially) women to live up to. Rather, as Berlant argues, “the new virtuous category of majority is ‘parent,’” which has superseded the two-as-one-unit of the couple as the gold standard for normative personhood and good citizenship in late twentieth century and early twenty-first century America.²⁵¹ This invigorated reproductive pressure however, still weighs most heavily on women in the twenty-first century, who increasingly find themselves laboring more than ever inside and outside of the home, as well as on their own bodies.

Indeed, reproductive rights and technology, family planning, social policy, medicine, education, the childrearing market, and cultural attitudes towards pregnancy and motherhood have changed dramatically since Lucy first announced she was “*enceinte*” and Doris Day poured over her temperature charts in *The Tunnel of Love*. After a surge of wedding themed romantic comedies, for instance, *Knocked Up* helped spawn a cluster of insemination comedies, including *Baby Mama* (2008), *The Switch* (2010), and *The Back-Up Plan* (2010), which feature single,

²⁵⁰ Denby, “A Fine Romance.”

²⁵¹ Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 76.

middle-aged women who attempt to conceive and raise children as single-mothers—that is, until their sperm donors unexpectedly decide to take up their proper role as partners and fathers.

While women may have access to more choices and opportunities than ever before, the reproductive imperative in millennial romantic comedy remains similar to that of the baby-boom era, especially when it comes to dealing with the male revolt. Despite their shared, marked discontent with uncomfortably similar, gendered markers of maturity and the day-to-day drudgery of marriage, both *The Tunnel of Love* and *Knocked Up* present stories about the ways in which unprepared and/or reluctant father figures react to (actual and imagined) unexpected pregnancies. In relishing in white male victimhood, both films flirt aggressively with vulgarity and irreverence but remain snagged in an unhappy pattern of simultaneously warning against and endorsing a woebegone doctrine of “no choice” settling for men and women.

***The Tunnel of Love*: “Entertainment That Will Raise Your Temperature!”**

In an attempt to pass off marriage, suburban living, and infertility as romantic comedy material, the theatrical trailer for the 1958 film, *The Tunnel of Love*, promised audiences a “delicious design for new combat tactics in the battle of the sexes in the suburbs.” Like most sex comedies, *The Tunnel of Love* foregrounded the fervent combativeness between the couple while pitching itself as a “bedtime story for adults only”—a common tagline that implied equal parts fantasy, titillation, and security. According to the trailer, *The Tunnel of Love* posed a rather unsettling and convoluted dilemma: “How can Dick Widmark convince Doris Day that the baby who looks exactly like him is their baby when she knows she didn’t have it?” As a story about “love and having babies, and how to enjoy both,” *The Tunnel of Love* also dared to explore the limitations of this life narrative.

The Tunnel of Love adapted its racy, befuddling plot line from the Broadway hit of the same title. However, the stage play’s “blushing” boldness that made it popular with urban, theater-going audiences was rather difficult for the film’s director, Gene Kelly, and producer, Martin Melcher, to translate on screen for mainstream audiences. The film faced a number of production obstacles, including stringent time budget constraints from MGM, objections from the PCA censors, and the last-minute casting of Ricard Widmark as a replacement for Glenn Ford.²⁵² Though Widmark was a well-respected, serious actor, general audiences were not particularly receptive to Widmark playing the comedic role of Augie Poole, whose character resembled the mopey, insecure husband played by Tom Ewell in Billy Wilder’s popular suburban

²⁵² In addition to shooting the picture in black and white over a short, three week time period, Glenn Ford, who was originally cast in the lead role, unexpectedly dropped out of the project due to a scheduling conflict. Kelly would later partially attribute the film’s box office losses to Ford’s replacement, Widmark. See “*The Tunnel of Love*,” The Films of Doris Day, <http://www.dorisdaily.net/tunnel-of-love/>

sex comedy, *The Seven Year Itch* (1955).²⁵³ As one reviewer put it, Widmark was best known for playing “virile roles,” and therefore did not seem “at ease” playing Day’s “tormented husband.”²⁵⁴

Day, on the other hand, proved to be the most powerful force in *The Tunnel of Love*’s production, marketing, and reception. She played Isolde Poole, Augie’s formidable, spirited wife who also happened to be “tormented” when it came to her struggles with infertility and her partner’s feebleness. By 1958, Day had not yet achieved the truly spectacular level of fame that the quintessential sex comedy, *Pillow Talk*, would bring her the following year, but she had essentially established the on and off screen qualities that would clinch her as sex comedy actress extraordinaire and national sweetheart.²⁵⁵

The Tunnel of Love’s suburban, matrimonial setting actually afforded Day with more room for comedic exploration than her career woman sex comedies. The film also set precedent for her future wifely and motherly roles in the comedies *Move Over Darling* (1963), *The Thrill of It All* (1963), and *Send Me No Flowers* (1964).²⁵⁶ As Spigel observes in regards to the era’s popular situation comedies, female comedic performances were made less threatening when wildly physical or risqué humor was embedded in domestic scenarios.²⁵⁷ Though it seemed

²⁵³ Coincidentally, Tom Ewell played the role of Augie Poole in the Broadway production of *The Tunnel of Love*.

²⁵⁴ “*Tunnel of Love*,” *Harrison’s Reports*, October 11, 1958, *The Tunnel of Love* File, Herrick.

²⁵⁵ According to *Photoplay*’s profile on the star in 1957, Day was already considered “the girl every guy should marry.” “Escape to Happiness (Doris Day),” *Photoplay*.

²⁵⁶ These Doris Day comedies, however, were not as popular with contemporary audiences, nor have they received the same scholarly and critical attention as the courtship sex comedies like *Pillow Talk*. As *Time* magazine’s review of *Thrill of It All* explained, “. . .one thrill is missing; the will she-or-won’t-she-question that so breathlessly sustained the previous assaults on Doris Day’s virginity in the recent sudsy cycle of Day comedies. Now that Doris has given in and traded maidenhood for motherhood, life is going to be drabber for the ladies in the balcony.” “Soap Operator,” *Time*, August 9, 1963. *The Thrill of It All* File, Herrick.

²⁵⁷ Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 153.

counterintuitive, on-screen wives and mothers could potentially engage in more comedic boundary pushing than say, for instance, the ditzy, bachelorette bombshells played by the Marilyn Monroe types.

Day's honorable reputation and down-to-earth charm aided in the studio's bargaining with the PCA, whose regulations stated that "the sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld," adding that "[a]dultery, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively."²⁵⁸ Unsurprisingly, the most obvious discrepancy between the stage and film versions had to do with Augie's extramarital tryst with the adoption agent. In the stage play, Augie goes through with the affair and impregnates the agent so that the child he ultimately adopts is his own.²⁵⁹ In the film version, however, the Code insisted that "the audience would know that the leading man is not the father of the child, and a great deal of the subsequent comedy would stem from the fact that is he accused of the paternity and is unable to disprove it."²⁶⁰

Though the script was certainly tuned down, it was not entirely tuned out. In part thanks to Day's antiseptic influence, *The Tunnel of Love* still flowed with innuendo and suggestive topics, including infertility, illegitimacy and adultery.²⁶¹ As one critic proclaimed, "[a] lot of the picture's quality comes from Miss Day's clean playing of sexy situations. She's as wholesome as

²⁵⁸ Basinger, *I Do and I Don't*, 146.

²⁵⁹ Dick Williams, "Sex is Dull Allusion in *Tunnel of Love*," *Mirror News*, December 18, 1958, *The Tunnel of Love* File, Herrick.

²⁶⁰ "The *Tunnel of Love*: Memo for the Files," *The Tunnel of Love* MPAA File, Herrick.

²⁶¹ One critic, for instance, imagined the producers' strategy went something like this: "get Doris Day—the epitome of wholesomeness—to play the feminine lead. Get Richard Widmark—one of Hollywood's model citizens—to co-star. Give them an honest situation with honest lines—and what is there to object to?" Lowell E Redelings, "The *Tunnel of Love*," *Hollywood Citizen News*, November 11, 1958. *The Tunnel of Love* File, Herrick.

wheat germ, as bubbly as champagne.”²⁶² Not only did the apparent cleaning power of the “well-scrubbed” Doris Day allow audiences to absorb more dirty jokes, but the PCA’s objections (along with the Legion of Decency’s “B” rating), ended up generating publicity for the film in a similar fashion to Preminger’s *The Moon Is Blue*. As the film’s trailer gushed, “confidentially, they said it couldn’t be made, but we made it!”

The Tunnel of Love was thus marketed and received most favorably as “adult” entertainment.²⁶³ As with *The Moon Is Blue*, however, numerous reviewers expressed disappointment in *The Tunnel of Love*’s representational restraint. For instance, the notoriously ornery *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther groaned: “Such blunt words as ‘Kinsey’ and ‘pregnant’ and even ‘aphrodisiac’ drop from the lips of the characters in unembarrassed loquacity. And what they are candidly discussing in this new film at the Roxy—well! We blush to have to tell you, but it’s philoprogenitiveness.”²⁶⁴ Most critics, however, were not nearly as vehemently dismissive as Crowther, and for good reason. Though the film ultimately lost money at the box office and went on to receive scant scholarly attention, *The Tunnel of Love* stirred up some rather sensitive subjects as it explored the limitations of the era’s good life fantasy.

As critic Jack Moffitt noted, *The Tunnel of Love* “proves that there are plenty of diverting boudoir excursions and alarms after marriage. It’s a rollicking sampling of the Kinsey report with

²⁶² Jack Moffitt, “*The Tunnel of Love*,” *Hollywood Reporter*, October 9, 1958. *The Tunnel of Love* File, Herrick.

²⁶³ According to a write-up in the *Hollywood Citizen News*, the film was well-received by two sneak preview screenings in Long Beach, California, which the article describes as a “retirement refuge for senior citizens.” The article quotes *The Tunnel of Love* screenwriter, Joseph Fields, who boasts “we’ve received more than 450 audience-reaction cards. . . Not one objection was voiced. In fact, we were complimented on presenting an adult comedy—and were urged to make more. . . One woman, who gave her age on the audience-reaction card as 74, commented ‘it’s the funniest picture I’ve seen since *The Moon is Blue*.’” “*The Tunnel of Love*,” *Hollywood Citizen News*, November 11, 1958, *The Tunnel of Love* File, Herrick.

²⁶⁴ Bosley Crowther, “*The Tunnel of Love*,” *New York Times*, November 22, 1958. *The Tunnel of Love* File, Herrick.

laughing gas used to anesthetize all the more serious problems.”²⁶⁵ Other critics recognized this embedded seriousness; a *Newsweek* reviewer observed, for instance, that the film “laughs at the top of its voice at an essentially tragic subject. . . The whole affair is about as funny as a musical comedy about a man in an iron lung.”²⁶⁶ Indeed, *The Tunnel of Love*’s rather impenitent tone signaled a certain internal frustration for its own limitations as a commercially produced genre film that wanted to take its discontent seriously. The discourse of *The Tunnel of Love* thus revealed that dissatisfaction with the era’s rigid sexual mores was, in fact, rather commonplace and impassioned before activists began naming things like “the mystique” and rallying for personal and political change in the mid and late 1960s.

The Tunnel of Love

As with most Doris Day comedies, *The Tunnel of Love* opens with Day’s trademark, extradiegetic singing voice. Set to footage of a car breezing down a highway, intercut with two-shots of Day and Widmark laughing and exchanging loving gazes, Day warbles a catchy tune about kissing in “the tunnel of love.” Although the song’s lyrics are rather vapid, the titular “tunnel of love” reference lends itself to several meaningful interpretations within and beyond the context of the film. In a historical sense, the “tunnel of love” names a popular amusement park ride from the early 20th century, where young couples rode two-passenger boats through dark passages. Similar to early movie theaters, the tunnel of love served as an erotically charged space where darkness provided a degree of privacy; the ride’s sometimes frightening spectacles also offered a socially acceptable “excuse” for physical contact at a time when public affection

²⁶⁵ Moffitt, “*The Tunnel of Love*.”

²⁶⁶ “Westport Gone Astray,” *Newsweek*, November 17, 1958, *The Tunnel of Love* File, Herrick.

was considered inappropriate.²⁶⁷ Fittingly, the camera in *The Tunnel of Love's* opening sequence does not show the couple's interactions once they enter the dark privacy of the tunnel; it remains at a distance until they arrive at their home in Westport, Connecticut, where they never quite recapture the kind of breezy, romantic joy they experienced before passing through that tunnel connecting their urban past and suburban present.²⁶⁸

In a more figurative sense, the liminal nature of the tunnel as a passageway speaks to *The Tunnel of Love's* inherent middle-ness as a romantic comedy about marriage. Colloquially speaking, the tunnel is often called upon to represent something one must persevere through before reaching the figurative "light" at the end of it. The ostensibly dark, tedious, uncertain middle-ness of the tunnel is thus subordinated to an imaginary, rewarding endpoint, such as in the mysterious processes of birth or death, for example.²⁶⁹ As the common wedding vow phrase "till death do us part" implies, marriage is often figured as a long stage between youth and death or autonomy and death; marriage thus provides the setting for the seemingly inevitable, gradual tapering of romance, passion, virility and fertility. In *The Tunnel of Love*, the day-to-day middle-ness of the couple's marriage in *The Tunnel of Love* is deeply problematic, but as a romantic comedy couple, their middle-ness is also filled with exciting deviations and hopeful possibilities, particularly when it comes to the prospect of new beginnings with a child.

While the goal of parenthood is almost immediately figured as the "light" this couple is

²⁶⁷ Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 25.

²⁶⁸ In yet another ode to the turn of the century amusement park attraction, Augie and Isolde's Westport home just so happens to be a converted barn resembling one incarnation of the tunnel of love ride called "Ye Old Mill." This subtle reference to the erotically charged, dark space of yore foreshadows the racy "philoprogenitiveness" that will soon be underway in the Poole household.

²⁶⁹ In the 21st century, in fact, "tunnel of love" is defined as a euphemism for vagina on the notorious website, Urban Dictionary. "Tunnel of Love," Urban Dictionary, July 30, 2005, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Tunnel+of+Love>

hoping for after struggling with infertility for years, the light at the end of the actual tunnel they pass through in the opening scene takes on a strangely foreboding quality. The suburb of Westport, in fact, evokes yet another colloquial usage of the word “tunnel,” in that its culture appears to be suffering from the kind of “tunnel vision” that defined and distorted all aspects of public and private life for Americans during the Cold War years. When the couple passes through the tunnel to Westport they both resist and conform to these narrow, rigidly defined expectations and roles that would later become known as the “mystique” or the breadwinner ethic. As its characters struggle to live up to and find fulfillment in this good life fantasy, *The Tunnel of Love* upsets what Elaine Tyler May identifies as the “two essential ingredients” required for strong families in the postwar era: “sexual restraint outside marriage and traditional gender roles in marriage.”²⁷⁰

Baby News

Strong families, however, also required children. While the opening scene gives the impression that Augie and Isolde are newlyweds embarking on a new (sex)life in the suburbs, the viewer learns that this canoodling couple has actually just returned from celebrating their five year wedding anniversary in the city. Upon entering their converted barn, Augie and Isolde are surprised by their neighbors, Dick (Gig Young) and Alice Pepper (Elisabeth Fraser), who have been waiting in the Poole’s living room with a bottle of celebratory champagne. In addition to the black and white film stock and the suburban iconography (e.g. lawns, picket fences, trees, driveways, etc.), this intimate, family-like relationship between the Pooles and the Peppers imbues *The Tunnel of Love* with a certain sitcom quality. As discussed in the chapter’s

²⁷⁰ May, *Homeward Bound*, 99.

introductory remarks, television had become a familiar and favorable outlet for exploring marriage's day-to-day dramas; the sitcom also played an important role in helping Americans come to terms with the explosion of new, government subsidized suburban developments and the experience of living in such communities, which were designed and pitched as the backdrop for the exclusionary and largely unattainable fantasy of the good life.

By foregrounding the closeness and constant comings and goings between the Pooles and the Peppers (especially between the husbands) *The Tunnel of Love* echoed the sitcom's efforts to acknowledge and mitigate fears about suburban alienation.²⁷¹ While filming is more or less limited to the Pooles' and Peppers' interiors and connected lawns, Westport serves as more than just a mere backdrop of manicured gardens and good neighborliness; this curiously animated and influential place occupies conversations and informs the characters' behaviors. Within the film world of *The Tunnel of Love*, as well as its extra textual discourse, Westport inspires a mixture of fascination and repulsion in a similar fashion to the diegetic and extradiegetic reactions to virginity in other midcentury sex comedies, such as *That Touch of Mink* and *The Moon Is Blue*. What makes *The Tunnel of Love* a rather exceptional text for the era is that the Pooles eventually forsake Westport (and its purported family-friendliness) in order to raise a family in the city.

Up until this last minute, spontaneous epiphany, however, the Pooles make a determined effort, like the Peppers before them, to settle for their historical moment's picture-perfect version of the good life. In continuing the quest to achieve this ideal, the Pooles excitedly reveal to the Peppers that they finally have some baby news. Five years of marriage with no children was,

²⁷¹ According to Spigel, television programs "provided an illusion of the ideal neighborhood—the way it was supposed to be. Just when people had left their lifelong companions in the city, television sitcoms pictured romanticized versions of neighbor and family bonding." Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 129.

after all, not only considered an eternity, but a tragic anomaly during the postwar baby boom when most married couples had an average of three children in a few years, usually before they reached age thirty.²⁷² Indeed, the era's skyrocketing birthrate was in large part ideologically driven. As May notes, "postwar men and women were endorsing and affirming, through their families, the goals expressed by major political leaders and experts," who called for "bigger and better 'successful' American families."²⁷³ In light of these tremendous social pressures, childlessness (even involuntary childlessness) was "considered deviant, selfish, and pitiable."²⁷⁴

While the Pooles possessed the entwined privileges of whiteness, heterosexuality, youth, and class required to access and thrive within a place like Westport, their childless status essentially rendered them outsiders, along with "people of color, lesbian and gay people, unmarried people, homeless people, and senior citizens," who the FHA had effectively zoned out of the suburbs and their community centers based on discrete stages of family development (e.g. schools, playgrounds).²⁷⁵ What makes matters even worse for the Pooles, especially for Isolde, is that their best friends, the Peppers, happen to be exceptionally, even irritatingly, fertile ("they had a house full without trying," as noted in the film's trailer).

After the Pooles' explain that their "baby" news has to do with their commencement of the adoption process and not Isolde's pregnancy, the Peppers pause before offering their enthusiastic congratulations. When the pregnant Alice proceeds to ask the poor, barren Isolde, "are you giving up the doctor and all those tests?" Isolde adamantly insists that they are still

²⁷² May, *Homeward Bound*, 137.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁷⁵ Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 110.

trying for one of their own. Dick then offers an unhelpful piece encouragement by reminding the Pooles of the common myth that a woman was more likely to get pregnant after adopting a child.²⁷⁶

Indeed, as Leslie Lindenauer's explains in her book on popular representations of the stepmother, *I Could Not Call Her Mother*, it was not uncommon for films, journal articles, and advice manuals of the 1940s and 1950s to celebrate adoption as a way to achieve the era's maternal ideal, but only as a last resort when biological means failed.²⁷⁷ According to Lindenauer, even as films and women's magazines tried to embrace adoption as a path to motherhood, "women's magazines and childcare books reemphasized the glory of birth and breastfeeding, and proffered pity to women who faced the horrible condition of infertility. Dozens of articles celebrated the joys of natural childbirth, the growing contention that birth could be 'thrilling' rather than a 'nightmare.'"²⁷⁸ The glamorous, patriotic, sacred glow of biological motherhood was inescapable, and infertility was, for many women, an inescapable reminder that they would never fully achieve the era's already impracticable feminine ideals.

When Isolde assures the Peppers "we're trying everything—we're going to exhaust *every possibility*," her remark is immediately followed by a wah-wah pedal sound effect (also known as the "sad trombone") as the camera cuts to a shot of her frowning, nervous husband. Dick gives Augie a stiff, encouraging nudge in solidarity and they exchange a smug albeit nervous grin.

²⁷⁶ According to Lindenauer, this "myth that a woman was more likely to get pregnant after adoption dominated popular media despite assurances by some in the medical profession that the statistical likelihood was no better than it had been before adoption." Leslie J. Lindenauer, *I Could Not Call Her Mother: The Stepmother in American Popular Culture, 1750-1960* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 114.

²⁷⁷ These biological failures were often pitted on the mother; Lindenauer confirms that certain psychological theories assigned blame to the childless woman by positing infertility as "a symptom of 'emotional disturbance,' a condition that might be mitigated by adoption." *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

While *The Tunnel of Love* certainly paints a sympathetic portrait of this generally good natured couple struggling through a most unfortunate situation, this moment of male camaraderie between Dick and Augie is the first of many instances where the film works particularly hard to align viewer identification and sympathy with Augie's character; it also foreshadows the subsequent, conspiring antics between the two husbands that provide most of the film's conflicts and comic relief.

Infertility

Within the first few minutes of the film, then, Isolde's turmoil and travails are overshadowed by Augie's plight and Dick's well-intentioned intervening. When Alice expresses sincere concern for Isolde, who is apparently "taking her temperature every day, keeping fever charts, going to the doctor, taking all sorts of tests, driving herself crazy," Dick is quick to remind her that Isolde's baby-making efforts are driving Augie crazy too. Alice says, "all he has to do is keep on tap at the right time, that's nothing," to which Dick replies, "Oh, that's nothing?" While Dick apparently has the ability to impregnate Alice just by "looking" at her, Augie is having trouble even looking Isolde in the eye out of shame, guilt, frustration for his perceived failure as a man.

The film, however, does not waste any time parlaying the otherwise melodramatic subjects of infertility and impotence into comedic material by shifting focus to the actual mechanics involved in getting pregnant. The discussion and representation of pregnancy—let alone the mechanics of it—was mostly uncharted comedic terrain for Hollywood movies. After all, it had only been five years since the word "pregnant" was spoken in *The Moon Is Blue*. Predictably, the Code censors were especially concerned with the films' philoprogenitiveness

element, much more so than the themes of adultery and illegitimacy.²⁷⁹ Considering its taboo factor, as well as the Code's objections, *The Tunnel of Love* foregrounded this baby-making element in its marketing strategy. The studio press book, for instance, summed up *The Tunnel of Love* as "all about how Doris Day and Richard Widmark discover that the rock-a-bye-road-to-romance is more than doing what comes naturally. Before it's over, even the birds and the bees look old fashioned."²⁸⁰ The trailer, moreover, promised audiences "entertainment that will raise your temperature" while Day and Widmark were shown kissing and cuddling on the sofa.

A few popular press reviews paid lip service to the film's suggestiveness; *LA Times* critic Betty Martin, for instance, described the film as a "sophisticated comedy" that "deals frankly and perhaps a bit too personally with a young couple. . .who are eagerly and graphically trying for parenthood."²⁸¹ Most critics, however, expressed at least mild disappointment in the film's overall tameness. In addition to Crowther's scathing remarks for example, one especially colorful review moaned that "screenwriter Joseph Fields, whose leering ideas of comedy are as quaint as they are archaic, has done what I didn't think possible—made sex intolerably dull in *Tunnel of Love*. . .there's about as much sex in it as in a tankful of tropical fish."²⁸² This "temperature raising" guarantee thus spoke to the film's promises of love and baby-making

²⁷⁹ A memo from the PCA to the producers noted: "This script was basically acceptable under the requirements of the Code but still contained one sequence which could not be given the approval of this office. Specifically, we were concerned with the scenes in which Augie and his wife carry on a detailed discussion of the mechanics of getting Isolde pregnant." "*The Tunnel of Love*," Memo for the Files, October 14, 1957, *The Tunnel of Love* MPAA File, Herrick.

²⁸⁰ "*The Tunnel of Love*," MGM Preview Program, *The Tunnel of Love* File, Herrick.

²⁸¹ Betty Martin, "Suburbia Goes Native in *Tunnel of Love*," *Los Angeles Times*, December 18, 1958, *The Tunnel of Love* File, Herrick.

²⁸² Williams, "Sex is Dull Allusion in *Tunnel of Love*."

sexual thrills, as well as to the low fever of anger that set in for the characters and audiences when these promises went unfulfilled.

In a sense, these remarks about the lackluster sex in *The Tunnel of Love* actually speak to the film's consistent, effective efforts to align viewer identification with Augie's flaccid disposition and psyche, which curiously contrasts with the widely publicized preview program's artistic rendering of Widmark in a seductive, mounting position over Day.²⁸³ For instance, the most controversial scene in the film, where Augie and Isolde discuss and attempt to execute the advice of the medical experts, opens with a shot of Augie lounging on the couch, exhausted from the summer heat and a frustrating work day. As Isolde messes with her temperature charts offscreen, Augie looks towards the camera and thinks to himself "if we don't have a baby there's no justice."

In addition to the voice-over device, which is one of cinema's most familiar, straightforward means of allowing audiences to access a character's inner thoughts and feelings, this scene makes strategic use of high and low camera angles in order to reveal and reinforce the shifting power dynamics between the couple. When Isolde rushes downstairs with her thermometer and chart exclaiming "it's up," she gives Augie a seductive, knowing look, implying that it's time for him to get a certain something "up" as well. During their conversation, the camera alternates between a low angle looking up towards Isolde and a high angle position glaring down on on Augie, who could not be less enthusiastic, let alone aroused by Isolde's insistence. "Darling," says Isolde, "we have to hurry because afterwards I need to be in Dr.

²⁸³ The film's official preview program featured a bundle-toting stork flying towards Widmark, who sprawls his pajamaed body across the couple's double beds and plants a kiss on Day. "*The Tunnel of Love*," MGM Preview Program.

Vancouver's office in thirty minutes." The camera cuts from Isolde's threatening gaze to a low angle of Augie curling into a fetal position on the couch.

While it is clear that Isolde is putting all the effort into curing their childlessness, the viewer is nonetheless drawn into sympathetic identification with Augie's character, who is not only rendered vulnerable cinematically but also views himself as a victim. Augie is up against Isolde's demands, his own insecurities, as well as a remote, authoritative third party meddling in their intimate affairs: Dr. Vancouver. By the end of World War II, family planning and parenting were two ostensibly private aspects of postwar life that fell under particularly obsessive outside scrutiny and regulation. While the era's rigid sexual mores, sky-rocketing teenage birth rates, and the baby-boom itself may suggest otherwise, the birth control movement actually picked up serious momentum during the fifties, but with one crucial caveat. As May explains, "contraception in the postwar years encouraged scientific family planning, rather than premarital sexual experimentation or alternatives to motherhood for women. American public opinion, legislative bodies, and the medical establishment all did their part to make sure that the birth control technology would encourage marriage and family life."²⁸⁴

Isolde and Dr. Vancouver's version of "scientific family planning," which involves "getting a hold of your husband" when a temperature graph hits a certain mark, and then driving straight to the doctor's office, only ends up sabotaging the couple's lovemaking, as well as their marriage. When Isolde reminds Augie that they are wasting "valuable time"—and more importantly, Dr. Vancouver's time—Augie snaps, "what does Vancouver think I am?"

²⁸⁴ May, *Homeward Bound*, 152.

UNIVAC?!”²⁸⁵ Augie continues to rant to Isolde, “you gotta consider *my* graph. . .I can’t meet a deadline.”

As his blunt remarks suggest, Augie is struggling with feelings of emasculation. In his mind, Isolde and Dr. Vancouver have reduced him to little more than a mechanized sperm tap—a means to an end. After Augie calmly reassures Isolde that he loves her and still wants a baby, Isolde stares off, and sighs “sometimes I ask myself is love enough.” According to the postwar breadwinner ethic, love was never, in fact, enough; both men and women looked to children as a means of reconfiguring and distracting from this painful realization, but experienced the rather tyrannical pressures of reproductive futurism differently. Lindenauer, for instance, observes that although most prospective father figures in postwar popular culture, including Augie, “might have relished the idea of being a father, the husband was more anxious to make his wife happy by fulfilling her dreams of motherhood.”²⁸⁶ While men may have, as May notes, worn the “badge of ‘family man’ as a sign of virility and patriotism,”²⁸⁷ childlessness for men was not considered nearly as devastating or damaging as it was for women.

Unlike men, who had easier and fuller access to public spheres, women were generally left to soak up this homegrown discontent. Though the number of married women working outside the home soared after the war,²⁸⁸ many women turned to “building successful families” in order to achieve a sense of accomplishment and “some measure of autonomy,” which is

²⁸⁵ UNIVAC is an acronym for Universal Automatic Computer, the second commercial computer made in the United States, which debuted in 1951. “UNIVAC I,” United States Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/history/www/innovations/technology/univac_i.html

²⁸⁶ Lindenauer, *I Could Not Call Her Mother*, 123.

²⁸⁷ May, *Homeward Bound*, 98.

²⁸⁸ Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 42.

“something that neither they nor their husbands were likely to find easily in the paid labor force.”²⁸⁹ In addition to frustration at work or boredom at home, however, having children was also—somewhat paradoxically—expected to placate feelings of sexual disappointment and incompatibility, which was a major source of marital strife and resentment for men and women during this time.

According to May, “[s]ex was expected to strengthen the marriage, enhance the home, and contribute to each partner's sense of happiness and well being,” but the tension surrounding premarital sex, combined with highly inflated expectations for sublime marital sex, often led to disappointment and difficulty.²⁹⁰ Though Augie may love his wife and profess his willingness to do anything to help her conceive or acquire a child, he firmly stipulates that these efforts must be “within reason.” Apparently, having sex when his wife (and by extension, her doctor) demands it, is beyond this scope of reason. Indeed, it is precisely Isolde’s authoritative and methodical takeover of the couple’s sex life that drives Augie to self-loathing, self-sabotage, and impotence. Moreover, it is precisely this element of *The Tunnel of Love* that caused the greatest disturbance with the Code censors. According to a 1957 memo to the filmmakers, for instance, the censors specified that “[a]ll of the clinical aspects of Augie and Isolde to conceive a child would be eliminated.”²⁹¹ While the filmmakers not only used the Code’s objections to their advantage when it came to marketing *The Tunnel of Love*, and even managed to release the film without

²⁸⁹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 179.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 133-134.

²⁹¹ The memo specifies: “. . . her use of all such expressions ‘we’ve got to hurry up—and afterwards I’ve got to be in his office in thirty minutes!’ would be eliminated. So, too, would her urging of Augie to come into the bedroom with her, and his complaint that he couldn’t perform on schedule.” “*The Tunnel of Love*,” Memo for the Files, July 15, 1957, *The Tunnel of Love* MPAA File, Herrick.

conceding to the Code's above requests to eliminate such content, Isolde's behavior was nevertheless treated as an alarming problem in need of correction.

When it came to midcentury sex comedies, married women were hardly given more sexual leeway than their single counterparts, whose sexual behavior was always subjected to the most severe scrutiny and regulation at the levels of text, institution, context, and reception. Although sex was expected to flourish in marriage for men and women, there was nonetheless the widely endorsed stipulation that men would be in control with sexually submissive, competent homemakers at their side.²⁹²

On the one hand, Isolde's resolute efforts and attitude were entirely justified, even admirable within the context of the film and its cultural moment. After all, she is not assuming the sexual upper hand in the name of lust, pleasure, or erotic empowerment, but for the noble, patriotic cause of procreation. Women, moreover, were expected to demonstrate at least some interest in sex in order to keep their husbands from straying, which was viewed as a gateway to other weaknesses. On the other hand, if Isolde had demonstrated ambivalence or avoidance of these temperature-raising undertakings, it would have been considered equally problematic as her eager behavior; as May explains, "[s]o prevalent was the assumption that women were naturally fulfilled in motherhood that anxiety or ambivalence surrounding pregnancy was actually considered a pathological condition."²⁹³

The Tunnel of Love thus tamed Isolde's clinical seduction by reconfiguring the situation as an opportunity for Augie to redeem his virility and a sense of control within his marriage and

²⁹² May, *Homeward Bound*, 116, 99.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 149.

suburban haven. In fact, after some sniveling about his “weak character” and “failure” converts Isolde’s anger into sympathy, Augie essentially puts the blame on the ‘burbs for killing their sex life and driving them apart. Once Isolde lovingly agrees to Augie’s pleas to “let nature carry the ball” and to let him “call all the signals” from now on, he starts reminiscing about their less comfortable, but far more exciting, boner-inspiring lives in the city when they “had to get into bed to keep warm.” Augie’s smoldering memories of urban life prove to be amazing foreplay for both parties involved. After a considerably lengthy montage of shot-counter-shot continuity editing that kept the couple in separate frames during their disagreement, Isolde and Augie snuggle into the same overhead shot and share lingering, impassioned kisses on the couch.

Even though Augie may have regained the sexual upper hand, he is nonetheless willing to make one major concession to Isolde without risking emasculation: calling Dr. Vancouver. The scene wraps with Augie breaking away from Isolde’s embrace, walking over to the phone, and dialing Dr. Vancouver’s office while holding his wife’s wildly wanting and appreciative gaze from across the room. While the erotic tone of this scene is rather exceptional for a midcentury romantic comedy, Augie’s phone call to the “expert” nonetheless endorses the unsettlingly reductive cultural consensus that the sexiest, most pleasurable and meaningful type of sex is, in fact, the “philoprogenitive” kind.

Infidelity

As it turns out, however, it is actually the fruitlessness of his chosen career that Augie finds even more emasculating than the fruitlessness of his loins. The first act reveals that Augie is failing as a freelance artist and, to make matters worse, Isolde’s grandmother is the one subsidizing his unprofitable passion and cushy Westport lifestyle. Considering, however, that the

number of married women in the workforce skyrocketed during the fifties, Augie could at least take some twisted sense of comfort in the fact that his wife was not technically working to support him and/or out-earning him (as in the 1963 sex comedy *Thrill of It All*).²⁹⁴ While Day is often remembered for playing these successful, elegant career woman types in sex comedies such as *The Thrill of It All*, *Teacher's Pet*, *Pillow Talk*, and *Lover Come Back*, *The Tunnel of Love* does not reveal any clues about Isolde's past education or professional experience, nor does her character speak of any career aspirations other than the unpaid labor of childrearing, homemaking, and volunteering as a local scout leader.

Though she may subscribe to the idealized woman's role defined by the breadwinner ethic, Isolde nevertheless troubles the rigid categories of acceptable femininity found in most midcentury romantic comedies and popular culture more broadly. For instance, unlike for many women on and off screen in the fifties, marriage was not a "meal ticket" for Isolde, which allowed her to make more passionate choices when it came to mate selection and relationship dynamics.²⁹⁵ Although Isolde and Augie are well aware that her inheritance is running dry, Isolde fervently supports her husband's unconventional career choice, and puts a great deal of effort into fortifying his fragile ego. Just as she reminds Augie that their childlessness is not his "fault," (at least not physically, according to Dr. Vancouver), she repeatedly dissuades Augie from giving up art and applying for a corporate, sell-out job that would help pay the bills and support her frivolous spending habits (she gets slapped with a hefty parking ticket while shopping at a New York City department store for a dress she can wear to shop in a more upscale department store,

²⁹⁴ In *Thrill of It All*, Day plays a doctor's wife and mother who just so happens to make a large fortune selling soap on television; it is not long, however, before she is shamed into quitting her celebrated career in order to work full time as a wife and mother—with another baby on the way for good measure.

²⁹⁵ May, *Homeward Bound*, 193.

for example). While Isolde's actions and attitudes provide a glimpse into what must have been a privileged upbringing, they also reveal a tremendous amount of confidence in her husband's earning potential, as well as a sincere belief that love is, above all else, more important than the breadwinner salary when it comes to marital and maternal bliss.

Isolde also shares Augie's fears about the soul-crushing, emasculating nature of the nine-to-five corporate culture. As Beth Bailey notes, in order to succeed in corporate culture, men were required to adopt a number of functional behaviors, such as "teamwork, conformity, and cooperation," which were considered traditional feminine behaviors.²⁹⁶ Indeed, the ability to achieve autonomy and financial success in exceptional careers outside of the corporate box was, in large part, what made the sex comedy playboy bachelor types in films such as *The Tender Trap*, *The Moon Is Blue*, *Pillow Talk*, *Lover Come Back*, *That Touch of Mink*, *Bachelor in Paradise*, and *Sunday in New York* so attractive, fun, and lovable for the on-screen heroines and popular audiences.

Although Augie finds himself in an exceptionally fortunate position to be pursuing his dream career as a self-employed artist, he nonetheless expresses feelings of boredom, disappointment, and emasculation in regards to his work—most of which he completes from his small, at-home studio. Augie's feelings of work-related emasculation stem in part from this muddying of work and leisure space, the gendered division of which has structured middle class ideals of domesticity since the 19th century; for complicated and evolving reasons, the conceptually, albeit never concretely, distinct spheres of public and private life were gendered

²⁹⁶ Bailey writes that in order "to provide well for his family, many feared, a man would have to act like a woman." Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 104.

masculine and feminine, respectively.²⁹⁷ During the fifties, the suburban home was not only looked to as a site of family leisure and respite, but as a planned, “self-contained universe” appointed with all the necessary technological advances, architectural amenities, and landscape features that domesticated recreation and minimized the need to import or export services (e.g. laundry, gardening, cleaning, etc.).²⁹⁸ When such household appointments raised standards for completed work and allowed time for new and additional tasks, work at home became, perhaps more than ever, associated with unpaid, undervalued, and decidedly “feminine” labor.²⁹⁹

Without children to fill the rooms and hours, a breadwinner salary to keep up with the Joneses, and enough excuses to venture from the feminized zone of suburban home life, Augie’s impotent soul rivaled Isolde’s barren womb as the film’s most tragic case of unfulfilled gender expectations. When addressing Augie’s despondency, Dick in fact, makes a spot-on comparison between Augie and the potted plant in his home studio. In channeling that signature second banana insight, Dick tells Augie, “you need more elbow room, more dirt. . .you’ll never be an artist because you’re denying yourself the emotional soil your roots need. You’re potbound.” Between Dick and Augie, *The Tunnel of Love* tuned into what May identifies as a tragic flip side of postwar prosperity. According to May, “the provider role was a heavy burden, and not all men could be successful at it. Nor was the status of family breadwinner always an adequate compensation for an otherwise monotonous or dissatisfying job.”³⁰⁰

²⁹⁷ As Spigel summarizes, “the public world came to be conceived as a place of productive labor, while the home was seen as a site of rejuvenation and consumption.” Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 73.

²⁹⁸ May, *Homeward Bound*, 171.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 177.

As one of the lesser known albeit model sex comedy second banana performances,³⁰¹ Dick's delightful and difficult pip of a character personifies such urges to compensate for the shortcomings of breadwinning. At a glance, Dick reads as a model example of postwar, American masculinity; in addition his good looks and tall stature, Dick is the successful editor of a publication called the *Townsmen*, the owner of a spacious, well appointed home in an affluent suburb, husband to a lovely, oblivious wife, and father of three children with one on the way (followed by other one towards the end of the film). Though the PCA, along with most reviewers, agreed that the film portrayed Dick "sympathetically," he is not exactly one of Westport's upstanding citizens.³⁰²

Dick does not, for instance, deny his wife's accusations that he "resents" his family, especially when it comes to supporting them. He repeatedly warns Augie about needing "dough" once his kid comes, and his philosophy on parenting is as follows: "being a parent is just feeding the mouth that bites you." Though decidedly more playboy-esque in his personality and confidence compared to his second banana role as Roger in *That Touch of Mink* (as well as to Tony Randall's quintessential second banana characters in *Pillow Talk*, *Lover Come Back*, and *Send Me No Flowers*), Dick nevertheless engages in certain gender-troubling behaviors which imbue his character with hints of effeminacy, immaturity, and homosexuality. For instance, he sees an analyst regularly to work on his "quivering conscience," pops prescription tranquilizers "like they're popcorn," enthusiastically "chases around" with other women, and takes a rather imposing, intimate interest in Augie's sex life—or lack thereof.

³⁰¹ Gig Young and Doris Day actually starred in four movies together during this time period, including the melodrama, *Young At Heart* (1953), and the sex comedies *Teacher's Pet*, *Tunnel of Love*, and *That Touch of Mink*.

³⁰² The memo noted "Gig Young as 'sympathetically' portrayed." "*The Tunnel of Love*," PCA Film Content, 1958, *The Tunnel of Love* MPAA File, Herrick.

After using Augie's telephone to arrange an afternoon tryst, Dick chastises Augie for being "too darn normal," and "inhibited," and encourages him to "live a little." Dick is rather glib about his method for alleviating the miseries associated with the good life, and in a mock psychoanalysis session, Augie plops on the couch and asks Dick to "enlighten" him. Dick reveals that "chasing around" is the key to his own personal happiness; according to his analyst, Dick feels "uncomfortable" without guilt so he must continuously "recapture" it in order to feel alive. While Augie makes it clear that he does not understand why Dick is "always on the prowl," he does not exactly disprove of his philandering ("I don't care what you do in your own time," he says), as long as it does not affect his ability to serve as a reference for their adoption investigation.

Out of guilt for potentially letting *Augie* down rather than out of respect for his wife and children, Dick cancels his afternoon delight and quips, "there's nothing as smug as a monogamous man." At the same time, however, Dick senses Augie's potential open-mindedness and urges him to unwind with an extramarital romp because his current baby-making game-plan is clearly not working. According to Dick's risk assessment, a little action on the side would give Augie the confidence and boost he needs to make a baby, and in so doing, save his marriage—so long as Isolde never finds out. Despite all the jabbering on about his uninhibited spirit, however, it becomes clear that Dick harbors fear of his wife; when Alice unexpectedly interrupts their scotch infused man-to-man chat by ordering Dick to put down the bottle of booze, he trembles in shock and reacts with immediate obedience.

Often masked as vicious resentment, this instinctive male fear of women informed most explorations of infidelity in midcentury comedies, despite the fact that many of the male

characters, much like the “detouring husbands” in *The Tunnel of Love*, had perfectly attractive, sexual wives, who also happened to be competent homemakers and mothers.³⁰³ Unlike melodramas such as *Strangers When We Meet* (1960) or *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956), comedies of infidelity were overwhelmingly limited to fantasy and failure. In large part, actual affairs were rarely consummated in comedies (and certainly not on screen) because comedic treatments of adultery violated the Code’s moral guidelines. Moreover, if adultery was deemed necessary plot material, the PCA required an element of punishment for the adulterers, a tragic ending, or a sufficient voice for morality, all of which were largely incompatible with the romantic comedy’s zany and forgiving middle-ness.³⁰⁴

While postwar romantic comedies remained as fascinated by adultery as their pre-war screwball predecessors, adultery took on a special allure in the fifties’ sex-saturated popular culture and psychology. At the same time, however, there was also an intensified apprehension and frightfulness around this subject because it ultimately undermined the breadwinner ethic, which was the bedrock of private and public life in the postwar era. May describes the severe, vexing expectations placed on married couples, as well as the domino-like fearfulness surrounding adultery as such:

Men in sexually fulfilling marriages would not be tempted by the degenerative seductions of the outside world that came from pornography, prostitution, ‘loose women,’ or homosexuals. They would be able to stand up to the communists. They would be able to prevent the destruction of the nation's moral fiber and its inevitable result: communist takeover from inside as well as outside the country. At the same time, women had to turn their energies toward the family in healthy ways. As long as they were subordinate to their husbands, sexually and otherwise,

³⁰³ Gig Young is described as a “detouring husband” in the film’s official preview program. “*The Tunnel of Love*,” MGM Preview Program.

³⁰⁴ Basinger, *I Do and I Don’t*, 146.

they would be contented and fulfilled wives devoting themselves to expert childrearing and professionalized homemaking. As loving, erotic mates, they would prevent their husbands from straying from the straight and narrow. And they would raise healthy children to be strong, vital citizens.³⁰⁵

Romantic comedies, along with women's pictures, weepies, and family melodramas, have known all along that the totalizing fulfillment promised by marriage, sex, family, romance, and money was, in fact, a powerful myth. In the face of such formidable personal and political pressures during the postwar era, however, many people felt that an insincere embrace of this seemingly invincible myth was preferable to the consequences of denunciation, especially when it came to the sanctity of marriage.

Indeed, the rising marriage rate, falling divorce rate, and the booming birth rate did not mean that people were necessarily happier, more in love, or more fulfilled; many couples, as May confirms, "simply learned to live with sexual incompatibility or frustration."³⁰⁶ This "learning to live" with disappointment, however, often involved some component of fantasy or experimentation. On the one hand, midcentury comedies of attempted or fantasized infidelity received praise for their light titillation, for giving a validating voice (no matter how timid) to the era's unwieldy "male revolt," and for exercising restraint and discipline in their representations of such a delicate subject. On the other hand, even a small sampling of popular press reviews reveals a marked frustration and disappointment with such teasing and restraint. The most stinging of these criticisms revolved around the films' portrayal of the American male as hopelessly immature, insecure, and incapable.

³⁰⁵ May, *Homeward Bound*, 97.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

Billy Wilder's comedy *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), stands as an early and champion example of the era's contradictory pulls around the subject of infidelity.³⁰⁷ Although this film is best remembered for the ubiquitous, positively glamorous publicity still of Marilyn Monroe standing over a subway grate, clutching her floating dress, the actual content of the film is rather joyless and disenchanting. Tom Ewell plays a publishing executive who spends most of the film moping over his micromanaged, boring life after his wife and kid leave Manhattan for summer vacation. It's perhaps understandable that this out of practice, aging bachelor husband fails to swoon Marilyn Monroe, the nameless sex angel upstairs who practically stumbles into his living room, munches on potato chips dunked in champagne, and shows off her professional nudie portraits. It's rather unsettling, however, to watch when his character is rendered pathetically incapable and unattractive within his own escapist, sexual fantasies about other women.

While Monroe was given well-deserved praise for keeping “sex tempting and visually present in a story that never gets sexy,”³⁰⁸ Ewell's lame character prompted several reviewers, such as Ruth Waterbury, to ask, “what is American manhood coming to?”³⁰⁹ In another particularly impassioned critique, Jack Moffitt bemoans the lacking “element of masculine vitality,” that results in “the faintly unpleasant feeling that the hero is incapable of making anything happen.”³¹⁰ Ewell's masculinity does eventually receive a much needed boost from

³⁰⁷ Similar to *The Tunnel of Love*, *The Seven Year Itch* was adapted from a popular Broadway production, which featured an actual, consummated act of adultery. *Variety* bemoaned the film version's “emasculatation of the original plot,” and noted that the bachelor husband “remains totally, if unbelievably, chaste” as per the Code's adultery clause. “*The Seven Year Itch*,” *Variety*.

³⁰⁸ Jack Moffitt, “*The Seven Year Itch*,” *Hollywood Reporter*, June 3, 1955, *The Seven Year Itch* File, Herrick.

³⁰⁹ Ruth Waterbury, “Miss Monroe Knock Out in 7 Yr Itch,” *Examiner*, June 18, 1955, *The Seven Year Itch* File, Herrick.

³¹⁰ Moffitt, “*The Seven Year Itch*.”

Monroe, who leaves a bold, lipstick mark on his cheek so that his ungrateful, smug wife will be reminded of his desirability to other women and stop taking his loyalty for granted.

These fears and fascinations with scratching the “seven year itch,” along with the sorry state of the American male, and the fault-finding women purportedly behind his misery, found its most prolific and prominent echoing in film comedies from the early 1960s. During this time, the Code’s power and influence grew weaker, the rumblings of the sexual revolution grew stronger, and audiences grew ever jaded with “sexy but safe, tame and talky,” bedroom comedies without bedrooms.³¹¹ *Boys’ Night Out* (1962), for instance, is a lesser known infidelity comedy that actually frames itself as a sociological study on the American male and his discontents. In the film, a group of three bored, “sheepish husbands,” and one newly divorced bachelor split the rent on a swanky pad in Manhattan and arrange for a sultry blonde, played by Kim Novak, to reside there and service each of them on different nights of the week.³¹² Little do they know that Novak is a graduate student writing a thesis on the American male.

To astonishment of “red-blooded male audiences,” Novak’s experiment yields some shocking results: men, in fact, don’t want sex at all. Instead, as one reviewer observes, *Boys’ Night Out* “careens merrily on the premise that a man’s vanity is more potent than his libido.”³¹³ Indeed, much to Novak’s relief and popular audiences’ irked bewilderment, she discovers that one husband just wants to be fed without any dietary restrictions, one just wants a woman to listen to him ramble, one just wants to feel a sense of accomplishment through completing minor

³¹¹ “*Boys’ Night Out*,” *Cue*, June 23, 1962, *Boys’ Night Out* File, Herrick.

³¹² Ira Wallach, “MGM Synopsis: *Boys’ Night Out*,” March 21, 1962. *Boys’ Night Out*, MPAA File, Herrick.

³¹³ Dorothy Masters, “Kim Novak Triumphs in a Farcical Role,” *Daily News*, June 22, 1962, *Boys’ Night Out* File, Herrick.

home improvement projects, and the divorced chap (James Garner) wants—and gets—the bombshell with the Ph.D and “double D’s” to boot.

Though this type of bedroom farce was usually shrugged off as ridiculous, and audiences understood that the routine sexual cop-outs were still mandated by the Code, *Boys’ Night Out* actually touched a major nerve—much more so than *The Seven Year Itch* had seven years prior.³¹⁴ Namely, most critics were quite annoyed by the film’s “sad commentary” on the “average “Yank”—i.e. the breadwinner husband—, who comes across “as a guy obsessed with extra-sexual activities, but thoroughly inept and incapable. In short, a boob.”³¹⁵ While *Boys’ Night Out* may have questioned the red-bloodedness, maturity, and intelligence of the American breadwinner, the film, as well as the popular press reviews, did not offer much sympathy or concern for the women caught up in the mess.

Despite the deluge of publicity materials that promised heterosexual men dirty talk and deeds with a buxom blonde, *Boys’ Night Out*, like *Seven Year Itch* before it, actually seemed to speak more to women than the “average Yank.”³¹⁶ The messages, however, were vexingly mixed. On the one hand, married women and prospective wives were assured that their men were too stupid and undesirable to actually have sex with other women, but on the other hand, they were admonished for driving their men to stray.

In a sense, it would have been easier for women to accept sex as the problem and solution.

³¹⁴ According to a review in *Variety*: “This sad commentary on the American male is apparently designed as a frivolous but sophisticated romantic farce with tongue-in-cheek overtones. It turns out to be something more than that.” “*Boys’ Night Out*,” *Variety*, June 6, 1962, *Boys’ Night Out* File, Herrick.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*

³¹⁶ As one critic noted in *Show*, these Greenwich, Connecticut boys were the type “who would not be caught dead spending a night out in Manhattan at a movie like *Boys’ Night Out*,” which suggests that the “average Yank” was not exactly the ideal target audience for this comedy. “*Boys’ Night Out*,” *Show*, June, 1962, *Boys’ Night Out* File, Herrick.

Instead, women were faulted for reducing their husbands to their salaries, sperm and social security. Even more problematically, they were judged for infantilizing their husbands despite, as Novak's study finds, the "boys'" desires to be doted on and cared for as if they were children. Given that settling was the only acceptable choice men and women had when it came to their personal lives on and off screen, *Boys' Night Out* skirts its naughty promises and ends with the boys, along with their wives, "gratefully settling for married life in suburbia,"³¹⁷ but lacks genuine remorse or resolve. Indeed, although most popular press reviews, which were and still are written mostly by and for white men, rooted for the boys' efforts and were dismayed by their unbelievable chastity, a small minority of critics, such as female journalist Hazel Flynn from the *Citizen News*, echoed the PCA's marked concern for the film's distasteful premise ("isn't a share-the-blonde or brunette idea rather unclean?") and flippant attitude towards infidelity.³¹⁸ This unpopular, largely dismissed position mainly took issue with the fact that the three husbands were primarily concerned with "getting caught" by their wives rather than the immorality of their "adventurous" ideas.³¹⁹

Significantly, midcentury comedies often insisted that one's most pressing reasons for turning down perfectly titillating extramarital opportunities extended to more practical, concrete matters other than morality. On much rarer occasion, certain comedies even dared to acknowledge that this desire to stray did not belong to heterosexual men exclusively. *The Facts*

³¹⁷ Wallach, "MGM Synopsis: *Boys' Night Out*."

³¹⁸ Hazel Flynn, "*Boys' Night Out* is Cynical Farce," *Citizen News*, July 5, 1962, *Boys' Night Out* File, Herrick.

³¹⁹ In a letter from the PCA to the filmmakers, for instance, Shurlock writes: "May we also comment at this point that an element which is seriously lacking in this story is an awareness of right and wrong from any of the four men. The three who are married are mostly taken up with the problem of getting caught. Not one of them seems to have the notion flicker across his mind that their adventurous idea might be immoral." Geoffrey Shurlock, "Letter to Robert Vogel," October 2, 1961, *Boys' Night Out* MPAA File, Herrick.

of Life, for instance, is an extraordinary comedy of attempted infidelity told from woman's perspective, which received effusive praise at the time of its release, albeit curiously limited scholarly attention thereafter.³²⁰ Unlike *Seven Year Itch*, *Boys' Night Out*, as well as *The Tunnel of Love*, *The Facts of Life* does not pit a middle-aged fuddy-duddy husband against a young knock-out. Rather, Lucille Ball and Bob Hope star as middle-aged, married with children suburbanites who share similar stakes, fears, and desires as they venture into an ultimately unrequited affair. Ball plays a bored, unhappy, under-appreciated wife and mother who unexpectedly falls in love with Hope, her best friend's husband, during a group vacation in the exoticized paradise of Acapulco, Mexico—where upstanding, civilized Americans contend with their darker, baser instincts at a safe distance from their suburban home and hearth.

The would-be lover's attempts to make love in various stateside beds, however, are thwarted by a series of comical disasters. When finally given the appropriate time and space to consummate the feelings ignited below the border, the couple ends up having a serious talk about the impracticality of their relationship. The legal hassle and expense of two divorces, the ordeal of relocation, and most of all, the logistical nightmare of child custody arrangements, prompts them to reconsider acting on a romantic spark that has no guarantees of lasting. Although Hope's wife remains in the dark, Ball is presumably forgiven by her husband for her indiscretion in a rather subtle, noble fashion reminiscent of *The Awful Truth*. Both characters return to their respective spouses and friendships remain, but so does the melancholy.

³²⁰ Crowther commended the film as "a wonderfully good-humored estimation of an essentially pathetic state of affairs." In rare form, he added that "[a]nyone who is worried about the state of the nation and of home life should see it and be refreshed." Bosley Crowther, "Bob Hope and Lucille Ball Star in Comedy," *New York Times*, February 11, 1961, *The Facts of Life* File, Herrick. Also, a review in *Limelight* noted: "Sequence after sequence got rounds of applause from the preview audience." "The Facts of Life," *Limelight*, November 17, 1960, *The Facts of Life* File, Herrick.

Indeed, while *Seven Year Itch* and *Boys' Night Out* may have hit a nerve with popular audiences, *The Facts of Life* hit close to home.³²¹ Rather than complaints about the extramarital ineptitude of the American male and the repulsive, narcissistic bossiness of the American wife, the aptly titled film prompted audiences to consider how and why marriage's promises of wholeness inevitably fall short, and the heartbreaking lack of options one can resort to when this realization occurs. *Time* magazine's review, for instance, noted that *The Facts of Life* "inquires with wicked glee into the nature of the tie that binds men and women in holy wedlock. Is it love? No, it is inertia: most married people remain faithful to each other because it is just too much trouble to cheat."³²²

Though there were a small number of moral objections to the film, the limited criticism was usually couched in frustration with the oppressive nature of the "facts," rather than the film itself.³²³ The *New Yorker's* review, for instance, noted that "the humor here is wintry indeed, since it depends upon demonstrating, with almost vindictive detail, that American adults simply cannot conquer their flabby nerves and escape the details of their over-organized lives to the point where they may indulge in a brief bout of adultery."³²⁴ While the relatable characters, settings, and desires in the *The Facts of Life* may have moved audiences to sympathetic and

³²¹ *Variety's* review, for example, noted certain scenes from the film that "have an immediate communicative impact on audiences. They hit home." "*The Facts of Life*," *Variety*, November 14, 1960, *The Facts of Life* File, Herrick.

³²² "*The Facts of Life*," *Time*, January 27, 1961, *The Facts of Life* File, Herrick. See also James Powers, who wrote in his review: "What they seem to have had in mind originally was to present a study of marital infidelity as a study also in futility. That is, that extra curricular sexual activity has its enticements but in today's world of unrelenting togetherness, from group vacations to PTA board meetings, it is just more trouble than it is worth." James Powers, "*The Facts of Life*," *Hollywood Reporter*, November 1, 1960, *The Facts of Life* File, Herrick.

³²³ For example, a review in *The Christian Science Monitor* noted that *The Facts of Life* "abstains from all possible moral attitudes, satisfied to play the titillated, sentimental observe of middle-aged infatuation." "*The Facts of Life*," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 18, 1961, *The Facts of Life* File, Herrick.

³²⁴ "The Current Cinema: Off Season," *New Yorker*, February 18, 1961, *The Facts of Life* File, Herrick.

agitated recognition, the message was still the same: “a less-than-ideal marriage was better than no marriage at all.”³²⁵

While *The Tunnel of Love* shares these themes of male ineptitude, as well as the notion that infidelity’s most formidable deterrent was inconvenience, and not necessarily immorality, this film adds the doubly inconvenient, scandalously immoral element of illegitimacy to the mix—and does so with élan.³²⁶ Indeed, in addition to the baby-making bait, the film’s theatrical trailer foregrounds Dick’s philandering and Augie’s potential extra-marital encounter. The trailer cuts from a shot of Dick encouraging Augie to “live a little” to footage of Augie passed out in another woman’s car in front of a motel, while the voice-over narrator exclaims, “Boy, did he live it up!” The woman he chooses and, ultimately fails, to “live it up” with is none other than Ms. Estelle Novick, played by Gia Scala, the adoption agent from the prestigious Rock-a-Bye organization.

Predictably, Augie gives off a rather ghastly first impression, which not only hurts his chances of bedding Ms. Novick, but almost destroys his and Isolde’s chances at adopting a child. Augie answers the door wearing a rumpled button-down shirt, a towel draped sloppily around his boxers, and a bottle of booze in hand. Apparently in Westport, scotch is consumed morning, noon, and night.³²⁷ Under the mistaken assumption that Ms. Novick is going door to door on behalf of the suggestively named “community chest,” Augie offers her scotch and cracks lame jokes in between his unsuccessful swats at the mice scurrying around the living room. Despite

³²⁵ May, *Homeward Bound*, 203.

³²⁶ The notion of illegitimacy was, indeed, rarely given comic treatment in the movies. In his negative review of the film, however, Crowther compared *Tunnel of Love* to an updated version of a pre-code comedy called *The Little Accident* (1930) starring Douglas Fairbanks. In this comedy, a man receives word the day before his wedding that his ex-wife has given birth to his son and will be putting the child up for adoption. After kidnapping his child, he and his first wife eventually decide to rekindle their romantic relationship. Crowther, “*The Tunnel of Love*.”

³²⁷ At one point, Alice warns, “if we’re going to get investigated maybe we all better cut down on those late parties and drinking.”

noting the red-flags of Augie’s day-time drunkenness, unkempt appearance, and rodent infestation, Ms. Novick proceeds to question Augie about his views on parenting.

Augie’s clueless and flippant responses—“none of that progressive stuff around here,” he insists—reveal that he knows very little about bringing up a child. Although fatherhood was more or less limited to breadwinning in the fifties, Augie’s ignorance is somewhat alarming given the unprecedented levels of scrutiny parents found themselves under during the postwar era, when the subject of child-rearing found itself at the center of obsessive theorizing, Cold War paranoia, and misogynistic rage. As Spigel explains, “childhood was conceived as a time of innocence, and the child a blank slate upon whom might be imprinted the evils of an overly aggressive and sexualized adult culture.”³²⁸ As the notions of childhood innocence intensified, Lindenauer notes that “the definition of ideal motherhood expanded, as a way of tempting or constricting the roles a woman might seek outside the home.”³²⁹

Lindenauer goes on to explain that the on the one hand, the fifties emphasized the importance of what today is called “attachment parenting”; popular culture and advice literature, for instance, encouraged women to breastfeed, to share their beds with infants, and respond to their cries immediately.³³⁰ On the other hand, this era also emphasized the dangers of overprotective mothering popularly referred to as “Momism.”³³¹ According to May, psychologists put forth theories asserting that “[m]others who neglected their children bred criminals; mothers who overindulged their sons turned them into passive, weak, and effeminate

³²⁸ Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 52.

³²⁹ Lindenauer, *I Could Not Call Her Mother*, 114.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ American Author Philip Wylie coined this term in his 1942 collection of non-fiction essays, *Generation of Vipers*.

‘perverts.’”³³² Just as Ms. Novick is beginning to suspect she may, in fact, be dealing with one of these so-called “weak” characters, Dick intrudes on the scene and seals her belief that the Poole household is an entirely unsuitable environment for child-rearing.

After he makes a pass at her, Ms. Novick promptly rejects Dick’s advances and reveals her identity and purpose to the two Westport husbands. Under the impression of the era’s rigid, gender stereotypes, Augie had assumed the adoption agent—as a professional, working woman of a certain authority—would fit the profile of an unattractive battle-ax; his initial reaction to Ms. Novick’s identity is thus one of accusation and defensiveness. While insisting on his “inhibited” character, Augie accuses Ms. Novick of maliciously deceiving them with her “aphrodisiac perfume” and “subversive neckline.” Dick, however, begs for her forgiveness on account of his “playful,” “childlike” nature.

Indeed, though Dick may complain he has “nothing in common” with his own brood of children, his pleading marks the first of several references to the husbands’ childlike natures, which befits the sex comedy’s penchant for puerile playboys and breadwinners alike. Without missing a beat, Ms. Novick snaps back, “unfortunately, Mr. Pepper, we’re not putting you up for adoption.” Ms. Novick is, in fact, so appalled by Augie and Dick’s behavior that she dismisses any consideration of Isolde as a potential adoptive mother, despite the era’s enormous investment in the power and responsibility of the mother to perform the bulk of ever-expanding parenting duties.

After his unsuccessful attempt to apologize and persuade Isolde to return home from the Pepper’s, Dick pushes Augie to make a pass at Ms. Novick, who makes an unexpected

³³² May, *Homeward Bound*, 96.

reappearance at the Poole household and decides she wants that drink after all. Augie washes down one of Dick's tranquilizer pills with scotch and attempts to start again with Ms. Novick, who removes her bulky overcoat to reveal the slinky, skin-showing dress underneath. In contrast to Isolde's all American girl-next door look, Ms. Novick is dark-haired, serious and speaks with an unidentified Slavic accent that is both intimidating and alluring. Ms. Novick's attractiveness is so striking, in fact, that Augie worries it will not be possible to find a single husband in Westport to restrain himself long enough to serve as an upstanding reference on his behalf—Westport, it seems, is just as overrun by wolves as the sex comedy versions of Manhattan.

In a similar fashion to Monroe's confidence boosting pep-talk to Ewell in *The Seven Year Itch*, Ms. Novick assures Augie, "personally I think you're a very attractive man." Upon learning she is a graduate student studying anthropology, Augie's interest piques when Ms. Novick explains how her anthropological research focuses on "sexual patterns in New Guinea." As discussed previously in relation to *That Touch of Mink*, the sex comedies often displaced eroticism onto racialized people, places, and things. In this case, Ms. Novick's obvious yet mysterious foreignness, along with her research on sex in "primitive" cultures serves as Code and audience-approved suggestiveness, as well as foreplay to their subsequent sexual (mis)adventure.³³³ In yet another irresistible, ego-massaging moment for Augie, Ms. Novick, who apparently knows a thing or two about sexuality, fails to detect any evidence of the "inhibition" Augie had babbled about earlier. Once the scotch and tranquilizers kick in, Augie asks Ms. Novick to dinner—"in the interest of pure research."

Indeed, in the stage version of *The Tunnel of Love*, Augie and Ms. Novick not only have

³³³ A *Los Angeles Times* review even referenced this racial element in its title: "Suburbia Goes Native in *Tunnel of Love*." Martin, "Suburbia Goes Native."

sex, but according to the *Daily Variety* review of the film, Ms. Novick seduces Augie “in order to get pregnant so that she might experience firsthand the plight of unwed mothers” for research purposes.³³⁴ When it came to the film version, however, the Code mandated that Augie and Ms. Novick “would become involved in an interlude which most specifically and positively would not include any sexual relations, but during the course of which the leading man would become intoxicated to the point of oblivion. Subsequent circumstances would lead him to wonder whether or not he had an affair with this woman.”³³⁵ The interlude thus begins with a two-shot of Augie and Ms. Novick driving, which harkens back to the opening scene between Augie and Isolde.

Just as the audience is reminded of Isolde, Augie’s nervous, frightened facial expressions make it clear that he is preoccupied with thoughts of his wife as well. In order to emphasize his paranoia and, once again, draw the viewer into deeper identification with this self-professed “weak” character, Augie’s internal monologue asks “what am I doing here?” “How am I going to square this with Isolde?” Ms. Novick nuzzles her head against Augie’s shoulder, and the voice in his head prompts him to pop additional tranquilizers. The scene then fades out to another two-shot—this time with Ms. Novick in the driver’s seat with Augie relaxing against her.

While Augie seized this opportunity in order to redeem his virility and swagger, he actually finds himself, once again, in an emasculated position. Augie’s paranoia and hesitation, for instance, recalls that of most female characters in infidelity movies, who according to Basinger’s

³³⁴ “*The Tunnel of Love*,” Turner Classic Movies, <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/474/The-Tunnel-of-Love/notes.html>

³³⁵ “*Tunnel of Love*,” Memo for the Files.

overview, were more likely than men to consider adultery a “serious decision.”³³⁶ Moreover, Augie’s pill-popping reads as an unlikely precursor to Day’s drunken escapades in *Lover Come Back*, as well as *That Touch of Mink*, where the only way her character can bring herself to experience sex out of wedlock is by way of excessive intoxication. As visual evidence of his compromised state, Augie and Ms. Novick eventually switch positions in this scene; after a fade, Ms. Novick takes control behind the wheel, while Augie sits in the passenger seat, slumped over and vulnerable.

Although the Code insisted “there would never be any doubt in the mind of the audience that Augie and Ms. Novick did not have an affair,” there is indeed a degree of ambiguity in this scene; there is simply no way of knowing what took place during the fade-out.³³⁷ A certain ambiguity also lies in between the cuts of Ms. Novick dropping Augie off at a motel in an incoherent state and then driving off. Augie does not awake until two-o’clock the next afternoon, when the motel manager notifies him it is check-out time. Augie is completely unaware of his surroundings and has no recollection of what happened the evening prior. The manager explains that the night-shift employee saw a woman leave Augie at the motel with nothing but a note thanking him for a “lovely evening.” To Augie’s horror, the note concluded with the phrase, “you were wonderful.”

Illegitimacy

Though the viewers are aware—according to the PCA censors, at least—that nothing sexual happened between Augie and Ms. Novick, the hero has legitimate reason to believe he is

³³⁶ Basinger, *I Do and I Don’t*, 155.

³³⁷ “*Tunnel of Love*,” Memo for the Files, July 15, 1957.

guilty of adultery, and thus finds himself even more tightly wound than when the story began. *The Tunnel of Love* constructs a descending hierarchy of knowledge between Ms. Novick, the viewer, Augie, and Isolde. Since the audience is presumed to understand Augie's essential innocence—in terms of action, not intent—long before Ms. Novick's detailed reveal in the final scene, this hierarchy of knowledge reinforces Augie's victimized state, as well as the viewer's sympathetic identification with the hero despite his questionable intentions. Augie's efforts, however, to ward off Isolde's suspicions and/or secure her forgiveness preemptively, only make her more suspicious.

Much to Augie and Dick's surprise, Isolde believes his poorly contrived story about being stuck on a bridge overnight in his car, but she has been secretly complaining to Dick and Alice that his extreme attentiveness (e.g. breakfast in bed) has been strange and overwhelming. Meanwhile, Augie finds himself bombarded by bad omens and bad news. In yet another nod to the sex-hungry wolves of Westport, Isolde informs him that the happiest couple in the neighborhood, the Paxtons, are getting a divorce because Ethel caught Bill red-handed with her best friend. Considering his own guilty conscience, as well as his tolerant attitude towards infidelity in general, Augie slams Bill's actions as "unforgivable," only because the woman he cheated with was not a stranger. What Augie finds most shocking about the situation, he tells Isolde, is that Ethel seemed like the "broad-minded, understanding type—like you!"

Although Augie's reaction may come across as insensitive to twenty-first century audiences, infidelity was not necessarily considered immediate grounds for divorce in the fifties. As May stresses, "most people were unwilling to risk the loss of reputation, the stigma and economic hardship of divorce, or the destruction of 'togetherness' that were likely to result if

they strayed from the prescribed code.”³³⁸ Augie soon becomes aware that it is not only infidelity, but an illegitimate child, that might destroy his marriage. After he receives a mysterious phone call from Ms. Novick, whose request for a meeting is followed by a very “pregnant pause,” Augie jumps to the conclusion that she became pregnant after what he believes was a one night stand.³³⁹ With Dick’s assistance, Augie begins making plans to “do right” by Ms. Novick.

As Basinger notes, even in the face of serious marital dysfunction, audiences “still wanted respect for parenting”;³⁴⁰ according to Augie, Dick, and the consensus ideology at the time, “doing right” by Ms. Novick meant supporting her financially. Giving up one’s career aspirations and secretly funding one’s bastard child’s upbringing is more acceptable and less frightening than admitting infidelity to one’s wife and risking divorce—not to mention her cushy inheritance. Earlier in the film, Dick offered Augie a job as a “gag-man” for the *Townsmen*—a well-paying gig writing the quips beneath other artists’ drawings. While Augie scoffed at the idea when it came to supporting his own wife and prospective child, he now begs Dick to reconsider the offer; he also asks for a thousand dollar advance so that he can pay it forward to Ms. Novick, presumably as hush money. Dick obliges out of friendship as well as guilt. Augie, as it turns out, is the only person capable of reaching Dick’s “quivering conscience,” which speaks to the importance and strength of the male bond in this film.

Indeed, in addition to the illegitimacy factor, *The Tunnel of Love* is a rather exceptional

³³⁸ May, *Homeward Bound*, 134.

³³⁹ In a film about legitimate and illegitimate kinds of baby-making, this is the only time the word “pregnant” is spoken; all actual references to conception are spoken of in terms of “temperature” and “charts,” while Alice’s barely noticeable condition is referred to as being “off to the races.” Even in the midst of a baby-boom, pregnancy was still a sacred and scary subject, as well as the most obvious and difficult marker of female sexuality.

³⁴⁰ Basinger, *I Do and I Don’t*, 180.

comedy for the time period because Dick remains curiously unscathed by the consequences of his actions. Dick's indiscretions are always implied and offscreen, but they are never exposed to his wife or Isolde. What's more, towards the end of the film Dick explains that his analyst has supposedly cured him of his guilt: "now I can chase around as much as I want without feeling guilty." In evading any real punishment (unless one considers living in Westport and supporting a brood of five children a just sentence), tragedy, or shame, Dick continues to thrive in the sex-comedy's gloriously bewildering middle.

Indeed, Dick incurs only negligible monetary losses as a direct consequence for his involvement in Augie's messy state of almost-affairs. Although it is not until the very end of the film when Ms. Novick reveals that the purpose of the thousand dollars was to help her anthropologist husband get an advance on his book in exchange for moving the Pooles up on the adoption list, she is very much under the impression that the Pooles and the Peppers understand the reality of the situation, which of course, hardly matches what Augie and Dick believe to be true. After Ms. Novick informs both couples that the Pooles' baby will arrive in five to six months, the Peppers decide to throw an extravagant suburban soiree in honor of their pending adoption.

Isolde suspects, however, that Alice is throwing the party as an excuse to show off her post-baby figure. While Alice remains sensitive to Isolde's desperate longing to experience pregnancy and motherhood, her character provides a small but significant note of doubt and discontent when it comes to women's personal and social experiences of pregnancy. In keeping with the Hollywood tradition of telling rather than showing pregnancy, Alice's expectant condition is hardly noticeable in *The Tunnel of Love*. Save for her horribly frumpy wardrobe, especially when

compared to Isolde's form-fitting outfits, Alice and Dick take turns announcing to the audience, as well as to the other characters, that she is indeed "off to the races."

Outwardly, Alice embraces the feminine mystique, which required women to appear "young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home."³⁴¹ Dick and Augie remark upon Alice's stupidity (in comparison to Isolde), and (mis)interpret her tight-lipped, dutiful tolerance as total obliviousness. While Alice's mothering and home-making duties remain largely offscreen, rare glimpses into her private moments with Dick reveal a fever of resentment over her ostensible inability to control her fertility, as well as her husband's shameless insensitivity and disinterest in his family.

In addition to his flagrant philandering and substance abuse, Dick shows little respect for parenting or his own children, who remain mostly off-screen. Dick, for instance, refuses to read his children's postcards from camp because he doesn't miss them "a damn bit," and as they play in the backyard off-screen, he threatens to send them to boarding school if they don't "pipe down." Although his actions may be frowned upon, it would have been unthinkable for Alice to demonstrate this kind of resentment and selfish carelessness towards her children—in a comedy, at least. Hence, her husband becomes the receptacle for her socially unacceptable, ambivalent feelings, which surface as the couple dresses for their house party.

As Alice models a stunning, curve-hugging, floor length black gown, she invites her husband's gaze, which according to her, is the reason she's always "off to the races" in the first place. Dick hungrily looks her up and down as he steps closer, but Alice shoots him down before

³⁴¹ Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 240.

he can pounce her on one of their separate twin-sized beds.³⁴² “This time I’m going to get some wear out of it,” she cautions. On the one hand, Alice enjoys having sex with her husband, but the stress of perpetual pregnancy, motherhood, a dysfunctional marriage, as well as the societal pressure to smile through the pain and disappointment is wearing on her physically and emotionally. In addition to the impracticality of abstinence (the birth control pill was still illegal in the state of Connecticut at the time) the era’s investment in and expansion of motherhood also incentivized large families. After all, “motherhood could only be full time as long as there were young children at home. Once the children entered school, full-time motherhood was not possible unless the women had more children.”³⁴³ Considering most women were inclined to believe that the material and social benefits of marriage and motherhood outweighed the disappointments, it is not long before Alice becomes pregnant with their fifth child.

As the Peppers prepare to put on an extravagant performance of marital and suburban bliss, Augie and Isolde ready themselves to be the reluctant center of attention. In accentuating the Poole’s financial and bedroom problems, Augie and Isolde’s barn-house bedroom appears cramped, shabby and rustic compared to the Peppers’ well-appointed, spotless mansion. Their separate beds feature more prominently than the Peppers,’ as a reminder of their troubled,

³⁴² The Peppers and the Pooles share the peculiar furniture arrangement of the separate twin beds, which in addition to servicing the PCA moral interests, compliments the film’s sitcom like sensibility, as well as the couples’ respective bedroom problems. It is important to note, however, that this sleeping arrangement was considered odd by midcentury standards. As David Randall writes in *Salon*: “What seemed modern at the turn of the twentieth century simply felt outdated by the middle of it, in part because baby boomers saw twin beds as something out of their parents’ generation. Sex became recognized as not only an obvious part of marriage but also an important part of maintaining a healthy one. Freudian-influenced marriage counselors started worrying about “frigid” wives, and magazines and self-help manuals urged women to become receptive to their husband’s sexual needs. Sleeping apart began to be seen as either a sign of a marital problem or something that would eventually lead to one. If a couple wasn’t enjoying every moment together — even when those moments conflicted with something as prosaic as sleep — then something was amiss.” David K. Randall, “Separate Beds are Liberating,” *Salon*, August 13, 2012, http://www.salon.com/2012/08/14/separate_beds_are_liberating/

³⁴³ May, *Homeward Bound*, 159.

fruitless lovemaking. Unlike Dick, Augie does not make a move on his wife, but experiences a similar sense of erotic deflation when Isolde reminds him of the stress of impending fatherhood. She offers him unsolicited reassurance that his uneasy feelings are “completely normal”—a label Augie resents hearing from his wife as much as he resents hearing it from Dick, despite the era’s social and psychological premium placed on conformity.

When they arrive at the Peppers’ party, however, Augie is thankfully reminded of his desirability once again—this time by a ditzzy, licentious television actress. This feisty refrigerator model grinds against Augie on the dance floor and becomes aroused by the whole of Augie’s manhood. In addition to his sex appeal, she even swoons over Augie’s artistic background and, in a subtle wink to the suggestive “Ye Ol Mill” of yore, becomes especially aroused by the fact that he lives in a barn.³⁴⁴ Fueled by jealousy, Isolde grabs a dance with Dr. Vancouver, the third term presiding over her and Augie’s lovemaking, and flaunts her fur-clad figure across the dance floor, ultimately retrieving her sheepish looking husband from the actress’s clutches.

Considering fur’s status as a prominent, meaningful trope in the sex comedy cycle, Isolde’s fur shawl, which is actually on loan from Alice, figures as *The Tunnel of Love*’s most significant prop. In contrast to her usual boyish crop pants and her authoritative scout’s uniform, Isolde drapes the shawl over a glamorous evening gown, accentuating her femininity as well as her sexuality. In this particular scene, Isolde’s fur shawl also compliments her aggressive, predatory recapture of her husband from the affections of a younger, sexier, hungrier woman. Isolde then

³⁴⁴ While *The Tunnel of Love* employs a sitcom sensibility, this minor role of the television actress actually provides an interesting example of the ways in which television was “questioned and deliberated upon” during the fifties. According to Spigel, one of the main questions put forth in popular culture and advice literature had to do with the way television might “affect romantic and marital relations.” In this case, the television actress is flagrantly instigating marital stress by tempting a husband away from his own wife, who must essentially rescue him with her aggressive charm. Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 3.

lures Augie into a spirited, romantic song and dance, thus setting the tone for a sexually promising evening. The erotic promise, however, along with the shawl, vanish from the screen before the evening comes to a bitter end. Isolde effectively kills the romantic vibes after she receives conflicting stories from Dick and Augie regarding the mysterious, thousand dollar deficit in their finances.

Rock-a-Bye Bye Bye

Isolde grows more suspicious of Augie and Dick's strong "male union" as their impending adoption date grows closer. The Pooles receive word from the Rock-a-Bye agency regarding another potential baby who is reported to be an excellent match for the couple. The Poole's new adoption agent, Miss McCracken (Elizabeth Wilson), who appears more in line with the severe type of woman Augie and Dick had imagined for the job, boasts that "there is a tremendous demand for our little ones and a very small supply." In addition to reportedly having the "best babies between Yale and Smith," Rock-a-Bye also prides itself on their agents' ability to match adoptable babies with their adoptive parents, who are most likely resorting to adoption because biology has failed them. Such statements regarding exclusivity and matchability speak to the era's invigorated allegiance to reproductive futurism, as well as to a tacit understanding that the adoption market (within *The Tunnel of Love's* film world, at least) caters primarily to white, middle-class couples in search of white babies, ideally from "good families." Indeed, while the Poole's trifecta of white, middle-class, and heterosexual privilege certainly helped their chances of adoption, it was Augie's underhanded loan of one thousand dollars that allowed them to bypass a list of two-hundred couples eagerly awaiting their own chance to adopt a prized child from Rock-a-Bye.

In what would have been cause for celebration and relief under ordinary circumstances, the uncanny likeness between Augie and their adopted baby boy stirs up nothing but sneaking suspicion in Isolde and extreme anxiety in Augie, who has since grown a mustache to distract Isolde from what Dick describes as the “frightening resemblance.” Although his new facial hair gives him a certain distinguished, fatherly quality, he continues to find his masculinity tested in his role as husband, father, and breadwinner. For instance, given that Augie works from home, Isolde has developed a habit of leaving the baby in his care while she enjoys a break from the demands of attachment mothering. When the baby starts crying on Augie’s watch he immediately calls for Alice, who in addition to her own four children and a fifth on the way, somehow finds the time to mother Augie’s child as well.

Alice realizes that Augie must have forgotten the baby’s feeding schedule, despite the fact that the focal point of the Poole’s barn—the living room bar—has been converted into a baby formula and bottle station. Indeed, in addition to his living space, Augie admits to Dick that fatherhood has monopolized his time and thoughts to the point where he’s having serious trouble completing his work. While Augie certainly shares Dick’s incompetence when it comes to childcare and shares some of his frustrations with parenting, his experience of fatherhood is considerably more loving. As Dick watches Augie bottle feed his baby in the backyard, Augie describes fatherhood as a “spiritual experience” and admits that he could just stare at his baby all day, which offsets Dick’s disrespectful remarks about his children and parenthood. In any case, this rare, intimate moment of male homosocial and father-son bonding comes to an abrupt halt when Isolde slyly reveals to Augie, as well as the Peppers, her suspicions that Augie is indeed the father of their child.

Isolde has spent her afternoon off from motherhood to enlarge an old photograph of Augie as a baby, which she successfully passes off to Dick and Alice as a recent image of their adopted son. Isolde reveals that the baby in the photograph is, in fact, Augie and storms off to pack her bags. Meanwhile, Augie shaves off his mustache as Dick observes him from the bathroom doorway. In what would become a memorable fixture in the sex comedy cycle, as well as an anticipatory element for the millennial brom-com, the palpable homosocial intimacy within such scenes depicting the male sidekick observing the male lead during some kind of bathroom and bedroom ritual is almost always tempered by hostile disagreement.³⁴⁵ As Dick boasts shamelessly about finishing his analysis and being free to chase around without guilt, Augie finally loses his temper and yells, “it’s unfair, you pick em’ up and toss em’ away like used razor blades, but me, I slip once and they nail me to the wall like a butterfly.” Clearly, Augie is more regretful that he was caught in a lie—not to mention jealous of Dick’s clear conscience and clean record with his exceptionally fertile wife—than he is remorseful of his actions or intentions.

When Isolde appears in the living room with her packed suitcases, Augie accuses Isolde of becoming “narrow-minded and bitter” like her mother and asks “what happened to that free spirit I married?” “*You* happened to it,” Isolde screams. This particularly heated, penetrating exchange essentially sums up why romantic comedies almost always end before marriage begins. Indeed, as a genre that has always been hyper-conscious of generational conflict, romantic comedies almost always omit or disparage parental figures; they also tend to terminate their narratives before young lovers have a chance to become like their parents. As with their parents before them, Isolde and Augie come to realize that their generation’s intimate expectations could not

³⁴⁵ Gig Young, for instance, performs a similar scene opposite Cary Grant in *That Touch of Mink* (1962).

possibly guarantee their totalizing promises. While postwar prosperity may have afforded new comforts and opportunity, containment culture, as it were, nevertheless required the containment of one's spirit.

Just as Augie misdirects his anger towards Isolde's damaged spirit and her unwillingness to forgive and forget, Isolde largely blames Westport for her troubles; "I'm getting sick of you and Westport and everybody in it. . . I never wanna see a tree or a blade of grass or a piece of chintz again as long as I live," she says as she packs for the city. Amidst the domestic chaos, Ms. McCracken makes an unexpected visit to check on the Pooles, who are still considered "probationary parents" for one year. With the understanding that their baby could be taken away at any moment, Augie lies about the suitcases scattered about the living room, which he claims are Isolde's "bundles for the poor." Ms. McCracken is shocked and disturbed to learn that Isolde has made time for volunteer work; "I should think the baby should be a full time job," she tells Augie.

Although working mothers were considered one of the biggest threats to the country's booming birthrate and the well-being of children at the time,³⁴⁶ Ms. McCracken's concerns are exacerbated when one of the suitcases pops open, exposing the fur shawl Isolde had worn to the Pepper's soiree. A dramatic sound effect cues as the camera lingers on the sudden reappearance of the fur shawl. Given the material's metaphorical significance within the context of the sex comedy cycle, and this film in particular, the garment's dramatic reappearance suggests that Isolde is heading to the city with plans to do some "chasing around" of her own while she works out a plan for becoming a single and, most likely, working mother. Without the chance to explain

³⁴⁶ May, *Homeward Bound*, 139-140.

herself to Ms. McCracken, Isolde attempts to flee Westport on bicycle, but gets hit by a delivery truck right outside her home. The collision leaves her with a painful, debilitating ankle injury, which not-so-tenderly traps her in marriage, motherhood, and Westport.

In addition to rendering her physically unable to escape the containment that ails her, Isolde's character is suddenly subjected to the kind of infantilization the film had reserved for Augie and Dick up until this point. Although Isolde wails and carries on like a pettish child as Augie tries to tend to her injury and make amends, her childishness soon transfers back to Augie, who prepares to confess his guilt. As Basinger observes, movies and television programs about married people have made something of an "American ritual" out of their shared "rhythm of lying and confession, whether comic or tragic."³⁴⁷ In hopes of receiving such absolution, Augie transforms into the "poor, helpless little boy" Isolde claims to have married, and begins recounting the fuzzy details from his drug-induced date with Ms. Novick. Fittingly, the only detail Augie recalls with clarity has to do with his indecision over whether or not to order the lamb chops off the *children's* menu.

Just as Isolde loses her patience, and moments before Augie confesses to an indiscretion he did not, in fact, commit, Ms. Novick makes another surprise appearance and thoroughly absolves Augie, as well as herself, of all suspicion. In what numerous critics described as a "contrived" resolution, Ms. Novick hands Augie a check for one thousand dollars, as well as a copy of her husband's book, *Tondo: The Story of a Savage*, as a token of thanks for Augie's one thousand dollar loan. Although Augie has no recollection of their agreement, Ms. Novick explains that the generous loan made it possible for her husband to complete his book and, in turn, gave her the

³⁴⁷ Basinger, *I Do and I Don't*, 291-292.

opportunity to give birth to their daughter in the states. When Isolde still appears flustered and skeptical after hearing the story, Ms. Novick provides photographic evidence of her daughter, who, according to Isolde's strong and apologetic reaction, appears nothing like Augie.³⁴⁸

In a sense, this short, chain reaction of childishness between Isolde and Augie extends to the audiences at the moment of the reveal; as one reviewer snarked, "after letting the audience snigger at titillating sin for an hour and a half, the writer pulls the rug out at the last minute by contriving a finish which makes everyone innocent as little children."³⁴⁹ Augie, for instance, is rescued from the wrath of his wife and from the enormous weight of his own guilty conscience; Ms. Novick is redeemed as a devoted wife and mother, and Isolde is relieved of her suspicions. But she is also punished for doubting her husband's moral character in the first place—"suddenly I feel guilty, as if it were all my fault," she says.

Although spoken confessions were certainly the most popular and ideal "form of absolution" for television programs because of their short, serial format, *The Tunnel of Love's* status as an autonomous feature film allows the narrative to bypass the traditional moving image confession in favor of a far more dramatic, largely unspoken and invisible means of forgetting, more so than forgiving: an unexpected pregnancy.³⁵⁰ While Augie never openly confesses his intention of committing adultery, he reiterates his failures and frustrations as a man. In making one last attempt to win Isolde's sympathy, he whines "I couldn't sell my drawings. I couldn't

³⁴⁸ Isolde's emphatic expression of relief, coupled with the title of Mr. Novick's book and the nature of their research, warrants the subtle possibility that the father of Ms. Novick's child may not necessarily be white.

³⁴⁹ Williams, "Sex is Dull Allusion in *Tunnel of Love*."

³⁵⁰ Pregnancy is used in a similar fashion in *Thrill of It All*. In this film, Doris Day's husband, played by James Garner, deceives her into believing he is having an affair with another woman, but never explains his scheming. Instead, all is forgotten when Day helps deliver another woman's baby and decides she would rather have another child of her own rather than continue on with her exceptionally lucrative, flourishing career.

have a child.” In addition to his formal exoneration on Ms. Novick’s authority, however, Augie receives the ultimate masculine redemption and diversion when Isolde asks him to pick up a “double order of moo goo tai pain,” for which she has had an “irrepressible longing” all week. Isolde’s request echoes Alice’s earlier request for “egg foo yun,” a craving which signals her fifth pregnancy. Considering these mirrored references to Chinese cuisine, along with Ms. Novick’s strategically timed gifting of her husband’s offensively titled book on savage sexuality, *The Tunnel of Love* rather heavy-handedly uses race to reveal Isolde’s miracle pregnancy.

After slowly absorbing the significance of the Chinese food craving, Augie reminds Isolde of the popular myth that people “usually” end up conceiving after adopting a child, which is enough to convince them both that Isolde is, in fact, expecting. In these final moments, Isolde remains quiet but agreeable as her ostensibly pregnant body becomes the immediate means through which Augie regains his confidence, motivation, and swagger. While Isolde finds herself with the added weight of guilt and pregnancy, Augie becomes lightened in conscience and spirit. It would not, as it were, have been a happy enough ending for Augie and Isolde to reconcile, earn a decent living, and raise their adopted child in the suburbs; it is only through Isolde’s pregnancy that both characters are able to achieve a robust fulfillment of their respective gender roles.

Though this miracle pregnancy is certainly one of the more reactionary elements in *The Tunnel of Love*, the film remains rather exceptional in that the narrative does not repudiate its frank criticism of suburban life, just as it does not punish its denizens for their indiscretions. The suburban cesspool of Westport, where people cheat on their spouses, hate their lives, and resent their families, may have been good enough for their adopted child or for the dysfunctional Peppers, but Isolde’s pregnancy inspires Augie to move his family “back to the city” for the sake

of their “own” baby, who was conceived in a purportedly natural, normal way. In blatantly contradicting his running resentment for anything considered “normal,” as well as shaking up the broader cultural consensus and romantic comedy conventions of the era, Augie declares, “the country’s no place to bring up kids. Our baby’s gonna be born in Manhattan, in a *normal*, healthy atmosphere.” In a grand demonstration of his reinvigorated masculinity, Augie sweeps Isolde off her feet and carries her into their barn. A choral rendition of the opening song swells, taking viewers back to where the story began—in the exciting uncertainty of the “tunnel of love,” as opposed to the stifling finality of the “tender trap.”

***Knocked Up*: “What if This Guy Got You Pregnant?”**

Nearly fifty years after Augie and Isolde rejoice over their miracle pregnancy, Ben Stone accidentally knocks up Alison Scott after a one night stand in *Knocked Up*. In the fifties, Alison’s situation would have been the subject of a scandalous “B picture” about the (white) babies who end up on the Rock-a-Bye adoption agency’s roster; in 2007, the unlikely couple learns to accept their mistake as an absolute blessing shortly before the credits roll. Despite the significant differences in context, characters, and story in *The Tunnel of Love* and *Knocked Up*, these romantic comedies about “where babies come from” are primarily concerned about the effects of unexpected *and* unconventional instances of impending fatherhood on sym(pathetic) male characters, who futilely complain and revolt against similar, largely inescapable versions of proper adulthood.³⁵¹

Unlike *The Tunnel of Love*, however, *Knocked Up* was tremendously successful and influential within and beyond the confines of genre. In addition to *Knocked Up*’s impressive box office grosses, nearly all of the film’s performers went on to become leading stars in film and television.³⁵² And nearly a decade after its release, *Knocked Up* remains a touchstone text for gender relations in millennial popular culture, as well as the pillar in Apatow’s increasingly powerful and personal comedy empire. As one *Variety* critic noted, *Knocked Up* affirmed “Apatow’s gift for balancing the madcap swagger and uninhibited bawdiness of a high-testosterone farce with the unabashed sweetness and romantic yearning of a chick flick.”³⁵³

³⁵¹ *Knocked Up*’s theatrical trailer describes the film as “a comedy about where babies come from. . .and how grown-ups are born.”

³⁵² *Knocked Up* cost \$30 million to make but collected \$185 million worldwide in 2007. Peter Mitchell, “US: 2007 the Year of the Geek in Film,” *AAP General News Wire*, September 9, 2007, *Knocked Up* File, Herrick.

³⁵³ Joe Leydon, “*Knocked Up*,” *Variety*, March 14, 2007, *Knocked Up* File, Herrick.

Although audiences were quick to describe *Knocked Up* as one of the key romantic comedies of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the studio downplayed elements of rapture or romance, and primarily sold the production as the unruly, ugly-cute offspring “from the proud parents of *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*.”³⁵⁴ In foregrounding Apatow’s creative paternity, *Knocked Up* promised to deliver familiar quirky faces from the Apatown family, R-rated raunch, and a more relatable, abrasive and critically endangered version of male immaturity than its titular boy-scoutish predecessor in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. Though not without dark undercurrents, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* mostly tantalized audiences with seemingly harmless sexual teases and wolf-pack debauchery while *Knocked Up* (as the crass title alone attests) manifested a truly panic-inducing, time-sensitive sense of dutifulness for the hero as well as the heroine. In mimicking the subject matter and style of *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*’s official poster, the most widely distributed and recognizable poster for *Knocked Up* replaced the clean-cut, blissfully unaware portrait of Carell’s forty year-old virgin with a medium close-up of a comparatively chubby, unkempt Seth Rogen shooting a slightly worried, clueless smirk directly into the camera. The text above Rogen’s grubby, teddy-bearish face reads, “What if this guy got you pregnant?”

Described as Apatow’s “comedy son,” Rogen quite literally became the poster boy-man for the brom-com cycle, as well as a scruffy icon of millennial loutishness.³⁵⁵ Jessica Grose at *Slate* appropriately dubbed him the “omega male.”³⁵⁶ Rogen’s career-catapulting performance as

³⁵⁴ The film’s trailer noted that *Knocked Up* was “from the proud parents of the *40-Year Old Virgin*.”

³⁵⁵ Stephen Rodrick, “Judd Apatow’s Family Values,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 27, 2007, Judd Apatow File, Herrick.

³⁵⁶ Rosin uses Grose’s “omega male” label in *The End of Men* to describe the endless variations of the “unemployed, romantically challenged loser” types of men circulating in twenty-first century popular culture. Rosin, *The End of Men*, 56.

Ben Stone essentially reprises the loutishness from his second banana role as Cal in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* albeit with a few key tweaks. In contrast to Cal, Ben has no job, no sex life to speak of, no confidence, and perhaps most regrettably of all, a guilty conscience. While critics were quick to describe Ben as a “schlub,” “Shrek,” “geek,” “loser,” “slacker,” “sad sack,” and “nerd,” many reviews admitted there was *something* appealing and hopeful about his character. According to the *Hollywood Reporter’s* review, for instance, “[t]he script and marketing materials have a bit of fun with Rogen’s burly build and plain face, but he’s wholly believable as a guy a beautiful woman might (perhaps after an initial shock) fall for.”³⁵⁷

Indeed, Rogen’s portrait on the above described poster is at once off-putting and endearing; it is not a stretch to suggest he resembles an overgrown baby. Although Rogen’s cuteness is made strange by his age and unkemptness in this image, Lori Merish notes that the “cute always in some sense designates a commodity in search of its mother, and is constructed to generate maternal desire”; cute, in other words, “interpolates its viewers/consumers as ‘maternal.’”³⁵⁸ In conjunction with the caption reading “what if this guy got you pregnant?” this poster offers what is ultimately a false, even insulting sense of female agency and subjectivity. Though the caption is misleading when it comes to the types of choices available to women, as well as their degree of subjectivity within the diegesis, the poster actually presents a truthful foreshadowing of the double maternal duty facing the heroine, who is expected to mother her own child, as well as the man-child who impregnates her.

³⁵⁷ “*Knocked Up*,” *Hollywood Reporter*, March 14, 2007. *Knocked Up* File, Herrick.

³⁵⁸ Lori Merish, “Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 186.

These messages regarding Rogen's centrality, as well as the unseen heroine's labor, are repeated in the film's other, more visually informative poster, which features both Rogen and his co-star, Katherine Heigl, seated in a doctor's waiting room. In this image, Rogen appears unkempt and bewildered next to Alison, whose model-good looks are polished to perfection. Alison scowls off into space, as she sits cross-legged, leaning away from Ben, who man-spreads in the chair beside her and mugs diffidently for the camera. While both Ben and Alison appear affected by the image's overall tone of dread and intimidation, there is nonetheless a marked, troubling sense of imbalance suggesting an undue burden for the heroine, which in turn squelches any trace of potential desire or amiable collaboration between them.

Though the tagline above Heigl reading "A one night stand that becomes something more," borrows from classical romantic comedy language, this promise of "something more" refers first and foremost to imminent responsibility. This "something more," however, also speaks to the promise of transformation, of which Alison appears effectively excluded. For instance, in addition to Ben's body posture and direct gaze, which monopolize the viewer's visual attention, Ben is positioned below a framed "timeline of pregnancy" wall-hanging featuring scientific illustrations of fetal development. Unlike the sex comedy's delightful male pregnancy gags in *Pillow Talk* and *That Touch of Mink*, however, the close association between the hero and pregnancy take on a strikingly more somber tone in *Knocked Up*.

Tellingly, Ben appears aligned with the earliest stages of fetal development while the more advanced stages expand away from Alison and towards the righthand side of the frame. This composition emphasizes Ben and his unborn child's capacity for growth and transformation and accordingly aligns his character with the dominant, American conceptualization of the child

as a “potentiality rather than an actuality, a becoming rather than a being: an entity in the making.”³⁵⁹ While Ben finds himself in a similar position to his unborn child, which is at once vulnerable and powerful in its potential, Alison finds herself reduced to the vessel for their inevitable projected growth.

Even behind-the-scenes anecdotes revealed that Heigl was, at least in part, cast based on her ability to withstand Rogen’s unrelenting vulgarity and insults, not keep up with or challenge him.³⁶⁰ Months following *Knocked Up*’s release, Heigl shared her misgivings about Judd Apatow, her role, and the film, which she described as “a little sexist,” in a now infamous interview with *Vanity Fair*:

It paints the women as shrews, as humorless and uptight, and it paints the men as lovable, goofy, fun-loving guys. It exaggerated the characters, and I had a hard time with it, on some days. I’m playing such a bitch; why is she being such a killjoy? Why is this how you’re portraying women? Ninety-eight percent of the time it was an amazing experience, but it was hard for me to love the movie.³⁶¹

For the most part, Heigl’s impugning remarks about the role that launched her to “It Girl” status were painted as ungrateful, stupid, and hypocritical; numerous interviews with Rogen and Apatow revealed their shocked and defensive reactions to Heigl’s diss, for which she reportedly never apologized, and from which her reputation and career has not yet recovered.³⁶² While

³⁵⁹ Castañeda, *Figurations*, 1-2.

³⁶⁰ For instance, Heigl is quoted in *Knocked Up*’s official program as saying, “I spent a lot of my first audition for the movie just reacting to things he said simply because I couldn’t think of anything fast enough.” “*Knocked Up*,” Universal Pressbook, p. 14, *Knocked Up* File, Herrick.

³⁶¹ Lisa Bennett, “Heigl’s Anatomy,” *Vanity Fair*, January, 2008, <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/01/heigl200801>

³⁶² She later went on to clarify her remarks in *People* magazine: “I was responding to previous reviews about the movie the interviewer brought to my attention. My motive was to encourage other woman like myself to not take that element of the movie too seriously and to remember that it’s a broad comedy.” Tim Nudd and Julie Jordan, “Katherine Heigl Clarifies *Knocked Up* Remarks,” *People*, December 7, 2007, <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20165062,00.html>

Knocked Up got people talking, Heigl's inflammatory remarks secured the film as an object of spirited discourse (much of it angry) with Apatow as a whipping boy for women's inequality, homophobia, and the so-called "end of men."

Though the conversation extended well beyond matters of genre and taste, most mainstream reviews actually echoed Heigl's concerns about *Knocked Up*. On the one hand, critics lauded *Knocked Up* as "explosively funny,"³⁶³ as a "terrific film" with a "relaxed, shaggy vibe."³⁶⁴ *New York's* film critic David Edelstein, for instance, raved "[t]he banter is bruisingly funny, the characters *brilliantly* childish, the portrait of our culture's narrowing gap between children and their elders hysterical--in all senses."³⁶⁵ On the other hand, the film's ostensible "celebration of American schlubitude," was deemed largely superficial. Many critics, in fact, felt compelled to warn audiences about *Knocked Up's* darker, more unsettling elements—namely its "unfashionably conservative center," which the studio worked to pass off as the "good heart" element of Apatovian comedy.³⁶⁶

Although, as Heigl's remarks suggest, *Knocked Up* contained more than enough objectionable material to make female viewers wince, these well-meaning warnings in the popular press were mostly directed towards the boy-men in the audience. *New Yorker* critic Anthony Lane, for example, postulated that men "will be too busy watching through their fingers. To them, this is 'The Omen.'"³⁶⁷ Neal Gabler, who references *Knocked Up* in his critique

³⁶³ Leydon, "*Knocked Up*."

³⁶⁴ Robert Wilonsky, "It's a...Hit!," *Village Voice*, May 30-June 5, 2007, *Knocked Up* File, Herrick.

³⁶⁵ David Edelstein, "9 1/2 Months," *New York*, June 4, 2007, *Knocked Up* File, Herrick.

³⁶⁶ Wesley Morris, "*Knocked Up* Movie Review," *The Boston Globe*, June 1, 2007, *Knocked Up* File, Herrick.

³⁶⁷ Anthony Lane, "Men At Sea," *New Yorker*, June 4, 2007. *Knocked Up* File, Herrick.

of millennial loutishness, confirms that Apatow's films do not "celebrate" loutishness per se, but instead insist that loutishness must be abandoned in order to "embrace adulthood with all its benefits."³⁶⁸ These so-called "benefits," however are problematically absent or largely inaccessible in the versions of adulthood made available to both men and women in *Knocked Up*, along with the millennial brom-com and popular culture more generally.

What is exceptional about *Knocked Up* and its discourse, however, is not so much its iteration of the male revolt, which essentially rehashes the complaints and detours that preoccupied the midcentury sex comedy, but the ways in which the text solicits a particular class of women into this ongoing conversation about what it means to be an adult in the twenty-first century. While the millennial brom-com is at a loss for desirable and sustainable alternatives to the heteronormative life narrative, *Knocked Up* marks the cycle's first significant attempt at granting women some limited access to the expressions of anger and discontent mostly reserved for the (boy)men.

Odd Bedfellows

In employing the romantic comedy genre's dual focus narrative approach, *Knocked Up*'s first act oscillates between the hero and heroine's separate lives, the differences of which are purposefully exaggerated for comedic effect. Set to the nineties hip-hop song "Shimmy Shimmy Ya," performed by the aptly named artist Ol' Dirty Bastard, the film commences with a montage of happenings between Ben and his pack of schlubby, twenty-something white guys. The bros dance, get high, play with fire, horse-play in a filthy pool, and ride rollercoasters. After indulging in what the film's press book describes as Ben's "flophouse for lost boys," this "slacker fantasy"

³⁶⁸ Gabler, "Day of the Lout."

montage cuts to a typical morning routine in Alison's pristine and adult world.³⁶⁹

Alison wakes up in the tastefully appointed guesthouse of her sister and brother-in-law's Brentwood mansion. While Alison readies herself for work, the film offers a brief, albeit telling birds-eye-view glimpse into the daily life of Debbie and Pete, who serve as the film's paradigm for marriage and parenthood. Despite their sizable home, the couple's two daughters are pictured sleeping on pull-out beds next to their parents, moments before rousing them awake with demands and haphazard smacking. Following this quick hint about the lack of intimacy and excess obligation marking Debbie and Pete's marriage, the sequence cuts to a marital spat in the kitchen, the nature of which speaks to the privilege informing the lives of these characters, and presumably, those of the film's imagined audiences. Pete playfully engages with his youngest daughter while Debbie orders him to drive the girls to school and berates him for forgetting to mark his personal training session on their calendar. This brief interaction essentially establishes the three characters' types; Pete is portrayed as a fun-loving, doting father, Debbie's first lines paint her as a hostile nag, and Alison is thrust into a maternal position after offering to drive the girls to school on her way to work.

The film then cuts back Ben's flophouse family, where the housemates discuss their joint business venture—an online database called “Flesh of the Stars,” which catalogs nude scenes in mainstream movies (they will eventually discover that such a site already exists). From their “work”-related conversations peppered throughout the film, “Flesh of the Stars” focuses almost exclusively on female nudity; without a shred of regard for their own unkempt, oafish appearances, the louts delight in criticizing the highly disciplined and culturally revered bodies

³⁶⁹ “*Knocked Up*,” Universal Pressbook,” p. 10, p. 14.

of female celebrities in the most vulgar and misogynistic terms.

Up until this point, Ben's lifestyle and personality seem wholly incompatible with Alison's state of affairs, but their individual career aspirations reveal a subtle yet significant spark of affinity. While Alison's career is more impressive, lucrative, and socially acceptable than Ben's, both characters are essentially in the "flesh of the stars" business. After Alison spends her commute trying to break up a fight between her nieces in the backseat, she once again finds herself serving in a maternal-like position at her workplace, the E! Entertainment News Channel. Alison works as a production assistant for the network, which involves holding clipboard, wearing an earpiece and mothering the show's fussy anchor (pop culture magnate Ryan Seacrest). Though both Alison and Ben peddle in celebrity skin, Alison's ability to succeed in her sector of the industry depends on her willingness to direct the pernicious and deeply misogynistic objectification motoring this business towards her self.

That day, for instance, Alison is offered a major promotion from production assistant to an on-camera news anchor for E! News. Immediately following her acceptance, however, Alison's male boss and an awkward, unsupportive female superior (Kristen Wiig) talk up the complimentary gym membership that comes with the promotion. In echoing Ben and his housemates' vicious critiques of female bodies in the previous scene, and foreshadowing many disparaging remarks directed towards Alison's pregnant body, the two bosses ask Alison to "tighten up," and "be healthy by eating less." Alison accepts their conditions with only slightly less hesitation than when she decides to carry her unwanted pregnancy to term.

Just as Ben Stone is the poster-boy for the millennial brom-com and boy-man, Alison is the quintessential brom-com heroine and post-feminist icon for the twenty-first century. While

Ben and his housemates reflect contemporary concerns about men “becoming poorer, dumber, sicker, lonelier,” and “more marginal, more unnecessary, less loved,” Alison’s character closely mirrors Rosin’s description of a contemporary woman in her prime.³⁷⁰ According to Rosin, “a 27 or 28 year old woman with no children is at the top of the game. She is, on average, more educated than the men around her, and making more money. She is less restricted by sexual taboos than at any other time in history. None of her peers judge her for not being a mother; in fact, they might pity her if she were.”³⁷¹ While most of the feminist critiques surrounding *Knocked Up* focus on Alison’s lack of choice when it comes to her pregnancy, this early, often overlooked workplace scene, where Alison’s delight, accomplishment, and subjectivity are undermined in a number of ways, provides a crucial snapshot of the millennial brom-com’s post-feminist double address.

As Tasker and Negra explain, post-feminist texts are often “openly contradictory” in that they “incorporate a feminism that is at once achieved and abjured.”³⁷² On the one hand, *Knocked Up* delights in presenting its heroine as conventionally attractive, pleasant, successful and, unlike other neo-traditional rom-com heroines (e.g. *The Wedding Planner*), Alison’s femininity is never threatened by her professionalism. On the other hand, Alison is hollowed, silenced, and stunted in terms of narrative and characterization. Indeed, in addition to the shameless forms of sexism Alison silently tolerates in the workplace, as well as the dismaying lack of solidarity and encouragement she receives from her female superior, Alison’s promotion somewhat

³⁷⁰ Guy Garcia, *The Decline of Men: How the American Male is Getting Axed, Giving Up, and Flipping Off His Future* (New York: Harper, 2008), 51.

³⁷¹ Rosin, *The End Of Men*, 37.

³⁷² Tasker and Negra, “Postfeminism and the Archive for the Future,” 171-172.

paradoxically undermines her subjectivity in this film. In revealing her promotion in the first act of the film, viewers are never given any insight into Alison's efforts to achieve her career goals, nor are they given substantial cause to root for her character. Since the film begins with Alison at the ostensible peak of her adulthood and Ben begins without any of the traditional markers of maturity or success, his struggles, shock and growth occupy the bulk of the narrative action and visual economy—even Alison's pregnancy is portrayed as something that, first and foremost, affects Ben and his lifestyle.

Thus, while *Knocked Up* begins in a spirit of egalitarianism, it soon becomes clear that these “odd bedfellows,” as Apatow describes them in the film's press book, are not just unlikely but unequal in terms of agency, focus, spirit, and sympathy. This shift becomes apparent in the following nightclub scene, which frames Alison as an unattainable dream girl and Ben as a butthurt underdog. When Debbie and Alison arrive at the club, the bouncer happily grants the ladies immediate entry into the club based on their good looks, while Ben and his schlubby crew are forced to wait in line behind the velvet rope. When the schlub crew finally gains access to the club, they do not dance or socialize; instead, they engage one another in a spirited conversation regarding their own perceived victimization as Jewish men. In the first of several Jewish references peppered throughout the film, the boys rave about Eric Bana's performance as a Jewish assassin in Steven Spielberg's 2005 film, *Munich*. They praise Bana's character for challenging cultural and historical constructs of Jews as victims or, put more crudely, “if any of us get laid tonight it's because of Eric Bana.”³⁷³ In Ben's case, however, the reason he gets laid that night has more to do with alcohol than his Jewish mystique.

³⁷³ Ironically, the actor Eric Bana is not of Jewish descent. See Lewis Beale, “Jewish Guys Get an Image Makeover,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 2009, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jan/04/entertainment/ca-jewish4>

Before Ben works up the nerve to introduce himself and swipe a couple beers for Alison at the overcrowded bar, Alison spends her big night out assuaging Debbie's insecurities about her age and appearance. Indeed, despite the initial exhilaration of being granted access to the club on the basis of her good looks, Debbie's thrill is almost immediately deflated upon observing the younger, presumably childless women in the club. She looks to Alison for reassurance, asking, "Am I too old to be here?" "Am I hotter than these little bitches?" "Guys in here would fuck me right?" As a female comic second, Debbie is undoubtedly the wittiest, smartest, and most outspoken character in the film, but her personality and actions are primarily informed by a sad and crippling sense of insecurity, the basis of which is rooted in the same superficial, misogynist tyranny that informs Alison's work.

While Alison may have trouble finding supportive female colleagues in the workplace, her relationship with Debbie is one of the strongest and most developed female relationships in the millennial brom-com cycle to date—Debbie is the person Alison loves, depends on, and fears the most. There is, in fact, a great deal of fear surrounding Debbie. In addition to the individual characters' fears of becoming her or becoming a target of her rage, there is also a broadly felt, unspoken fear of the sisters' closeness—especially when it comes to the possibility of Debbie and Alison raising their children together. More so than the bromances, female bonds threaten to disrupt the brom-com's project of mitigating the male revolt by insisting that men are relevant, necessary, and worthy of love. Hence, in order for *Knocked Up* to focus on Ben's growth, as well as to validate the doctrine of reproductive futurism that causes so much pain and frustration for the characters in the first place, the film finds subtle and aggressive ways to chip away at Alison and Debbie's relationship.

Eventually, Ben and Jason work their way over to the sisters' corner of the club. Just as Debbie starts to enjoy some much needed reassurance from Jason's aggressive flirtations, Pete calls Debbie back to her rightful place at home when he suspects one of their daughters has the chicken pox. Other than these unremarkable, fleeting moments with Jason in the club, Debbie finds herself utterly unable to escape her roles as a wife and mother, as well as her own vitriolic self-hatred, for the remainder of the film. After ending her hostile phone conversation with Pete, Debbie appears concerned by Alison's decision to remain at the club with Ben instead of accompanying her back to Brentwood. It is this initial separation of the sisters, and the extrication of Debbie from the situation more specifically, that not only leads to Alison's fateful one night stand but also anticipates an even more decisive separation between the sisters, which occurs just in time for Alison's crowning.

Alison and Ben go on to enjoy a night of dancing, drinking, and flirtation; she even invites him back to her place and, much to his surprise, initiates a sloppy make-out session while they wait for a cab. Once they arrive at Alison's guesthouse, the brief, fumbling sex scene unfolds mostly from Ben's bewildered and excited perspective. Not only is the viewer positioned to identify with Ben's thrilling sense of disbelief and victory for going home with a woman like Alison, but he/she is also invited to share in Ben's frustration and performance anxiety when Alison asks him to "hurry up" and put a condom on. Alison eventually pauses her half-hearted imitation of pornography-inspired moaning and tells Ben to "stop talking" and "just do it already," which he takes as an order to discard the condom.

In sharing Ben's understanding of the condom debacle, the audience is then subjected to a few brief moments of Ben's clumsy thrusting while he spouts annoying, apologetic commentary

on his performance. Alison does her best to keep up with her porny performance of arousal, unaware that she is engaging in unprotected sex with a stranger. Despite her best efforts to keep up her porny performance of female arousal, Alison tells Ben to “stop talking,” which marks the end of the scene. In addition to leaving all traces of either character’s genuine pleasure or climaxing off screen, whatever voyeuristic pleasure the viewer may have enjoyed in watching their hook-up is potentially tainted by the knowledge that this encounter was unsafe and, as the film’s title suggests, extremely consequential.

The Bitter Morning After Pill

On the one hand, Rosin suggests that this sort of “hook-up” is most advantageous and practical for a young, professional woman like Alison, who is theoretically free to explore and enjoy her sexuality without shame or commitment to a male partner who may impede her growth or, at the very least, encroach on her valuable time and space.³⁷⁴ Indeed, *Knocked Up* makes it quite clear that Alison enjoys a sexual freedom and assertiveness her sex comedy predecessors never had (even within their own marriages, as in *The Tunnel of Love*), but this is not the sort of sex most women in the fifties or in the year 2007 may have fantasized about.³⁷⁵ The next morning, Alison’s expressions of regret are quiet and contemplative, yet powerfully so. In a rare instance where Alison’s point of view and expression is given more time and weight than Ben’s, the camera lingers on a low-angle shot of Alison glaring down at Ben’s naked bum with an unmistakable look of queasy fretfulness on her face. She nudges the bed with her foot repeatedly

³⁷⁴ Rosin, *The End of Men*, 262.

³⁷⁵ In fact, this irresponsible, sloppy, and not particularly pleasurable one-night stand is nothing short of the sex comedies’ worst nightmare. The closest the sex comedy ever came to this sort of mismatched, drunken hook-up occurred between Doris Day and Rock Hudson in *Lover Come Back*, who unknowingly overdose on alcoholic candy and find themselves in bed together in a dumpy motel. After the initial shock and repulsion, these bitter rivals discover that, in their utter inebriation, they got legally married in the courthouse before jumping into bed and, as luck would have it, getting “knocked up.”

as if she were flushing a public toilet; Ben eventually stirs awake, glances at his nakedness and asks “did we have sex?”

In another lop-sided attempt at the dual-narrative strategy, Alison and Ben discuss their hook-up with others later that day. When Alison talks things over with Debbie, she simply admits she made a drunken mistake and mentions using a condom; Ben’s self-deprecating rehashing of events, however, leads to a more colorful conversation with his housemates, who are quick to label Alison as a “stuck-up fucking bitch.” They also, however, congratulate Ben for having sex with “a girl like her” and revel in what they experienced as a vicarious sense of conquest and validation: “I feel like I had sex with her also.” As per typical male pack dynamics in the brom-com and millennial teen comedies, the gang’s misogynistic vilification of a female intruder solidifies their homosocial bond, which always dabbles in the homoerotic—in this case, the vicarious sharing one member’s sexual conquest.

Their exchange also speaks to the misguided resentment that has informed the male revolt for decades. In this case, *Knocked Up* imbued Alison and Ben’s unlikely hook-up with a troubling element of vindictiveness; numerous critics even described the film as a “nerd” fantasy or “revenge.”³⁷⁶ Apatow confirmed that this sense of male vindictiveness was both intentional and personal: “I relate to underdogs. It may be my way of saying to every girl who ever broke up with me, ‘why did you do it?’”³⁷⁷ Although *Knocked Up*, along with much of its extra-textual discourse, is informed by the idea that Ben is an excessively unworthy partner for Alison, there is

³⁷⁶ In her review of the film, Waxman writes, “[c]all it the revenge of the nerds”; and in the same article, Apatow is quoted as saying, “I think there is a nerd’s fantasy involved in many of these films.” Sharon Waxman, “Giving the Last Laugh to Life’s Losers,” *New York Times*, May 6, 2007, *Knocked Up* File, Herrick.

³⁷⁷ In response to the widespread disbelief regarding Alison’s decision to have even have sex with Rogen (let alone raise a child), Apatow offered an even more personal defense: “I say, ‘look at my wife. She can make that mistake, why can’t Katherine Heigl?’ It’s possible. The goofy Jewish guy succeeds every once in a while.” Waxman. “Giving the Last Laugh to Life’s Losers.”

never any narrative evidence to suggest that he is especially *not* her “type.”³⁷⁸ Other than Debbie, who does not represent a viable partner choice for Alison within this heteronormative life narrative, Ben is never held up against another potential mate for Alison. Nor does Alison contemplate the possibility of finding a more suitable one. Without a solid sense of competition with other types of manhood, Ben’s sense of inferiority and victimization is largely internalized; as *Time* writer Joel Stein observes, unlike “the comedies that dominated the 1990s—movies by the Farrelly brothers, Jim Carrey, and Adam Sandler in which over-the-top characters triumph over an evil dumb guy—Apatow’s movies are bildungsromans in which low-key guys push aside their comic books and triumph over themselves.”³⁷⁹

While *Knocked Up* follows through with the kind of no-strings attached, exciting hook-up that the male pack in *40 Year-Old Virgin* had imagined and sought for the underdog Andy, labeling *Knocked Up* a “nerd’s wet dream” carelessly disregards the narrative’s severe and nauseating textual labor.³⁸⁰ With Debbie and Pete symbolizing the doom that awaits them, Ben does not want to be saved from his “slacker fantasy” of regression any more than Alison wishes to be saved from her singleness. If *Knocked Up* contains an element of “rescue,” it finds its most problematic and powerful concentration in the dividing cells that mark the passing of eight weeks since the hook-up that no one—including Alison and Ben—believed should or could have happened.

³⁷⁸ As *Los Angeles Times* critic Carina Chocano rightly observes, “Ben may have no job, no muscle tone and no clue what he’s doing, but he may be the best thing that ever happened to Alison [because] he’s pretty much the only thing that’s ever happened to her outside of work.” Carina Chocano, “Another Fine Mess,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 2007, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jun/01/entertainment/et-knocked1>

³⁷⁹ Joel Stein, “Judd Apatow, Seriously: How Did a Neurotic, Self-lacerating Stand-up Comedian from Long Island Conquer Hollywood? He Earned It,” *Time*, August 10, 2009, Judd Apatow File, Herrick.

³⁸⁰ Ella Taylor, “*Knocked Up* Puts the Fear of Life into a Slacker,” *LA Weekly*, Jun 1, 2007, *Knocked Up* File, Herrick.

Was Your Vagina Drunk?

Much to her humiliation, Alison first suspects she is pregnant after vomiting during an on-camera interview with James Franco. After a marathon of at-home, positive pregnancy tests, Debbie can only offer Alison half-hearted, vague reassurances; she also urges Alison to contact Ben, who happens to be getting high with his unruly housemates when he takes her call. Ben's juvenile disrespectfulness carries over into their dinner date conversation, where he reveals that, for the past ten years, he has been living off of a \$14,000 settlement awarded to him by the Canadian government after a postal truck ran over his foot.³⁸¹ Such notions of illegal immigrants and lazy welfare dependents are usually accompanied by ugly stereotypes and evoke serious, often angry responses in political discourse and popular culture. However, Ben's whiteness and Canadian citizenship—the fact that he is mooching off of the comparatively socialist Canadian government and not the American government—allows *Knocked Up* to transform otherwise disturbing and complex social problems into a light-hearted underdog story about a loser who comes to be accepted by a gorgeous girl (“warts and all”).³⁸²

In Ben's case, his “warts” are not all endearing or vulnerable, but in many ways contemptible. Ben, for instance, barely finishes his sentence about stretching the remaining nine hundred dollars of his settlement money over the next two years when Alison blurts out, “I'm pregnant,” to which he immediately replies, “fuck off.” Indeed, Ben's hateful attitude and lack of accountability is perhaps even more alarming than his dismal financial situation. He grows more

³⁸¹ This plot element is, perhaps, an homage to one of *Knocked Up*'s most important precursors, *Big Daddy* (1999), a comedy starring Apatow's close friend, colleague, and iconic nineties boy-man hero, Adam Sandler. In this film, Sandler is living off of a handsome government settlement after a vehicle accident, which allows him to enjoy a cushy, lazy life of puerile pleasures. In the process of caring for an abandoned little boy who shows up at his doorstep, Sandler turns his life around and becomes a responsible adult—i.e. by the end of the film he becomes a successful lawyer, husband, and father to a child of his own.

³⁸² Waxman, “Giving the Last Laugh to Life's Losers.”

defensive and hostile when Alison learns he did not, in fact, wear the condom. Since birth control is often assumed to be the woman's responsibility, Ben blames Alison for not being on another form of birth control, and for not realizing he was not wearing a condom in the first place—"was your *vagina* drunk?" he asks. Ben apologizes for his anger and, in her astounding capacity for forgiveness, Alison asks him to accompany her to the doctor with the hope that the dozens of positive pregnancy tests were inaccurate—an intimate request that seems far better suited for Alison's sister Debbie rather than this disrespectful stranger who repulses her.

In what would become a popular image for the film's publicity and marketing materials, Alison and Ben sit in awkward silence as they observe the goofy-looking babies, mothers and couples in the bustling waiting room at the OB/GYN office. As in the film's poster, more focus is given to Ben's nervous and bewildered expressions as the dual focus strategy starts to give way to the weight of Ben's troubled journey into adult manhood. The awkwardness intensifies when the doctor rather egregiously presumes Alison and Ben are married and confirms the pregnancy with the aid of a live ultrasound image. He makes a point to acknowledge the flickering embryo's beating heart and congratulates the couple. Alison stares at the screen in shocked and horrified disbelief—"that's it?!" she exclaims. The doctor says, "take good care of it" and excuses himself from the room while Alison weeps with anguish besides Ben, who stands by the examination table stunned and speechless.

In addition to its pivotal narrative significance, this scene marks *Knocked Up's* politically and ideologically weightiest moment precisely because of its use of ultrasound imagery, a mass media form wherein the tenets of reproductive futurism have found their most salient and powerful figuration—much more so than the cheeky Chinese food cravings that confirmed

Alice's and Isolde's pregnancies in *The Tunnel of Love*. Indeed, in writing about the media of reproduction's constitutive influence in various institutions of intimacy, ranging from the couple to a nation's identity and future, Berlant argues that the mass media form of the fetal image marks a "a condition of extreme vulnerability and also of immense power."³⁸³ Since *Life* magazine published the first photographic images of a wombed fetus in 1965, a swirl of political, religious, scientific and cultural discourse has obsessed over the life and subjectivity affirming power of this representational technology, which overwhelmingly configures the fetus as "the most perfect unbroken example of iconic superpersonhood."³⁸⁴

In light of this supreme innocence, elements of extreme vulnerability and rescue necessarily inform most media of reproduction, which work to reinforce a particular, American conceptualization of children that sociologist Viviana Zelizer traced back to the late 19th and early 20th century. In her book, *Pricing the Priceless Child*, Zelizer examines how children became refigured as "economically useless" but "emotionally priceless."³⁸⁵ This shift, which gradually transcended class and ethnic divides, imbued children with a new sense of empowerment as well as endangerment; as their sentimental value increased so too did the desire and efforts to protect them against an ostensibly corrupt and dangerous adult world.³⁸⁶ This sentimental ideology intensified during the postwar era when men and women were called upon

³⁸³ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 129.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁸⁵ Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 43-55.

to produce big families as a way to protect the nation from Communism and various other threats.

While the advent of photographic fetal imaging in the mid 1960s further enhanced these notions of childhood innocence and preciousness in new and important ways, this visual technology also affected the ways in which pregnant women are treated in popular representation, everyday life, and in medical settings. For instance, when Alison's doctor tells her to "take good care of it," his remark speaks to the broadly felt societal fears that the fetus is hopelessly contingent on the maternal body, which pro-life advocates and medical professionals alike routinely figure as a sort of "hostile gulag" where the fetus runs the risk of exposure to an ever-expanding list of hazardous behaviors, environments, and substances.³⁸⁷ His remarks, however, also speak to the ways in which the pregnant woman's subjectivity becomes subjugated to that of the fetus's imagined personhood.

As Berlant notes in regards to media of reproduction, "the pregnant woman becomes the child to the fetus, becoming more minor and less politically represented than the fetus, which is in turn made more national, more central to securing the privileges of law, paternity, and other less institutional family strategies of contemporary American culture."³⁸⁸ *Knocked Up*, however, speaks to the fears that the pregnant woman's subjectivity is not only downgraded to that of a child or criminal, but almost eradicated entirely. In *Knocked Up*, it is Ben who becomes child to the fetus while Alison serves as little more than a screen (and in a wink to postfeminism, a meal

³⁸⁷ Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 97.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

ticket) for the moving ultrasound image that strikes “the fear of life” into Ben and keeps his reluctant and non-linear maturation in motion.³⁸⁹

Taking Care of It

The narrative acts in *Knocked Up* are demarcated by a few brief moments of moving ultrasound images depicting an eight, sixteen, twenty-four, and finally, twenty-eight week old fetus, whose features and movements gradually become more recognizable as human. Such visible traces of distinct human qualities and behaviors including heartbeats, thumb-sucking, or the growth of fingernails are often championed for anti-choice purposes in popular representations, political discourse, and in real life—to the point where nearly half of all American states regulate the provision of ultrasound technology by abortion providers.³⁹⁰

Significantly, Alison’s shockingly dismissive reaction to the representation of the eight week old fetal matter—“That’s it?!”—actually speaks to the same images’ potential to undermine said efforts to limit women’s reproductive choices and subjectivity through guilt, sentimentality and, as Edelman puts it so provocatively, “the fascism of a baby’s face.”³⁹¹ However, in falling into the trap of the post-feminist double address, *Knocked Up* fails, rather egregiously, to follow through on this possibility—despite the fact that socially, economically, and geographically privileged adult women like Alison have access to more reproductive choices than ever before.³⁹²

What is even more shocking than Alison’s course of action, however, is the film’s

³⁸⁹ Taylor, “*Knocked Up*.”

³⁹⁰ “State Policies in Brief: Requirements for Ultrasound,” Guttmacher Institute, last modified November 1, 2015, http://www.guttmacher.org/statecenter/spibs/spib_RFU.pdf

³⁹¹ Edelman, *No Future*, 75.

³⁹² A deleted scene titled “Should We Keep It?” features a conversation between Alison and Ben, during which Ben defends his robotic reaction to the ultrasound image by dismissing it as a “pixelated dot”—on “TV,” no less.

inexplicable lack of deliberation and frank discussion when it comes to the reproductive choices available to her. Indeed, for all the vulgarity, misogyny, homophobia, drug-use, and insidious racism in *Knocked Up*, the clinical term “abortion” is treated as a dirty, unutterable word. When Ben breaks the news to his housemates, Jonah tells Ben that Alison should “take care of it.” “Tell me you don’t want him to get an ‘A word!’” exclaims Jay, the pro-life housemate who is routinely teased for his feminine and homosexual tendencies. Jonah clarifies, “Yes, I do, and I won’t say it for little baby ears over there, but it rhymes with ‘schmaschmortion.’ You should get a ‘schmashmortion’ at the ‘schmaschmortion’ clinic.” It is only a matter of moments before Jonah’s reasonable suggestion becomes lost in a swirl of homophobic jokes about Jay “rearing” Ben’s child. For in this world of boy-men, pedophilia is a safer and funnier topic of conversation than terminating a pregnancy, and much more preferable than actually thinking about the level of responsibility involved in raising a child.

Jonah’s remarks are made safe with gay jokes and male camaraderie, but when Alison’s mother advises her to “just *take care of it* and move on” over lunch, the suggestion takes on a decidedly off-putting and even hateful tone. In contrast to the doctor’s advice to “take good care of it,” which privileges the fetus’s well-being at the expense of Alison’s, her mother’s delicate choice of phrasing demonstrates a focused concern on protecting Alison from future hardship, regret, despair. She expresses concern for Alison’s career and warns her of the humiliating, horrifying body changes that surely await her—i.e. a “fat ass” and “jowls”—if she decides to carry the pregnancy to term. When Alison asks her to be more supportive, her mother remains firm: “I cannot be supportive of this, this is a big *mistake*.”

She then reminds Alison of her step sister who went through a similar situation, “had it taken care of” and went on to find a husband—“now she has a *real* baby,” she says. On the one hand, Alison’s mother describes a rather commonplace scenario; for around the time of *Knocked Up*’s release in 2007, nearly two thirds of unwanted pregnancies ended in abortion.³⁹³ What makes this mother’s suggestion seem so shocking and cold-hearted, however, is her use of the term “real baby,” which according to the context of her story, still means the same thing as it did in the fifties when Isolde and Augie (along with so many other married American couples), struggled to conceive a “real,” biological child out of intense personal desire and civic duty.

In implying that only planned babies born within wedlock deserve to be born, her suggestion to terminate the pregnancy comes across as more shocking and cruel than rational and well-intentioned. This vilification of on and off-screen mothers, often set in contradiction to a reverence for the institution of mothering, is a long-standing romantic comedy quirk that often finds colorful expression millennial brom-com cycle. As part of the brom-com's more generalized tendency to disparage female support systems, Alison’s mother comes across as shallow, old-fashioned, selfish and cold-hearted, especially when juxtaposed to the following scene where Ben seeks advice from his incredibly loving, easy-going teddy-bear of a father played by Harold Ramis.

While Ben actually agrees with Alison’s mother’s assessment of the pregnancy, calling it a “disaster,” Ben’s dad views it as a “blessing.” He expresses genuine delight about becoming a grandfather, reassures Ben that it is, in fact, still possible to enjoy marijuana once you become a parent, and very gently nudges Ben to reevaluate his life’s direction. Although he is a largely

³⁹³ Mireya Navarro, “On Abortion, Hollywood is No-Choice,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/10/fashion/10Knockedup.html?fta=y&_r=0

overlooked character, Ben's father is the only other character in the film whose symbolic power contends with that of Alison's baby bump; he is also the only character in the world of *Knocked Up* who has achieved a certain level of maturity without losing likability or the ability to enjoy life. In response to Ben's apprehensions over becoming a father, he very sweetly reassures his son, "I love you totally and completely. You're the best thing that ever happened to me."

Between his dad and his housemates, Ben enjoys a more diverse and sympathetic support system than Alison; other than the unpleasant conversation with her cold mother, Alison is not given the opportunity to talk things over with friends (at this point, it's unclear if she even has any) or even her experienced and opinionated sister. Not that women owe anyone an explanation about what they decide to do with their own bodies, but other than a possible desire to spite her judgmental mother, Alison's motive for keeping the baby is never divulged. In what would have been a doozy of a split-screen conversation for the sex comedies, Alison informs Ben of her decision to go through with the pregnancy over the phone rather than in person, creating a cautious distance that is further reinforced by the scene's separation editing during their nervous exchange. Ben does not press her for details or encourage her to reconsider; instead, he repeats his father's advice to roll with life's punches and offers Alison his support—with the caveat that Alison agrees to tell him "what to do."

While most critics expressed frustration and disbelief over the idea that Alison would have sex—let alone raise a child—with a person like Ben, *Knocked Up's* fearful, judgmental, and ultimately dismissive treatment of abortion as something to choose *against*, proved much more controversial. As commercially driven texts subjected to various forms of censorship and regulation throughout history, Hollywood stories have long avoided or obscured

abortion as a thematic element, even following the procedure's legalization in the early 1970s, because it is too contentious of an issue. Considering the unfortunately simplistic assumption that comedy necessarily trivializes its subjects, Hollywood comedies are especially unlikely to engage with the "A-word" (with the 1982 teen comedy, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* as the oft-cited, rare exception). In light of its particular historical moment, however, as well as the hype surrounding Apatow's so-called "groundbreaking" brand of raunch comedy, audiences seemed to expect something different from *Knocked Up*, which *New York* critic David Edelstein described as a "parable for the post-Roe vs. Wade era."³⁹⁴

Among the audiences who expected something different from *Knocked Up*'s treatment of unplanned pregnancy included those on the far right. On the one hand, conservative, pro-life activists and politicians, such as former Senator and presidential candidate Rick Santorum were pleasantly surprised by *Knocked Up*'s rejection of abortion as a serious and desirable option for Alison and praised its use of ultrasound imagery for "awakening the characters and audience to the humanity of the unborn."³⁹⁵ On the other hand, most popular press responses to the film expressed concern with the dismissive treatment of abortion; such criticism, however, was rooted less in the politics of women's equality, reproductive freedom, or the rights of the unborn than in matters of verisimilitude.

As several interviews reveal, Rogen and Apatow did not exactly disagree with critics, such as the *New Yorker*'s Anthony Lane, who described *Knocked Up* as "a morality play dressed

³⁹⁴ Edelstein, "9 1/2 Months."

³⁹⁵ Rick Santorum, "5 Characters Reject Abortion in a Cultural Shift in Movies," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 3, 2008, http://articles.philly.com/2008-01-03/news/25254650_1_pop-culture-abortion-movies

up as a filthy piece of mummery.”³⁹⁶ Rogen, for instance, admitted in an interview with *Time* magazine, “we make extremely right-wing movies with extremely filthy dialogue.”³⁹⁷ When pressed about *Knocked Up*’s no-choice message more specifically, Rogen and Apatow explained that the decision was for the sake of the narrative and not politically motivated.³⁹⁸ Apatow had a very specific story about masculine redemption to tell—Alison’s unplanned pregnancy was merely a “MacGuffin” used to motivate Ben’s overdue coming of age story.³⁹⁹

As Berlant explains, Hollywood narratives often harness the “world-making force of the fetal image,” and the sentimental value of children more generally, as a “charm” to transform men into more attentive and affective fathers and partners.⁴⁰⁰ According to Aronson and Kimmel, the innocent influence of partially and fully formed children becomes particularly important in a post-feminist age where women are no longer considered to embody the same kind of virtuous innocence—on screen and in real life—capable of transforming “bad men into good men.”⁴⁰¹ As

³⁹⁶ Lane, “Men At Sea.”

³⁹⁷ Joel Stein, “Rewiring the Comedy Machine,” *Time*, May 28, 2007. Judd Apatow File, Herrick,

³⁹⁸ In an interview with *Playboy*, Apatow offered the following response to the abortion question: “If Katherine Heigl’s character had an abortion, the movie would have been only eleven minutes long, so that wasn’t an option for us.” Eric Spitznagel, “Judd Apatow Interview,” *Playboy*, July/August 2009, Judd Apatow File, Herrick.

³⁹⁹ Carrie Rickey, “*Knocked Up*: Sad Sack Morphs into Daddy,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 1, 2007, http://articles.philly.com/2007-06-01/entertainment/24993830_1_alison-common-ground-judd-apatow

⁴⁰⁰ Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 139.

⁴⁰¹ Amy Aronson, and Michael Kimmel, “The Savior and the Saved: Masculine Redemption in Contemporary Films,” in *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture*, ed. Peter Lehman (New York: Routledge, 2001), 44. *Knocked Up*, for instance, reads as a filthier, darker offspring of the neo-traditional romantic comedy *Nine Months* (1995), which stars Hugh Grant as a child psychotherapist struggling to accept his long-time girlfriend’s unplanned pregnancy because he dreads the lifelong responsibility of fatherhood. After a long, tearful look at a moving ultrasound image of his unborn child, Grant embraces fatherhood with full force and, ostensibly, becomes a better man. Even the more female-centered, albeit largely “no-choice” comedies of insemination that became popular after *Knocked Up*’s release, including *Juno* (2007), *Baby Mama* (2008), *The Switch* (2010), *The Back-Up Plan* (2010), and *The Kids Are Alright* (2010), devoted considerable narrative attention to persuading reluctant and/or inadequate fathers to become something more than sperm donors. Indeed, regardless of the manner in which a child is acquired or the characters’ individual histories, these comedies face an overwhelming compulsion to do the “right thing” for the sake of the children.

one of the more disturbing examples of what Negra describes as a post-feminist, “perverse spirit of gender egalitarianism” in Hollywood films,⁴⁰² Ben is portrayed as having “no choice” when it comes to growing up.⁴⁰³ While Ben’s “no-choice” scenario provides him with the opportunity to experience dramatic personal growth, Alison’s lack of choice over her own body and life only produce a great deal of anxiety.

Bumps in the Road

Though Alison’s mother is vilified and promptly dismissed from the narrative for telling Alison “honey, this is *not* the time,” time is precisely the issue that preoccupies post-feminist selfhood on and off screen. In contrast to their sex comedy predecessors, who struggled with right and wrong partners, as well as the right and wrong times to have sex, post-feminist heroines are increasingly finding themselves preoccupied with questions of the right and wrong time to have a baby.⁴⁰⁴ In her book, *What a Girl Wants?*, Negra explains that these perceived crises of time so integral to post-feminist identities are, in large part, rooted in efforts to idealize mothering over the past decade or so. In addition to those pesky facts of biology, the pressures of reproducing and mothering in the new millennium clashed with new economic and social pressures for women to overachieve in the workplace.⁴⁰⁵

As women become more essential to the particular nature of the new global economy,

⁴⁰² Diane Negra, “Where the Boys Are: Postfeminism and the New Single Man,” *Flow* 4.03 (2006), <http://flowtv.org/2006/04/wedding-crashers-failure-to-launch-feminism-postfeminism-masculinity/>

⁴⁰³ Apatow, in fact, envisioned Ben as the type of guy “who has no choice but to grow up, because he got someone pregnant too early and now he has to be an adult—whether he likes it or not.” “*Knocked Up*,” Universal Pressbook, p. 12.

⁴⁰⁴ In fact, in the insemination comedies that came after *Knocked Up*, like *Baby Mama*, *The Switch*, and *The Back-up Plan*, the familiar romantic comedy questions of “will she or won’t she,” “should she, or shouldn’t she?” have given way to a new kind of paranoia: what if you artificially inseminate yourself and then meet the perfect guy? In these comedies, sex and partners are not only of secondary importance, they are optional—at least until the final scenes.

⁴⁰⁵ For more on the post-feminist “time crisis,” see Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 47-85.

many find that they are expected to acquire greater positions of power, meet higher standards than their male counterparts, and maximize their earning potential, all of which require major sacrifices.⁴⁰⁶ For instance, unlike the older heroines in the insemination comedies, Alison happens to be in her reproductive prime, yet she admits to Ben that she was planning to wait “at least ten years” before even considering having children so that she could focus on her career (Ben, on the other hand, admits he is still coming to terms with the idea that someone would have sex with him). For women, meeting the pressures of careerism often requires putting off having children to the point where it becomes necessary to seek not-so “real” babies through expensive, time consuming, and often physically and emotionally agonizing fertility treatments or adoption efforts.⁴⁰⁷

If and when women do have children, regardless of the means, they often find themselves up against the impossible expectations of the “new momism.” In her book, *The Mommy Myth*, Susan Douglas defined the new momism as “the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children.”⁴⁰⁸ While mothering was certainly idealized in the fifties and women, on average, had much larger families than women in the

⁴⁰⁶ For an overview of the contemporary backlash against the “having it all” myth, see Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All,” *The Atlantic*, July/August, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>

⁴⁰⁷ In 2010, over 61,500 kids resulted from assisted reproductive technology, and Silicon Valley companies such as Apple and Facebook have begun offering egg-freezing services. Jennifer Senior, *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood* (New York: Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 126.

⁴⁰⁸ Susan Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 4.

twenty-first century, the fact that modern women have more choices than ever before has created its own set of struggles.

In summarizing this shift in personal and societal attitudes and expectations regarding mothering in her book, *All Joy and No Fun*, Jennifer Senior notes:

Because so many of us are now avid volunteers for a project in which we were all once dutiful conscripts, we have heightened expectations of what children will do for us, regarding them as sources of existential fulfillment rather than as ordinary parts of our lives. It's the scarcity principle at work: we assign greater value to that which is rare—and those things for which we have worked harder.⁴⁰⁹

Although *Knocked Up* is relatively generous and sympathetic in its portrayal of Debbie's complaints, heartache, and inability to escape her role as a mother, the film predictably seeks comfort and restoration in the new momism when it comes to Alison, whose baby bump bumps her career forward in ways she never anticipated.

After having the wardrobe attendant disguise her pregnancy for months, Alison's boss finally confronts her at the eight-month mark and offers her a special correspondent position for the E! Network's "maternity month" special. "Turns out people like pregnant," he says, "the bigger you are, the bigger your numbers." Indeed, twenty-first century entertainment and celebrity culture has championed the new momism to the point where baby bumps are the hottest accessory on the red carpet, followed only by a mythical "post-baby" body. As Berlant and other feminist scholars have noted, pregnancy is no longer a "transgressive revelation of a woman's sacred and shameful carnality," or an occasion to dress oneself in shapeless sacks (recall, for instance, Alice's frumpy get-ups in *The Tunnel of Love*), but rather "an eroticized norm in

⁴⁰⁹ Senior, *All Joy and No Fun*, 123-126.

American public culture.”⁴¹⁰ As an employee for an industry largely hinged on shaming and policing women’s bodies, however, Alison’s fortuitous professional gain is made contingent on her willingness to “tighten” her body back up once the baby born.

Though Alison’s pregnancy turns out to be economically and professionally advantageous, Ben’s insouciance continues to wear her down. Sensing that Alison is ashamed to be carrying his “bastard child,” Ben decides to do the so-called right thing for the baby by making “an honest woman” out of Alison. With an empty engagement ring box, Ben proposes marriage to Alison since, unlike Augie in *The Tunnel of Love*, he cannot ‘do right’ by her and the baby by writing a fat check. Alison’s polite rejection of Ben’s proposal speaks to the trends and cultural fears regarding American marriages, which tend to focus on the rise of female breadwinners, the decline of “marriageable” men, and the so-called national “fathering deficit.” According to Rosin’s analysis of these recent trends, “the establishment is being marshaled to confirm our new cultural notion that men have become the frail dependents in need of a protector. That men need marriage more than women do. In fact, they need it to survive.”⁴¹¹

While the cultural tendency to constrict the male role to either “breadwinner or nothing” is unfair, outmoded, and damaging (especially within disadvantaged communities),⁴¹² Ben has

⁴¹⁰ Berlant, *The Queen of American Goes to Washington City*, 84.

⁴¹¹ According to Rosin, for “the 70 percent of Americans without a college degree, the rise of the breadwinner wife is associated with the destruction of marriage. Women are choosing to stay single rather than marry men who can’t step up and provide.” Rosin, *The End of Men*, 68. This statistic appears to hold true when children are involved; according to *Atlantic* journalist Richard Reeves, “the proportion of children being raised by a single parent has more than doubled in the last four decades.” Richard V. Reeves, “How to Save Marriage in America,” *The Atlantic*, February 13, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/02/how-to-save-marriage-in-america/283732/> And in 2003, investigative journalist Katharine Boo wrote an award winning article in the *New Yorker* about a state sponsored, Bush administration endorsed anti-poverty program that proclaimed marriage as a cure for poverty; this social policy rested on the efforts of poor women, who were instructed to “push their male counterparts into the cultural and economic mainstream,” through marriage commitments. Katharine Boo, “The Marriage Cure,” *New Yorker*, August 18, 2003, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/08/18/the-marriage-cure>

⁴¹² Reeves, “How to Save a Marriage in America.”

not demonstrated any significant compensatory value to Alison—save for a vague, symbolic sense of respectability that is hardly relevant in the twenty-first century, when the majority of “Americans think marriage is not necessary for sexual fulfillment, personal happiness, or financial security.”⁴¹³ Alison’s polite rejection thus deepens Ben’s own self-victimizing sensibilities (“I’m the guy girls fuck over,” he tells Alison early on in their courtship), which ultimately serves to ennoble his rather unremarkable redemption.

While Ben may not find himself pitted against an identifiable antagonist in *Knocked Up*, there is no doubt that fully and partially formed children (though shrouded in protective sentimentality) wield a tremendous and disruptive power over adults in this film—especially when it comes to sex, or lack thereof. Early in their courtship, Ben admits to Alison that he had hoped to get “a little fun out of [her] situation,” implying that he felt entitled to sexual access to her—unencumbered by even the thought of using a condom. When given the chance to have sex with his very visibly pregnant (and very eager) partner, however, Ben is unable to perform out of fear of hurting or offending his unborn child—“I can’t do that to our baby,” he says. While Ben finds it “weird” that the baby is between them, Alison is more weirded out by the sight of her own pregnant body; her self-disgust thus sits uneasily alongside the film’s self-reflexive use of the contemporary fetishization of celebrity baby bumps.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ As Peter Bradbury observes in his essay on men’s compromised power in relation to the “drama of pregnancy,” “[i]t has become virtually impossible to represent the pregnant woman as sexual, or as an object of erotic desire, except perhaps in rare cases where pregnancy is fetishized.” Peter Bradbury, “Desire and Pregnancy,” in *The Sexuality of Men*, ed. Andy Metcalf et al. (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 143.

Indeed, as the baby becomes more fully formed on the ultrasound and in their imaginations, Alison becomes increasingly separated from her own body and sense of self. As Berlant notes in regards to the fetal image and its “world-making” powers:

The structure of rescue this image forces any ethical subject to assume almost invariably, and with devastating effects, erases other images: of specific maternal bodies, of adult women in their contexts of domestic and public work, women who act in history and have value beyond their specific place in the sacred national temporality of reproduction.⁴¹⁵

In a twenty-first century context, these notions of sentimentality and rescue around the fetus are grounded in a particular paradigm of childhood innocence, but Ben’s protection instincts are mostly limited to abstract and, rather absurd, fears. In contrast, for instance, to his passionate insistence on protecting his unborn child from being sexually assaulted by his penis, Ben’s protection instinct goes completely dormant when Alison actually finds herself at real risk of bodily harm.

Though the earth may not have moved during their awful lovemaking session, an earthquake strikes Los Angeles later that night; the quake violently rattles the walls of Ben’s flophouse and causes a major emotional riff in his relationship with Alison. Among the many disasters in *Knocked Up*, this act of God marks a turning point in Alison’s efforts to make it work with Ben, whose first instinct is to clutch his bong and carry it with him outside, where his housemates are gathered in various states of highness and undress. Alison asks, “How am I supposed to be comfortable with the idea that you can take care of me and the baby because you’re always getting high?” As a testament to the romantic comedy genre’s melodramatic underpinning, the earthquake’s symbolic value surpasses its narrative purpose. In addition to the

⁴¹⁵ Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 129.

literal and metaphoric significance of the earthquake itself, the tremors draw the camera's lingering attention to a number of symbolically charged props, which remain mostly unremarked upon by the characters.

For instance, when police officers sound their sirens as they patrol the neighborhood for possible damages, Ben reacts in a panic and shatters his beloved, oversized bong—the most phallic of all the symbols of Ben's immaturity. While Ben's destruction of his bong signals important changes ahead for his boy-man masculinity and lifestyle, the trinkets scattered in his bedroom point to a long, difficult, and possibly not worthwhile struggle. Alison makes a number of powerful, silent observations of particularly alarming findings among the rubble; she takes long, hard look at a samurai sword, at one of Ben's recent bank statements, and most disturbing of all, at the pile of unread baby books that were never removed from the original shopping bag. In addition to the melodramatic sensibility at work here, where the film text gestures to that which cannot or will not be said, Alison's silence and restraint is also a symptom of her postfeminist subjectivity.

According to Angela McRobbie, the post-feminist repudiation of an explicit feminist agenda has produced a new female subject who, “despite her freedom, is called upon to be silent, to withhold critique. . .this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom.”⁴¹⁶ Taken together, these objects—especially when filtered through Alison's point of view—demonstrate that Ben is not committed to being a partner to Alison, a breadwinner, or even a responsible, involved father figure to their child. As the quintessential, hollowed-out brom-com heroine, Alison continues to withhold critique and judgement, ultimately holding out for “grudgingly

⁴¹⁶ Angela McRobbie, “Post-feminism and Popular Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (2007): 260.

ethical behavior,” which as Aronson and Kimmel note, is “about the best today’s women can get from men.”⁴¹⁷

People Who Love Each Other Get Married and Have Babies

By the time of her last ultrasound at the twenty-eight week mark, both Alison and Debbie become increasingly frustrated with their respective partners to the point where they can no longer “withhold critique.” While Aronson and Kimmel argue that the “grudgingly ethical behavior” these on-screen heroines can only hope to receive from men in contemporary Hollywood films is often “more than compensated by sisterly solidarity,” Alison’s close relationship with Debbie is beginning to cause her more stress than comfort.⁴¹⁸ More specifically, Alison grapples with the likelihood that she is doomed to the same unhappy fate as Debbie if she continues to force a romantic relationship with Ben in a misguided, dutiful effort to protect their unborn child from inarticulable trauma.

Pete and Debbie were married under similar circumstances; two daughters and ten years later, their marriage still rests primarily on their mutual fear of ruining their beloved daughters’ innocence or losing their adoration. On the one hand, this desire to protect their children appears to be the only thread holding Debbie and Pete’s marriage together; on the other hand, Debbie and Pete most often find themselves arguing about how and from what to protect their daughters, especially when it comes to their sexual innocence. Within the immediate context of the narrative, these unsettling squabbles between Debbie and Pete are, indeed, less about child welfare than they are about providing glimpses into Alison and Ben’s future, as well as

⁴¹⁷ Aronson and Kimmel, “The Savior and the Saved,” 44.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

enhancing Debbie's characterization as a controlling, judgmental nag and Pete as a sympathetic, fun-loving bro. As Debbie puts it in her signature, caustic brilliance, "so I'm the bad guy because I'm trying to protect our kids from child molesters and mercury and you're cool because you don't give a shit?" "Yeah," says Pete, as Ben looks on in absolute horror.

Indeed, in addition to an overblown fear of sexual predators living in their neighborhood, Debbie tries to protect their daughters' from the ostensibly scandalizing truth that Alison and Ben are having a child without being married or even "loving each other." One day at breakfast, their eldest daughter, Charlotte, who has developed a morbid interest in murder, gore, butts, and "pricks" despite her parents' efforts to protect her innocence, starts asking questions about Alison and Ben's relationship. When Pete mentions that two people do not, in fact, have to be married in order to have a baby, Debbie snaps back and states firmly, "people who love each other get married and have babies." This painfully self-reflexive one-liner reveals Debbie's own stirring disillusionment with her life choices, while also recognizing the often elusive mission statement of reproductive futurity that underpins *Knocked Up*, the romantic comedy genre, and far more encompassing discourses of citizenship. Indeed, *Knocked Up* exposes Debbie and Pete's dissatisfaction with their life choices only to force identical expectations on Alison and Ben, as well as on to the futures of Charlotte and Sadie. As Denby observes, *Knocked Up* leads its characters and viewers into a heartbreaking, frustrating trap: "If you're young, you have to grow up. If you grow up, you turn into Debbie. . . Either way, you're in trouble."⁴¹⁹

In addition to convincing Pete to "care more," Debbie makes it her mission to expose her husband as a "dirty little scumbag." Doomed from the start, Debbie's backfiring efforts to

⁴¹⁹ Denby, "A Fine Romance."

nitpick, nag, manipulate, and snoop come to a sad and humiliating climax when she investigates her suspicions that Pete is having an affair with another woman. In jumping to Pete's defenses, Ben mentions that he would not be entirely surprised if Pete strayed because he's "awesome" and Debbie is a "pain in the ass"—in other words, she deserves it.

The film works to validate Ben's reasoning by showing Debbie's withholding of sex from Pete. Unlike most secondary female characters within the sex comedy and brom-com cycles, who demonstrate excessive sexual desires that intimidate or repulse the male characters (e.g. Alma in *Pillow Talk*, Gloria in *Wedding Crashers*, Beth in *Virgin*), Debbie treats sexual propositions with exhausted disgust. When Pete attempts an unromantic, unenthusiastic initiation of sex, Debbie counters with a labored groan and an equally unsexy remark about her constipation. On the other hand, however, it seems perfectly reasonable that Pete would prefer his habit of masturbating into Debbie's bath towels over getting involved with another woman who, after all, would probably come to expect something more from him than just casual sex.

While the most meaningful and acceptable type of sex in the contemporary rom-com is reproductive sex, a few recent brom-coms, including *Hall Pass* (2011) and *The Change Up* (2011), have attempted to revisit the infidelity plot. Much like their midcentury heirs, however, American men are still apparently incapable of following through on their desires—except these

days there's no Production Code to blame for their ineptitude.⁴²⁰ As the following chapter discusses in greater detail, men are not only unable to follow through on their desires to cheat, but these sorts of casual, clandestine sexual relationships with women no longer have the same pull as they did in the midcentury sex comedy; rather, brom-com heroes like Pete often find themselves seeking avenues of escape that do not include women at all.

In recalling Isolde's deflated spirit of exhilarated vengefulness when her calculated scheme to expose Augie as a cheater proves false in *The Tunnel of Love*, Debbie experiences a terrible shock she finds Pete in a living room full of grown men engaged in a heated fantasy baseball draft instead of in bed with another woman. Debbie finds Pete's secret more hurtful than cheating, but has trouble explaining why—"this is you wanting to be with your friends more than your family," she whimpers. What follows Debbie's humiliating sting operation is one of the darkest, tear-filled moments in Apatow's comedy oeuvre to date, where Pete offers his teary-eyed, heartbroken "ball-buster" of a wife a cold, straightforward explanation for his secrets and lies.⁴²¹ What it comes down to, according to Pete, is his "sanity."

Without so much as an inflection of apology or empathy, he tells Debbie, "I needed to get away. You know, with work, and you, and the kids. Sometimes I just need some time to myself."

⁴²⁰ For instance, while the wives in *Boys' Night Out* do not become aware of their husbands' schemes until the end, in *Hall Pass*, it is the wives who arrange for their husbands (and as it turns out, themselves) to enjoy a week off of marriage. While the wives have no trouble attracting desirable men, the husbands fail miserably at navigating contemporary hook-up culture—especially the frumpy dad, Owen Wilson, who we later find out has only slept with one woman his entire life. All parties involved soon realize that the dull safety of marriage and family is preferable to any kind of experimentation. In Apatow's *Funny People* (2009), Leslie Mann's character receives oral sex from an old fling and contemplates leaving her husband who admits to having meaningless affairs with foreign women. They decide, however, to stay married for the sake of their two daughters. Out of all the contemporary examples, *The Change Up* takes things to the most ridiculous extremes when a married with children lawyer switches bodies with his man-child bachelor friend. After thwarting a number of exciting and perverse sexual possibilities—including a near sexual encounter with a very horny and pregnant woman—the tiresome and disgusting trappings of marriage and parenthood are upheld over the sorry meaninglessness of bachelorhood.

⁴²¹ Taylor, "Knocked Up."

It had not occurred to Pete that Debbie would feel the same way. “I need time for myself. I want time for myself too. You’re not the only one,” she says. While the brom-com is willing to acknowledge the fact that some women might wish to escape their roles as wives and mothers, these desires rarely materialize. Perhaps Debbie wanted to catch Pete acting on a sexual rather than a baseball fantasy because it would have given her a more socially acceptable reason to leave her marriage, or at least, to get some time to herself. As Alison and Ben eavesdrop from the curb, Debbie and Pete confront the awful truths that they have known for quite some time; they are mismatched in spirit but equal in their dissatisfaction with the roles and obligations they have accepted as right and good. Debbie and Pete’s marriage never quite recovers from this revelation, which also happens to cause an explosive argument between Alison and Ben.

Alison revisits the sorry subject of the fantasy baseball bust, which she describes as “one of the most selfish things [she’s] ever witnessed,” while driving Ben to their next gynecologist appointment. Ben cheerfully comes to Pete’s defenses; he explains to Alison, “when you’re a guy, and you know, you have a family, you have responsibility, you lose that male camaraderie. And I get that.” Up until this point in the narrative, Alison has kindly and patiently defended Pete, as well as Ben, from Debbie’s hostile accusations and criticism, but she finally snaps from the unbearable weight of niceness. She screams at Ben to get out of her car and, much to his surprise, Alison leaves him in the middle of a highway in Koreatown. “I am hormonal. I am terrified. And I am falling apart,” she warns. When Ben unexpectedly shows up at the doctor’s appointment, Alison tries to end their relationship. In raging disbelief, he screams “I know this isn’t you talking, it’s your hormones. But I would just like to say fuck you hormones, you are a crazy bitch, hormones. Not Alison.” Much like Debbie, Alison’s feelings and expressions of

anger and dissatisfaction are undermined in a number of ways, while Ben's general likability and pitiful disposition remain intact. As this scene makes clear, Alison's thoughts and actions are no longer considered her own; her anger, her defense of Debbie, as well as her decision to end her relationship with Ben, are instead effectively written off as pregnancy hormones.

What Happens in Vegas

After Ben and Pete find themselves estranged from their partners following their respective, barn-burning arguments, they indulge in the kind of escapist male camaraderie that got them into trouble in the first place. Indeed, over the course of Alison's pregnancy, Ben actually develops a closer, more meaningful relationship with Pete than he does with her. In addition to a genuine affection for one another, the two bros bond over their shared feelings of resentment and regret, as well as their mutual dislike of Debbie, who not only "busts their balls" every chance she gets, but also tries to turn the otherwise agreeable Alison against them. For instance, in an earlier scene, Pete brings up the subject of regret while the couples are out on a double date. He asks, "isn't it weird though when you have a kid and all your dreams and hopes go right out the window?" With a boyish sense of excitement, Ben and Pete imagine entering a time machine and making different life decisions, none of which involve getting married or having children. While Alison and Debbie refuse to admit any regrets or fears, Debbie suggests that Ben and Pete get into their time machine, "go back in time, and fuck each other."

The closest Ben and Pete come to Debbie's spot-on suggestion is a gentlemen's get-away to Las Vegas, which turns out to be even less scandalous than Augie's pill-popping misadventure with Ms. Novick in *The Tunnel of Love*. Instead of gambling and chasing women, they get high on psychedelic mushrooms and stare at each other while receiving side-by-side lap dances. Their

escapist, bromantic thrills, however, are short-lived. The mushrooms start to lose their desired effect during a bizarre and homoerotic Cirque du Soleil performance. The distorted camera work invites the viewer to share Ben's panicked, trippy perspective as he hallucinates a large, demented baby on stage who calls him "Papa." The bad trip continues in Ben and Pete's hotel suite, where they once again bring up the subject of regret, but this time the discussion takes on a strikingly different tone—"I should have read the baby books," says Ben.

In what *Time* critic Richard Corliss describes as the "deepest communion of personalities" in *Knocked Up*, Ben and Pete have a heartfelt and unsettling conversation about their own pathetic, miserable states.⁴²² Much like most popular audiences, they wonder how Alison and Debbie could even like them, let alone love, forgive, and want them "around all the time." Pete whines about his inability to accept Debbie's love, which he confuses with his struggle to accept his rigidly defined role as a breadwinner husband and father. Ben mopes about Alison's refusal to "give her life" to him the way Debbie has given her life to Pete. Similar to the way the legitimacy of Alison's outrage in the previous scene was undermined by her admittedly imbalanced hormones, Ben and Pete's drug use somewhat diminishes the emotional sincerity, as well as the seemingly lucid articulations of guilt, shame, and resentment in this scene.

The sentiment here, however, resonated powerfully with certain viewers, namely "young husbands," who according to Apatow, "said they felt guilty that they weren't at home more with their families" after screening the film.⁴²³ As with other popular brom-coms, such as *Hall Pass*, *The Hangover*, and *The Change-Up*, where the male leads realize that life away from marriage

⁴²² Richard Corliss, "Superbad: A Fine Bromance," *Time*, August 17, 2007, <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1653918-1,00.html>

⁴²³ Waxman, "Giving the Last Laugh to Life's Losers."

and women is far worse than life with them, Ben and Pete's trip (both in the travel and drug sense of the word) ignites a strong, urgent desire to not only "go home" to Alison and Debbie, but to reconsider their otherwise happy and uncomplicated bromance. Ben, for instance, does not offer Pete much in the way of sympathy or solidarity when he complains about Debbie's smothering love. Instead, he tells Pete, "she's too good for you. . . .she busts your balls because you're a little bitch." In shameful agreement, Pete curls up into the fetal position and shoves his fist in his mouth like a child.

Girls' Night Pout

Although *Knocked Up* makes discontent and desire available to both sexes, it does not make modes of expression and escape equally available. Ben and Pete's get-away may not have gone as planned, but they nonetheless fare much better than Debbie and Alison, who are unable to experience even a fleeting moment of escape during their botched girls' night out. Under the influence of energy drinks (as opposed to hallucinogenic drugs) and a manic surge of positivity, Debbie declares that she and Alison are "gonna create a new life, and it's gonna be awesome." Like Ben and Pete, their girls' night out is spoiled prematurely by guilt and despair, but of a much different sort. Their plans to dance their troubles away at the same nightclub where Alison and Ben first met are thwarted by the club's black doorman (Craig Robinson)—the only black character with any lines in the film—who denies them special admission to the club on the basis that Alison is "pregnant" and Debbie is "old as fuck." "Can't have a bunch of old, pregnant bitches running around," he says, "that's *crazy*."

Indeed, the doorman's judgment speaks to much larger discourses of patriarchal power that police female bodies, which are judged according to increasingly narrow standards of sexual

desirability, as defined by white heterosexual men. Considering, as Berlant notes, the traditional belief that “once pregnant the woman loses her feminine gender, becoming primarily a mother,” Alison and Debbie’s bodies are fetishes, at best (e.g. the M.I.L.F), within the context of twenty-first century hook-up culture.⁴²⁴ The doorman’s refusal to concede to Debbie’s undignified, hostile negotiations sends her into a shocking, misanthropic fit of rage, which, as one critic warns, “violates enough Hollywood no-nos about age and race to have earned the movie its R-rating.”⁴²⁵ Debbie berates the doorman for his low-status job before spouting ugly, homophobic slurs. In an outburst that makes the “you’re so gay” jokes about “butt-fuckingham palace” and “Gay-be Ruth” between Ben and Pete seem droll, Debbie shrieks “fuck you, you fucking fag with your fucking little faggy gloves.”

While men in the brom-com routinely use homophobic, racist, and sexist language to humorous effect, Debbie’s language and behavior in this particular scene renders her character unlikable, ultimately undermining whatever sympathy or admiration audiences may have felt her up until this point. In a surprising act of generosity, however, the doorman pulls Debbie aside and apologizes to *her* for having to “pass judgement” in order to do his job. He then gives Debbie what she came to the club for in the first place—reassurance that she is, despite cultural beauty standards, still considered fuckable. “I would tear that ass up,” he tells her, sending a sad, subtle twinge of relief and appreciation over her tear-stained face. Then, in one of the exceptionally rare moments where matters of white privilege are addressed in the brom-com, he speaks to her about

⁴²⁴ Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 99.

⁴²⁵ Taylor, “*Knocked Up*.”

the sordid and decidedly racist nature of his doorman duties, which make him physically ill. “I’m only allowed to let in five percent black people,” he admits in shame.

While this brief exchange feels markedly out of step with the rest of the film, it provides a crucial reminder of the subjects and struggles eschewed in *Knocked Up*, as well as the brom-com cycle at large. In contrast to the scene in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, where Andy gains confidence and respect among his peers after insulting a black woman in defense of his friend, Debbie’s outburst puts her in a place of defeat and humiliation. Unlike Ben and Pete, who remain blissfully unaware of their position of power as white heterosexual men, Debbie is the one character forced to confront her “WASPish” privilege, as well as her bad parenting. The doorman suggests that Alison and Debbie try a “Yoga class” instead of a nightclub, which is no place for a pregnant woman—“that’s not even good parenting right there,” he says, “your old ass should know better than that.” Alison and Debbie should, indeed, know better because responsibility is *all* they know. Whereas Ben and Pete come to realize their guilt and shame through their own (drug-induced) epiphanies, Alison and Debbie are schooled in the inappropriateness of their actions and intentions from a third party. “Now I feel guilty, I’m sorry,” Debbie whimpers, before walking away with Alison, who, as per usual, had been standing by in silent, idle horror.

The sisters spend the rest of their night resting uncomfortably on the curbside of an empty street, where viewer attention is subtly redirected towards what one critic describes as the “aching dissatisfaction behind Debbie’s toxic snippiness.”⁴²⁶ Their exchanges of self-loathing and shame, however, differs from those expressed by Ben and Pete during their hotel room meltdowns. Alison and Debbie, for instance, have nothing sentimental, loving, or even

⁴²⁶ Leydon, “*Knocked Up*.”

disparaging to say about their partners and relationships. Rather, their despair is concentrated exclusively on matters of image—"I get worse looking and he gets better looking," Debbie cries, as she mourns her lost youth. Alison and Debbie go back and forth about which one of them is the least deserving of being seen in public or experiencing genuine pleasure. Just as Ben and Pete are unable to escape their sense of obligation and the guilt they feel for resenting that obligation, Alison and Debbie are tragically locked in their own hateful self-criticism and their maternal roles. Debbie and Alison, however, did not enjoy the luxury of traveling to a different city for an entire weekend, divorced from any actual responsibility. Instead, the sisters pick themselves up off the curb and head home by the stroke of midnight in order to relieve the babysitter, "the pissy little high school cunt" for whom Debbie reserves her final, abhorrent smear of the night.

Growing Pains

It turns out, however, that Ben and Pete did not leave their feelings of guilt and regret behind in Las Vegas. They return to Los Angeles with a matched eagerness to recommit to their relationships, but their respective partners are not equally receptive, nor do they share the same approach when it comes to the labor of romantic relationships. Earlier in the film, for instance, Debbie offers Alison some supposedly Oprah-approved relationship advice: "You need to train him," she says. She explains, "you criticize them a lot and then they get so down on themselves that they're force to change and then, in the end, they thank you for it." Superficially, Debbie's method appears to have worked; when Ben encounters Pete for the first time since their Vegas trip, he is decked out for his daughter's princess themed birthday party, chipper, and catering to Debbie's every whim with a smile and a kiss.

Whereas Debbie is an agent of change, Alison is more of a vessel, or a deadline; she takes

a hands-off approach to “training” Ben, which involves withholding judgement and doing nothing—except for giving birth. During the birthday party, Ben approaches Alison about getting “back on track” but offers no apology or evidence that he will be more considerate or that they will be better matched. With her pregnancy hormones seemingly under control, Alison delivers a more polite, albeit equally rational rejection of romance and a thoughtful plea for a friendly co-parenting relationship. She reasons, “just because we’re two nice people doesn’t mean we should stay together. I don’t want this baby to determine the rest of our lives. Me not wanting to do this alone is not enough a reason to drag you into a relationship with me.” She also revisits her fear of becoming a vengeful nag like Debbie, but her fears are less grounded in self-love and protection than they are out of concern for Ben’s freedom and future happiness. Alison assures him, “I don’t want to force you to be what I think you should be.”

Through Alison’s lovely rejection and withholding of judgment, Ben is tricked into believing he owns his desire to change—into believing that, unlike her, he has a freedom of choice. A long-awaited, unremarkable montage showcases Ben’s equally unremarkable maturation, cross-cut with glimpses of Alison’s journey to single motherhood. In addition to telling off Pete, Ben cuts ties with his housemates and moves into his own apartment. He somehow manages to secure a job for a first time in his life—a cushy desk job at a hip web design firm, no less. Considering the myriad studies, statistics and overviews regarding the state of men’s affairs in twenty-first century America, this often overlooked element is perhaps even more out of touch with reality than Alison’s decision to carry her pregnancy to term. Ben spends his paycheck on boutique baby clothes and shoddily decorates a baby crib nook for his apartment. He curls up on the couch with the baby books instead of meeting up with his

housemates or hitting his bong.

None of these accomplishments are particularly impressive, but considering his low starting point, Ben's efforts are nonetheless imbued with a sense of triumph and gallantry. One critic found this boosterism particularly dismaying within the larger context of the romantic comedy genre, noting:

Whatever changes Gable and Grant had to undergo in their comedies of remarriage, they didn't need to learn to accept minimal adult responsibility. You may judge the distance between their era and ours by the fact that Rogen's education in *Knocked Up* barely rises to adult topics. He mostly learns to bathe, dress neatly, tidy his room, eat properly, engage people in conversation and read: training for a 6 year old.⁴²⁷

Ben's domestication and growth, however unexceptional, still surpasses that of Alison's since she never really had much to learn about being an adult, consumer, mother, or woman. Taken as a whole, the montage intimates that Alison and Ben could, in fact, make competent and amiable co-parents, perhaps even friends.

While Ben trains for adulthood, Alison attends Lamaze classes with Debbie, folds baby clothes alone in her camera-ready nursery, and looks sad during ultrasound appointments. Just at the film simply hands Ben an artsy-tech job on the basis of no experience or merit, Alison receives her unsolicited and underhanded promotion at work, which requires her to focus on the mythology of pregnancy and motherhood ("the hopes, dreams, whatever," says her boss), but none of the "gross stuff." It is not long, however, before *Knocked Up* shows all of the "gross stuff" in order to distract from the other horrors at play—like forcing a romantic relationship with an unsupportive, poorly matched partner and becoming responsible for another life before one is ready.

⁴²⁷ Stuart Klawans, "Boys (and Girls) of Summer," *The Nation*, July 30, 2007, *Knocked Up* File, Herrick.

Labor Pains

Just as Ben disconnects from his male pack, Alison finds herself separated from her support system the night she goes into labor. Unable to reach Debbie or her doctor, Alison reluctantly resorts to phoning Ben for help. When Ben finds Alison working through the labor pains in a luxurious bubble bath, he attempts to win back her love by proving that he has read the baby books. Ben starts talking about the various stages of labor, which brings Alison to tears of appreciation and forgiveness. Indeed, in keeping with the narrative's grand scheme of male redemption, Alison's labor is not about her or the baby, but about Ben's final push into meeting very basic criteria of neoliberal adulthood and twenty-first century citizenship, which primarily values private, self-empowerment and improvement. As with Andy in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, Ben's journey towards self-empowerment is two-fold; Alison's labor presents the ideal opportunity for Ben to demonstrate that he has not only taken charge of himself (e.g. reading the baby books), but he must also "effectively conduct a charge."⁴²⁸

Up until this point, Ben has asked others, mainly Alison and his father, to tell him what to do and what to say, but the time has come for Ben to make decisions and, more importantly, to make demands on others. In what started with reprimanding Pete for being a "pussy" and a "shitty husband," Ben confronts several people over the course of Alison's labor, including her chosen doctor, who broke his commitment to Alison in order to attend a bar mitzvah in San Francisco. Ben leaves the doctor a hateful, threatening voicemail that rivals Debbie's

⁴²⁸ According to Ouellette and Hay's examination of neoliberal selfhood, "[e]xercising freedom, as a matter of learning how to act and behave, makes the self a conductor of power in two senses: as someone empowered to take charge of one's life, and also as someone who can effectively conduct a charge (as certain metals conduct electricity), or someone who can deliver what is expected. In one's ability to practice freedom well and responsibly and in one's reliance upon the technologies of the self one becomes a good conductor of power in both senses." Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 15.

misanthropic rage during that fateful girls' night out. In unexpectedly putting aside his strong feelings regarding Jewish solidarity, he ends the message with "I hope you fucking die or drop the fucking chair and kill that fucking kid." Granted, in most other contexts, this type of outrageous behavior would not be considered very adult or indicative that Ben will make a respectable husband and father. In the world of the Apatovian brom-com, however, Ben's anger signals an invigorating step toward rehabilitated manhood—the apathetic insouciance that threatened the heterofamilial romance has become counterbalanced by a disappointingly brutish, more traditional mode of masculine aggression.

By the time they arrive at the hospital, Ben is still riding the momentum of this invigorating, hotheaded aggression. While Ben takes an immediate liking to the young white male nurse (played by Adam Scott) who makes lighthearted jokes and speaks to Alison as if she were a child, he has trouble relating to their back-up doctor, Dr. Kuni, played by Ken Jeong. Indeed, Dr. Kuni presents a strikingly different mode of masculinity than the other male characters in the film. In addition to the obvious differences of race (Jeong would go on to become the favorite, token Asian American performer of the millennial brom-com cycle) and professionalism, Dr. Kuni is not soulful or fun-loving; in fact, he has a snarky bedside manner that puts both Alison and Ben on the defensive. In addition to making a snide remark about his fortuitous lack of Jewish friends, Dr. Kuni is dismissive of Alison's "birth plan," and essentially accuses her of endangering the baby with her demands.

Ben requests a word with Dr. Kuni in the hallway and, instead of threatening to kill him, attempts to start a calm, rational dialogue about the tension in the delivery room. Dr. Kuni calls Alison a "control freak," while Ben calmly explains that Alison wanted the birth to be "a special

experience.” Their exchange speaks to a relatively new figuration of privileged, monstrous femininity that developed in tandem with the heightened expectations for parenting defining the new momism. Recently dubbed the “birthzilla,”—a spin-off of the “bridezilla,” a now all too familiar fixture in millennial pop culture—this term marks a nexus of anxiety and desire rooted in postfeminism, capitalism, neoliberal citizenship, white privilege, and reproductive futurism.⁴²⁹

Birthzillas use birth plans to gain a sense of control and self-empowerment during an unpredictable experience with many risk factors. Alison, for instance, initially refuses medication because she does not want her baby to be born “all drugged out,” but will later find herself screaming for an epidural once it's too late. While Dr. Kuni's aims and attitude demonstrate a similar privileging of the baby's well-being over that of the mother's agency or experience, Ben pleads with him to use a gentler tone with Alison. Dr. Kuni also adopts a decidedly more sympathetic tone with Ben—“I think we're bonding,” he says. Indeed, even more so than consideration for Alison's feelings, it is important for Ben to have an element of male camaraderie in the delivery room for some selfish comfort of his own.

In addition to relinquishing control of her body and experience to the better judgment of the men in the delivery room, Alison also finds herself reassuring Ben that he is, in fact, the “right guy” for her. Much like Isolde, who despite her innocence, ends up apologizing to Augie for doubting his integrity in *The Tunnel of Love*, Alison seeks forgiveness for doubting Ben's potential as a mate and father shortly before their baby is born. In his infinite, adolescent narcissism, however, Ben does not reciprocate with an apology of his own; instead, he admits “I

⁴²⁹ As Dr. Amy Tuteur explains, both bridezillas and birthzillas refer to women who become unruly “tyrants” in their pursuit of an impossibly perfect wedding or birth, respectively. Despite significant differences in terms of the stakes, resources, and socio-economic factors involved, both bridezillas and birthzillas “justify their hypersensitivity, obsessive need for control, and rudeness to everyone else with the all purpose excuse ‘It's my special day.’” Amy Tuteur, “Birthzillas,” *The Skeptical OB*, January 11, 2009, <http://www.skepticalob.com/2012/01/birthzilla.html>

knew you'd give me another shot. I'd figured it be a lot sooner than this." While Ben has proven himself worthy of Alison's last minute love, one task remains before the baby can be born into this reconciled space—Ben must stand up to Debbie.

Indeed, just as this baby can only be born into a heteronormative coupling, there is only room for male camaraderie in Alison's delivery room. Ben rudely banishes Debbie to the hospital waiting room, where she rejoins Pete and Ben's housemates in a spirit of defeat, as well as hopefulness. In interpreting Ben's abusive language and expulsion as a sign that he actually cares enough about Alison and the baby to get pissed and territorial, Debbie tells Pete, "He said he's gonna take care of her. He really seems on his game. I think he's gonna be a good dad. I think I *like* him. Thank God." Though Ben may have proven that he "cares more," Pete, along with Ben's housemates, have gone mostly unchanged.

Crowning Achievement

While in the waiting room, Ben's housemates act like unruly children; they horseplay with wheelchairs in the hospital hallways, mocking disabled and sick people the same way they sneer at women, gays, and various "others" that might put pressure on their already flimsy sense of privilege as young white men. Jay, however, experiences a profound, potentially life-changing moment when he "sneaks a peek" into Alison's delivery room after her bloodcurdling screams fill the waiting room. To be sure, Alison's pregnant body remains the object of constant, internal and external scrutiny throughout her labor. In honoring its penchant for all things outrageous, awkward, and grotesque, *Knocked Up's* lampooning of this E! Entertainment Network version of pregnancy as a beautiful miracle filled with hopes, dreams, and reasons to shop finally culminates in three shots of a simulated baby crowning, which is made all the more shocking by

the fact that *Knocked Up* is otherwise devoid of frontal nudity.

Despite the male characters' running obsession with "pussy,"—as both an object of sexual desire as well as vulgar shorthand for a shameful failure to be masculine—and a running repulsion of pubic hair, Ben and Jay are positively aghast by the sight of Alison's bald, perfectly pink and sanitized, camera-ready vagina performing its most awesome biological function, which much to their horror, has nothing to do with their sexual pleasure. Although Ben advises her not to look at the spectacle of her own body, Alison requests a mirror and shrieks in similar horror at the reflection, but what she finds far more horrifying is the fact that Jay is sharing in this nightmarish moment. This otherwise miraculous and exceedingly painful moment for Alison is thus transformed into an abject spectacle for Ben and Jay, who despite his initial excitement and anticipation over the birth, returns to the waiting room a traumatized man.⁴³⁰ "Try getting a boner now," says Jonah, whose cynical disapproval of Ben's impending fatherhood and Jay's enthusiasm soon gives way to overwhelming expressions of group love and joy.

When Alison finally gives birth, the screaming and repulsion gives way to a deluge of sentimentality, save for a couple requisite dick and ball jokes to keep the chick-flick gushiness in check. After exchanging breathless "I love you's" with Ben immediately after the birth, Alison hangs in the background of the convivial proceedings. Debbie kisses Ben and tells him she loves him. Debbie even shares a laugh and a kiss with Pete before stupefying him with a quip about having another baby—because what better reason to stay in their joyless marriage?⁴³¹ When Ben

⁴³⁰ In her analysis of the crowning scene in *Knocked Up*, Tania Modleski describes Jay's traumatic witnessing of the grotesque event—"a repellent sight of reproductive sexuality's issue at the very moment of its emergence"—as a "visceral rejection of reproductive futurism." Tania Modleski, "An Affair to Forget: Melancholia in Bromantic Comedy," *Camera Obscura* 29, no. 2 (2014): 131.

⁴³¹ Debbie actually does get pregnant again in *Knocked Up's* "sort of sequel," *This Is 40* (2012).

announces the news to his housemates with joyful pride, the waiting room swells with hugs and cheers for the baby they assumed would tear them apart and disrupt their way of life.

Ben also demonstrates a profound shift in attitude towards his new role as father; for in addition to learning to work, live, read, shop, and threaten people like a *man*, he must also clear his mind and heart of all doubt and regret in order to make his transition into proper, mature manhood complete. In a dramatic reversal of his earlier remark, where he wished for a time machine so that he could go back to that fateful night, “maybe put a condom on,” and pursue a completely different life, Ben lovingly cradles his newborn daughter in his arms and declares that not using a condom was “the smartest thing” he has ever done. In what is easily the most socially irresponsible and pernicious line in the film, Ben’s remark not only implicitly disregards the dangers of unprotected sex, but it also repudiates the more resonant and pleasurable elements of the film’s narrative middle—including the short-sighted thrills and the rich expressions of anger and disappointment that led up to this point.

Most emphatically, the final scene discounts the possibility of Alison and Ben raising their baby as co-parents within a wider network of family and friends, which marked the film’s most promising alternative to the version of heteronormative adulthood behind the characters’ running anxiety and discontent. While there is no explicit mention of marriage, Alison agrees to move into Ben’s apartment, which is removed from the filth and hazards of the group flophouse, as well as from the threat of Debbie and Alison raising the child together had Alison remained in the Brentwood guesthouse. Similar to *The Tunnel of Love*, *Knocked Up* closes on a potentially hopeful notes of travel and in-betweenness, except there is no sexual or romantic thrill; there is no grand embrace or swelling choral voices, only separation and responsibility.

Upon leaving the hospital, Ben helps Alison and the baby into the backseat, where Alison has been all along in this story, and they head for his apartment in East Los Angeles. As Alison tends to the baby in the back, Ben makes lighthearted jokes with racist undertones regarding the gang activity near his apartment—“we have to decide if we’re going to be Crypts or Bloods before we get there,” he jests. In making light of the racialized poverty and violence the white-washed world of *Knocked Up* necessarily ignores, Ben’s joke foreshadows the conflict that awaits them. “The fighting continues,” says Ben, when he and Alison align themselves with different gangs.

While they agree to compromise and become “Latin Kings,” there is still the unavoidable feeling that Alison and Ben will end up at odds like Debbie and Pete, except with less money, less house, and probably more sexual predators to worry about.⁴³² As the film comes to a close, the camera cranes out to show Ben driving excessively slow on a crowded coastal freeway. While Ben uses the baby’s safety to defend his crawling pace to Alison, there is also the looming sense that he is postponing something awful, such as the real labor of “making it work” that begins once they arrive at their destination, or, the oppressively sentimental closing credit sequence that follows.

Unlike *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, where the closing credit sequence undermined the tacked-on heteronormative resolution through an exuberant splattering of sex and bromance from a safe space beyond the diegesis, *Knocked Up*’s sappy montage of happy, “normal” families from

⁴³² Most responses to the film shared a similar concern. As Mark Olsen noted in his review in *Film Comment*, “[t]he sense that all’s well ends well slots a little too neatly into our era’s sanctification of family and children, particularly since the couple are no more obviously compatible now than they were in the months prior to the birth of their daughter. The prospect that they too will become a bickering, mismatched couple like Pete and Debbie haunts any attempt at blissed-out afterglow.” Mark Olsen, “3 Dimensional Man: Judd Apatow’s Warm-Hearted Life-Sized Comedies,” *Film Comment* 43 (2007): 34.

within and beyond the diegesis offers no disavowal of its dismaying textual labor. In what could reasonably pass as a Santorum approved, pro-life public service announcement, *Knocked Up* marshals an excessive celebration of heteronormativity as a last-ditch attempt to assuage its vexing premise and the assorted miseries acknowledged in the narrative middle. Set to Wainwright Loudon's "Daughter," a saccharine ode to the filial love between a father and daughter, the credits roll over vignettes of Ben and Alison, along with their collection of family and friends, sharing precious, clichéd moments with their growing baby.

This inclusion of extended networks of family and friends—including Alison's unlikable mother, who has apparently learned to love her grandchild despite her not being a "real baby"—revives the compelling promise that Alison and Ben will not only maintain close relationships outside of their partnership, but that their baby will also enjoy a more communal upbringing. As soon as this collective configuration of intimate and familial relations registers, however, it fades into a medley of intimate snapshots of select cast and crew members posing with their babies or with their parents, thus affirming and extending the film's narrative of reproductive futurism behind and beyond the diegesis.

CHAPTER THREE: SECOND BANANAS AND GAY CHICKEN

Later on in the summer of 2007, the Apatow produced teenage brom-com, *Superbad*, provided a welcome diversion from *Knocked Up*'s coercive sentimentality and hypocrisy. Although *Superbad* predictably nudged its two young protagonists towards adulthood and heterosexual coupledness, the regrettable, melodramatic dissolution of the juvenile male bond gave way to an extraordinary end credit montage of whimsical penis illustrations, marking something of a bromantic point of no return in the millennial brom-com cycle. By 2008, bromance became the dominant mode of the romantic comedy genre and worked its way into other modes of cultural production.⁴³³

Time magazine critic Richard Corliss epitomized the popular press's often snarky and conflicted reactions to the cycle's bromantic turn when he posed the following question in his *Superbad* review:

Why don't Apatow and Rogen just do the honorable thing and tell the world they're gay? It would save them a lot of time wasted pretending their movies are about young men growing up and finding the right young woman. It would also save movie critics from having to find new ways of saying, about their maxi-raunch comedies, 'Oh, but at heart they're really sweet.'⁴³⁴

Much like the brom-coms themselves, mainstream responses to this perceived bromantic turn in the Hollywood romantic comedy are informed by a post-closet discourse that mythologizes the closet as an individual choice rather than a complex cultural construction.⁴³⁵ As Richard Meyer

⁴³³ For several examples illustrating how the bromance phenomenon spread to fandom, sports, and politics, see Michael DeAngelis, introduction to *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television*, ed. Michael DeAngelis (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 1-2.

⁴³⁴ Corliss, "Superbad."

⁴³⁵ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 56.

notes, homosexuality is not simply an “‘identity’ owned by gay people,” but a “site of sexual and symbolic power that is under continual dispute, both by those who identify themselves as gay or lesbian and those who do not.”⁴³⁶ As the millennial bromance demonstrates, post-closet discourse “sharpens and blurs” categories of gay and straight, masculine and feminine, and homosocial and homosexual in pleasurable and disturbing ways.⁴³⁷ Like Corliss, many critics struggled to reconcile the pleasure and frustration they experienced watching the brom-com while not necessarily understanding that the contemporary bromance would cease to exist without the heterosexual love plot, which serves as both a structuring aspiration and source of dread.

Predicated on contradiction, bromance emerges from a careful, teasing interplay between homosocial and homosexual codes and expressions of intimacy while necessarily operating within the limits of post-closet heteronormativity. As Michael DeAngelis summarizes in *Reading the Bromance*, the “bromance-defined” relationship requires purportedly straight men “to demonstrate an openness to intimacy that they neither regard, acknowledge, avow, or express sexually,” but this notion of asexuality is not necessarily considered a guarantee by the “bromancers” themselves, or by the third party observers within and beyond the film text.⁴³⁸ By supposedly removing sex from the situation, the bromance offers straight men a form of intimacy that is more self-enhancing than their ostensibly self-denying sexual relationships with women.

Despite the phenomenon’s far-reaching popularity in the first decade of the twenty-first century, bromance’s inherent contradictions are not particularly revelatory when considered in

⁴³⁶ Meyer, *Outlaw Representation*, 19.

⁴³⁷ Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, 4.

⁴³⁸ DeAngelis, “Introduction,” 1-2.

relation to existing bodies of knowledge about the fluid nature of human sexuality or desire—especially when it comes to the understanding of homosexuality as a site of fear and fascination that is both acknowledged and disavowed by the dominant culture.⁴³⁹ Since the bromance, however, engages a developing post-closet discourse that emerged in the nineties, its participants face historically specific pressures and opportunities to push verbal and physical boundaries in their nervously sincere forms of intimate expression. Murray Pomerance thus proposes that the bromance is a “*stunt form* of affective or passionate human relationship” in which “males symbolically play out romantic attachments to one another while artfully maintaining assiduous control of social and interactional distance.”⁴⁴⁰ Bromance, however, is also an ostensibly *stunted* form intimacy—one characterized by regressive behaviors and set in opposition to heterosexual coupledness, which remains a salient, cultural marker of adulthood. How are the risks and rewards negotiated in this stunt and stunted form of intimacy within the context of twenty-first century brom-coms?

Contemporary film bromances, including those found in *Wedding Crashers* (2005), *Superbad*, *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007), *Pineapple Express* (2008), *Stepbrothers* (2008), *Role Models* (2008), *I Love You, Man*, and *Get Him to the Greek* (2010), offer a broad spectrum of homoerotic boundary pushing, also popularly known as “gay chicken.” Though such stunt antics lacked a cutesy name in the midcentury sex comedies, a similar, albeit more insidious stunt sensibility also existed in the affective relationships between presumably

⁴³⁹ Meyer, for instance, speaks to the “doubleness of homosexuality” in *Outlaw Representation*; he notes that “heterosexuality carries homosexuality within it—as a fantasy of transgression, as an image of alterity, as a possibility at once desired and disavowed.” Meyer, *Outlaw Representation*, 17.

⁴⁴⁰ Murray Pomerance, “The Bromance Stunt in *House*,” in *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television*, ed. Michael DeAngelis (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 259 (original italics).

straight men in films such as *Pillow Talk*, *Lover Come Back*, *Send Me No Flowers*, and *That Touch of Mink*. These comparatively stylized and uniform antics emerged in a drastically different context of industrial and social constraints, which meshed with the era's widespread, institutionalized homophobia.⁴⁴¹ Though not entirely devoid of sincerity and affection, these midcentury male pairings mainly served as an especially dizzying, naughty distraction from the vexed conservatism of the heterosexual love plot. While the emboldened twenty-first century bromances share this narrative and ideological function, there is a discernible element of seriousness in feeling and function that makes these contemporary male pairings seem weightier and more sustainable than those found in the sex comedies.

However the context, rules, payoffs, and players may vary, the bromantic antics in the sex comedy and brom-com cycles cannot be discussed apart from desire and its “close connection” with homosexuality.⁴⁴² In one of the foundational texts of queer theory, *Homosexual Desire*, Guy Hocquenghem suggests that “[h]omosexuality expresses something—some aspect of desire—which appears nowhere else, and that something is not merely the accomplishment of the sexual act with a person of the same sex.”⁴⁴³ Significantly, these aspects of desire underpinning the bromance and its affective rewards are not necessarily limited to the narrow range of subjects who partake in such intimate relationships, or to the targeted, straight, white male audiences who most closely identify with them. Rather, the bromance, and the sense of lack from which it emerges, can speak to a broader range of subjects, including women and those who do not

⁴⁴¹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 10.

⁴⁴² Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Daniella Dangoor (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 50.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*

identify as straight, whose roles in the bromance are mostly prohibitive, at times instrumental, and still very much in the process of being worked out.

All American Man Crushes

Paul Rudd, brom-com regular and gay chicken extraordinaire, is a suspiciously adorable figure in ongoing, unorganized efforts to elevate the bromance as something more sincere and sustainable than a vulgar ruse.⁴⁴⁴ Rudd's brom-com performances and star persona also offer a starting point for considering the broader appeal of the bromance as a privileged form of immaturity and intimate relations, as well as the possible democratization of its pleasures and utility. As a married with children, forty-something year old actor with an ageless, boyish handsomeness about him, Rudd had already established his acting career, along with a female and gay fan base, prior to his brom-com performances.⁴⁴⁵ In addition to his good looks, Rudd's characters often exhibit a fashionably mature sensibility and sensitivity that distinguish him from the "aggressively unattractive," abrasive, and puerile types of masculinities occupying most brom-com territory.⁴⁴⁶ This distinctiveness has earned him extraordinary likability in the popular

⁴⁴⁴ When Rudd hosted *Saturday Night Live* for the first time in November of 2008, most of the skits involved some form of "gay chicken." Seth Abramovitch provocatively described the episode as a "gay minstrel show," whose airing happened to coincide with the devastating passing of Proposition 8, which banned same-sex marriage in California. Seth Abramovitch, "SNL's Gay Minstrel Show," *Gawker*; November 18, 2008, <http://gawker.com/5090837/snls-gay-minstrel-show>

⁴⁴⁵ Rudd is, in fact, the only brom-com regular who continues to take risks with more traditional and often unpopular rom-coms, or chick-flicks, such as *Over Her Dead Body* (2008), *How Do You Know* (2010), and Amy Heckerling's straight to DVD *I Could Never Be Your Woman* (2007).

⁴⁴⁶ John Alberti argues that most male characters dominating the brom-com "are not just positioned as ugly ducklings or diamonds on the rough; they are aggressively unattractive, personally dedicated to rejecting qualities that would render them as good candidates for any kind of stable long-term relationship, whether economic or romantic." John Alberti, "'I Love You, Man': Bromances, the Construction of Masculinity, and the Continuing Evolution of the Romantic Comedy," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 30, no. 2 (2013): 166.

press, where he is often described as some variation of the all American boy next door, ideal husband material, a guy's guy and, most contentiously, a "gay icon."⁴⁴⁷

While Rudd responds to these descriptions with humble suspicion and disavowal (which is, no doubt, part of his tremendous charm), such an assortment of labels reveals an undeniable gregariousness about his star persona and brom-com characters, who float through and sometimes unite different intimate worlds. Much like the bromance phenomenon itself, Rudd remains an at once curiously mainstream and naughty pop culture force; his brom-com characters encourage exploration of the dark ideological uncertainties and disappointments underpinning twenty-first century conceptualizations of the good life while maintaining a certain noble, even loving attachment to a so-called traditional narrative of homeward-boundness, and to the women tasked with its symbolization.

Although Rudd is very much a twenty-first century 'man of the moment,' his superstar powers actually recall those of sex comedy heartthrob Rock Hudson, whose star persona embodied a similar kind of accessible, non-threatening, "American," masculinity in the fifties. In marking yet another surprising and important parallel between these two rom-com cycles and their respective moments, both Rudd and Hudson offer their contemporary audiences safe spaces for the expression of discontent and desire.⁴⁴⁸ Both stars are, in fact, no strangers to film melodrama and, more specifically, women's pictures. Hudson was well known for his starring roles as strapping, morally upstanding hunks in Douglas Sirk's family melodramas, such as *All*

⁴⁴⁷ In 1998, Rudd offered the following reaction to the "gay icon" label: "If I'm a gay icon. . . then gay people need a better icon." Jennifer Senior, "Ballyhooed, if Belatedly," *New York*, July 20, 1998, Paul Rudd File, Herrick.

⁴⁴⁸ Meyer, for instance, argues that "Rock Hudson provided a less threatening sexual model of masculinity: Hudson offered not only the visual pleasure of his form, his open-faced good looks and unparalleled large proportions, but the promise to control that big body—the promise not to pounce." Meyer, "Rock Hudson's Body," 263.

That Heaven Allows (1955) and *Written on the Wind* (1956), before becoming famous for his sex comedies; Rudd has been playing the part of sensitive stud in neo-traditional romantic comedies since the nineties (in addition to his two-year stint as a dreamy boyfriend on the extraordinarily popular sitcom, *Friends*, in the early 2000s).

As evinced by their characters' parallel anti-marriage rants from *Pillow Talk* and *Knocked Up* discussed in the previous chapter's introductory overview, Hudson and Rudd also took on roles of "melodramatized men" in film comedies. In her book, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, Rowe describes how "melodramatized" men in romantic comedies appropriate feminine modes of emotional expressivity and sensitivity in ways that mostly end up serving their own egos and interests.⁴⁴⁹ In balancing embittered narcissism with a sense of vulnerability, Hudson's and Rudd's melodramatized comedy roles in the sex comedy and brom-com cycles, respectively, allowed them to express rage and frustration while harnessing the therapeutic function of the complaint. These roles, then, also enhanced their sexually non-threatening, low maintenance modes of masculinity, which held extraordinary appeal for male and female audiences within these disparate contexts.

While both actors were admired for their distinctive ordinariness and accessibility, Hudson faced an additional burden of negotiating his supposedly "normal," female-friendly version of American manhood with his hyper-masculine, beefcake physique. Hudson's mythically large, manful proportions were made enticing and strange in the sex comedies, as well as his star discourse, in ways that both concealed and revealed another exceptional aspect of his persona: his closeted homosexual identity. As Cohan, Meyer, Klinger, and filmmaker Mark

⁴⁴⁹ Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995), 196-197.

Rappaport have shown, the ways in which Hudson's homosexuality registered in his carefully managed stardom and sex comedy performances read as obvious, even excessive after his public death from AIDS related complications in 1985.⁴⁵⁰ Such gags and winks, however, had their own kind of meanings and pleasures in the midcentury context from which they emerged.

Although somewhat of an open secret among those who managed his stardom,⁴⁵¹ Hudson's homosexuality was mostly situated in the "shadowy realm of connotation," which according to Alex Doty, has long served as "the representational and interpretative closet of mass culture queerness."⁴⁵² Doty's understanding of connotation as mass culture's "closet" speaks to Sedgwick's influential analysis of the homosexual closet as a productive and restrictive discourse of sexual knowledge and power. As an ideological construct with public and private consequences, the closet must be understood in relation to discursive practices of revealing as well as concealing, speaking as well as silencing.⁴⁵³ The use of connotation in mass culture texts like the sex comedy, for instance, "allows straight culture to use queerness for pleasure and profit in mass culture without admitting to it."⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵⁰ See, especially, Mark Rappaport's 1992 documentary *Rock Hudson's Home Movies*, which offers a thorough investigation of the ways in which Rock Hudson's homosexual identity was acknowledged and disavowed by Hollywood and popular audiences. Mark Rappaport, dir., *Rock Hudson's Home Movies*, (Coach Potato Films, 1992), Videocassette.

⁴⁵¹ Hudson's agent, Henry Wilson arranged the 'lavender marriage' between Hudson and Phyllis Gates in order to suppress rumors about his homosexuality. Meyer suggests that in addition to Wilson, it is quite possible that Hudson's directors, photographers, and fanzine journalists may have also been aware of his homosexuality. Meyer, "Rock Hudson's Body," 282.

⁴⁵² Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, xi-xiii.

⁴⁵³ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 67-90.

⁴⁵⁴ Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, xi-xiii

Filmic connotations regarding Hudson's homosexuality achieved their most memorable and meaningful expression in the sex comedies *Pillow Talk*, *Lover Come Back*, and *Send Me No Flowers*. Co-starring Doris Day and Tony Randall (whose (hetero)sexual identities have also aroused varying degrees of suspicion), these dazzling and dizzying pictures presented three different scenarios in which Hudson's desire is triangulated between Randall and Day, for whom he performs some kind of deceitful masquerade in order to disguise his true intentions.⁴⁵⁵ In *Masked Men*, Cohan argues that this repeated and beloved buddy element implied that Hudson's romantic relationship with Day was "somehow inconceivable" without a second banana in the mix, and ultimately of less importance to Hudson's masculine identity than his homosocial relationship.⁴⁵⁶ By the time *Send Me No Flowers* was released in 1964, the escalating queer antics and possibilities presented by the widely popular threesome materialized from the sheer force of repetition, as well as from marked shifts in sexual attitudes and industrial practices, including those that weakened restrictions on filmic portrayals of homosexuality and made it more difficult for studios to protect its stars' images.⁴⁵⁷

In the film, Day and Hudson play a happily married couple with no children, whose marriage is tested when Hudson falls under the mistaken impression that he will soon be dead from a terminal illness. While he hides this morbid discovery from his wife, he confides in his best friend and neighbor, played by Randall, who takes the news hard. Together they make death

⁴⁵⁵ Day has gained, for instance, a notable lesbian following with her role in *Calamity Jane* (See Glitre, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, 159). Tony Randall's widow attempted to disavow rumors of his homosexuality years after his death in 2004 (See Judith Newman, "She Was a 20-Year-Old Intern, He Was 50 Years Her Senior," *Marie Claire*, January 28, 2008, Tony Randall File, Herrick).

⁴⁵⁶ Cohan, *Masked Men*, 290-292.

⁴⁵⁷ DeAngelis, "Introduction," 6.

arrangements and man-hunt for a suitable replacement husband for Day, who starts to suspect her husband is cheating on her with another woman. *Send Me No Flowers* stands apart from the trio's previous sex comedies because its narrative unfolds within the comparatively dull but forgiving contexts of marriage and suburbia, rather than the glittering setting of a Manhattan courtship. In addition to managing the queer excesses between its male lead and second banana, *Send Me No Flowers* struggles to make sense of the frustratingly central and yet uncertain role of its female third term.

Compelling in their own right, the exceptional aspects of *Send Me No Flowers* also provide useful links to the 2009 brom-com, *I Love You, Man*; as end points in their respective cycles, both films nudge their respective bromances to points of silly and sentimental oversaturation. Like *Send Me No Flowers*, *I Love You, Man* offers a non-threatening model of ideal masculinity through its leading man, Paul Rudd, and presents a triangulated version of male desire within thoroughly domesticated contexts. In contrast to Rudd's supporting role in *Knocked Up*, whose character needed to "care more," his character in *I Love You, Man* cares way too much; he is sympathetically portrayed as insufficiently masculine because he is too enthusiastic about getting married to and supporting his perfectly pleasant fiancée, played by Rashida Jones. Whereas women in the sex comedies and brom-coms most often function as obstacles in the triangulation of male homosocial desire, Jones is figured as more of a facilitator; she initially encourages her partner to become a better man through forming, rather than abandoning, male friendships. In echoing the man-hunt indirectly motivated by Day in *Send Me No Flowers*, Rudd goes on a series of "man-dates" before he eventually finds himself in an exclusive bromantic relationship with a likable slacker, played by Jason Segel, who spends most of his time jerking

off and jamming out in his “man-cave.” As Segel schools Rudd in his loutish version of what it means to be a real man, their relationship easily supersedes the heterosexual romance and the two bros grow inseparable.

In contrast to the conventions of the midcentury sex comedy cycle and most other brom-coms, *I Love You, Man* actually posits bromance as a marker of the central character’s mature masculinity. While the film dares to suggest that bromance can serve as an ancillary (rather than an obstruction) to heterosexual marriage, which remains an important stamp of adulthood in the twenty-first century, *I Love You, Man* also figures bromance as a more burdensome form of affective labor (at least initially) for the hero than his heterosexual relationship. *I Love You, Man* thus presents a loaded case study in the post-closet pushing of bromance towards the narrative center, especially when grounded in an historical and generic comparison with *Send Me No Flowers*. Such a comparative engagement offers a nuanced exploration of the ongoing, discursive negotiations of the bromance’s limitations, affective rewards, and ideological holdings on hegemonic categories of sexuality and intimacy.

As DeAngelis summarizes, the “process and product” of bromance “provides a litmus test for discerning not only the extent to which homosexuality has been assimilated in contemporary culture, but also the degree of comfort (or discomfort) that this culture actually experiences with such assimilated homosexuality.”⁴⁵⁸ Indeed, the bromance speaks to the dominant culture’s long-running, implicit jealousy of homosexuality; in both the sex comedy and brom-com cycles, this jealousy is grounded not so much in sex, but in male fantasies of not having to deal with women, and the confinement and responsibility they have come to represent.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 14-15.

While the important hegemonic shifts in comfortability with queerness signaled by the bromance have a decidedly misogynistic streak, *Send Me No Flowers* and *I Love You, Man* are exceptional in that they at least entertain the possibility of *detaching* women from the set of expectations they have come to represent. The following textual analyses thus consider the bromance as a barometer of desire and lack that potentially speaks to both men and women. While women may be deprived of equal access to growth, escape, and same-sex intimacies in these films, bromance gestures toward the bigger picture of what's "missing" from the heteronormative life narrative, and to what José Muñoz theorizes as a queerness "always on the horizon."⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁹ In his book, *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz questions Edelman's call for a queerness rooted in the rejection of futurity, as it is figured in and through the Child. Muñoz argues "that queerness is primarily about futurity and hope. That is to say that queerness is always on the horizon." Muñoz thus contends "that if queerness is to have any value whatsoever, it must be viewed as being visible only in the horizon." José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1, 11.

Blossoming Bromance in *Send Me No Flowers*

The quintessential midcentury sex comedy, *Pillow Talk*, both owed and bestowed success to its three “playmates,” Doris Day, Rock Hudson, and Tony Randall, who would go on to become a packaged commodity during the cycle’s short-lived heyday.⁴⁶⁰ *Pillow Talk*, in fact, positively transformed the individual film careers of its two leads, Day and Hudson. While Day owed her most tremendous fame (as well as her only Academy Award nomination for acting) to her *Pillow Talk* performance, critics overwhelmingly hailed the film as a breakout vehicle for Hudson, whose career up until that point had consisted mostly of melodramatic roles. Despite being snubbed by the Academy for his *Pillow Talk* performance, critics predicted Hudson would soon become Cary Grant’s rightful successor as Hollywood’s next big comedy star. Much like Grant, however, Hudson’s status as a postwar American heartthrob was always a complicated one.⁴⁶¹

According to Cohan, *Pillow Talk* presented an invaluable opportunity for Hudson to revamp his star image as a desirable, heterosexual bachelor following his carefully orchestrated marriage and subsequent divorce from his agent’s secretary, Phyllis Gates.⁴⁶² In this well-praised performance, Hudson takes on a “dual characterization.”⁴⁶³ He plays a suave ladykiller, Brad Allen, who masquerades as a simple Texan dandy, Rex Stetson, in order to seduce and humiliate

⁴⁶⁰ One of the taglines for *Lover Come Back* read “those ‘Pillow Talk’ Playmates Are At It Again!”

⁴⁶¹ For example, one reviewer described Hudson’s performance as “the kind of role that, 20 years ago, would have gone automatically to Cary Grant.” “*Pillow Talk*,” *Saturday Review*, October 10, 1959, *Pillow Talk* File, Herrick. For more on Cary Grant’s peculiar status as a heteromasculine sex symbol, see Cohan, *Masked Men*, 27-29.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 300.

⁴⁶³ *Pillow Talk* director, Michael Gordon is quoted as saying “After playing straight dramatic roles ever since he started acting, Rock stepped into a very difficult comedy role and played it to perfection,” adding, “Hudson’s role in *Pillow Talk* was made particularly difficult by the fact that it was virtually a dual characterization.” “*Pillow Talk* Gives Hudson New Career,” *Mirror News*, October 10, 1959, *Pillow Talk* File, Herrick.

Jan, a discriminating interior designer played by Day. Critics remarked favorably upon the ease with which Hudson transitioned into this ostensibly challenging comedic role, without openly acknowledging that this dual characterization purposefully toyed with his own, ongoing masquerade as Rock Hudson the movie star.⁴⁶⁴ As Cohan argues, Rex's "pureboy characteristics," including his prudish gallantry, preference for old-fashioned women, affinity for recipe collecting, and closeness to his mother, which are purposefully mocked as queer by the film text, also happened to be the aspects of Hudson's star persona most celebrated in fan magazines.⁴⁶⁵

In his marvelous analysis of Hudson's *Pillow Talk* stardom, Cohan goes on to explain that:

A closeted gay man like Hudson could make the best straight man, precisely because he (and his agent) had learned to mime—and to mine—the part so well. To be sure, in 1959 audiences in *Pillow Talk* were aware of Rock Hudson's failed marriage but not of his homosexuality, which is no doubt why the film could be bold enough to embed his bachelor character in so much queer innuendo.⁴⁶⁶

Paradoxically, Hudson's dual role in *Pillow Talk* rendered his homosexuality both unthinkable and devilishly suspect. This comedic interplay of reassurance and confusion over his heteromascularity made its way into Hudson's other sex comedies, such as *Come September* (1961), *Man's Favorite Sport* (1964), and *Strange Bedfellows* (1965), but was most expressive in his three comedies with Day and Randall.

⁴⁶⁴ For instance, according to one reviewer, "Rock Hudson is so relaxed that it's obvious he enjoys the dual role he plays." "Universal's Jet-Propelled *Pillow Talk* Takes off with Big Promotional Push," *Motion Picture Herald*, October 31, 1959, *Pillow Talk* File, Herrick.

⁴⁶⁵ Cohan, *Masked Men*, 302.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 297.

As *Pillow Talk*'s original title, "Any Way the Wind Blows," would have naughtily intimated, this triangulation of desire between Day, Hudson, and Randall, wherein each character embodies a special kind of middle-ness within their own right, and within their relationships to one another, allowed for a fête of queer play among the characters. These "flexible spaces" allowed general audiences—regardless of the members' individual identities—to tap into a "less-censored range of queer desire and pleasure" than would have been possible in daily life at the time.⁴⁶⁷ Just as Hudson's performance in *Pillow Talk* entertained wickedly naughty suspicions of his homosexuality, each film in the Day-Hudson-Randall trilogy dared to suggest, however fleetingly, that its dizzying destabilizations of gender and sexuality could mean a little something more than a punchline to its characters and audiences—especially when it came to Hudson and Randall's on-screen buddy dynamic.

While such zany flirtations with sexual transgression were mostly contained to Hudson's multiple masquerades in *Pillow Talk*, the queer innuendo grew more pronounced in Hudson's buddy-buddy relationships with Tony Randall's second banana characters over their next two films together—often at the expense of Day's characters' dignity, choices, and fate. In a September, 1959 issue of *Life* magazine, one particularly eye-catching, enlarged photograph accompanying a small puff piece on *Pillow Talk*, titled "Rollicking Role for Rock," anticipated this purposeful progression with striking lucidity. In a photograph taken at Doris Day's studio birthday party, Day, Hudson, and Randall are positioned in a triangular formation. Day sits on a chair holding a teacup and cake plate. Hudson, who the piece describes as a "towering hunk of handsomeness," leers over her on one side, while Randall mirrors his position on the opposite

⁴⁶⁷ Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, 3-4.

side.⁴⁶⁸ Hudson and Randall lock eyes and lean their grinning faces closer to one another, as if to move in for a kiss. Hudson and Randall each have a hand clasped around a single teacup, which purposefully blocks the bottom half of Day's face as she tries to speak. Though her open mouth is almost entirely obscured by her costars' shared teacup, her squinting eyes reveal her laughing expression—it is not, by any means, one of Day's more flattering photographic moments. The image is straightforwardly captioned with the line "quieting the comedienne."

In addition to foreshadowing Day's decline as a film comedy star by the mid to late sixties, this image also speaks to Day's ambivalent position within her sex comedy roles, particularly those costarring Hudson and Randall.⁴⁶⁹ As the first chapter discussed in greater detail, Day's sex comedy characters, who despite their compelling independence, resourcefulness, and perfected adherence to midcentury ideals of white femininity, are routinely objectified, trivialized, and made the butt (sometimes literally, as in *Pillow Talk*) of jokes made by men and for men, including the male spectator.⁴⁷⁰ In the *Life* photograph, Hudson and Randall work together to obscure Day's face from view, to silence her speech, and to encroach on her personal space in order to move closer to one another.

The image reads as a playful snapshot of the typical fate of Day's sex comedy heroines who, as Dennis Bingham notes in one of the rare, insightful essays on Day's sex comedy stardom, become increasingly isolated and confronted by "a united front of male buddy

⁴⁶⁸ "Rollicking Role for Rock," *Life*, September 21, 1959, *Pillow Talk* File, Herrick.

⁴⁶⁹ For more on Day's decline as a comedienne and the seemingly "overnight datedness" of her film work, see Dennis Bingham, "Before She Was a Virgin...": Doris Day and the Decline of Female Film Comedy in the 1950s and 1960s," *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 3 (Spring, 2006): 3-4.

⁴⁷⁰ Bingham, for example, describes the scene in *Pillow Talk* where Rock Hudson eyes Day's Jean-Louis clad rear-end on the dance floor, and lights up once he realizes that the butt he's lusting after is no other than "the other end" of his partyline. Bingham, "Before She Was a Virgin," 9.

solidarity.”⁴⁷¹ While Day is often positioned, as she is in this photograph, as a wedge keeping the two men apart, she also provides the common ground upon which their buddy-buddy relationship rests. Her characters, however, have comparatively little choice or reward in this state of in-betweenness within this male-dominated trio, where they often find themselves burdened with blame, ridicule, and deception.

By the time *Send Me No Flowers* was released in 1964, strong comedic roles had all but disappeared for middle-aged, female performers like Day, who despite her tremendous stardom, faced cruel, sexist biases from producers, audiences, and critics. *Time* magazine’s review of *Send Me No Flowers*, for instance, noted that Day, “who at 40 should maybe stop trying to play Goldilocks, comes off as a cheerful, energetic and wildly overdecorated Mama Bear.”⁴⁷² While Day’s age and “wrinkles” had become an issue for critics and filmmakers at least as early as *Pillow Talk* in 1959, Hudson only seemed to grow more attractive to filmmakers, make-up artists, and movie-goers alike.⁴⁷³ He also managed to stay in the critics’ good graces despite the fact that *Send Me No Flowers* did not enjoy the same success as the triumvirate’s previous two pictures together.⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁷² “*Send Me No Flowers*,” *Time*, November 20, 1964, *Send Me No Flowers* File, Herrick.

⁴⁷³ In a striking example of sexist Hollywood double standards, a review in *Time* magazine included the following remark about Day’s appearance in *Lover Come Back*: “Doris Day, 37, is filmed in soft focus to conceal her wrinkles, and sometimes unfortunately her features disappear too.” “*Lover Come Back*,” *Time*, February 2, 1962, *Lover Come Back* File, Herrick. In contrast, a 1957 article in *Photoplay* gushed: “It was easy to understand the remark made by a studio makeup artist after working over Rock’s face. ‘Hudson’s face is almost too handsome. In most actors you have to take out lines. But with Hudson you have to put them in.’” “Give a Man Room to Grow (Rock Hudson),” *Photoplay*, May, 1957, *Photoplay* Microfilm, Herrick.

⁴⁷⁴ Considering the creative challenge involved in balancing repetition and variation for the triumvirate’s third sex comedy together, most reviewers echoed *Variety*’s tepid review, which described the film as “old-hat” and “lightly amusing.” “*Send Me No Flowers*,” *Variety*, September 2, 1964, *Send Me No Flowers* File, Herrick.

In all fairness, *Send Me No Flowers* emerged in a particularly difficult moment for romantic comedies. As the genre failed to keep up with industrial crises in Hollywood, as well as the growing sexual revolution and activist spirit of the sixties, *Send Me No Flowers* boldly eliminated *Pillow* and *Lover*'s sparkling, signature elements of courtship and Manhattan glamour, but retained the most pleasurable aspects of all: Day's expensive, designer fashion and Hudson and Randall's buddy-buddy relationship. In contrast to the repeated complaints and insults hurled at Day in the popular press, Hudson, Randall, and a horde of secondary male performers received glowing praise for their performances. One review, for instance, noted that "Hudson improves as a comedian with each picture and this performance is certainly his best. Likewise Randall, who has always been adroit at this type of nonsense, was never better than he is here," adding, "the way their buddy-buddy relationship is depicted is most droll."⁴⁷⁵

While Randall had always been billed as a sideshow attraction in his three films with Day and Hudson, the publicity materials for *Send Me No Flowers* signaled his characters' heightened importance to the plot, the laughs, and to Hudson's comedy performance in particular.⁴⁷⁶ Indeed, in writing about Randall and Hudson's buddy dynamic, Bingham observes that "the male heroic lead, who is expected to be the least demonstrative cast member, draws energy from the second male lead, in the way that the male stars of romantic comedies a generation earlier played off

⁴⁷⁵ "Send Me No Flowers," *Motion Picture Herald*, September 2, 1964, *Send Me No Flowers* File, Herrick.

⁴⁷⁶ There is, no doubt, a notable reduction in viewing pleasure when watching a Rock Hudson sex comedy without a strong second banana, such as the underwhelming 1964 Howard Hawks romantic comedy, *Man's Favorite Sport*, in which Cary Grant had originally been set to star. In indirect regards to Hudson's lackluster performance sans second banana in *Man's Favorite Sport*, one critic remarked, "Rock Hudson seems to have no identifiable personality or background. He is simply there, and less a fact of life than a fact of the movies. He looks pleasant, he smiles, he frowns, but his natural bodily essences appear to be missing." "Man's Favorite Sport," *Saturday Review*, February 29, 1964, *Man's Favorite Sport* File, Herrick.

lively female co-stars like Stanwyck, Katharine Hepburn, and Carole Lombard.”⁴⁷⁷ Since heterosexual couplings in the midcentury romantic comedy were so burdened by the era’s rigid courtship conventions and the steamrolling ideology of the breadwinner ethic, the sex comedies looked to secondary characters and the narrative middle in which they lurked, in order to tap into this nostalgic sense of screwball silliness and tenderness.

In recognition of his indispensable importance as a third term, Randall occupied more visual space in the promotional campaign for *Send Me No Flowers* than he had in the materials for *Pillow* and *Lover*, which prominently featured Day, Hudson, and their embodied promises of romance, glamour, sexual sizzle, and tension. Unlike *Pillow* and *Lover*, which were essentially billed as romantic battles “with Tony Randall on the side lines,” *Send Me No Flowers* was billed as a packaged star vehicle and group romance.⁴⁷⁸ The most widely distributed poster, for instance, featured similarly sized and stylized renderings of the three stars’s faces and names, while the theatrical trailer described the film as a “a tantalizing, tingling, *triple play* from Rock Hudson, to Doris Day to Tony Randall (my emphasis).” With Day once again in the middle of this “triple play” with little to do other than react to the indignation and lunacy that surrounds her, *Send Me No Flowers* takes Randall’s role, as well as his relationship with Hudson, to a new level of queer innuendo that flirts, rather aggressively, with feeling; in fact, the only formal declaration of love in the entire film occurs in an alcohol-induced moment of clarity between Randall and Hudson.

⁴⁷⁷ Bingham, “Before She Was a Virgin,” 21.

⁴⁷⁸ One of the posters for *Lover Come Back*, for instance, featured the line, “Romantic Mix-up with Tony Randall on the Side Lines.”

Significantly, this amplification of Hudson and Randall's buddy-buddy dynamic does not unfold in relation to the vertical boss/employee relationship, or to the exaggeratedly different codes of masculinity that informed the duo's dynamic in *Pillow* and *Lover*. Even more boldly, *Send Me No Flowers* shucks the protective shell of Hudson's playboy bachelor masquerade, whose consummate handsomeness and sumptuous heterosexual fixation allowed the stars, audiences, critics, and censors to enjoy—or at least, tolerate—the films' transgressive thrills without feeling too scandalized or enlightened.⁴⁷⁹

For instance, aside from the PCA censors' objections to minor but rather flagrant “fairy gags” aimed at Hudson's playboy characters as individuals, such as the scene in *Lover* when two male onlookers mistake the playboy for a homosexual when he struts past them in a woman's mink coat (“he's the last guy I would have figured,” says the onlooker!), the PCA remained unbothered by queer connotation surrounding Hudson's suspiciously close relationship to Randall's pansy-coded characters in both *Pillow* and *Lover*.⁴⁸⁰ With the Code's demise on the horizon, Hudson's homosexuality still in the closet, and his status as a “beefcake charmer” still very much in tact, *Send Me No Flowers* managed to elude controversy while introducing new twists and pushing the limits of social propriety.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁹ As discussed in the first chapter, it is interesting to note that the 1962 film, *That Touch of Mink*, which recycled most of the dirty jokes that *Pillow Talk* had already delivered three years prior (including the male pregnancy perversion), faced firm objections from the PCA for its homosexual content. No such measures, however, were taken with any of Hudson's sex comedies from the same era, which were often much more suggestive. While this striking shift in the censors' attitude cannot be reduced to a single explanation, the situation speaks at least in part to the power of Hudson's status as a symbol of ideal American manhood.

⁴⁸⁰ The Code censors objected to the onlooker's line in two separate letters to the filmmakers, calling it a “fairy gag” and “pansy gag.” Geoffrey Shurlock, “Letter to Kathryn McTaggart,” August 15, 1960; Geoffrey Shurlock, “Letter to Kathryn McTaggart,” October 27, 1960, *Lover Come Back* MPAA File, Herrick.

⁴⁸¹ “*Pillow Talk*,” *Monthly Film Bulletin*, October, 1960, *Pillow Talk* File, Herrick.

In tapping into the core contradiction informing midcentury ideals of masculinity, *Send Me No Flowers* dropped Hudson's playboy bachelor routine in favor of an equally important and complicated fantasy of Hudson as a domesticated, breadwinner husband. While Hudson was, no doubt, manufactured and embraced as a dreamboat husband—"handsome, tall and strong, steady, faithful, and honest"—this "ideal husband" aspect of his star persona became messier following his divorce.⁴⁸² *Send Me No Flowers* not only dared to consider Hudson as the marrying type, but also the divorcing type. More specifically, the film indirectly engaged fan magazine speculations about one of the more undesirable and suspect aspects of his Hudson's public personality: his preference for male over female friendships.⁴⁸³

Indeed, at least one widely speculative and sensationalized 1958 *Photoplay* article blamed Hudson's penchant for male camaraderie for his divorce from Phyllis Gates:

And there were his friends--so-called. She'd pictured their home as a private haven for just the two of them. But it wasn't long before it was being invaded by all sorts of left-over pals from Rock's bachelor days. Pals, he called them. Hangers-on, she felt. She tried to like them. Oh, she tried. But she just couldn't help it. He'd stop to see some friend, 'for a few minutes,' but even if it was really only that, the lovely hot dinner she'd spent hours preparing was spoiled.⁴⁸⁴

In what was considered a suspicious, flawed aspect of Hudson's personality, these rumors about his relationship with the so-called "pals" lingered in fan magazine profiles years after his

⁴⁸² "Can Rock's Marriage be Saved?" *Photoplay*, February, 1958, *Photoplay* Microfilm, Herrick.

⁴⁸³ Hudson had let on to his preference for male friendships in various print interviews. In a 1957 profile piece in *Photoplay*, for instance, the article noted that Hudson "made better friends with men than women" because such relationships were uncomplicated by "physical attraction." The same article quoted Hudson as saying: "With a woman the elements of physical attraction enters the relationship [. . .] It generally puts people on a different level from friendship." "The Rock Hudson Story," *Photoplay*, March, 1957, *Photoplay* Microfilm, Herrick.

⁴⁸⁴ "Can Rock's Marriage Be Saved?," *Photoplay*.

divorce.⁴⁸⁵ They also figured in to the marital unrest in *Send Me No Flowers*, where Hudson's intimate friendship and scheming with Randall supersedes and destabilizes his endangered marriage to Day.

Given *Send Me No Flowers*'s status as a romantic comedy, as well as its queer approaches to intimacy, space, and time, it is somewhat surprising that the film takes place within the overlapping contexts of suburbia, breadwinning, marriage, and terminal illness. Similar to *The Tunnel of Love*, *Send Me No Flowers* embraces these seemingly innocuous and even morbid settings as an exceptionally flexible and forgiving space that allows for complaints and transgressions. *Send Me No Flowers* is most unique, however, in its odd, unexplained absence of children and its attendant disregard for reproductive futurism. Without so much as a male pregnancy gag, *Send Me No Flowers* disconnects from the former heterosexual love plots between Day and Hudson, whose old stories ended with implied and imminent parenthood in *Pillow Talk* and *Lover Come Back*, respectively. In rejecting the trappings of optimism and sentimentality that the presence or possibility of children necessarily demands within heteronormative culture,⁴⁸⁶ *Send Me No Flowers* displaces the cycle's typical flirtations with sexual fantasies on to a far more subversive death wish narrative. By way of its unexpected and invigorating thrills of living for the here and now, *Send Me No Flowers* confronts the potential

⁴⁸⁵ Following his divorce, *Photoplay* featured a speculative blurb about Hudson in their March, 1960 issue; the blurb described Hudson as the type of bachelor who "needs to be left alone, sometimes for weeks at a time—to sail, hunt or hike, he'll tell you, but really, to think. This, he believes, is still a man's privilege in what is fast becoming a woman's world. No, he says, to too much 'together'—like trotting together, plotting together, what-notting together." "A Leap Year Guide to 8 Types of Bachelors," *Photoplay*. In 2013, the family of the private detective (Fred Otash) Phyllis Gates had hired to snoop on Hudson, revealed a handwritten transcript of Hudson's so-called, secretly recorded "gay confession" to Gates. According to the transcript, Gates confronts Hudson about the "boys" he was "picking up off the street." Hudson then admits to having sexual intercourse with said "boys." See Stephen Galloway, "Rock Hudson's Wife Secretly Recorded His Gay Confession," *Hollywood Reporter*, June 6, 2013, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/rock-hudsons-wife-secretly-recorded-562508>

⁴⁸⁶ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 171.

delight and anxiety over an uncertain future, both for its characters and—on a more meta-level of genre—for the demising sex comedy cycle.

Pill Talk

Send Me No Flowers' opening title sequence subtly plays on the film's swapping of romance for death by presenting a colorful montage of overlapping paper flowers; when considered in relation to the narrative, these flowers take on a more funereal than romantic quality. These seemingly cheerful floral arrangements are accompanied by the equally soothing sound of Day's offscreen singing voice. Set to a delightful, breezy melody, Day sings (for the first and only time in the entire film) about themes of heartache and reconciliation:

*There is nothing that a flower can say
That your lips can prove with a kiss
Send me no flowers today
Got a lot of flowers and what I miss
Is being in your arms again*

In this catchy ode to forgiveness, a burden with which Day's sex comedy characters are all too familiar with, Day begs for her lover to "come back" and urges forgiveness.

The song is a pleasant foreshadowing of the film's rather peculiar marital dispute, which the theatrical trailer pitches as: "Rock's off to find Doris a husband, but why?" The trailer mostly consists of enticing snippets of Day and Hudson engaged in intimate moments with several other people—including Tony Randall, with whom Hudson is seen sharing a bed—rather than with each other. These glimpses of intimacy are intercut with Hudson enduring various forms of physical abuse at the hands of Day while declaring his innocence. Taken together, the opening theme song and trailer suggest that Hudson has something to "prove" to Day from the get-go—something that cannot be communicated or mystified with the typical tokens and gestures of

romance. What could Hudson *possibly* have to “prove” that his six-foot-five frame and thirty-four inch chest expansion—that rock-solid body that “could handle a riot”—could not automatically guarantee?⁴⁸⁷ How is it possible that Hudson never could love Day the way that she loves him?

The title sequence’s paper flowers fade to a bedroom decorated with floral wallpaper and matching floral drapes. The *mise-en-scène* is mostly obscured by text that reads “the desire to take medicine is perhaps the greatest feature which distinguishes man from animals.”⁴⁸⁸ As the text fades away, it becomes clear that there is, indeed, a fine specimen of a pajama-clad man to be found in this femininely decorated bedroom. It is made almost immediately apparent, however, that something is not quite right with this man. His beefcake body tosses and turns over ruffled sheets as the camera creeps closer, revealing a close-up of Rock Hudson’s handsome face resting against a pillow.

The only ‘pillow talk’ in this scene, however, is all in his head. With the aid of post-production animation and masks, Hudson’s face transforms into a black and white image on a television screen, upon which the inner-workings of his mind are rendered through illustration and voice-over narration. Hudson’s fantasies in this scene, however, resemble nothing like the dirty thoughts that presumably filled his waking hours as a playboy bachelor in *Pillow and Lover*; instead, his fantasies consist of television commercials for pharmaceuticals, which promise to treat his imaginary ailments. Over a series of short, animated advertisements for

⁴⁸⁷ The March, 1958 *Photoplay* featured an article with the following description of Rock Hudson: “He’s shy and gently, easy-going and quiet—But that six-foot-five frame could handle a riot. Dependable and honest, never one to run amok, Would that more men were as solid as Rocky!” “Kings of Hearts,” *Photoplay*, March, 1958, *Photoplay* Microfilm, Herrick.

⁴⁸⁸ The film attributes the quote to Sir William Osler, one of the founding members of Johns Hopkins Hospital.

various medications, the camera eventually moves away from Hudson's face and reveals his rock-solid torso, the wedding band on his finger, and finally, an animated diagram of some pretty worrisome activity inside his digestive system. When the pill in his artistically rendered gut sets off firework explosions, Hudson snaps awake, walks to the bathroom, and opens a mirrored medicine cabinet overloaded with pill bottles.

In beginning the film on a self-reflexive note, the "medicine" to which the aforementioned quotation refers not only speaks to the hero's ostensible pill addiction, but also to a far more pervasive, cultural desire for frivolous, mass entertainment as a quick fix for any sort of malaise. In his surprisingly favorable review of the film, for instance, Bosley Crowther likened *Send Me No Flowers* to "a sort of homeopathic remedy"—one that "causes you so much pain laughing you forget your other ills. . .like the imaginary ills of the hero, which are the cause of all his anguish in this film."⁴⁸⁹ This sequence, however, also ties into the film's displacement of sexual economies on to economies of death and dying; instead of focusing on the exchange rate of mink coats and female virginity in the heterosexual courtship market, the hero in *Send Me No Flowers* obsesses over the financial cost of dying and his post-mortem expenses.

As far as the hero and his so-called "imaginary ills" are concerned, *Send Me No Flowers* also immediately taps into extra-textual discourse over Hudson's star persona, as well as the rich intertextuality developed over the course of his previous sex comedies with Day and Randall. Within the film's very first frames, Hudson's body, the midcentury epitome of health, virility, and handsomeness, is rendered defective and suspect. There is, of course, no shortage of examples in Hudson's midcentury sex comedies where his refreshingly normal, American manhood is made

⁴⁸⁹ Bosley Crowther, "Send Me No Flowers Opens: Doris Day in Comedy With Rock Hudson," *New York Times*, November 13, 1964, *Send Me No Flowers* File, Herrick.

the site of “irony and contradiction.”⁴⁹⁰ Indeed, the most pleasurable aspects of his playboy characters in *Pillow* and *Lover* were also considered troubling maladies within the film text and its broader context. As discussed in greater detail in the first chapter, the playboy’s immaturity, promiscuity, narcissism, and consumption threatened to slide into femininity and, worst of all, homosexuality. *Time* magazine’s review of *Lover Come Back*, for instance, went so far as to describe Hudson in his playboy role as “the oversized, under talented ex-postman from Winnetka. . . [who] still has not learned to deliver the male.”⁴⁹¹ Granted, such brazen remarks about Hudson’s manhood were exceptionally rare, and most critics delighted in the playboys’ so-called flaws. While the playboys’ masculine shortcomings were easily identifiable and, on a superficial level of film genre, quickly remedied through their commitment to marriage and breadwinning, Hudson’s distinctly post-marital affliction in *Send Me No Flowers* is more nebulous and unsettling; it is a most queer, constant aching resistant to being named or cured.

In addition to revealing the disconnect between Hudson’s solid body and ostensibly unsound mind, this opening sequence also establishes a close psychological intimacy between the viewer and Hudson’s character, George Kimball. This close, increasingly sympathetic connection between George and the viewer is in part maintained by the film’s simultaneous efforts to distance the viewer from other characters, particularly George’s wife, Judy, played by Day. These various distancing strategies at the level of form and narrative encourage the viewer to laugh, often along with other male characters on screen, at Day’s repeated humiliation and frustration from a detached position.

⁴⁹⁰ Glitre, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, 178.

⁴⁹¹ “*Lover Come Back*,” *Time*, February 16, 1962, *Lover Come Back* File, Herrick.

Unlike the opening sequence, which poked fun at George's lame fantasies about painkillers (which are perhaps even sadder than the fantasies of impotence and restraint that preoccupied the frustrated husband in *The Seven Year Itch*), Judy's humiliation is typically unrelated to her character development. Compared to George, Judy is subjected to forms of humiliation that are not only more excessive and external, often beyond her awareness or control, but also carried out in a public setting with a rotating assortment of male witnesses in the mix. Rather than looking to Judy's psyche for a laugh, for instance, the extended opening sequence quite literally makes Judy the butt of a lengthy and mean-spirited joke.

While George sleeps in, Judy performs household duties on the downstairs level of their grand, seven bedroom home in an unnamed suburb of San Francisco. Moments after stepping outside to retrieve the newspaper, Judy is bombarded by a succession of awkward encounters with three characters from the film's carnival of queer male second bananas, all of whom admire Judy for their own reasons, all of whom gaze and remark upon her, and all of whom violate her personal space (much like the way Hudson and Randall crowd and quiet her in the above described *Life* photograph).

First, Judy cheerfully greets and waves to Arnold, their next door neighbor played by Randall, who barely musters an awkward wave and creepy smile in return. Judy is then confronted by Ernie (Dave Willock), the neighborhood milkman and flibbertigibbet extraordinaire. He mindlessly overloads Judy's arms with groceries, as she reluctantly absorbs his gossip about the Bullards, the latest couple in the neighborhood to divorce. After the blabbering milkman finally scampers off, Judy accidentally locks herself out of the house. With

her bath robe jammed in the front door, and her arms still overflowing with reminders of the domestic tasks awaiting her inside, Judy desperately calls out to her husband for help.

Judy's desperation and unanswered cries are cross-cut with glimpses of George using an inhaler, inserting ear plugs and taking his temperature in the shower. Although Hudson's bathing beauty was a familiar spectacle in midcentury sex comedies, this scene troubles the (homo)erotic promise of Hudson's wet, naked body. In contrast to *Pillow*, where Hudson makes flirtatious phone calls from a bathtub that barely fits his hunky body, or to the bachelor pad scene in *Lover Come Back*, where he confidently struts around in nothing but a towel while Randall gazes upon him with awe and admiration, George appears anxious and insecure with his beefcake physique. Much more so than Day, Rock Hudson is repeatedly made the erotic object of the gaze in *Send Me No Flowers*, as viewers are invited to consider the absurdity of his insecurities against his physical perfection and potency.

In obsessively tuning in to his body, George tunes out everything else, including the cries of his wife at the door. In desperation, Judy drops the groceries and scopes out the scene for possible onlookers before removing her robe. The soundtrack switches to a sexy nightclub beat, effectively twisting her efforts to escape into a tame, humiliating strip tease. After freeing herself from the jammed door, she worries about being spotted in her billowy nightgown and her oversized, fuzzy slippers. Though absurd in their size and ostentation, Judy's slippers harken back to the many uses of fur as a signifier of Day's sexuality and desire in her earlier sex comedies. In taking special interest in these tacky, furry slippers, the scene features several close up shots of Judy unintentionally destroying her only "touch of mink," in the film. As part of the opening act's assault on the ilk of glamour and sex that characterized Day and Hudson's earlier

sex comedies, Judy reacts in anger and frustration after stepping in broken eggs, spilled milk, and yard debris as she clumsily trudges around the house.

She is eventually spotted by the local dry cleaning delivery boy, Vito (Clive Clerk), the free-spirited, ethnic teenager who shamelessly dances along to the funky music on his portable radio as he makes his rounds. When Judy attempts to climb through an open window, the camera focuses on her rear end before cutting to Vito, who witnesses the spectacle from across the street. Much to Judy's surprise and humiliation, Vito whistles at the sight of her derriere and offers to lend her a hand. Mortified, she crashes through the window as Vito's hoots of laughter continue offscreen, presumably joining the chorus of snickering from the audience.

Breakfast with Freud

In spite of her terrible morning, Judy snaps back into polished, pleasant, attentive housewife mode just in time to serve breakfast for her husband. Unlike Day's career girl characters in *Pillow* or *Lover*, who had clients and friends to tend to, wolves to resist, and effeminate men to seduce, *Send Me No Flowers* leaves Judy with plenty to wear, but little to do or say besides her "puffs and sputters" at the dysfunctional, untrustworthy men who surround her.⁴⁹² Judy, in fact, has less in common with Day's career girls than with the scattered descriptions of the "old fashioned" kind of wife Hudson would claim to be holding out for when trying to explain away his bachelorhood in various *Photoplay* interviews.⁴⁹³ For critics such as Crowther, who openly loathed Day's earlier sex comedy performances for her characters' stubborn withholding of free pleasure from the playboy hero or her enterprising housewife role

⁴⁹² Crowther, "*Send Me No Flowers*."

⁴⁹³ *Photoplay* speculated that Hudson "didn't want to marry a career girl. Maybe he was old-fashioned, but he believed that a woman's place was in the home, making her husband happy and raising his kids." "Can Rock's Marriage Be Saved?," *Photoplay*.

in *The Thrill of It All*, Day's performance in *Send Me No Flowers* was a welcome change-up. "For once," writes Crowther, Day "is a normal, happy housewife, undisturbed by ambition or sex."⁴⁹⁴ Judy is, however, disturbed by her husband, who not only eats a dish of pills for breakfast, but is also a bit of a pill himself.

During breakfast, George is too preoccupied with his phantom chest pains and fretting over the obituaries to demonstrate even the slightest interest in anything Judy has to say. Despite her husband's grumpy self-absorption, Judy remains pleasantly polite and indulgent while he works himself up over the subjects of death and dying; at one point she lets out a bubbly giggle and tells him, "George, your hypochondria's showing." The joke is, of course, that his signs and symptoms are all in his head or, at worst, psychosomatic. George believes his body can betray him at any moment—a turn of events he both dreads and anticipates.

Although exaggerated, George's fears are not necessarily irrational; after all, if one has anything to learn anything from Hudson's sex comedy performances and stardom, it is that the body does not reveal or guarantee *everything*. Even though Hudson's body routinely inspired naughty gender subversions, the actor's psyche was typically left unaffected. As Barbara Klinger notes in her analysis of Hudson's midcentury stardom, "wholesome Hudson appeared as a kind of antidote to an overdose of unstable oddballs," such as fellow fifties icons James Dean and Marlon Brando.⁴⁹⁵ In addition to putting George on the defensive, Judy's hypochondria remark indirectly engages Hudson's carefully guarded star persona, as well as a much broader cultural interest in Freudian theories of sexuality.

⁴⁹⁴ Crowther, "*Send Me No Flowers*."

⁴⁹⁵ Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, 109.

Although explicit references to psychoanalysis in the sex comedy cycle were mostly limited to the male second bananas, for whom undergoing analysis was a lifestyle and trademark, Freudian theories of sexuality were of great interest and influence to postwar culture, and found gainful expression in the sex comedy cycle. Hypochondria, for example, was one of several neuroses Freud analyzed in relation to narcissism, a withholding of the libido from objects that can manifest in many different ways.⁴⁹⁶ Indeed, the sex comedy cycle's presentation of narcissistic traits in its male characters, including George, along with Hudson's earlier playboy characters, their alter-egos, and their second bananas, are necessarily varied; such an assortment of traits and presentation, however, all flirted naughtily with Freudian theories about the slippery relationship between narcissism and homosexual desire.

Among his various formulations of narcissism, Freud theorized that homosexual object choices were inherently narcissistic; rather than modeling love-objects on their mother, homosexuals were thought to take *themselves* as their love objects.⁴⁹⁷ Sticking to the label and story of hypochondria thus allowed *Send Me No Flowers* to entertain George's possible homosexuality and, in turn, entertain mainstream audiences without actually acknowledging the subject of homosexuality, which remained listed as a sociopathic personality disturbance in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders until 1974.

⁴⁹⁶ Freud writes: "Hypochondria, like organic disease, manifests itself in distressing and painful bodily sensations, and it has the same effect as organic disease on the distribution of libido. The hypochondriac withdraws both interest and libido—the latter specifically marked—from the objects of the external world and concentrates both of them upon the organ that is engaging his attention." Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction (1914)" in *Freud's "On Narcissism: An Introduction,"* ed. Joseph Sandler et al. (London: Karnac Books, 2012), 13-14.

⁴⁹⁷ Freud writes: "We have discovered, especially clearly in people whose libidinal development has suffered some disturbance, such as perverts and homosexuals, that in their later choice of love-objects they have taken as a model not their mother but their own selves. They are plainly seeking themselves as a love-object, and are exhibiting a type of object-choice which must be termed 'narcissistic.'" *Ibid.*, 18.

While complications stemming from George's advanced stage hypochondria motivate the queer exchanges between him, Arnold, and other secondary male characters, such connotation also manifests in subtler and more serious expressions of melancholic despair. In his 1917 essay, *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud theorizes melancholia as an inability to mourn a loss; for the melancholic subject, the lost object is "withdrawn from consciousness" and imprinted on the ego.⁴⁹⁸ The melancholic subject's narcissistic relationship to the lost object, which is often an abstract ideal, is further complicated by feelings of ambivalence that may manifest as self-hatred.⁴⁹⁹

During the long decade of the fifties, for instance, there was a tremendous amount of public and private investment in the breadwinner ethic, through which adulthood, citizenship, the good life, and even one's gender identity and sense of self-worth were strictly defined. Although George appears to meet the expectations for the breadwinner role, he has trouble sleeping, eating, and enjoy life outside of reading the obituaries and medical journals, through which he scours for clues as to what ails him, or what is destined to destroy him. What is this inarticulable but ever-present aching—in his heart, no less!—that worsens despite the pill-popping, the breadwinner salary, the sizable home in the suburbs, the Cadillac convertible, the country club membership, and the perky blonde wife who performs all the domestic duties expected of her—a wife who wears Jean Louis dresses on an ordinary day, giggles on cue, and wouldn't dream of bothering her husband with details of her day?

⁴⁹⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia (1917e [1915])," in *On Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia,"* ed. Leticia G. Fiorini et al. (London: Karnac Books, 2009), 33.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

As Berlant explains in *Cruel Optimism*, an object of desire—be it a person, place, institution, norm, an idea, etc.—actually names a “cluster of promises.”⁵⁰⁰ As a “synonym for privilege,” normativity is chief among the cluster of promises embedded in the good life, which according to Berlant, “is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it.”⁵⁰¹ Indeed, maintaining attachments to the good life’s world-building activities and its cluster of promises is particularly taxing for non-normative people, such as George, whose enduring attachments to such objects result only in anxiety and despair.

George, in fact, remains just as unfulfilled by the promises embedded in the era’s competing version of normative heteromascularity: the playboy bachelor. After breakfast at home with his wife, George has tea with a friend, Winnie Burr (Hal March), an aging, off-putting bachelor who has made something of an art preying on the vulnerable, potential divorcees in their country club social circle. While Hudson’s playboy characters in *Pillow* and *Lover* would have offered praise and taken notes on Burr’s very own “patented procedure,” George looks on in disgust as Burr dials Linda Bullard (Patricia Barry) from a table side rotary phone and convinces her to join him for a “a quiet little drink.”

Bad News is Good News

Underwhelmed or repelled by the era’s dominant modes of hetero-masculinity and the promises and privilege therein, George seeks fulfillment in the inevitability of his own demise. After Burr stiffes him with the lunch bill, George heads to the doctor’s office for a full check-up,

⁵⁰⁰ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 23-24.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

despite having one just two weeks earlier. Dr. Ralph Morrissey, played by Edward Andrews, is a likable, kind, ostensibly single man whose motives and sexuality are slightly fishy, and delightfully so; he is, as Crowther writes, “a physician you just know you can’t trust.”⁵⁰² While George eagerly awaits his examination, Dr. Morrissey rambles on about his upcoming weekend fishing trip on a gall bladder doctor’s boat, and expresses regret over not becoming a specialist like his allergist friend, whose earnings increase along with the pollen count—“just like the stock market.”

Dr. Morrissey’s running commentary, along with the pill commercial parodies in the film’s opening sequence, speak to the increasingly specialized and profit driven nature of health care, which tied into the era’s growing fears about the declining health of the overworked, overstressed American male.⁵⁰³ George, for example, tells Judy that the obituaries are full of men his age, who are “dropping like flies.” Although he knows better, the money motivated Dr. Morrissey is more than happy to indulge George in his hypochondria, and agrees to investigate the pain in his chest.

The camera shows the length of George’s body in full view as he unbuttons his shirt and goes under the stethoscope, giving viewers yet another chance to consider Hudson’s “incredulously healthy” body in relation to his character’s unsound mind, as well as his masculine good looks in relation to his questionable masculinity.⁵⁰⁴ “What’s the bad news? Is there some medical term for it?” George asks in eagerness. Dr. Morrissey assures him that he’s

⁵⁰² Crowther, “*Send Me No Flowers*.”

⁵⁰³ According to Cohan, evidence of the breadwinner’s physical malaise, which ranged from high blood pressure, alcoholism, depression, and heart disease, mounted in doctor’s offices as well as on screen. Cohan, *Masked Men*, 56.

⁵⁰⁴ “Sick Joke,” *Newsweek*, November 30, 1964, *Send Me No Flowers* File, Herrick.

only suffering from some minor indigestion; he sends him to the adjoining restroom to take some mystery pills, which are likely the same sugar pills that Judy secretly and successfully administers to her husband as sleeping medication every night. “This pain in my chest...I can just go ahead and live a normal life?” he asks.

Although Dr. Morrissey offers plenty of reassurance, there is a sense of mutual suspicion among George, Judy, the doctor, and the viewer that indigestion is not the problem and sugar pills are not the solution. There is, in fact, something deeply unfixable about George; he will never achieve a “normal life” with his so-called hypochondria, nor does he necessarily aspire to do so. While George is in the restroom, he gets the “bad news” he had been hoping for all along. He eavesdrops on Dr. Morrissey’s phone call conversation with a cardiologist, with whom he discusses a terminally ill patient’s cardiogram results. Mistakenly assuming that the cardiogram results in question are his own, George listens intently as Dr. Morrissey solemnly remarks that the patient has only a few weeks to live, and that he’s “better off not knowing about it.”

Much like the hierarchy of knowledge used to explore the hero’s anxieties in *The Tunnel of Love*, this pivotal scene in *Send Me No Flowers* establishes a disparity of knowledge between the viewer and the hero, which deepens viewer sympathy for George as an unfortunate victim of his own mind, as well as an absurd misunderstanding. Hiding away in the restroom, George reacts to the news in anguish, as the soundtrack cues a haunting piano requiem. He emerges from the restroom looking sweaty and disheveled, and immediately begins processing every interaction and event through the somber and exhilarating perspective of imminent death. After years of obsessive, debilitating anticipation, George can finally achieve a long-awaited sense of

inner peace, as well as vindication against his doubting wife—“someday when I’m lying in the hospital in my bed of pain, you’ll change your tune,” he warns her.

The interrelation between George’s neuroses, his allusive homosexuality, and his curious predilection to death invites a consideration of the death drive (*Thanatos*), which Freud analyzes in opposition to the sexual instinct (*Eros*) in his paradigm shifting 1920 essay, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.⁵⁰⁵ Here Freud describes the self-annihilating aim of the death drive and likens this instinct “to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world” to the sexual act, noting “how the greatest pleasure attainable by us, that of the sexual act, is associated with a momentary extinction of a highly intensified excitation.”⁵⁰⁶ The death drive, however, marks a site of opposition to sexual reproduction, connection, and other modes of social viability, which has been a particularly influential force in queer theorists’ deconstructionist approach to normative categories of gender, sexuality, and personhood.

As previously discussed in relation to Andy’s character in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, Edelman’s polemic, *No Future*, marshals the negativity of the death drive, the site of compulsion and repetition, and ultimately, self-destruction, in its model for a radical queerness that rejects futurity in all its forms.⁵⁰⁷ Fixated on the final, pleasurable extinction promised by his own self-destruction, George figures aspects of the death drive; such expression, however, is played out within the context of his enduring attachment to his role as breadwinner husband and its trappings of domesticity. With death replacing marriage, sex, or parenthood as the heterosexual

⁵⁰⁵ In this essay, Freud notes that the widely accepted hypothesis of self-preservative instincts stands in marked opposition to the idea that instinctual life serves to bring about death. Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920g), in *On Freud’s “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,”* ed. Salman Akhtar et al. (London: Karnac, 2011), 13-70.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁰⁷ Edelman, *No Future*, 6.

love plot's structuring drop-dead deadline, George begins to express his "illness" more openly. The pleasures he seeks in his final days involve distancing himself from his wife, making arrangements for his own funeral, canoodling with another man, and cruising the woods for rich, good looking bachelors.

Best Friends on a Train

The viewer's understanding that George is not, in fact, about to expire, makes the subsequent spree of queer innuendo between him and Arnold seem especially naughty; inevitably, both men will have to come to terms with the feelings expressed and intimate exchanges that took place under this false impression of limitation. The first of these intimate exchanges between George and Arnold takes place on a commuter train, a place of transit that evokes the very notions of middle-ness and in-betweenness that characterize the sex comedy's second bananas and their friendships with the male hero.

In this particular scene, George and Arnold's relationship sinks deeper into that middle ground between friends and lovers.⁵⁰⁸ In *Send Me No Flowers*, the train scene begins with George seated in the cabin at a table, man-spreading his tree-trunk legs and looking forlorn. Arnold enters the cabin, takes a seat, crosses his legs, and cozies up next to George; he then announces with delight, "I just put Ruth on a plane to her mother's, the kids are at camp, and now I'm alone." Considering Arnold's particular use of body language and affect, this line could have read as a naughty proposition had it not been for the two sets of long, skirt-sporting legs that happen to strut past them at the right moment. In a quick, albeit heavy-handed recognition of

⁵⁰⁸ In fact, their first on-screen interaction reads like a spoof on the homoerotically charged opening scene of Alfred Hitchcock's 1951 psychological thriller, *Strangers on a Train*, where a meeting between two men on a train leads to a fateful double murder pact.

Arnold's capacity for heterosexual, extramarital desire, he lustfully gazes at the torso-less skirts and, after a pregnant pause, exhales, ". . .and unafraid."

Out of Randall's three performances as Hudson's second banana, Arnold comes the closest to achieving the era's ideal version of normative masculinity because he meets the basic expectations for the breadwinner role. Unlike his divorced, childless, hopelessly single and neurotic characters in *Pillow and Lover*, Arnold is married (not necessarily happily) and has two nameless, unseen children. Significantly, Arnold bears closer resemblance to the era's ideal version of manhood than George, whose childless status excludes him from the glorified status of 'family man.' Also unlike Randall's previous two characters, Arnold is not the incapable heir of limitless fortune, but an upper middle class attorney; and while Arnold has no mommy issues, daddy issues, or an analyst to speak of, *Time's* review noted that Randall nevertheless looks like "an unsolicited testimonial for psychoanalysis."⁵⁰⁹ Though certainly not without his bizarre quirks, Arnold stands as the first of Randall's second bananas to possess an ostensibly sounder mind and worldview than the hero. Despite, however, the film's efforts to place Randall and Hudson's characters on more equal ground when it comes to their masculinities, *Send Me No Flowers* adopts similar visual strategies from *Pillow and Lover*, which continuously draw attention to the differences in their physicality and affective expressions.

The pair's first interaction on the train establishes a set of filming practices and visual codes that characterize their increasingly intimate interactions throughout the film. In order to emphasize their differences in size and stature, such as Hudson's man-spreading and Randall's daintily crossed-legs, the camera maintains medium distances of framing. Moreover, the use of

⁵⁰⁹ "Send Me No Flowers," *Time*.

shot-countershot continuity editing is minimized during their scenes together. Instead, *Send Me No Flowers* often employs blocking, a theatrical practice that focuses on the placement and movement of the actors within a defined space. As Cohan observes, such visual codes in *Pillow, Lover*, and *Send Me No Flowers* often call attention to Randall's habit of gazing upwards at Hudson, suggesting an erotic gaze similar to that of Day's and the viewer's.⁵¹⁰ In addition to emphasizing their amusing differences, however, these formal practices also emphasize the near constant acts of touching between the two men. Such physical contact becomes much more frequent and tender after George delivers news of his death sentence to Arnold.

Unresponsive to Arnold's excitement and quasi-proposition, George stares into space for a moment before turning to his friend and asking, "Arnold, can I take you into my confidence?" The camera cuts to a closer distance of framing as George leans towards Arnold and admits he has some "rather bad news." Arnold jumps out of his seat in shock and disbelief before letting the news sink in. In what begins a three day binge-drinking bender for Arnold, he invites George to join him for a drink at the train bar. He gingerly assists George out of his seat and guides him to the bar, mere steps away, and gives him a few loving pats on the back, which George kindly accepts.

Arnold's nurturing touches grow more affectionate the drunker he gets; his puny body awkwardly clings to George's towering handsomeness like a monkey clings to a tree. At the bar, their conversation turns to the subject of Judy and, more specifically, George's decision to withhold the prognosis from his wife—"I couldn't bear it. She'd probably go to pieces, all the weeping, wailing. You know Judy," he says. While Randall's second banana characters have

⁵¹⁰ Cohan, *Masked Men*, 93.

always been more open in their expressions of dependence and admiration than Hudson's heroes, George's decision to confide exclusively in Arnold is a rather profound testament to his investment in their friendship.

George essentially chooses to spend his final days in the good, doting company of Arnold over that of his wife. While Arnold praises George for his astounding nobility and "unselfishness," in facing death, George's decision to keep Judy in the dark actually provides an ironic counterpoint to such praise by revealing a most selfish and vindictive side to his character. With Judy unaware of the situation, George not only spares himself the unpleasantry of dealing with her "weeping and wailing" at his bedside, but it also makes for an especially stinging final vindication—"my hypochondria has finally paid off," he says, in a keepsake recording he composes for Judy to listen to after his death.

Although knowledge of George's demise weighs heavily on Arnold and drives him to drink to excess, he agrees to keep the secret from Judy, and offers George his services as both a lawyer and his "best friend." On the one hand, this unified front of secrecy between George and Arnold serves to keep Judy at a distance, but at the same time she becomes the crux of their union. In their shared despair, Judy unfairly and unknowingly becomes their shared burden—a pretty object to pity, safeguard, pass off, deceive, and to model designer fashions while posing in a shiny Cadillac convertible.

Their first interaction as a threesome takes place at the train station, where George's strange behavior, Arnold's public drunkenness, and Judy's bewilderment make for some wildly awkward exchanges. In keeping with the same visual strategies of blocking and medium distances of framing, their three-way exchanges and touches are played for maximum visibility

and laughs. Upon exiting the train, George greets Judy with a passionate embrace and lingering kiss. Judy, however, reacts to his unusually demonstrative act of affection with coy bewilderment, a reaction she repeats when she receives inappropriate or uninvited acts of affection from men other than her husband. This running thread of compulsory politeness that unites all of her sexually besieged sex comedy characters remains, of course, one of the cycle's most recognizable tokens of an era when "sexual harassment" was not yet part of the legal, political, or social lexicon. While George and Judy engage in their intense, public display of affection, Arnold looks on in drunken, insufferable angst.

Throughout the film, Arnold's drunkenness allows his character to push the boundaries of good taste in his interactions with George, as well as Judy. It is not long, for instance, before Arnold pushes George away from his wife's embrace and gives Judy a long, intense stare. When he plants a sloppy kiss on her lips—ostensibly still wet from her husband's saliva—she giggles it off and asks "are you taking George's vitamin pills?" The uncomfortable moment recalls the underwhelming kiss Day and Randall shared in *Pillow Talk*, when Randall played Hudson's sexual rival for her affections. In this case, however, Arnold is not kissing Judy out of desire or jealousy.

Rather, this scene sheds light on Sedgwick's theorization of woman's role in the triangulation of male homosocial desire; within this structure, women allow men to express their intimate feelings for one another without confronting the conscious or unconscious influence of homosexuality underpinning their desires.⁵¹¹ As Judy's remark about the vitamins suggests, Arnold kisses her out of desire to connect with George (and, perhaps, his residual saliva), who

⁵¹¹ Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 25-27.

watches Arnold put the moves on his wife with a look of restrained concern, but no detectable signs of jealousy or anger.⁵¹² In satisfying their competing affections, George squeezes himself between Judy and Arnold, whose drunken state necessarily requires more of George's physical strength and attention, as they walk together as a threesome. Arnold babbles on about George's nobility, asking Judy, "do you know what a noble man you're married to? Always thinking of the other guy even at a time like this." Indeed, what better time other than death to think about another guy—or several guys, for that matter?

The Price of Virginia Ham

Though George does not consider Arnold a threat (sexual or otherwise) because of his comparative effeminacy and familiarity as close friend and object of his most sincere affection, he does view Judy's interactions with other men with suspicion and contempt. Upon returning home from the station, for instance, Judy and Vito the cleaner share a brief inside joke about her embarrassing nightgown sighting earlier that morning. He hands her an expensive looking white dress wrapped in plastic and jokes, "man is that something! Almost as wild as this morning's outfit, huh?" George, who remains purposefully unaware of his wife's humiliating episode that morning, looks displeased and tells Judy that Vito is a "pretty fresh kid." When she comes to Vito's defenses, George snaps back with a dubious remark—"I bet he makes out pretty good in this neighborhood," he says.

While George's remark intimates that there are a number of bored, sex-starved housewives (or husbands, for that matter) in the neighborhood who would love to "make out

⁵¹² This moment, which positions Day as the channel through which Hudson and Randall's characters communicate their love and affection for one another, recalls a famous publicity still from the *Pillow Talk* premiere. The image features Day standing in between Hudson and Randall as they each plant a smooch on her cheek. Day is once again figured as the wedge and channel between the two men.

pretty good” with an ethnic teenager,⁵¹³ he is not overly concerned with Judy’s sexual hunger. Rather, George worries that Judy might actually go hungry without his breadwinner salary, book-keeping skills, and masculine common sense. In cruel contrast to Day’s exceptionally successful and happily independent characters in *Pillow* and *Lover*, Judy’s incompetence and resistance to education and self-sufficiency is astounding.

As they unload groceries in their large, state-of-the-art kitchen, George discovers that Judy wrote out a check for the mechanic with her license plate number instead of the bill amount; she doesn’t know, nor “care” what “amortization of a mortgage” means; and she laughs in disbelief when George suggests she attend night school to learn accounting and book-keeping skills. “What’s the sense in both of us knowing the same things?” she asks. With the merits of self-improvement or education beyond the scope of her desire, as well as the era’s codes of ideal femininity, Judy assumes George must have lost his job. As far as Judy’s opinion is concerned, George has no legitimate cause for anxiety as long as his job and salary are secure; it is, after all, the breadwinner salary that makes their idyllic life possible—or at least, makes the appearance of that life possible.

While Judy never intentionally makes consumer driven demands on her husband, there was a great deal of speculation during the postwar era that attributed the alarming decline in health among male breadwinners to the pressures they faced at home. According to this argument, breadwinners faced more stress sustaining their wives’ shopping habits than pleasing

⁵¹³ Ethnic characters always threatened to disrupt the sexual status quo in suburban sex comedies. Recall, for instance, Ms. Novick from *The Tunnel of Love*. Augie fears her seductive charms would bring out the wolfish side in all the neighborhood husbands, thus making it impossible to find a respectable reference for their adoption application.

their superiors in the workplace.⁵¹⁴ George develops more anxiety over Judy's stubborn dependency, ditziness, and ignorance over "the price of Virginia ham" than over his own untimely death, let alone his job. Fed up with his pestering calls for improvement and accountability, Judy shoos George away to invite Arnold to dinner.

Beware the Bongos

While Judy may not know anything about finances and lack basic common sense, Arnold demonstrates even more alarming signs of co-dependency and helplessness in the wake of George's death sentence and his wife's absence. George spots Arnold across their shared courtyard, where he nurses another drink on the swing set of his unseen, nameless children. While their first man-to-man chat on the train played on the liminal state in their relationship, this somewhat ghoulish playground tableaux intimates signs of regression and immaturity, which toned Hudson and Randall's relationships throughout their three comedies together.

The scene begins with a visual emphasis on Hudson's tall, impressive, masculine physique; he barely stretches in order to rest his arms on the top bar of the swing set, where Arnold is seated precariously on a swing. The *mise-en-scène* continues to emphasize their differences in size and stature for comedic and ironic purposes as Hudson takes a seat on an empty swing. Hudson then assumes more of a childlike position while Arnold stumbles to his feet, and gently pushes George on the swing in a caring, motherly fashion. Eventually, Arnold takes a seat beside the sandbox in the foreground, where he digs mindlessly in the sand with the focus and motor skills of a toddler.

⁵¹⁴ Cohan, *Masked Men*. 56.

While the absurd sight of a grown, average man pushing a larger, glowingly handsome man on a swing set and digging in a sandbox certainly lightens up their conversation about death, these notions of regression speak to the era's more serious concerns about the blurred lines between immaturity, failed masculinity, and homosexuality.⁵¹⁵ Unlike their respective characters in *Pillow* and *Lover*, whose immaturity primarily stemmed from their failure to meet the expectations of the breadwinner role, George and Arnold's immaturity has more to do with questions of potency, stability of body and mind, and their curiously close homosocial bonding, which soon becomes compounded by a peculiar man-hunting mission. As George swings and Arnold gets dirty in the sandbox, they speak only about their love for each other, and the importance of finding a replacement husband for Judy, who George fears "will never make it alone."

He then sighs and declares, "Hindus had the right idea, Arnold. When the husband died the wife went with him. Threw herself right on the funeral pyre. Then he didn't have to worry about her." This unsettling reference to the *sati* funeral ritual reveals that George is more distressed by his wife's irritating helplessness and the burden of her survival than he is by the knowledge of his own demise. Like the racially charged references peppered through the midcentury sex comedy cycle, George's observations on the *sati* practice speak to a forbidden fantasy; more specifically, *sati* speaks to a patriarchal fantasy of women's totalized subjugation in mind and body. While George, in his selfishness, considers such a tradition admirable, his thoughts turn to more fearful, sexually charged fantasies about the ruination of women.

⁵¹⁵ See Ehrenreich, *Hearts of Men*, 20.

In another insinuating remark about racial otherness, George reminds Arnold about a local widow who ran off with a “bongo player” a week after her husband’s funeral—“took her for every cent,” he says. Considering the bongo drums’ origins in Afro-Cuban culture, as well as the sex comedy cycle’s habitual displacement of sexually explicit content on to references and symbols from ‘the dark continent,’ George’s tale first comes across as a fearful account of vulnerable, sex-crazed white women corrupted by savage sexuality. George’s version of events, however, also suggests that the widow’s financial ruin was far more tragic than her sexual corruption.

These racially charged fantasies of ruined women haunt George’s dreams. In yet another look into George’s paranoid and impotent psyche, viewers are treated to a dream sequence featuring Judy and Vito dancing passionately in the Kimball’s living room. The conservative look and feel of the Kimball’s decor purposefully clashes with Judy and Vito’s wild choreography and their bright, matching outfits. Apropos of George’s tribal references in the previous scene, Judy and Vito also happen to wear matching tribal figurine necklaces. When Vito pauses his dance moves to ask about “the old boy’s life insurance,” Judy does a little wiggle and hands him a check. Vito looks the check over, shrugs, and says they can always “sell the joint” when the inheritance runs out. They immediately snap back into rhythm.

While images from this brief dream dance sequence appear as a titillating touch in nearly all the film’s marketing materials, it is actually the thought of this young, ethnically ambiguous man freeloading off his hard-earned inheritance money—more so than getting off with his wife—that jolts George awake. These insights into George’s most pressing fears testify to the ideological stronghold of the breadwinner ethic, which conflated personhood with personal

wealth and idealized the ‘self-made’ man. Though visions of Judy foolishly squandering his hard-earned estate preoccupy his final days, the sexual threat of younger, darker, less honorable men also lingers beyond George’s fearful dreamworld.

After waking up in a cold sweat, George sees his wife lying beside him, presumably enraptured in a dreamworld of her own. After registering Judy’s sexy, satisfied smile (the same look of self-pleasure Day exhibited in those ‘pillow talking’ scenes from *Pillow Talk*), George notices Judy’s feet moving to the same bongo drum beat from his nightmare. This brief glimpse of Judy’s visible, nocturnal bliss is by far the most explicit representation of erotic desire or pleasure in the entire film. Considering, however, the lingering fears and limitations surrounding the subject of female sexuality within and beyond the genre at the time, as well as George’s hypochondria-related anxiety, Judy’s pleased state goes unengaged. Rather than seizing the intimate opportunity, George looks upon his wife’s apparent randiness with horror and disbelief.

Make It For Three

In a wonderfully macabre transition, Judy’s sleepy *petit morte* fades in to the drab interior of cemetery plot sales office. George has come to make arrangements for ‘the big sleep’ with Mr. Akins, “the outrageously cheerful and commercially glib” sales director played by Paul Lynde.⁵¹⁶ Lynde, whose gayness was much more of an open Hollywood secret than Hudson’s, but still never publicly acknowledged during his lifetime, delivers a dizzyingly campy performance that overpowers whatever requisite notions of solemnity and restraint such a morbid scene would

⁵¹⁶ Crowther, “*Send Me No Flowers.*”

entail. It is both despite and because of his obviously creepy affect and wicked irreverence that nearly every reviewer noted Lynde's performance as one of the highlights of the film.⁵¹⁷

In contrast to George's funeral-ready black suit and sober, strong-and-steady demeanor, the squirrely Mr. Akins sports a loud, maroon houndstooth print jacket that compliments his snarky, thousand-watt smile. He shuffles and emotes around the office with a frenetic energy and enthusiasm that makes even the most neurotic moments of Tony Randall's second banana performances seem tame. While these two men certainly differ in affect, appearance, and motivation, both men share an obsession and excitement with death; for them, the "final resting place" is more appealing and comforting than their current situations.

George soon realizes, however, that the cemetery's seemingly consolatory slogan, "truly a home away from home," is not necessarily comforting when put into practice. Indeed, the socially prescribed role and lifestyle George is so eager to leave behind turns out to be practically inescapable in death. Just as it delightfully lampoons the pharmaceutical industry's efforts to keep people alive, paranoid, and placated, *Send Me No Flowers* snarks at the crass capitalism of end of life service industry, as well as its Cold War values. For instance, when Mr. Akins gushes about the cemetery's "wonderful impression of uniformity," George snidely refers to it as "a Levittown of the hereafter." After Mr. Akins shows George his "honey" of a cemetery plot on the 3-D model, he mentions that the state plans to build a highway—one of the government funded infrastructure projects that made the "Levittowns" and good-life fantasy possible in the postwar era—through the cemetery around 1980, which would necessarily require the relocation of his

⁵¹⁷ There was, however, one notable exception. In response to Mr. Akin's irreverence, one critic cautioned about the scene's "doubtful fun," noting that "any member of the audience who may have recently lost a loved one will not be amused." Dale Munroe, "Flowers Sent to Multiple Theaters," *Citizen News*, October 14, 1964, *Send Me No Flowers* File, Herrick.

remains. The future, as it turns out, is inescapable; George must plan for the future even after he is dead and gone.

While George is unconcerned with post-burial matters, he is unsure about the etiquette involved in making his final resting place arrangements given his exceptional circumstances—George is not only relatively young, but he also happens to be childless. Besides implicit reasons of genre, the film never offers any explanation for George and Judy's lack of children, or for that matter, George's lack of desire to produce an heir before he passes away. As previously discussed in relation to *The Tunnel of Love*, children were sacred subject matter; a comedy about the untimely death of a breadwinner would have been tricky, if not impossible to construct around the barrier of sentimentality protecting not only children, but the institution of parenthood itself.

Send Me No Flowers, however, manages to play with the curious anomaly and mock such sentimentality through Mr. Akins. Although Mr. Akins happens to adore big families with lots of children, his appreciation is not rooted in the era's sentimental, moral, and patriotic endorsement of large families; rather, his interests are purely profit driven and downright ghoulish. He encourages families, for instance, to tour the cemetery together, noting that "the kids love it. . .they have a ball!" Thus, when George admits he has no children, Mr. Akins' manic grin turns to a look of profound disappointment.

While Mr. Akins tries to remain hopeful and asks George about the possibility of "any little additions," George hardly pauses to think before replying. "Well, there might be another man along later," he tells Mr. Akins, whose sullen face perks up with a kooky look of delight and disgust. With no heir to carry on his name and no desire to produce one, George only leaves

behind an attractive widow who will surely marry again. Since Judy and her new husband will likely survive well into the 1980s, long after George's remains are relocated "deeper beneath the freeway," George decides to "go all the way" and tells Mr. Akins to "make it for three." With three cemetery plots on the books, George moves one step closer to extinguishing the role, identity, and relationships he knows now, but first, he sets out to find a man with whom to share his final—and perhaps a not-so-final—resting place.

The Woods Must be Full of Them

After making arrangements at the cemetery, George ditches golf plans with Judy in order to meet up with Arnold in the bar of their ritzy country club. He tells Arnold, "I've got just one more thing to attend to—I've got to stop all this gallivanting around, go to bed, and wait." George's use of the word "gallivant" is interesting in this context; according to one of the definitions listed for the word in the *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, to "gallivant" is to "to go about usually ostentatiously or indiscreetly with members of the opposite sex."⁵¹⁸ When it comes to "all this gallivanting around," George and Arnold sport matching shades of gray and cruise the country club together, in a mostly indiscreet search for hot, single members of the same sex. "The woods must be full of them," says George, recalling Hudson's eloquent anti-marriage speech in *Pillow Talk*, where he likens unmarried men to tall, strong trees in the forest.⁵¹⁹

Indeed, in all three of their films together, Hudson's characters presume an air of expertise about what traits Day's characters will find irresistibly attractive and respectable in a man. Hudson's characters thus makes it their mission to present Day with a male object of desire

⁵¹⁸ *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, s.v. "gallivant," accessed December 9, 2015, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gallivant>

⁵¹⁹ A direct quotation from the anti-marriage rant appears in the introductory remarks to Chapter Two, on page 153.

that stands out among the many wolves (and neurotics) in their lush (sub)urban jungles. In contrast to *Pillow* and *Lover*; however, where Hudson orchestrates elaborate masquerades with the unabashedly devilish intentions to seduce and humiliate Day, George's comparatively understated masquerade of health and normalcy, along with his man-hunt, are veiled in nobility and selflessness. Much like the playboys, however, his efforts are ultimately self-serving; George is eager to pass Judy off on another man in order to free himself from responsibility and relish in his own demise ("go to bed and wait!"). But first, he takes advantage of this ideal opportunity to "gallivant" with Arnold, as well as with other men.

Despite staging their man-hunt in an exclusive setting of white privilege, affluence, and leisure, George and Arnold are curiously nit-picky about the men under investigation, especially considering George's limited criteria. As the man-hunt goes underway, it becomes clear that the search is about the kind of man George wants, not Judy. Later that night, for instance, when Arnold delicately asks George how he feels about Judy doing "you know" with her second husband, George insists that Judy "wouldn't think of *that* with another man!" George's expectations for men and women are, in fact, very much in line with the consensus ideology of the time, which defined marriageable men by their ability to bankroll the good life, and placed impossible expectations on women's so-called virtue. "I want a man who can afford to give Judy what I went into debt for," he tells Arnold. Although Judy's interests do not initially factor into the man hunt, Arnold and George take the prospective bachelors' sex appeal into limited consideration insofar as it enhances their own erotic viewing pleasure.

For instance, they attentively observe a hunky, sandy-blond tennis player, Paul, who looks as if he has just walked off the set of Jane Russell's famously (homo)erotically charged

musical number, “*Ain’t There Anyone Here for Love?*” from the 1953 musical sex comedy *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. George and Arnold stand on the sidelines applauding and cheering for Paul, who shows off his skills and great smile on the court. George locks his eyes on Paul and says to Arnold, “he’s reasonably good-looking.” In an all too brief moment of sweet sincerity, Arnold earnestly replies, “not as reasonable as you, George.” Despite Paul’s attractiveness and athletic finesse, however, he turns out to be a total klutz. Sam, another eligible bachelor, apparently “hasn’t got a quarter,” and George and Arnold catch Harry in an undignified act of cheating on the golf course. Just when they start to realize the woods may not be as full of bachelors as they thought, George and Arnold meet the bloke who will bring them closer together by driving Judy and George apart.

While George and Arnold get handsy with one another on their golf cart, Judy spots them from an uphill putting green, where she has been golfing alone. Suddenly, George and Arnold see Judy careening down the hill on a golf-cart. Unable to steer or activate the brakes, Judy endures yet another undignified episode of public humiliation. Her exaggerated incompetence on the golf course, as well as in other areas of her life, demonstrates her urgent need for a husband—a husband who looks at and after her body rather than obsessing over his own. As George and Arnold try and fail to save her, Judy helplessly swerves through sprinklers, golfers, and horseback riders before finally being rescued by a mysterious, strapping man. He effortlessly sweeps her up on to his horse, parks her safely on the ground, and yells “yee-haw” before forcefully kissing her against her will. George and Arnold lock eyes in mutual bewilderment upon witnessing the intense caress between Judy and the heroic brute, who she eventually recognizes and introduces as her old college “sweetheart,” Bert Power.

Bert, played by Clint Walker, reads as a macho reincarnation of Hudson's masquerade as the effeminate oilman, Rex, in *Pillow*. Bert is built like a tall, sturdy cowboy (similar in height and build to Hudson), but he lacks Rex's delicate manners, cosmopolitan social graces, and curious maternal attachments; instead, Bert comes across as rude, arrogant, and unbearably obtuse. Even though he lacks the very traits that Day's character found so appealing about Rex in *Pillow*, Judy appears smitten with her old beau. She coos, giggles, and holds Bert's hand as he repeatedly insults and condescends to George. Upon being introduced to George and Arnold, for instance, Bert assumes that George is not her husband, but the "good friend and neighbor." He adds, "Judy was always kinda the campus queen. . .sorta figured she'd wind up marrying somebody like Cary Grant." This self-reflexive jab, which returns a joke from *That Touch of Mink* about Day marrying Hudson, renders Bert all the more obtuse; he becomes the only character in the film who fails to recognize George's undeniable, movie-star good looks.⁵²⁰

While George and Bert compete for physical real estate of Judy's body and her adoring attention, Arnold reaches for George's arm out of protectiveness and support. In bringing their first, awkward encounter to a close, Bert turns to Judy and not-so-innocently suggests, "we oughta get you outta those wet clothes." As Bert promptly escorts her back to the country club, Arnold tries to wrap his arm around George, mimicking Bert's embrace of Judy, as they follow far behind. United as a couple, George and Arnold grow closer than ever in their mutual dislike of Bert, who continues to act like an insensitive blowhard during lunch.

With all four character seated at round dining table, the film's fun-loving threesome dynamic becomes thrown off by such an unwieldy fourth player. In keeping with the film's

⁵²⁰ In *That Touch of Mink*, Gig Young and Cary Grant briefly consider Rock Hudson the movie star as a potential suitor for Day.

playful fixation on masculinity and size, Bert stretches out of his chair and practically rests his huge feet on the table in front of Arnold, who intently examines the cowboy boots for size. Bert also reveals the enormous size of his ego as he brags about his oil fortune—“people are always bellyaching about not having any money, they should all get into oil,” he gloats. Bert has, presumably, found success in the oil business through inheritance rather than hard work, thus eschewing the bootstrap ideology so fundamental to the era’s masculine ideals. This rare acknowledgement of poverty and privilege, however, quickly turns back to matters of size, a subject with which the sex comedies are far more comfortable and well suited for over-analyzing.

Indeed, the film’s official press book took special interest in Clint Walker’s dimensions in comparison to Hudson, boasting that “*Send Me No Flowers* marks the first time in Hudson’s film career that he has not been the biggest cast member, anatomically speaking.”⁵²¹ As such, the hugeness of Bert’s cowboy boots, ego, and fortune are humorously contrasted with George’s comparatively humble demeanor and his less lucrative, but more honorable line of work. George works for a “small company,” that manufactures a “tiny transistor.” In a barely veiled joke about penis size, Judy approximates the size of the tiny, but “very important,” transistor with her fingers. George promptly corrects her, making an even smaller approximation with his fingers —“This big!” he snarks. *Send Me No Flowers* thus invites the viewer to consider Hudson—the epitome of postwar masculinity and sex symbol supreme—as not only a gravely ill, mentally unstable, possibly queer, and impotent man, but most naughtily of all, as a poorly endowed man. These jokes, of course, are contingent on the impossibility of Hudson possessing these flaws,

⁵²¹ “Walker, at 6 foot 6 and 248 pounds, tops Rock by two inches in height and 50 pounds on the scales.” “*Send Me No Flowers*,” Universal Pressbook, *Send Me No Flowers* File, Herrick.

which explains the film's consistent visual invitations to consider Hudson's beauty against his characters' weaknesses.

Our Worries Are Over

As the sexual tension between Judy, Bert, and George swells around the lunch table, Arnold playfully adds to George's emasculation by suggesting his nose could use "a little powder." He beckons George away from the dining room and exclaims, "*Our* worries are over! *We've* found a man for Judy!" In emphasizing their united front, Arnold appears even more motivated than George to pass Judy off to another man. While George hesitates because Bert is such a "cornball," Arnold reminds him that he's "*loaded*," and that there is no guarantee that the kind of eligible bachelors George has in mind will be interested in marrying an ostensibly barren, middle-aged widow—delightful and attractive as Judy may be. The soundtrack suddenly changes to a solemn requiem and George returns to the table, where he slaps Bert on the shoulders and invites him to be their guest for the club's "dinner dance" that evening, thus forming a new triangle of desire.

While George and Arnold's "worries" may be over, Judy's worries are just beginning. As George and Judy primp and dress for the dinner dance that evening, George goes on and on about Bert's many talents—"I've never seen anything greater than Bert's backhand! And those drives off the tee! And wasn't it a pleasure playing bridge with him. Did you ever see a more polished player?" he blathers. Judy, however, no longer appears excited about Bert's unexpected return. Instead, she expresses disappointment and suspicion in George's sudden infatuation with him. "What's gotten into you," she asks, "normally, if I spent that much time with another man you'd be wildly jealous."

As Judy helps adjust his collar and suspenders, they reminisce about past man-handling incidents and George admits that he only acts jealous to please her, noting that she would be “furious” if he did not. For as long as Judy has been dealing with unwanted male attention, George has been performing the dutiful role of the jealous, desiring husband. In pulling her close and kissing her neck, George manages to temporarily distract Judy from his curious insistence on inviting Bert into their lives and, in a manner of speaking, into their bedroom. Soon after the romantic, orchestral music cues, Judy pulls away—“If I don’t hurry, we’ll miss the dance,” she warns. Though George continues with his caresses, reminding her it would not be the first dance they have missed, Judy releases herself from his embrace. “Shouldn’t have invited Bert,” she says, with a restrained spitefulness that puts the chill on an otherwise lovely, intimate moment.

Judy’s rejection in the closet sets the tone for the rest of the ill-fated evening. George spends the dinner dance pimping Judy out to Bert on the dance floor, to the point where Bert appears as suspicious and uncomfortable as Judy with George’s insistence. George looks on, registering displeasure at the way Bert’s oversized cowboy boots step on Judy’s tiny feet on the dance floor—the cowboy boots once again signifying Bert’s marked inelegance and oppressiveness. While Bert may be troubled in body, George is troubled in mind. When Judy protests to another dance with Bert, she pries George on his insistence that Bert is such a “marvelous dancer.” “How would *you* know,” she asks, “have *you* danced with him?” Although not explicitly stated, of course, Judy’s distrust suggests her mind is jumping to not so unthinkable conclusions about her husband’s attraction towards Bert.

It may very well have come to a relief to Judy when she catches George in the coat closet in a compromising embrace with Linda Bullard, the club’s hot, new divorcée. With the viewer

made unequivocally aware of his innocence, the closet becomes the setting of misunderstanding and rejection for George, who resists Linda's affectionate demonstrations of gratitude. When he scopes the scene for possible witnesses, he sees Judy staring at him with her mouth agape in shock. He chases Judy through the club parking lot and tries to explain the innocence of the situation, but she refuses to believe his version of events. While Judy is fraught with anger and surprise, she no longer suspects that her husband is harboring same-sex feelings or plotting to arrange a three-way with her college sweetheart. "It all fits now," she shrieks, "shoving me off on to poor Bert Power so you wouldn't feel guilty about going with another woman."

Since the viewer is assured of George's innocence—insofar that he is not harboring lust for Linda—Judy's shrill emoting and her refusal to consider George's pleas comes across as more frustrating than sympathetic. She shrieks in horror at the thought of the milkman and bridge club gossiping about the affair, as if the gossip is worse than the betrayal itself. As Judy struggles to find their car in a lot full of similar-looking shiny convertibles, she flings insults at her husband, calling him a "swinger," "playboy," and "adulterer"—the very sex comedy character types perfected by Hudson in *Pillow and Lover*; and most beloved by popular audiences. Finally, Judy stops shrieking and struggling long enough for George to confess that he is dying.

In contrast to most of George's exchanges with Arnold, George's confession to Judy utilizes shot-counter-shot editing, which suggests a crucial separation of the two characters despite their close proximity in the cozy convertible. It is not until George mentions Dr. Morrissey that Judy believes his confession, which sends her into tear-filled hysteria. She throws herself at her husband, sobs into his shoulder and screams his name over and over. George pats her on the back and whispers, "chin up, at least this is better than having another woman"—a

snicker-inducing remark that lightens the moment by cheapening Judy's grief. By the following day, Judy shifts into the dutiful role of caretaker and tells George, "promise me you'll never keep something like that from me again." What secret could possibly be more shocking and shattering than death for a man like George, or Rock Hudson, to take to his three person grave?

Bedroom Problems, Revisited

While there may not, in fact, be "another woman" for Judy to worry about, there is certainly another man with whom George is gallivanting, making plans, and sharing tender moments in the moonlight. After George finally shares his prognosis with Judy, Arnold becomes increasingly involved with his end of life care, which mostly consists of pushing George around in a wheelchair that barely supports his colossal physique. Still maintaining his exceptionally healthy glow, George appears more relaxed and noble than ever in his wheelchair; the blanket draped delicately across his lap comically exaggerates his dignified enfeeblement by channeling the signature look of former U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt.

With a requisite beer in hand to temper the moment's sincere, intimate exchanges, Arnold coddles and fusses over George as he pulls the blanket up towards his chest, and presses his hand against George's heart. While George graciously welcomes Arnold's affectionate efforts to keep him comfortable, he finds Judy's well-intentioned endeavors to keep him alive irksome and unnecessary. Considering George's desire to hasten the extinguishing of life as he knows it, he protests to Judy's plans to check in to the Mayo Clinic on the basis of cost and futility. "It will just prolong it," he says, "I'll just lie there and linger. . .one of the most expensive things you can do these days is to linger." Though George refuses Judy's interference with his willed demise, he luxuriates in her efforts to mother him while he waits.

Judy's strength and care-taking efforts admittedly take him by surprise. "You've always been so *dependent*," he tells her. "If I had known it would be like this, I would have told you I was dying right away," George admits, as she tucks him into bed with a hot water bottle. This particular scene marks one of the last and most literal on-screen translations of Hudson's widespread appeal during the fifties. Hudson, as Meyer observes, "was a star fantasmatically defused of active (hetero)sexual desire, a man to marry or to mother but not to fuck."⁵²² While George certainly proves himself a reliable husband worthy of coddling and pampering, the film questions and troubles his sexual potency from the very beginning. A little pillow talk, however, is all it takes to reawaken his senses.

Framed in a cozy, medium close-up shot as to not appear too suggestive, Judy and George snuggle up to one another in bed as they reminisce about the first time they met. When their kisses are interrupted by the sound of the doorbell, the camera lingers on George's wanting look as Judy heads downstairs to greet the late night visitor. In keeping with an established pattern of interruption, the Kimball's bedroom affairs are once again thwarted by another male third term. When she answers the door, Judy finds Dr. Morrissey, who has just returned from his special fishing trip with his doctor friend, still dressed in full fishing gear, with a bag of bloody fish in hand.⁵²³ Dr. Morrissey appears genuinely dumbfounded when Judy castigates him for abandoning George after delivering his death sentence. After collecting his thoughts, Dr.

⁵²² Meyer, "Rock Hudson's Body," 279.

⁵²³ Both Judy and George make it known to Dr. Morrissey that they "hate fish." This minor, recurring gag about hating fish recalls the premise of Howard Hawks' comedy, *Man's Favorite Sport*, which also starred Rock Hudson, and premiered months earlier than *Send me No Flowers* in 1964. In this film, Hudson's character plays an expert fisherman who has not only never been fishing, but harbors a severe aversion to fish all together. Rappaport's *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* discusses Hudson's character and his hatred of fish (wherein "fish" is considered slang for vagina) in *Man's Favorite Sport* as an example of the way the star's closeted homosexuality worked its way into his on-screen performances.

Morrissey busts out in laughter and howls, “I’ve encountered many a hypochondriac in my time, but never anyone like that boy of yours.” Judy explodes in frustration and continues interrogating Dr. Morrissey, who is unable to explain why George would make up such a lie. “I don’t know, I’m not a psychiatrist,” he says.

Judy, however, would rather believe that her hunk of a husband is cheating on her rather than suffering from such severe, unidentifiable neuroses. Either way, adultery and mental illness were considered “weaknesses” within the era’s consensus ideology at the time, and all weaknesses threatened to slip into homosexuality. After Judy explains her infidelity cover-up theory with an almost maniacal zeal, Dr. Morrissey puts his arms on her shoulders and offers her a rehashing of the conventional wisdom of the day, which is “to just try and *forget it.*” Just like Day’s housewife characters in the sex comedies *The Tunnel of Love*, *The Thrill of It All*, Judy will eventually come around to Dr. Morrissey’s advice in the film’s final moments. In the meantime, she practically frightens Dr. Morrissey out the door and returns to the bedroom, seething and scheming.

Since no sex comedy misunderstanding would be complete without an element of public shaming, Judy takes a card from the playboy playbook and devises a vengeful seduction scheme. In contrast to *Pillow Talk* and *Lover Come Back*, where viewers were invited to take pleasure in the playboy’s plotting while at the same time acknowledging the morally repugnant nature of their intentions, Judy’s vengeful, even violent endeavors come across as less satisfying because the narrative insists on George’s innocence and noble rationale. While George sleeps soundly, Judy pretties herself at her make-up vanity and slips into a billowy, floor length designer night

gown, complete with a long, flowing train that makes her appear more like a blushing bride than an enraged housewife.

In an especially indulgent moment mimicking the famous scene in the sex comedy *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953), where Day's rival icon of midcentury femininity and fashion, Marilyn Monroe, admires her sumptuous appearance in a triple mirror, Judy pauses to drink in her masquerade before performing for her unsuspecting husband. This fabulously self-aware fashion show moment, which had become a more or less mandatory at this crowning point in the sex comedy cycle and Day's career, beckons the viewer as a co-conspirator. Armed with the truth of George's physical well-being, Judy walks over to her sleeping husband and slaps him across the face—hard. Considering Judy's pattern of polite tolerance when being manhandled by Arnold and Bert in previous scenes, her violent slaps shocks the viewer as well as George, who wakes up hurting and disoriented.

Judy cuddles and comforts him as if he had just woken from a nightmare, and continues her seduction plot. Like Day's characters in *Pillow Talk*, *Lover Come Back*, as well as *That Touch of Mink*, Judy's default reliance on sex in her revenge plot reinforces the era's widely accepted understanding of sex as something for which men must either force, buy, or beg from women. In this particular case, George's excessive excitement and gratitude, along with Judy's hidden, repulsed reactions to his eagerness, suggests that sex—or, at least Judy's initiation thereof—is a rare occurrence in this marriage.

In foreshadowing the conclusion that sex with his wife will eventually cure him of his “hypochondria,” George throws himself out of bed and, in a most uncharacteristic demonstration of strength and bravado, leaps over the upstairs banister instead of using the staircase. While

George frantically, mindlessly ransacks the cupboards and refrigerator for champagne and glasses, Judy appears in the doorway clutching his wheelchair. “Darling, you need to conserve your strength,” she whispers, and invites him to take a seat.

Unable to resist such a pick-up line or, for that matter, an opportunity to be mothered, George falls into her trap. Judy sends him reeling out of the house in his wheelchair and promptly locks the doors, thus forcing him into a humiliating situation similar to the one she experienced at the beginning of the film. Set to a frenzied xylophone sound effect, Judy ransacks George’s medicine cabinet; in the most dramatic fashion, she empties its contents—all of George’s crutches and comforts—into a waste basket and returns to the bedroom window.

Judy hurls the assorted pills and potions, along with a few angry remarks about Linda Bullard, onto George below. Although her behavior in this particular lovers’ quarrel is considerably more violent than her playful pranks in *Pillow Talk* and *Lover Come Back*, in all three of their sex comedies together, Day’s characters essentially devise schemes to get Rock Hudson naked. In *Pillow*, she redecorates his bachelor pad in poor taste which sparks their long awaited lovemaking; in *Lover*, she leaves him stranded, naked on a beach. In *Send Me No Flowers*, she tosses his hot water bottle out the window and it explodes on impact, leaving him soaking wet, defeated, and with a good excuse to disrobe and sleep at Arnold’s house.

Boys’ Night In

Since bromance tends to flourish in proportion to the level of unrest in the characters’ heterosexual affairs, Day’s schemes to outsmart and strip Hudson also indirectly drive him closer to his second banana during the narrative’s middle stages. After Judy’s tantrum, for instance, George picks briefly at the pills scattered across the patio before heading over to Arnold’s with

the bottle of champagne he intended to share with his randy wife. “I love champagne, George, how’d you know I’d run out of booze?” asks Arnold. In addition to the constant replenishment of booze that keeps the homosocial and homoerotic crosscurrents between the two friends thoroughly lubricated as well as in check, this memorable scene also introduces a marked element of gruffness—mostly on the part of George—that bitters their otherwise heartfelt affections.

When Arnold, for example, inquires innocently about George’s soaking wet appearance, he snaps, “Shut up! Get me a pair of dry pajamas.” “Well, *we’re* rather testy, aren’t *we*?” says Arnold, as if George were his other half. As the apotheosis of Hudson and Randall’s on-screen displays of physical affection, as well as sex comedy bromance at large, George and Arnold borrow from the beloved schtick of Laurel and Hardy, another duo of disproportionately sized males who bickered and bonded as a couple during the silent and early sound era.⁵²⁴ In performing a farcical vignette of a married couple, this sleepover scene between Arnold and George marks the climax of their closeness and intimate expressions, as well as the first major rift required for the heterosexual reunion that must inevitably take place.

It is, indeed, this oscillation between coldness and closeness, sass and sincerity—the “affection masking” dynamic that informs the most memorable of all romantic comedy couples, regardless of the couple’s composition—that makes this boys’ night in such a pleasure to watch.⁵²⁵ When Arnold attempts to cheer up the soggy and besmirched George by reciting

⁵²⁴ According to Basinger, Laurel and Hardy present “the most lifelike movie example of a real married couple’s relationship. . . They bicker, they disagree, they snipe, they challenge, and they yell, but if any outside threat arrives in their world, they instantly pull together. In their hearts they each know they’ve found the perfect other.” Basinger, *I Do and I Don’t*, 85.

⁵²⁵ Bingham, “Before She Was a Virgin,” 21.

highlights from his eulogy draft, George shuts down his thoughtful acclamations, shows himself upstairs into Arnold's master bedroom and takes a seat on the edge of the rumpled bed. In contrast to the sleek, bachelor pad spaces where Randall observes Hudson's character in various states of dressing and grooming rituals in *Pillow Talk* and *Lover Come Back*, the setting of their most intimate exchange in *Send Me No Flowers* is a hodgepodge of bourgeois feminine mystique and careless, temporary bachelorhood; it is, indeed, a *mise-en-scène* of uncertainty, confusion, and awkwardness. The clean design elements and symbolically loaded tribal figurines of the Manhattan bachelor pads have been replaced with ornate brass furniture and unremarkable paintings of fully clothed white women, which clash with the sloppy piles of Arnold's clothes and scattered remnants of midnight snacking.

As George explains away his marital dispute, Arnold kindly offers George his last remaining night shirt and both men begin to disrobe. In the foreground, George casts off his wet shirt, exposing his naked, muscular torso for Arnold as well as the desiring eyes in the audience. His beefcake body is made all the more awe-inspiring if not outlandish as he struggles to squeeze his massive frame into Arnold's small, garish red garment. In the background, the comparatively puny Arnold removes his outer robe, wedges the champagne bottle between his legs, and excitedly pops the cork—in what could reasonably be construed as a tongue-in-cheek phallic gesture—as George approaches him with the borrowed shirt still halfway up his back.

The booze, the bickering, and the chatter about George's domestic dispute with Judy mediate the scene's homoerotic overtures. In between heavy swigs of champagne directly from the bottle, Arnold assists George in pulling the shirt down over his bulk. While George plans to spend the night in the kids' bedroom, Arnold informs him that those rooms are being painted and

insists, “you’ll have to shack up with me.” George, as it turns out, does not have to wait until death to share a resting place with another man. Without pausing to consider the alternatives their five-bedroom home could reasonably afford, he agrees to occupy Ruth’s side of the bed.

Additional swigs of champagne, pillow talk about their wives, and speculations over one another’s extramarital activities, temper their complaints about one another’s cold feet and jagged toenails—a kind of pillow talk that most married audience members would likely find more relatable than the schmaltz Doris Day sings about in her sex comedies’ opening credits. Although George may be occupying the woman’s position of Arnold’s marriage bed, his manful proportions hog the bed space, as well as the blankets. Arnold gives George the cold shoulder and rests his head against the champagne bottle, which he clings to as if were a compensatory phallic object.⁵²⁶ Though they more or less go to bed angry when the scene fades to black, the fade in to the next morning reveals the couple sleeping rather peacefully.

Morning and Misunderstanding

In immediately reminding the viewer that alcohol had been consumed the night before and, presumably, influenced their decision to share a bed, the scene opens with a shot of the empty champagne bottle and midnight snack remnants on Arnold’s nightstand. Although the viewer is left to wonder what else may have happened that night, this morning after shot marks the most serene moment shared between two people in a bedroom throughout the entire sex comedy cycle. George’s ample body is haphazardly sprawled across the mattress, where he appears, for the first time in the film, to have slept soundly—a major feat considering he did not

⁵²⁶ Arnold’s incessant and suggestive clutching of the champagne bottle in this scene recalls *Lover Come Back*, where Randall’s character admits that his shrink has advised him to carry a walking stick in order to build up his “confidence.”

even take his placebo “sleeping pills” the night before. While Arnold is left pillowless, blanketless, and contorted into a fetal position, he too appears rather content curled up beside his dear friend. The ringing telephone on Arnold’s nightstand, however, sounds like a blaring alarm and sabotages their cozy morning afterglow. Barely able to open his eyes or speak, Arnold answers the phone and begins reciting George’s phone number to the caller on the other end, who happens to be Winnie Burr—the slimy divorcée predator from the club.

George darts out of bed and heads to the courtyard, where he squats behind a bush and eavesdrops on Judy’s telephone conversation with Burr, who is only the first of several secondary male characters to penetrate the Kimball household during their brief window of separation. George, meanwhile, is joined behind the bushes by the milkman, who has been spreading gossip about the Kimballs’ marital unrest after hearing the scoop from Dr. Morrissey earlier that morning. Before scampering off to chatter with Judy, the milkman awkwardly jokes with George about looking “great” for a “doomed man,” and flirtatiously pinches his red night shirt, which he thinks would “look better” on Arnold.

With an implicit understanding that the milkman will soon be spreading rumors about his ill-fitting, borrowed pajamas, George first attempts to salvage his relationship with Arnold before reconciling with his wife. George returns to Arnold’s house to call Dr. Morrissey, who explains the misunderstanding regarding the cardiogram results. With his face turning nearly as red as his borrowed night shirt, George’s inflamed, animated reactions to the news that he is not, in fact, dying stands in marked contrast to his quietly turmoiled acceptance of his mistaken death sentence in the film’s first act.

Overwhelmed with the anger and disappointment in knowing that their relationship can never be the same, George begrudgingly confesses the news to Arnold. “There’s not a *single* thing wrong with me,” he gripes. Initially overjoyed with the turn of events, Arnold gives George a warm hug and emotes cheerful exclamations of relief. He soon changes his tune, however, when George admits the ordeal was not the result of a medical oversight, but a complete misunderstanding on his part. “I was wrong, and I’m sorry,” he grunts. Arnold dramatically removes his glasses, and scolds George for driving him to drink, cry, and fret over his eulogy for the past three days. “This is a horrible thing to put a fellow through. I’m your *best friend!*” he whines. Both George and Arnold are ultimately let down by his unexpected death row pardon. Embedded within George’s kurt apologies and Arnold’s frustration is a remorseful repudiation of the time they have spent together, the feelings they have shared, and the level of affection they have expressed for one another over the past three days. Indeed, without George’s terminal death sentence as a dark, safe shroud, their affair cannot continue—at least not as openly or intensely as before.

It is only a matter of moments, for instance, before an uninvited looky-loo, the milkman, interrupts their exchange. In reminding them of their husbandly duties, as well as the ever-looming judgement that necessarily curtails their expressions of desire and affection, the milkman declares, “Newsflash! She’s packing for Reno!” After George brushes past him in a hurried panic, Arnold tears up the eulogy draft in indignation, only to reconsider and stash the scraps in his desk drawer—“he’s gotta go sometime,” he tells himself. Just as his second banana roles in *Pillow Talk* and *Lover Come Back*, demonstrate unconditional forgiveness when wronged by the playboy hero, Arnold keeps his most heartfelt feelings for George tucked away

for his own safe keeping and, potentially, for an unknown future use. The future is thus once again figured through death, and through hopes for a rekindling of the male buddy relationship, rather than through the heterosexual couple.

Was It Worth It?

After his unsuccessful attempts to prove his innocence to Judy, George promptly returns to Arnold with the news that she is officially leaving him. Arnold barely looks up from his cereal bowl and, without missing a beat, tells him, “tonight the window stays open!” In addition to opening up his bed to George once again, Arnold also indulges George’s pleas for advice on how to convince Judy that he was not ‘gallivanting around’ with another woman. Drawing from his experience as an attorney, as well as from his own implied brushes with adultery, Arnold encourages George to “face the facts.”⁵²⁷ In this context, of course, “the facts” refer to the sexist myths about women’s irrationality, stubbornness, and manipulative personalities awash in fifties popular culture. “What woman doesn’t want to see her husband crawl a little?” says Arnold. He thus offers George a questionable piece of advice: “Confess! And ask her to forgive you!” George resists Arnold’s advice at first, telling him, “I’ve heard of guys lying out of it, but I’d be the first one to lie into it.”

What George must lie about is not the affair itself, but that it happened to be a heterosexual affair. This supposedly unusual lie was, of course, by no means unfamiliar to a closeted gay man like Rock Hudson, who had spent his entire acting career feigning romantic attraction and relationships with women on and offscreen. In projecting the kind of confident insider knowledge about women that is much more familiar to the sex comedy’s playboy

⁵²⁷ During their sleepover, George threatens to tell Ruth about Arnold’s fling with a waitress during their couples’ vacation to Miami.

characters than the fey male second bananas, Arnold warns George that Judy will suspect he's had "dozens" of affairs if he shows any signs of hesitation during the interrogation. George, however, appears utterly miffed by Arnold's sample questions. He is especially stumped by what Arnold declares as the "most important" question of all: "Was it worth it?" George stares blankly at Arnold, and asks, "Was it?"

When considering that this conversation marked the beloved duo's last substantive on-screen exchange together, the question of "Was it worth it?" takes on a sentimental, even melancholic quality. Though peppered with requisite mentions of Judy and bitter generalizations about women, this final man-to-man chat about love affairs, confessions, and cover-ups lends itself to a momentary, touching reflection on the sprees and snags of their three on-screen affairs. Despite their spats and differences, Hudson and Randall's onscreen relationships shared an honest, open quality lacking from the heterosexual pairings.

In regards to George and Arnold more specifically, George freely admits and acts out his frustrations, weaknesses, and "testy" moods with Arnold while his marriage to Judy operates through good and ill intended forms of deception and convoluted schemes, like this bogus confession. Though Hudson and Randall's on-screen affairs were, no doubt, 'worth it' to their individual characters, along with general audiences then and now, this final and most intense affair must too come to an abrupt end. "No matter how great it was, you've got to say it wasn't so good," Arnold insists, although in their hearts they both know better. Without allowing the sentimentality to detract from the farcical situation at hand, their chat is cut short by the honking taxi cab waiting to take Judy to the train station.

The Baggage

The film then resorts to a ridiculous car-chase sequence in order to separate the triumvirate for the very last time. Since the male lead must inevitably part ways with the second banana in order for the heterosexual reunion to take place, Arnold mindlessly drives off in a car under the mistaken impression that George is in the backseat. Arnold chases after Judy's cab while George chases after Arnold all the way to the train station, where he grabs Judy out of a bustling crowd and attempts to "confess" and "beg for forgiveness." In typical sex comedy and midcentury sexist fashion, the crowd remains largely oblivious and unsympathetic to Judy's alarming resistance as George pulls her into the aptly labeled "baggage room," and invites her to unpack his poorly rehearsed confession.

Trapped, once again, in a closet with Judy and her suspicions about his true desires, George stumbles through Judy's interrogation about his affair with a fictional mistress, Dolores. Once the questioning winds down, George adds that "she wasn't worth the trouble." Judy groans in frustration and exclaims, "who asked you for *that!*" This notion of whether or not the affair was worth the trouble, which Arnold considered the most crucial point of the entire ruse, never entered Judy's mind—nor did George's unsolicited comment bring her any comfort or satisfaction. Although Arnold's fey and awkward nature does not necessarily inspire confidence in his knowledge of the opposite sex, there is a detectable element of sabotage in Arnold's single, egregious lapse in judgement when predicting Judy's questions and preferred answers. George's staged confession, as a result, fails miserably—just as Arnold may have very well intended.

In an attempt to convince Judy about how much he "loathes" his former, made-up mistress, George tells her that he sent Dolores away, against her will, to start a new life in New

York. Judy, however, only grows more enraged and frustrated with the fact that George spent money on another woman. When George shows her a copy of the check for one thousand dollars cash, which he made out for their cemetery plots earlier in the film, as proof of his affair, Judy squeals in anger and decides to end their marriage once and for all. Overwhelmed by the dread of public shame and deeply offended by George's dirty violation of their bank account, the nature of Judy's anger suggests that matters of reputation and cash are far more important than matters of sexual fidelity in a marriage.

While viewer sympathy for George reaches its climax during this horribly contrived confession, the same is not true for poor Arnold, who in addition to providing some much needed comic relief to the marital meltdown, also finds himself burdened with blame for creating such tension between George and Judy in the first place. Arnold, however, is not simply pinned as a convenient, goofy scapegoat for his unsuccessful advice; rather, his character serves as a stand-in for George's vilified, fictional mistress, Dolores. Indeed, when George lies to Judy about "loathing" Dolores, "repenting" their affair, and sending her away in order to save their marriage, he is actually coming to terms with ending the only affair he has been guilty of carrying on all along—the one that can no longer sustain itself without the certainty of his own premature death.

As Arnold scurries into the baggage room, reeling with delight upon discovering George, his excitement quickly changes to fear once he registers George's cold silence and intimidating body language. Sensing that his confession scheme was a "total failure," Arnold backs away from his angry hulk of a best friend, who continues pressing towards him without saying a word or laying a hand on him. "You're not gonna hit me, are you George? But you're gonna hurt me a lot, aren't you George?" he jabbars rapidly. Arnold's last lines of the film, which are also

Randall's last spoken words to Hudson on the big screen, not only foresee his character's violent erasure from the narrative, but also bring their storied buddy-buddy relationship to a rather uneasy and injurious end.

The disposal of Randall's second banana characters becomes increasingly cruel over the course of his three films with Hudson, just as their shared screen time increases, and the queer play and emotional closeness between their characters grows more pronounced. In *Pillow Talk's* final scene, for instance, Randall remains offscreen but he nonetheless serves as the implied "feminized father" to Hudson's expectant "male mother" within the film's formulation of the "homosexual couple."⁵²⁸ Just before Hudson becomes a father in the very last moments of *Lover*, Randall is reduced to a thoroughly humiliated, drunken fool after an accidental overdose on alcoholic candy drives him to behave like a caged chimpanzee. In *Send Me No Flowers*, Randall's defeat and containment is made especially cold and forcible in final preparation for the hero's brutish heteromasculine redemption. Arnold nervously anticipates a painful blow from George, and clumsily stumbles backwards into an oversized cargo bin. George slams the lid closed, and walks away without looking back. Although George tucks Arnold away—literally and figuratively—in the baggage closet, Arnold's violent disposal does not conclude George's acts of brute force and intimidation, nor does it seal off the possibility of the triumvirate's eventual return.

Happily Hereafter

Indeed, when Judy returns home to pack her bags, she is interrupted by yet another unexpected male visitor, Mr. Akins, who has come to deliver the deed and receipt for the three

⁵²⁸ Glitre, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, 176.

cemetery plots. Judy's confused reaction sends Mr. Akins into a tizzy of remorse for spoiling George's "surprise"—"hope this doesn't take the joy out of it," he tells her. In wickedly bucking romantic comedy convention, the surprise cemetery plots become the ultimate romantic gesture, and the means through which all is forgiven and love is restored.

A look of relief creeps over Judy's face as she realizes George did, in fact, make up his confession about Dolores. Mr. Akins matches her delight when he confirms that "there is no other woman" because George actually made "arrangements for another man." After pausing just long enough for the audience to snicker, Mr. Akins explains to Judy that George made "provisions for a second husband." Judy remains unflinchingly joyful upon hearing the news, and kindly asks Mr. Akins to mail George the paperwork in order to save the surprise.

In accordance with generic conventions and historically specific ideological frameworks, Judy performs an important symbolic function that mandates the restoration of the heterosexual couple and the concomitant dissolution of male homosocial bonds. As with any figure functioning within a triangulation desire, however, Judy's role necessarily carries an element of versatility that threatens to destabilize the culturally sanctioned two as one unit of the heterosexual couple. On the one hand, Judy's decision to keep the "arrangements for another man" on the books and, moreover, to take this knowledge of George's secret "provisions" with her to the grave (so to speak) adds an additional layer of deception to their union. On the other hand, Judy essentially opens their marriage to unknown queer possibilities through this act of secret acceptance.

Unlike Day's housewife roles in other midcentury marriage comedies, such as *The Tunnel of Love* and *The Thrill of It All*, in which Day's characters brush aside suspicions of their

husbands' infidelity upon being bulldozed by motherhood in the final frames, Judy makes an informed choice to present her husband with an impression of forgiveness for an offense they both know he did not commit. As such, Judy's impression of forgiveness is actually an unspoken coming to terms with George's so-called hypochondria, which proves more crucial to George's masculine redemption than sex or his cold disposal of Arnold.

While conventional wisdom and midcentury marriage comedies certainly encouraged women to forgive and forget their husbands' actual or suspected offenses, Judy's quiet, even cheerful acceptance of George's hypochondria takes on special meaning in relation to Day's comedies with Hudson, with whom she also shared a warm, lasting off-screen friendship. Although it remains unclear as to whether or not Day was aware of Hudson's homosexuality during the time of filming, their exceptional on and off screen chemistry no doubt required a deep sense of safety and mutual understanding, which positively radiates in their final big screen embrace.

In bringing the stars' three extravagant, big screen romances to a definitive end, *Send Me No Flowers* ends on a more sentimental note than the male pregnancy gag and maternity ward shot gun wedding in *Pillow* and *Lover*, respectively. Just as Mr. Akins slips out the backdoor, George returns home and receives Judy's "forgiveness" for his affair with Dolores. Before they seal their reconciliation with a champagne toast and a kiss, however, their intimacy is interrupted by one last meddler in a long series of uninvited men at the door. While Judy fetches champagne, George answers the door to find Winnie Burr in full seduction mode, complete with a sleazy grin on his face and a bouquet of red roses in his arms.

In a last-ditch effort to redeem his impaired heteromascularity, George snatches the flowers and punches Burr in the face. Just as he slams the lid closed on his relationship with Arnold, George slams the door shut on Burr, who served as the sleazy apparition of George's future had his marriage crumbled, as well as the sleazy ghost of Hudson's playboy past—a haunting vision of the playboys' fates had they been successful in their efforts to resist settling down with Day in *Pillow* and *Lover*. In coldcocking the extramarital alternatives of man-love and bachelorhood, George presents Judy with the stolen bouquet as she returns to the living room with the champagne glasses.

Staying true to its title and theme song, however, the clichéd, romantic tokens of flowers and champagne in these final moments of *Send Me No Flowers* are laughably superfluous and dark; their perfunctory appearance hardly distracts from the lies, secrecy, multiple graves, a boxed second banana, and a bruised bachelor upon which the couple's capricious reunion rests. As a final ode to Doris Day and Rock Hudson's frisky resistance to romantic convention and sentimentality throughout their three films together, George pricks his finger on a rose thorn as he goes to embrace Judy. He overreacts to the pain of the prick, but this time, his hypochondria does not spoil the intimate moment. Rather, they both share a hearty last laugh at his ridiculous, ever-surprising feyness, the acknowledgement of which unites them in a renewed spirit of mutual understanding and desire.

Judy wraps her arms around George and they kiss on the staircase, where their recommitment and passion unfold in a befitting, liminal zone between the upstairs, where George suffers from nightmares and impotency, and the downstairs, where a lineup of oddball men pass through their domestic space like clockwork. Their sweet caresses, along with the swelling love

theme, give way to an aggressively banal image of George's medicine cabinet, which remains empty save for two toothbrushes, and a frenetic xylophone sound effect—the same noise that punctuated Judy's ransacking of the cabinet's contents the fateful night of George and Arnold's impromptu sleepover.

The sentimental tone and home-sweet-home iconography in the final sequence play into a conservative reading about how the power of marriage, heterosexual sex, and machismo effectively cure George's problematic hypochondria. There is, however, something exceptionally open-ended and willful about the couple's final reconciliation that sets it apart from other midcentury sex comedies. In addition to the lame, snicker-inducing image of the empty medicine cabinet used to signify George's reinvigorated manhood and marital bliss, the relative barrenness of the cabinet speaks to a far more radical twist of convention that is often overlooked in histories of the Day/Hudson/Randall comedies. In boldly eluding the familiar trappings of reproductive futurism informing the romantic comedy genre and the culture's foundational belief systems, the final reunion between the couple in *Send Me No Flowers* feels refreshingly voluntary and unfixed; for it is not a child that waits in the couple's future, but a trio of movable graves and the promise of another man, whose identity and role in relation to the couple remains wildly and wonderfully unknown.

Manning Up for Bromance in *I Love You, Man*

In leaving its “eternal triangle”⁵²⁹ in lovers’ limbo, *Send Me No Flowers* put the nail in the coffin of the sex comedy cycle, and also marked the beginning of a considerable lull in man love within the romantic comedy genre.⁵³⁰ It was not until the brom-com cycle began to take shape around 2005 that similarly intense, male homosocial relationships resurfaced as a prominent and branded fixture in the genre’s treatment of male revolt and redemption. While bromance certainly appeared to be the most popular and pleasurable element in this contemporary romantic comedy cycle, its happenings were mostly contained to the narrative middles within a grander heterosexual love plot. As Peter Forster summarizes, “[h]eteromascularity is the destination, and homosocial bonding is the journey, of the bromantic comedy.”⁵³¹

In 2009, however, *I Love You, Man* became the first and only mainstream brom-com to elevate the bromance from subplot to main plot while remaining firmly grounded in the romantic comedy genre—as opposed to slipping into the teen comedy, male buddy film, action/adventure comedy, etc. *I Love You, Man* sold itself as a breezy, feel-good love story between two average, likable bros of the moment. The film’s most widely distributed poster emphasized the charming candor of the title by depicting a straightforward, no-frills bromance between the ordinary-

⁵²⁹ Day, Hudson, and Randall are referred to as “the eternal triangle” in *Send Me No Flowers*’ Universal Pressbook.

⁵³⁰ Bromance did not make its way into other forms of film comedy until the cluster of animal comedies emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. While the animal comedies mostly focused on pack bonding, the male buddy cop movies of the 1980s, such as *Lethal Weapon*, explored the dynamics of a seemingly unlikely duo engaged in an action-packed quest. It was not until the teen comedies of the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as *American Pie*, that man love began to resurface as a significant accompaniment, and possible rival, to the (heterosexual) sex quests and romance.

⁵³¹ Peter Forster, “Rad Bromance (Or *I Love You, Man*, But We Won’t be Humping on *Humpday*),” in *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television*, ed. Michael DeAngelis (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 209.

looking, casually dressed bromancers, Paul Rudd and Jason Segel, standing against a stark white background. The film's title is printed in red font just above the figures; the words "I love you" rest on top of the word "man," which is printed in a much larger, bolder typeface. Printed below the figures reads the provocative tagline: "Are you man enough to say it?"

Despite the looming, visual dominance of the loaded term—"man"—hanging over them, with its intimidating quality echoed in the tagline below, both Rudd and Segel mug boyish, self-contented smirks directly at the camera, appearing delightfully unfazed by the text's efforts to question their statuses as men. For what the overall design may lack in pizzazz, this unremarkable poster captures what Ken Feil identifies as the "hallmark of the modern bromance: smiling self-awareness, amused acknowledgement, and tongue-in-cheek self-labeling."⁵³² Their looks of "amused acknowledgement" mitigate the image's subtle foreshadowing of tension and insecurity, including these tricky questions about manhood, as well as the sliver of white space wedged between them—a gap which most midcentury and millennial bromances would have filled with the smiling, or perhaps scowling, self-awareness of a woman.

Beyond the obvious, even hackneyed question of what it means to be "man enough," this poster also poses implicit questions of genre and ideology. What happens when bromance is shucked from the romantic comedy's narrative middle? What happens when the woman's role in this familiar triangulation of desire is diminished almost entirely? Despite these promises of naughtiness and the absence of women, *I Love You Man* is hardly a no holds barred celebration of male camaraderie. Nor do its characters, as Peter Travers reassured his *Rolling Stone*

⁵³² Ken Feil, "From *Batman* to *I Love You, Man*, Queer Taste, Vulgarly and the Bromance as Sensibility and Film Genre," in *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television*, ed. Michael DeAngelis (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 166.

readership, infringe on “*Brokeback Mountain* territory.”⁵³³ As a film bromance by design, *I Love You, Man* necessarily operates within well-established conventions of genre and culturally sanctioned parameters of heteronormative adulthood.

What is most compelling about *I Love You, Man*’s take on bromance is the way its discourse negotiates those parameters. *I Love You, Man*’s premise inverts those of earlier brom-coms and their sex comedy predecessors, whose narratives are burdened with dissolving their bonded male pairs and packs because such relationships are deemed incompatible with heterosexual coupledness—the primary means through which one still gains access to proper adulthood and normativity. *I Love You, Man* is tasked with procuring and sustaining a close homosocial relationship, which the film considers an invaluable ancillary to the hero’s heterosexual relationship and the breadwinner role to which he has already subscribed. To be clear, *I Love You, Man*’s bromance is more than an escape from or meditation on manhood, and it is more than a character shake-up. In *I Love You, Man*, bromance is a socially prescribed lifestyle change. And like any lifestyle change, bromance takes learning, practice, and commitment.

In *I Love You, Man*, bromance thus becomes a labor of love for the hero, but it is labor all the same. Granted, male homosocial bonding has never been an effortless endeavor. Even when the rules of bromance remain unspoken, as in the sex comedies, the partakers must always (un)consciously work to protect their intimacies from the influences of women, as well as from slipping into the at once dreadful and enticing realm of the homoerotic.⁵³⁴ In both the sex

⁵³³ Peter Travers. “True Bromance,” *Rolling Stone*, April 2, 2009, p. 92. *I Love You, Man* File, Herrick.

⁵³⁴ Meyer, for instance, speaks about the “understanding of homosexuality as a site of both anxiety and fascination for the dominant culture,” in *Outlaw Representation*, 17.

comedy and brom-com cycles, the female love interest—regardless of her awareness or intention—already provides a reliable distraction and symbolic protection from such slippage.

In taking advantage of all the liberating and self-validating possibilities post-closet discourse offers straight, urban, upwardly mobile white men in the twenty-first century, *I Love You, Man* takes bromance to a level of expressiveness and sustainability that demands conscious regulation beyond the slowly weakening symbolic powers of the post-feminist brom-com heroine. In relying less on the two cycles' familiar precautionary measures, including connotation, fastidiously managed star personas, and even the protective mesh of the narrative middle, the bromance in *I Love You, Man* imparts both self-imposed and socially determined rules and responsibilities—the very stuff of heterosexual relationships from which both midcentury and millennial bromances typically offer a sense of escape.

Whereas the dating rules straight men have conventionally followed within the two cycles' involved securing sex from women but eschewing commitment or emotional attachment, the rules of bromance aim to protect an emotional connection from the perceived damages of sex, desire, or even suspicions thereof. In treating the bromance as an intimate labor with definitive rules, *I Love You Man* toys with the “‘just friends’ to lovers” progression that has dominated popular relationship discourse for decades, and achieved its most memorable expression in the 1989 rom-com, *When Harry Met Sally*.⁵³⁵

According to DeAngelis, this progression has become “such a natural ‘given’ in culture that its absence is seen as either a mark of failure (‘What prevented the couple from taking it to

⁵³⁵ DeAngelis, “Introduction,” 2.

the ‘next level’?) or the cause for sorrow or regret (‘If only it had happened’).”⁵³⁶ Since bromance is predicated on the disavowal of homoerotic desire—or at the very least, an understanding that neither party will act on such desires—*I Love You, Man* manipulates this friends-to-lovers progression by replacing sexual consummation with the ceremonious conferring and performing of the “best man” role. In doing so, *I Love You, Man* assimilates the bromance into a heterosexual life narrative and, by extension, into the good life fantasy of normativity.

Let’s Make Friends

It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that the film’s original, working title, “Let’s Make Friends,” eventually evolved into “I Love You, Man” before its release in 2009.⁵³⁷ By that time, Judd Apatow had already become known as “the king of such sublimated man-on-man affairs”; romantic comedies without female leads had become “Hollywood business as usual”;⁵³⁸ and some critics were already declaring that the brom-com had “overstayed its welcome.”⁵³⁹ In riding the momentum of the brom-com cycle’s rapid rise to over-saturation, *I Love You, Man* marketed itself as something of a long-awaited, feature-length tribute to the most pleasurable, heartfelt aspects of Apatovian comedy: the bromantic narrative middles. Apatow’s influence, no doubt, seemed obvious from *I Love You, Man*’s title, leading bros, premise, and marketing materials

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

⁵³⁷ Although there is no evidence to prove a connection, it’s possible that the working title, “Let’s Make Friends,” is a play on *Let’s Make Love*, a 1960 George Cukor sex comedy starring Marilyn Monroe and Tony Randall.

⁵³⁸ Manohla Dargis, “Best Man Wanted. Must Be Rush Fan,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2009, *I Love You Man* File, Herrick.

⁵³⁹ One critic, for instance, noted: “Just as we thought the ‘bromantic comedy’ had overstayed its welcome, the genre reaches its highest point with *I Love You, Man*.” Robert Wilonsky. “Eternal Flame: Not Even Brody Jenner Could Extinguish this Bromance,” *Village Voice*, March 18-24, 2009, *I Love You Man* File, Herrick. Another critic noted: “Actually the studio nearly called this one Bromance, but don’t let that deter you.” Mickey Rapkin, “*I Love You, Man*,” *GQ*, March, 2009, *I Love You Man* File, Herrick.

alone. As *New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis put it in the most colorful, brom-com terms:

“[Apatow’s] DNA is all over this bromance.”⁵⁴⁰

Critics and audiences alike, however, were surprised to learn that the so-called “father of bromance” took no (official) part in the creation or production of this hyped up, momentous ode to man-love.⁵⁴¹ The film was directed and co-written by John Hamburg, who had previously worked with Apatow on his short-lived television series, *Undeclared* (2001-2003), and *I Love You, Man*’s original screenplay (written by Larry Levin) had actually been completed eleven years prior to the film’s release—several years before the brom-com cycle and the Apatovian empire had been established.⁵⁴² Given Apatow’s monopoly on twenty-first century film bromance, his absence is more impactful than his influence in *I Love You, Man*. According to the overwhelming, and generally favorable critical consensus, the most remarkable aspect about *I Love You, Man* is its genuine optimism.⁵⁴³

Indeed, as *Newsweek* critic Jennie Yabroff noted in her 2009 reflection piece on the films of Judd Apatow, “Dark, with Almost No Sugar,” the famed director’s brom-coms “have less in common with that of *I Love You, Man* than they do with *Scenes from a Marriage*”; Yabroff adds, “take away the sitcom-set colors, the soft-rock soundtracks, and the fart jokes, and you’re left with a vision of loneliness, disappointment, and existential despair.”⁵⁴⁴ While *I Love You, Man* certainly retains the familiar aesthetics and body-based humor, as well as the Apatow-esque

⁵⁴⁰ Dargis, “Best Man Wanted.”

⁵⁴¹ Jennie Yabroff, “Dark, with Almost No Sugar,” *Newsweek*, July 27, 2009, Judd Apatow File, Herrick.

⁵⁴² Addie Morfoot, “‘Man’ Love at Preem,” *Variety*, March 10, 2009, *I Love You Man* File, Herrick.

⁵⁴³ Most popular press reviewers agreed that *I Love You, Man* was “sweeter and less vulgar” than Apatow’s body of work. John Powers, “Odd Couples,” *Vogue*, March 2009, *I Love You Man* File, Herrick.

⁵⁴⁴ Yabroff, “Dark, with Almost No Sugar.”

complaints about the expectations and disappointments underpinning contemporary intimate culture, the film unburdens itself from the heavy loads of Apatow's vexed fixation on 'family values' and his misanthropic worldview. As the previous analyses of *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and *Knocked Up* suggest, this Apatow-brand baggage undermines the brom-coms' more pleasurable pulls towards non-normative modes of adulthood and intimate relationships.

Ironically, Apatow's trademark, toxic cynicism and white male rage is most memorably embodied by the adorably handsome and all-around nice guy Paul Rudd, who was known for his "non-threatening masculinity"⁵⁴⁵ long before he became "Apatow's better-looking alter ego."⁵⁴⁶ Similar to the way *I Love You, Man* transfers bromance from subplot to main plot, the film also transfers the quirks Rudd became known for in his second banana roles in the Apatovian comedies to his leading role as Peter Klaven in *I Love You, Man*. By the time Rudd began his publicity rounds for *I Love You, Man*, the actor consciously put a post-closet spin on both the dreamy and dark aspects of his star persona. In marketing himself and the film through an appropriation of post-closet queerness, Rudd gushed freely about his gay-friendly personality and worldview: "I love straight guys that seem gay. I'm a little like that," he told one interviewer.⁵⁴⁷ In playing off of the many pleasures afforded by Rudd's complex stardom, Peter Klaven's character reads as a self-consciously constructed and performed caricature of Rudd's far-reaching appeal at the height of his film career.

⁵⁴⁵ In her shrewd take on Rudd's widely recognized sweeter side, Dargis identifies Rudd as "the ultimate in non-threatening masculinity," adding, "[he is] the male equivalent to one of those plush animals girls and even some women like to keep piled high on their beds." Dargis, "Best Man Wanted."

⁵⁴⁶ Wilonsky, "Eternal Flame."

⁵⁴⁷ Joel Stein, "Everybody's Buddy: Trolling For Friends With Leading Nice Guy Paul Rudd," *Time*, March 23, 2009, Paul Rudd File, Herrick.

Considering Rudd's all-encompassing dreaminess, whether as a queer/straight heartthrob, a guy's guy, or a gay chicken champion, *I Love You, Man*'s central premise seemed entirely fitting with his star persona and, at the same time, downright preposterous.⁵⁴⁸ Similar to the way *Send Me No Flowers*, invited audiences to consider Rock Hudson—the era's epitome of robust masculinity—as sickly, impotent, mentally unstable, and possibly queer, *I Love You, Man* is propelled by the absurd notion that Paul Rudd—"Hollywood's most likable leading bro"—managed to get through life without any male friends.⁵⁴⁹ As a post-closet text, this aspect of the hero's personality seemed much more peculiar to contemporary audiences than anything having to do with his questionable heterosexuality or female friendliness, both of which played much more directly to Rudd's star persona.

While most reviewers were generous in their suspension of disbelief regarding his characters' lack of friends, there was a mean-spirited streak in the way this character's predictably suspect heteromascularity was discussed in the popular press. Many reviews, for instance, echoed this blurb from *G.Q.* magazine:

Paul Rudd was tasked with a ruthlessly thankless role in 2009: *I Love You, Man*'s Peter Klaven—a character so pathetic, so emasculated, he can't find a best man for his own

⁵⁴⁸ Most popular critics dwell on the actor's undeniable appeal for straight women, but Rudd also has men under his adorable, non-threatening spell. In addition to attracting a gay fan base following his role in *Object of My Affection*, Rudd earned the effusively expressed admiration and devotion among straight male audiences. His co-star, Jason Segel, for instance, made his love and respect for the actor known in *I Love You, Man*'s official press book: "I'm heterosexual through and through, but I gotta tell you, that guy is dreamy," he gushes. "*I Love You, Man*," Dreamworks Press Kit, p. 6, *I Love You Man* File, Herrick. By the time of *I Love You, Man*'s release, Rudd had appeared in several popular brom-coms, including *Anchorman*, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Knocked Up*, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, and *Role Models*. In 2008, he also hosted a particularly contentious episode of *Saturday Night Live*, which consisted mostly of gay jokes and gay chicken stunts between Rudd and other male cast members, including his *I Love You, Man* co-star, Andy Samberg.

⁵⁴⁹ *Variety*'s review, for instance, derided the premise as "deeply lame," and noted: "It's rare that a film features an operating principle less compelling or credible than this." Todd McCarthy, "*I Love You, Man*," *Variety*, March 16, 2009, *I Love You Man* File, Herrick.

wedding. A man who, by Rudd's own description, 'is the kind of guy who would jerk off to pictures of his own fiancée.'"⁵⁵⁰

In sex comedy terms, Peter is the kind of guy who "looks forward to getting his branches chopped off"; he has the good looks of a playboy, the makings of a good breadwinner, but the awkward, unconvincing heteromascularity of a second banana.⁵⁵¹ Out of the brom-com's playbook of leading masculinities, Peter Klaven's character shares the most overlap with Andy from *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*; like Andy, Peter is a "painstakingly responsible fellow" doomed by a shocking, but decidedly non-sexual form of inexperience and, worst of all, a suspicious "respectfulness" of women.⁵⁵²

As the above *G.Q.* quotation intimates, then, Peter's heteromascularity is routinely called into question both within and beyond the film text because he is so terribly friendly, adorably awkward, overly eager to please, and worst of all, much too excited to marry his fiancée, Zooey (Rashida Jones). In contrast to Rudd's second banana roles in Apatow's body of work, *I Love You, Man*'s Peter Klaven is not consumed by bitter self-hatred, nor is he resentful of monogamy, adult responsibility, or the women who symbolize these modes of ostensible entrapment. In fact, Peter is so genuinely fulfilled by providing for and enjoying the company of Zooey, that it never even occurs to him that there might be something more to the good life than work and date nights at home watching chick flicks. It is precisely Peter's genuine love, respect, and desire for a

⁵⁵⁰ "Men of the Year," *G.Q.*, December, 2009, Paul Rudd File, Herrick.

⁵⁵¹ In response to Hudson's woodland themed anti-marriage rant in *Pillow Talk* (see page 153), his second banana, played by Tony Randall, suggests that "with the right woman" one looks forward to getting one's "branches chopped off."

⁵⁵² David Edelstein, "An Affair to Remember," *New York*, March 23, 2009, *I Love You Man* File, Herrick.

woman, and his enjoyment of women's culture, that is fundamentally, even repugnantly incompatible with the brom-com's dominant discourse of acceptable, loutish heteromascularity.

On the one hand, Zoey has all the makings of a cool fiancée that a brom-com hero could ask for. *I Love You Man's* publicity materials attempted to distinguish Zoey as a cooler, more confident, and intelligent brom-com heroine than those in the Apatovian comedies.⁵⁵³ Unlike Apatow's model heroines, Trish from *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and Alison from *Knocked Up*, Zoey is unburdened by motherhood, superficial insecurities, and an exceedingly immature partner. She is a conventionally beautiful, small business owner with a close knit group of girlfriends; and she is as sunny and bright as the cheerful shade of yellow she wears in nearly every scene. Instead of pushing or waiting around for her partner to meet her standards or "care more," she supports his pursuit of interests and same-sex friendships outside of their union. In fact, she is the only character in the film who accepts Peter for the man he isn't.

On the other hand, these consolation prizes barely distract from Zoey's striking hollowness, as well as the diminishment of her stakes and purpose in what is ultimately Peter and Sydney's love story. Whereas most brom-com and sex comedy heroines serve—both knowingly and unknowingly—as a force or vessel for change within their individual narratives of masculine redemption, Zoey serves in a strict and minimal symbolic capacity. She is astounding in her blamelessness. She is a flawless face bearing bewildered albeit approving witness as Peter falls head over heels for Sydney, a suaver, more self-sufficient embodiment of Cross' millennial boy-man, who remains the heart and soul of the brom-com cycle, and the popular culture at large.

⁵⁵³ John Hamburg is quoted in the film's press kit as saying: "It was important to me that Zoey not just be the girlfriend and react to the funny guys around her but that she be able to bring the role her own style of humor and point of view." "*I Love You, Man*," Dreamworks Press Kit, p. 8.

Zoey smiles and nods while Peter navigates what it means to be “man enough” for a privileged, white, straight man inhabiting an absurdly homogenous vision of Los Angeles in 2009. With its generic inversions, playful interrogations of sexual categories and markers of maturity, and its optimistic attempts to not only recognize, but also compensate its male characters for what’s missing from the heterosexual romance, *I Love You, Man* projects endearing originality as its heroes fumble for answers to these old, maddening questions of what it means to be a man, a couple, and an adult. *I Love You, Man*’s seemingly fresh take on the art and meaning of twenty-first century manliness, however, becomes less hopeful when situated in relation to the sex comedies’ figurations of male revolt and redemption.

Rather than marking a teleological endpoint in the discourse on male homosocial desire in the romantic comedy genre, *I Love You, Man* stands as a uniquely expressive installment in an ongoing struggle between patriarchal power, our intimate worlds, and the dominant cultural fantasy of the good life, which remains stubbornly attached to the postwar breadwinner ethic. Through its nervous, exalted bromance, *I Love You, Man* appropriates queerness to laugh and love around the enduring, often harmful attachments to these expectations, and to assuage men’s fears of failing to live up to them. For all its bromantic idealism and boundary pushing, however, *I Love You, Man* stakes itself on the same slippery slope as the sex comedies, where all perceived failures of masculinity spill into the same muck of homophobia and misogyny. In the tricky case of *I Love You, Man*, the only thing more shameful than being a homosexual in 2009, is being a straight man who prefers the company of women over men.

Lock That Tongue Down

I Love You, Man begins with the sun setting in downtown Los Angeles. Although the film power-washes its “politics of setting” by presenting Los Angeles as a city naturally inhabited almost exclusively by rich white people, the city nonetheless serves as a steady, symbolic force in the hero’s negotiations of masculinity.⁵⁵⁴ These politics of setting are most pronounced in Peter’s career as a real estate agent; in order to develop and sell high end Los Angeles real estate, Peter must also learn how to develop and sell himself as a certain kind of man to other upwardly mobile white men. He begins, however, by selling himself as husband material.

The first scene features Peter showing Zooley around an empty, seedy parking lot on the outskirts of downtown. Before getting down on one knee and presenting her with a diamond ring, Peter invites Zooley to visualize his plans to transform the empty space into a residential and commercial development property, which includes a space for Zooley and her girlfriends to open a second location for their unspecified retail business. Peter then segues his proposal for the development property into a proposal for marriage, which he qualifies with the troubling line: “I know it’s only been eight months.” *I Love You, Man* thus opens with a most enthusiastic, self-willed ‘chopping of the branches,’ so to speak. The film immediately presents the kind of grand, romantic gestures and pronounced commitment to monogamy and breadwinning that the sex comedies, and most millennial brom-coms, purposefully avoid until the final frames, when resistance and alternatives to proper adulthood are no longer sustainable.

⁵⁵⁴ See Davis’ analysis of *Y tu mama tambien* for deeper discussion of the politics of setting in the film bromance. Nick Davis, “I Love You, *Hombre: Y tu mama tambien* as Border-Crossing Bromance,” in *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television*, ed. Michael DeAngelis (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 127-128.

Before Zooley responds to Peter's dual proposal of marriage and upward mobility, the scene cuts suddenly to the newly engaged couple in the car, where Zooley is sharing the news with her two closest girlfriends and co-business owners, Denise (Jaime Pressly) and Hailey (Sarah Burns) via speakerphone. The couple's shared, post-proposal bliss, however, lasts only a few brief moments before Peter begins to show signs of displeasure. He appears annoyed, for instance, when Zooley tries to make out with him while he's driving, and when she shares the engagement news with her girlfriends, the joy of the situation gives way to extreme awkwardness.

Unaware that they are on speaker phone, Denise and Hailey begin rehashing the good, bad, and ugly details of important milestones in Peter and Zooley's sex life. Peter listens with horror as the girls gush over how often he performs oral sex on Zooley—"Lock that tongue down, girl," urges Hailey. Within the first few minutes of the film, then, *I Love You, Man* mystifies its conservative moral center with dirty talk and, more importantly, insists on Peter's heterosexuality in the most proper (i.e. the proposal), and vulgar of terms (i.e. performing cunnilingus "six times a week"). To borrow the language from *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, Peter not only "puts the pussy on a pedestal," he also reads as a bit of a 'pussy' himself within and beyond the film text. This insistence on Peter's ebullient oral pleasure-giving thus preemptively mitigates the film's relentless assaults on his heterosexuality.

In addition to safeguarding Peter's precarious heterosexuality, the tone and content of the girls' conference call speaks to *I Love You, Man's* treatment of the post-feminist double address, as well as to the broader trend of downplaying the importance of sex in the romantic comedy genre. These women, for instance, are considerably more vulgar and sex positive than their

brom-com counterparts (“That’s the place where you guys fucked for the first time, right?” “You had your period in Santa Barbara and you wanted to wait. God, you’re so old fashioned!”). And yet, despite *I Love You, Man*’s attempts to distinguish its female characters from the more rigid and reserved Apatovian heroines, and to render sexual pleasure equally accessible and important to men and women, there are no strongly suggested or actual sex scenes whatsoever in *I Love You, Man*. In elevating bromance, which is necessarily underwritten by an unspoken promise of asexuality, to main plot material, visual representations of sex of any kind predictably fall by the wayside.

For instance, instead of living up to the hot sex life her girlfriends described on speaker phone, Zooney spends the evening of her engagement on the phone with other friends. The establishing interior shot of Peter and Zooney’s magazine-worthy domestic space features a collection of framed photographs, where a single photograph of Peter and Zooney sits among multiple photographs of Zooney and her girlfriends. As a visual motif repeated within various domestic spaces in *I Love You, Man*, the film treats framed photographs as reliable evidence of the characters’ flaws and priorities. While this brief, post-engagement scene unfolds, Zooney comes to realize what the displayed photographs already make clear to the viewer: Peter is not only surrounded by women, he also has no frame-worthy, same-sex friendships. After Zooney apologizes for hogging the phone, Peter casually confirms that there are no “call right away” kind of guys in his life. Zooney responds with her signature bewildered smile and mindless nod.

A Girlfriend Guy

While Zooney and the viewer have already been cued in as to what is off about Peter’s manhood, he is not made explicitly aware of the problem until a celebratory dinner at his parents’

house turns into an awkward and hostile inquisition about his lack of male friends. Unlike Zoey, who has no family or past to speak of—an omission made all the more dismaying by the fact that she is the only non-white character in the main cast, not to mention the only non-white heroine in the brom-com cycle all together—Peter shares a close relationship to his mother (Jane Curtin), and strained but loving relationships with his father (J.K. Simmons) and openly gay brother, Robbie (Andy Samberg), who is eight years his junior. Just as in the sex comedies, where a man who was overly fond of his mother risked being labeled a homosexual, Peter’s closeness with his mother also plays into the suspicions surrounding his sexuality.⁵⁵⁵

This mother-son relationship, however, is rendered even more troubling for Peter when considered in relation to the extremely close friendship between his father and gay brother. Indeed, Robbie’s character is figured as the crowning achievement in the brom-com cycle’s post-closet discourse—even more so than the main bromantic relationship between Peter and Sydney. On the one hand, Robbie’s character reads as a far more progressive portrayal of gayness than token gay characters in earlier brom-coms, such as Todd from *Wedding Crashers*, whose character served as a disposable catchall for the film’s homophobic humor, and as a repulsive guarantor of the two lead characters’ heterosexuality. On the other hand, *I Love You, Man*’s post-closet treatment of Robbie falls into a similar trap as other “post” discourses; post-feminist discourses, for example, obfuscate systemic forms of sexism through glossy narratives of choice, while “post-racial” discourses often operate under a troubled pretense of ‘color-blindness,’ which white-washes racial difference and mystifies white privilege.

⁵⁵⁵ See, for example, Cohan’s reading of Rex Stetson’s mother fixation in *Pillow Talk*, in *Masked Men*, 300.

Indeed, Robbie's homosexuality was purposely downplayed within the film and publicity materials, which instead emphasized his effortless, heteromasculine 'cool' factor; Robbie works out, drinks beer, follows sports, speaks the vulgar tongue of the brom-com, and gets along with dudes of all sorts. As *I Love You, Man's* director, John Hamburg, confirms, Robbie "isn't defined by the fact that he's gay. . .In fact, it's almost inconsequential."⁵⁵⁶ Just as evidence of Peter's heterosexual identity is communicated most emphatically through other characters' descriptions and remarks (e.g. "Lock that tongue down, girl!"), so too is Robbie's "inconsequential" homosexuality.

During this fateful family dinner, for instance, the easy-going patriarch, Oz, jokingly remarks that Robbie always managed to form male friendships, even though "he probably just wanted to suck their dicks." Peter, on the other hand, had always been "a girlfriend guy," whose serial heterosexual monogamy left him with little time, energy, or desire to maintain close same-sex friendships. Indeed, although Andy Samberg, who identifies as straight, had become known for his routine gay-chicken shenanigans while working as a cast member on *Saturday Night Live*, Samberg played Robbie's character "straight" in order to make Peter's emasculated yet ebullient heterosexuality seem even more shameful and problematic.⁵⁵⁷ In addition to Robbie's dude-friendly disposition and smug fluency in bro culture, his close relationship to an otherwise traditional father figure is an important fixture in *I Love You, Man's* self-congratulatory post-

⁵⁵⁶ "I Love You, Man," Dreamworks Press Kit, p. 9.

⁵⁵⁷ *Out* magazine featured Andy Samberg on its cover in February, 2009. In the profile piece, Samberg's performance as a gay character in *I Love You, Man* was described as "straight." Joshua David Stein, "Andy Samberg Breaks Caricature," *Out*, February 15, 2009, <http://www.out.com/entertainment/2009/02/15/andy-samberg-breaks-caricature>

closet liberalism; Oz considers Robbie one of his two best friends, and Robbie considers Oz an “honorary homo”—an accolade that fills him with pride and appreciation.

In building on the “straight panic” anxieties Becker analyzes in relation to nineties discourses of multiculturalism, *I Love You, Man* taps into a broader cultural jealousy of homosexuality that emerged when privileged categories of white, straight masculinity became increasingly “maligned” and insufficiently edgy.⁵⁵⁸ Peter appears jealous of his father’s unabashed favoritism towards Robbie, as well as Robbie’s masculine coolness and the ease with which he befriends men. Peter is also made to feel insecure about his manhood upon learning that his father has a second best friend, Hank, a former coworker with whom he has maintained close and constant ties for over thirty years. In addition to serving as an unexpected marker of post-closet gay-friendliness, then, Oz also appears to have defied the fate of most sex comedy and brom-com heroes, whose homosocial bonds were either severed or significantly weakened as the heroes came to accept similarly rigid versions of adulthood.

Peter, then, is not only positioned as the pathetic victim of post-closet manipulations of gender norms and sexual categories, but his character is also made to suffer from the brom-com cycle’s “perverse spirit of gender egalitarianism.”⁵⁵⁹ Much like *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*’s treatment of Andy, Peter is subjected to the kinds of routine, mean-spirited scrutinization most familiar to the sex comedies’ proto-feminist career women and the post-feminist (b)rom-com heroines, who were forced to defend their happiness despite not subscribing to their respective eras’ gender ideals.

⁵⁵⁸ Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, 4.

⁵⁵⁹ Negra, “Where the Boys Are.”

I Love You, Man thus presents its feminized hero with a similarly vexing, albeit ultimately more manageable and rewarding version of the “having it all” myth underpinning post-feminist discourse. In addition to selling multimillion dollar celebrity homes, developing his own commercial real estate, and performing as a devoted husband to his knock-out fiancée, the hero must also learn the codes and value of bromance before he can consider himself worthy of the film poster’s dubious category: ‘man enough.’ For according to *I Love You, Man*’s post-closet worldview, it is more desirable to be an actual or an “honorary homo” than a “girlfriend guy,”—or, worst of all, a girlfriend guy who is mistaken for a gay guy.

A Friendless Guy

The dinner table attacks leave Peter feeling insecure in his manhood to the point of paranoia. In harkening back to Andy’s and Cathy’s hallucinatory episodes once they became painfully aware of their virginal states in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and *That Touch of Mink*, respectively, Peter starts seeing white men enjoying each other’s company all over town. As he drives to work, Peter stares at men jogging together in the park, and at construction workers yukking it up in the streets. While stopped at a red light, he fixes his gaze upon a group of white, suited up professionals in a carpool. When the men register his gaze, Peter waves awkwardly; the carpool, however, reacts to his innocuous gesture as if it were an unwelcome sexual advance of sorts, and Peter drives away feeling ashamed.

The film continues to portray Peter as a hopelessly and shamefully effeminate man in numerous contexts throughout his daily routine. At his downtown office, where the gender politics have more in common with the fifties and sixties than the twenty-first century, Peter seeks out the company of the secretaries, all of whom are female, rather than camaraderie with

the male realtors in the firm. In the break room, Peter puts on the charm and entertains the women with tales of his romantic proposal and wedding plans while they shower him with enthusiastic appreciation and praise; for Peter, these women are the only meaningful source of confidence and external validation outside of Zooney's cautiously approving nods.

His effortless rapport with the secretaries clashes with his forced and uncomfortable working relationship with his off-putting and self-exploitative coworker and competitor, Tevin (Rob Huebel), who wrestles with Peter against his will, forces him to view misogynistic pornography in the workplace, and also creates a hostile work environment for the female secretaries. Although Tevin's repulsive misogyny and egoism temporarily offsets Peter's troubling effeminacy, Peter's homosocial failures become even more pronounced when he is unable to establish a decent rapport with his comparatively well-adjusted fencing buddies in the locker room, where male camaraderie is thought to come naturally.

These awkward, unsuccessful attempts to bond with other men, however, are nowhere near as humiliating or impactful as Peter's surprise appearance at Zooney's girls' night in, which the film treats, both stylistically and narratively, as a crucial turning point in Peter's failed heteromascularity. When Peter returns home from fencing practice, he spies on Zooney and her entourage of white, dolled-up girlfriends, who are engaged in a spirited conversation about flawed men—one of the only talking points (other than shopping or motherhood) approved by the post-feminist double address. Peter listens intently as Denise complains about her husband Barry, who prioritizes the company of his male friends over their marriage. Denise's complaints about Barry invigorate Peter with a sense of smug self-assurance; he decides to show off his attentive, female-friendly qualities, and returns to the kitchen to prepare root-beer floats

(garnished with pirouette cookies for an extra special touch) as a surprise offering for the ladies. He immediately regrets his efforts, however, when he overhears the group talking about his lack of friends, his closeness with his mother, the unimaginable horror of Zooney walking down the aisle with an “uneven” wedding party or, worst of all, marrying a “clingy” guy.

Though Peter clearly prefers the company of women to that of men, it becomes brutally apparent that the circle of women in the living room is not a safe space for him to express his genuine, effeminate self. Although Zooney politely defends Peter from her girlfriends’ suspicions, Peter becomes overwhelmed with embarrassment upon overhearing their concerns, and begins to turn away from the door. When Zooney calls out to him, the film breaks from its established shot-countershot editing pattern and adopts Peter’s subjective and slightly distorted point of view. As Peter reluctantly enters the room with the tray full of special treats, the viewer is invited to share in Peter’s abject humiliation. Zooney and the girls clap nervously, as if they would for a small child who has just sneaked out of bed, as Peter makes his tragically awkward approach into the living room.

Despite the teasing and rejection he receives from his family members and other men, Peter is only able to register the gravity of his heteromasculine failures after learning that Zooney’s girlfriends disapprove of his “girlfriend guy” qualities. When the threat of losing the symbolic protection of women is made clear in the most embarrassing of ways, Peter returns to the kitchen, and mutters to himself, “I gotta get some fucking friends.” Although the viewer is encouraged to sympathize with Peter’s dejected state, *I Love You, Man* resists the sex comedy and brom-com cycles’ typical blaming strategies. Even more so than Judy’s bubbly and exceptionally forgiving character in *Send Me No Flowers*, for instance, Zooney is too devoted, too

good, and too powerless to serve as a vessel for blame and resentment. Moreover, bromance is posited as a far less punitive narrative pressure than those typically forced upon cycles' heroes, including marriage, fatherhood, and breadwinning.

You Know How I Know You're Still Gay?

Though *I Love You Man*'s narrative goal is generous and optimistic in spirit, Peter's search for man love is primarily fueled and structured according to an implicit fear of being mistaken for not only a gay man but an *effeminate* gay man. This fear ultimately undermines the film's self-important, post-closet lampooning of homophobia, as well as its sentimental attachment to the rituals and rewards of male homosocial bonding. Despite this essential fear shared by all brom-com and sex-comedy heroes, Peter nevertheless seeks out the advice of a gay man before beginning his search. As the unexpected authority on all things "manly" Robbie proudly serves as Peter's mentor in his search for a best man.

Robbie works as a personal trainer at an upscale fitness center, which appears inhabited almost exclusively by fit white men looking to bulk up, and looking at one another. Dressed in a sweater vest and trousers, Peter appears laughably out of place in this testosterone factory full of strong, sweaty muscle boys. Sensing Peter's obvious cluelessness regarding the codes of male homosocial bonding rituals and environments, Robbie offers his brother the following reassurance: "the good news is not only do I know men, but straight guys are my speciality. I get bored pursuing gays. I like to give myself more of a challenge." He then works his magic on an attractive young man struggling to complete his last rep of bench presses, which leads to an intensely flirtatious moment between them. Robbie then turns to Peter and gloats, "Did you see that wedding ring? Straight as an arrow."

I Love You, Man both depends on and questions the notion that symbols such as wedding rings, or even an actual wedding ceremony between a man and a woman, are uncontested, visible evidence of one's heterosexuality. This uncertainty was, of course, made all the more mainstream in 2009, after same-sex marriage had been legalized and subsequently repealed in California in 2008, and became reinvigorated as a subject of national debate, with several states legalizing same-sex unions in 2009. While this uncertainty works in Robbie's (sexual) favor, the same confusion only brings Peter a great deal of frustration and embarrassment, leaving him snagged in a post-closet, catch-22. On the one hand, his trouble making platonic male friends is rooted in a deep seated fear of being 'mistaken' for a predatory or effeminate homosexual, or at least, a failed heterosexual. On the other hand, Peter must form these male friendships in order to ward off suspicions of his possible homosexual tendencies.

Sensing Peter's insecurity, Robbie lays out some ground rules, which intentionally mock those from the romantic comedy genre's heterosexual romances. "You're gonna have to be aggressive about this, man. Use the Internet to meet guys. Get Mom to fix you up. I mean, if you see a cool-looking guy, strike up a conversation and ask him on a man-date," he says. According to Robbie, a "man-date" involves "casual lunch or after-work drinks [but] no dinner and no movies. You're not taking these boys to see *The Devil Wears Prada*." Peter's eyes practically roll back into his head at the mention of this popular chick flick. He sighs with pleasure, "God, I love that movie," as Robbie rolls his eyes in disappointment.

Between the pirouettes, the ebullient oral pleasure giving, and the *Devil Wears Prada* worship, Peter is starting to read as the sweater-vest wearing embodiment of all the punchlines to the memorable "you know how I know you're gay" exchange between Rudd and Seth Rogen in

The 40-Year-Old Virgin, where “gay” is used as a catchall term for anything determined vaguely feminine or uncool by the boy-man taste culture. In a broader thematic, as well as ideological sense, this catchphrase serves as a banner beneath which the brom-com cycle stages all of its narratives of intimacy, revolt, and redemption.

Man Date Disasters

I Love You, Man takes the punchline to this running “you know how I know you’re gay” exchange to a much naughtier and physical level than matters of taste. Predictably, Peter’s worst fear of being mistaken for a gay man is eventually realized when he starts putting Robbie’s man-dating advice into practice. A montage dedicated to Peter’s man-dates with a motley crew of white men showcases his interactions range from the awkward (e.g. being duped by an eighty-nine year old man over the internet) to the downright grotesque. Things begin to take a foul turn, for instance, when Peter invites himself to a ‘guys’ only’ poker night hosted by Denise’s husband, Barry (Jon Favreau)—a wholly unlikable foil to Peter’s effeminate masculinity.

The film’s spirited mocking of Barry’s excessive, repugnant machismo is part and parcel of its post-closet and post-feminist discourse. Barry and Denise, for instance, share a toxic, borderline abusive relationship, where they verbally abuse one another as foreplay for their kinky make-up sex sessions. Denise bribes Barry with promises of “sex with the lights on” in exchange for allowing Peter to join the poker game. Much to Barry’s rage, Peter ends up unknowingly winning the poker tournament, and even wins their fierce face-off in a beer-guzzling contest. Moments after making the winning chug, however, Peter projectile vomits all over Barry’s face and chest. The camera lingers on Barry’s vomit splattered face as he screams profanities at Peter, who remains frozen with fear and remorse.

With the combination of Peter's underdog status and Barry's repellant personality, however, the viewer is encouraged to consider Peter's vomiting episode as more triumphant than humiliating. Barry is, in fact, the type of man gay-chicken proponents like Samberg have in mind when they defend their jokes in the popular press. When interviewed by *Out* magazine, for instance, Samberg defended his "gay face" film and television performances by insisting they actually mock homophobic audience members, specifically men: "dudes that are bros and super antigay are the ones who need to get it the worst. They're the ones we have the most fun fucking with."⁵⁶⁰ On the one hand, Barry's brand of brutish, knuckle-dragging masculinity ultimately renders Peter's effeminate, awkward nature more desirable by comparison. At the same time, however, Barry's character also serves as a powerful distraction from the film's more insidious and casual forms of misogyny and homophobia.

Like the brom-com cycle at large, *I Love You, Man* remains both ignorant and irreverent of the ways in which women and queer identifying audience members could possibly take offense with its characterizations, scenarios, and punchlines. Peter's poker night with Barry and friends, for instance, is cross cut with another man date that also "leaves a bad taste in his mouth," in every meaning of the phrase.⁵⁶¹ Though shocking in its gross-out factor, Peter's unintentionally vindictive vomit actually provides the lead-in for a far more grotesque man-dating disaster involving a gay man.

After much hesitation, Peter decides to break one of Robbie's man-dating rules when his mother sets him up for a dinner date with a friend's son. Doug, played by straight actor Thomas

⁵⁶⁰ Stein, "Andy Samberg Breaks Caricature."

⁵⁶¹ Feil, "From *Batman* to *I Love You, Man*," 179.

Lennon, is a mild-mannered fellow with a fairly wooden personality. He doesn't seem to mind Peter's conversational awkwardness and poorly executed jokes; and when crosscut with clips from Peter's night at Barry's, the two gentlemen seem to genuinely enjoy one another's company during their elegant dinner. At one point, they even bond over their shared appreciation for their waitress's hot behind. For Peter, Doug's apparent lust for the waitress replaces the wedding ring as the visible guarantor of Doug's heterosexual orientation.

After dinner, Peter expresses his appreciation to Doug: "You know, I've been out with so many jerks recently. It's nice to meet somebody I can have an actual conversation with." Doug agrees and extends an invitation for sushi dinner the following night, which Peter happily accepts. This amiable exchange at the valet stand is yet another playful jab at the clichéd rom-com formula and popular discourses of modern dating, as well as Peter's effeminate nature; the tongue-in-cheek remark, however, is followed up by the unexpected insertion of Doug's tongue into Peter's open mouth. When he realizes Peter is unreceptive to his passionate kiss, Doug pulls away for a moment before placing another peck on Peter's mouth, which remains agape with shock, even as Doug gets into his car and drives off.

Whereas Robbie purposefully targets men who he believes are "straight as an arrow," Doug genuinely mistakes Peter for a gay man. Although *I Love You, Man* eschews the cultural stereotype of the effeminate, flamboyant, or creepy gay male that tends to crop up in other brom-coms and neo-traditional romantic comedies, such as *Wedding Crashers* and *The Break-Up*

(2006), respectively, Robbie and Doug are the post-closet tokens around which the film dances with damaging, homophobic stereotypes.⁵⁶²

Robbie for instance, is a gay man who turns his nose up at other openly gay men (like Doug), who he claims are all “too easy.” Robbie’s conversion tactics and dismissive attitude towards gay men, along with Doug’s presumptuous, forceful kiss, are jokes that play into harmful, far-reaching stereotypes that reduce gay men to either indiscriminate sex maniacs or, at the very worst, sexual predators. Such stereotypes informed the “gay panic” defenses and discourses that became reprocessed in several high profile debates and incidents of the nineties, such Matthew Shepard’s murder trial in 1998, and the ongoing debates surrounding the U.S. military’s controversial “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy, which was not officially repealed until 2011.⁵⁶³

In featuring Doug’s heavy tonguing of Peter’s mouth—almost in its entirety—in the film’s theatrical trailer, the studio not only revealed *I Love You, Man*’s most sexually suggestive visual in the entire film, it also gave away its dirtiest joke and most reassuring moment. For all the post-closet liberalism promised by its bromantic premise, *I Love You, Man* still sold the familiar, lighsome homophobia that underpinned the sex comedies, the earlier brom-coms, as well as their most immediate teen comedy predecessors.⁵⁶⁴ Since Robbie is given the consolation

⁵⁶² Doug, for example, functions similarly to Todd (Keir O’Donnell) from *Wedding Crashers*, who sneaks into Jeremy’s (Vince Vaughan) bedroom while he is tied to the bedposts, and propositions him with a nude portrait and sexual advances. Todd genuinely believes Jeremy is a closeted gay man with feelings for him, even though he is well aware that Jeremy is sleeping with his sister.

⁵⁶³ For more on gay panic, see Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, 17-25.

⁵⁶⁴ The gay panic humor implied by the fateful kiss initially attracted criticism in the LGBT blogosphere upon the trailer’s release in 2008. See, for instance, the short think piece titled “*I Love You, Man* Trailer Officially Ends My One-Way Bromance with Paul Rudd,” written for *The Backlot*, an online venue devoted to gay male perspectives of Hollywood culture. Brian Juergens, “*I Love You, Man* Trailer Officially Ends My One-way Bromance with Paul Rudd,” *The Backlot*, December 16, 2008, <http://www.thebacklot.com/i-love-you-man-trailer-officially-ends-my-one-way-bromance-with-paul-rudd/12/2008/>

prize of coolness and the ability to pass as straight, Doug fulfills the role as the uncool, handsy gay man, whose primary function is one of reassurance. In addition to the extra-textual reassurance that these are two straight actors engaging in choreographed gay-chicken on the big screen, Doug serves to reassure the characters, as well as the audiences, that no matter how ‘gay’ the male leads or their relationship may seem, they are not, in fact, *that* gay—the kind of gay that is perverse and wrong. In the dismaying albeit all too familiar case of *I Love You, Man*, “*that* gay” means a gay man like Doug, who actually wants to have sex with and date other gay men.

Although the overall tone of the scene is one of gay panic and homophobia, Peter does not respond to Doug’s kiss with even the slightest hint of violence, anger, or contempt that one might expect from other heterosexual male characters in the film, such as Barry. Peter simply stands by and allows Doug to kiss him not once, but twice on the mouth, and does not make him feel ashamed or threatened in any way. After the initial shock of Doug’s aggressive tongue leaves Peter tongue-tied, so to speak, Peter’s delayed processing of the kiss suggests aftertastes of straight panic, guilt, and self-blame. In spinning the film’s casual homophobia with a touch of casual misogyny—more specifically, the ‘blame the victim’ ideology perpetuated by rape culture—Peter blames himself for breaking the rules of man-dating and giving Doug the wrong impression.

Peter admits his guilt and shame later that night when Zoey breaks their most intimate make-out session in the film to confront him about the bad taste in his mouth—“your mouth tastes like an ashtray,” she says. Peter reluctantly admits that he has been seeing other men in order to find a best man for their wedding. He explains, “My mom set me up with this guy, and he thought I was gay, and it was just. . .a whole misunderstanding.” Unlike Debbie in *Knocked*

Up, who considers her husband's secret fantasy baseball nights with the guys worse than cheating, Zooey reacts to the 'cheating' confession with forgiveness and understanding.

"I just want you to be happy and to stop kissing strange men," she tells him. All she asks, is that he wash the gay residue out of his mouth before kissing her again. In undermining whatever gay acceptance his passive, polite reaction to the kiss may have demonstrated, Peter admits that he's already brushed his teeth several times, but cannot wash away the taste—"I gotta go with chemicals on this. . . I might use Comet," he jokes. Though manifested as light-hearted, gross out humor, the insidious, homophobic notions of contagion, contamination and repulsion are thus not so easily rinsed away.⁵⁶⁵

Bro Meets Bro

While the barbaric masculinity of Barry and the trauma of being kissed by a gay man are almost bad enough to make Peter quit his man-hunt, everything changes during his first open house event at Lou Ferrigno's mansion, for which he has an exclusive listing. Best known for his starring role in the television series, *The Incredible Hulk* (1978-1982), Ferrigno's mansion is a treasure trove of homoerotic memorabilia. Numerous statues, works of art, and publicity photographs, most of which feature Ferrigno wearing nothing but bikini briefs, pay homage to his gargantuan, body-builder physique. For Peter, this hyper-masculine Ferrigno memorabilia takes on a symbolic, aspirational quality. In bankrolling his goals of marriage and business success, this is the house that will make Peter a real man; this is also the house where Peter will meet the man of his dreams.

⁵⁶⁵ Peter and Zooey's repulsed reaction to the icky physical and psychic residue of Doug's gay kiss recalls a scene in *American Pie*, where one bro becomes horrified and publicly humiliated after he accidentally drinks his friend's semen during a chaotic house party. See Greven, "Dude, Where's My Gender?," 18.

Pete first spots Sydney enjoying the snack table offerings at the open house. Sydney has a distinctive look about him. He is tall and gangly, with shaggy hair; he wears jeans and a wooly sports jacket over a couple of layered shirts. As a long time Apatow collaborator, Jason Segel approaches his role as Sydney as if were reprising a slightly more sophisticated and mature version of his character in *Knocked Up*, who played the part of Rogen's pseudo-intellectual, womanizing housemate in *Knocked Up*. This touch of endearing sophistication and zen Segel brings to the brom-com's usual brand of loutishness also recalls that of the sex comedy's playboy bachelors.

Like the playboy, Sydney is immature because he eschews a heterosexual marriage for headier interests, but he at least lives independently, subscribes to a white-collar profession of "investments," carries himself like an adult, and has a certain flare for reading people and social situations. A combination of the dapper playboy, Brad Allen (Rock Hudson), from *Pillow Talk* and the unlikable scoundrel, Winnie Burr (Hal March), from *Send Me No Flowers*, Sydney not only avoids marriage, but benefits from its failures; his modus operandi involves seducing rich divorcées, who he assumes are only looking for one night stands.

When Peter initiates polite small talk, Sydney impresses him with a spot-on reading of an arrogant jerk who feigns interest in buying the house to impress a first date. He also treats Peter to a play-by-play account of this guy's attempt to sneak a fart while his date wanders into another room—"I know my farts," says Sydney. Through gross-out humor, Sydney makes it clear to Peter, as well as to the viewer, that he is a guy's guy, despite his mannerly affect, as well as his enthusiastic appreciation for Peter's choice of "sun-dried tomato aioli" on the complimentary panini. This exchange thus marks the first time a heterosexual man has expressed appreciation

for Peter's effeminate qualities. After being taken with Sydney's honesty and touched by his kind remarks regarding his thoughtful refreshment spread, Peter casually suggests they exchange business cards.

Peter then visits Robbie at the gym for advice on how to make the next move. Peter tells him, "I'm really nervous about this one." Robbie says, tongue-in-cheek, "Cause you really like him." At this point, Robbie has eased into a slightly twisted version of the gay best friend role that helped straight women navigate torrid dating terrain in comedies like *Object of My Affection* and *My Best Friend's Wedding*. He urges Peter to call Sydney, but warns him not to have dinner unless he wants another "tongue-fucking at the valet stand." With the knowledge that his heteromascularity—this abstract, unstable asset upon which his personhood is largely valued and judged—hangs in the balance, the prospect of reaching out to Sydney over the phone sends Peter into a nervous tizzy of self-doubt and excitement.

After staring at Sydney's business card, Peter repeatedly picks up and puts down the phone as he rehearses his spiel to himself, displaying the same kind of new-love butterflies so familiar to the rom-com genre. As the first instance in a running gag of poorly constructed and executed jokes, nicknames, and impressions (which all end up sounding like a leprechaun), Peter ends up leaving Sydney a spectacularly awkward voicemail. Peter cringes as he confuses his own name with Sydney's name, and blurts out ridiculous, made-up slang words on the fly. The botched voicemail makes it uncomfortably clear that in addition to mastering the rules of bromance, Peter must also learn how to "brommunicate"—a term that refers to both a manner of

speaking, and of establishing a “uniquely masculine” means of connection beyond the comprehension of women.⁵⁶⁶

Unlike the sex comedy male pairings, men learning how to brommunicate with other men becomes particularly important in the brom-com, where men are portrayed as lovable, flawed underdogs and women are often too hollow and busy with “doing it all” to laugh, let alone make their own jokes. The loutish proponents of the modern bromance are thus most often valued—by one another, as well as by women—for their cool, profanity-laced wit more so than their looks, professional success, masculine feats of strength, or their sexual conquest with women. Indeed, as Corliss observes in his review of *Superbad*, the modern bromancers are, above all, “joke jocks.”⁵⁶⁷ Peter’s voicemail is a total failure of the kind of cool, “rudely clever” brommunication that normally comes so effortlessly to the joke jocks of the modern bromance.⁵⁶⁸ Much to Peter’s surprise, however, Sydney manages to overlook the nonsensical awkwardness, returns his call, and suggests they grab a drink in Venice Beach.

Breaking The Rules

The white-collar hustle and bustle characterizing Peter’s professional life in downtown LA predictably clashes with Sydney’s beach bum lifestyle in Venice Beach, which is considered one of the more laid back and self-contained neighborhoods of Los Angeles. Although they do not engage the neighborhood’s diverse, quirkier attractions and inhabitants, it is nonetheless fitting that Peter and Sydney’s bromance flourishes in this hedonistic part of town, because it imbues their bromance with an escapist, vacation-like vibe. Whereas Peter shows up to their first

⁵⁶⁶ Forster, “Rad Bromance,” 203.

⁵⁶⁷ Corliss, “*Superbad*.”

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

Venice Beach man-date dressed in a business suit and prepared to discuss real estate, Sydney sports his beach bum gear and immediately turns the conversation to the subjects of anal sex and fish tacos—both of which send Peter into a panic.

Considering it is, after all, their first (man)date, Peter is a little taken back when Sydney starts asking questions and making assumptions about his sex life with Zooey. With a little coaxing, however, Peter eventually admits his shameful disappointment in Zooey's unwillingness to perform oral sex.⁵⁶⁹ This revelation is made all the more humiliating and pathetic for the viewers, who are aware of Peter's generosity in the cunnilingus department. Sydney is, to say the least, outraged by this glaring omission. He then unintentionally heightens the sexual tension when he insists they order fish tacos for dinner. With the aftertaste of shame, fear, and self-blame still fresh in his mind and mouth after his first dinner man-date took a sloppy, gay turn, Peter hesitates before he decides to break the rules once again.

In keeping with its continuous lampooning of romantic comedy convention, however, Peter discovers that pre-existing rules never apply to the "right" one, who is always full of surprises. Needless to say, the two end up devouring three orders of fish tacos. Indeed, from the moment they bonded over Peter's carefully selected "rosemary flatbread paninis" at the open house, food becomes one of their favorite shared pleasures. During their many outings together, they stuff themselves with an assortment of special treats as if they're on vacation, or, as if they're trying to satisfy an overpowering, unrelenting hunger—the sense of something 'missing' that brought them together in the first place.

⁵⁶⁹ This sort of sexual frustration has become a minor trope uniting Rudd's most memorable brom-com performances (e.g. *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Knocked Up*), which plays into Rudd's tremendous appeal across barriers of gender and sexual orientation. His inability to get properly laid, by anyone, is part of his non-threatening, diffuse charm, and part of the more recent, generalized downplaying of sex that began in the neo-traditional, post-feminist romantic comedy cycle of the eighties and nineties.

In addition to enjoying a long dinner with Sydney without any unwanted tongue action afterwards, Peter also manages to binge drink with Sydney without throwing up in his face. Sydney, in a manner of speaking, is much easier for Peter to swallow than Barry and his other prospective male friends; when Peter's first man-date with Sydney comes to an end, the only lingering aftereffects are pleasant drunkenness and school-boy giddiness.

While Peter is initially charmed by the good humored, sophisticated, and slightly effeminate sides of his personality, Sydney's more vulgar and barbaric qualities come to light during their second man-date on the Venice Beach boardwalk. As they stroll along the boardwalk (kebabs in hand), there is a vaguely detectable sense of weirdness in the passersby, but Sydney turns out to be the most unhinged person on the boardwalk—by far. When Sydney refuses to clean up after his not particularly 'manly' pug-beagle mix, Anwar, he is confronted by a hotheaded man. Much to Peter's horror and confusion, Sydney reacts to the confrontation as if he were a raging lunatic; he screams profanities and threatens violence, which is enough to scare the man away. The incident is more shocking than the other examples of masculine rage in the film, such as Barry's reaction to Peter's projectile vomit, but Sydney's freak out is not blind or unthinking. "I'm a man," explains Sydney, adding "I've got an ocean of testosterone flowing through my veins. Society tells us to act civilized, but the truth is we're animals, and sometimes you gotta let it out."

Indeed, Peter and Sydney's relationship grows from what is initially a player/coach dynamic, where Sydney schools Peter in his loutish version of how to be a real man. Similar to the way the male second banana loosens up the male hero in the sex comedies, there is a screwball comedy-esque gender dynamic inversion underway in *I Love You, Man*, but with a

post-feminist, post-closet twist. As David Edelstein observes in his review of the film, “in screwball comedies, overly cerebral, ‘de-bodyized’ men are forced to loosen up by free-spirited women, not men whose apartments have a special sacred chair for jerking off in.”⁵⁷⁰

That same day in Venice Beach, for instance, Peter receives his first official lesson in manhood under a pier on the beach, where Sydney instructs him to release his inner barbarian through screaming. When Peter reluctantly humors him with a quiet yelling sound, Sydney offers the following “joke jock” response: “That was good. Now gently remove your tampon and try again.” Sydney’s remark is one of several casual uses of women and gay people as punchlines—as interchangeable symbols for anything weak, lame, or lacking an entire “ocean of testosterone.” Sydney’s put-down prompts Peter to unleash an alarmingly loud scream that turns heads on the pier.

While all brom-coms are marketed, presented and, for the most part, consumed as light-hearted, frivolous comedy, there is a strong undercurrent of white, heterosexual male rage running throughout this cycle of films. What are these men so angry about? In Peter’s case, he’s angry because he may have to split the commission on a \$4 million Hollywood mansion; he’s angry because he can’t ask for blow jobs from his beautiful fiancée; and he’s angry because he gets mistaken for a gay man. Indeed, the expression of outrage in popular representation and political discourse is, in and of itself, often a privilege belonging to those with the most power.⁵⁷¹ By urging Peter to release his pent up rage, Sydney grants Peter permission to own up to his white phallus and everything to which it lays false claim.

⁵⁷⁰ Edelstein, “An Affair to Remember.”

⁵⁷¹ Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 189.

The Man Cave

This matter of owning one's white phallus takes on a more literal significance when Peter encounters the "jerk-off station" in Sydney's Venice Beach man-cave. In what appears to be a repurposed garage, Sydney's man-cave has more in common with Andy's apartment of boyhood wonderment in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* than with the sumptuous, cutting edge bachelor pads of the sex comedies. The space is replete with the cheap, unglamorous trappings of adolescence, including drum sets, guitars, amplifiers, old television sets stacked on top of one another, a mini fridge, and walls covered in posters and framed photographs of Sydney posing with various friends at different ages.

Peter ogles the surroundings with boyish awe; for him, this space is radically different from the tastefully appointed home he shares with Zooey, from the cold, palatial celebrity homes he sells, and from his small, very non-private office cubicle. Unlike most sex comedy and brom-com heroes, Peter has long eschewed the pleasures, trappings, and possibilities of his own private space; he exists only in shared, claimed, and incessantly invaded spaces where his manhood is both challenged and reinvigorated. As DeAngelis argues, however, "bromance enables and requires home to become a defining, stabilizing space,"⁵⁷² and *I Love You Man's* bromance finds that home in Sydney's man-cave—or as he refers to it, "the pièce de résistance, bitch."

As he gets acquainted with the man-cave, Peter is particularly taken with a photograph of Sydney taken in the ninth grade, and remarks on his shockingly small size—"I was a late bloomer," says Sydney. Peter, in contrast, apparently matured at a very young age. Not only did

⁵⁷² DeAngelis, "Introduction," 11.

he have the “a bush like a forty year-old Serbian” at the age of twelve (according to his father), but the family photographs on display in his parent’s home reveal that he was wearing suits and selling houses with his realtor mother from a very early age. While Peter matured in line with the expectations laid out in the breadwinner ethic, Sydney shows no signs of blooming into this version of mature adulthood anytime soon.

Peter spots a smattering of condoms, along with a tall, unmarked bottle of lotion, on the end table besides Sydney’s recliner. “What’s goin’ on over there?” he asks, as his boyish excitement gives way to nervous discomfort. “Oh, this is where I jerk off,” says Sydney, without a blip of hesitation or shame. In deadpan fashion, he goes on to explain that he uses the condoms for their easy clean-up, as well as their desensitizing powers—“I can last longer,” he says. Still visibly nervous, Peter follows up with another question: “And when your divorcées come over you put them away?” “Pete, this is the man cave. There’s no women allowed in here. I got a jerk-off station, for God’s sakes,” Sydney replies, ever so matter-of-factly.

Once considered the embarrassing marker of sexual desperation in the teen comedy (e.g. *Fast Times At Ridgmont High*; *American Pie*), male masturbation has become a prominent, redeemed trope in the millennial brom-com. As one of the brom-com’s more prominent and undervalued elements, jerking off is often treated as a kind of sacred ritual (e.g. Andy’s elaborate mood-setting before his botched night of self-pleasure) within the cycle’s grand fantasy of male regression, as well as a desirable refuge from what its male characters perceive as the constant rejection and judgement from women.⁵⁷³ In Sydney’s case, his masturbation ritual reads as a

⁵⁷³ In *Hall Pass*, for example, Jason Sudekis repurposes his minivan for a man cave. In an effort to escape his wife, who he perceives as controlling, frigid, and judgmental, he makes a special ritual out of masturbating in his minivan while parked just outside of the home.

ridiculous metaphor for his own “treadmill lifestyle”; he wants to jerk around for as long as possible in order to avoid commitment and adult responsibility.

Moreover, Sydney’s “no-girls allowed,” treehouse mentality speaks to the regressive and exclusionary purposes of the modern “man-cave”—a coveted architectural fixture among the middle classes. According to *The Art of Manliness* (a popular blog “dedicated to uncovering the lost art of being a man”), a man cave is defined as “any place a man sets aside to pursue his interests, whether with friends, family, or by himself.” Although it can be a single room within a larger living space, or a detached structure, the man cave is by no means “a shop or workspace, but rather a place for a man to relax and enjoy himself.”⁵⁷⁴ In other words, the man cave names a dedicated space for men’s leisure activities, one “set aside” from a primary domestic space presumably shared with or influenced by a woman.⁵⁷⁵

In contrast to the sex comedy’s representation of the bachelor pad, which was a unified, live-in haven equipped to entertain and accommodate women on a nightly basis, man-caves like Sydney’s are set apart from a main living space, and rather aggressively opposed to any domestic features in which women could take comfort or pleasure. The form and function of Sydney’s man-cave, however, is actually prefigured by Rock Hudson’s bachelor pad in *Pillow Talk*. According to Cohan’s sharp reading of this use of space, Hudson’s bachelor pad features separate zones; the downstairs level (with the pull out couch), is where he entertains women, while the private room upstairs is used for other, unspecified (read: not necessarily heterosexual)

⁵⁷⁴ Jayson Franklin and Morgan Gagne, “How to Decorate a Man Room,” *The Art of Manliness*, August 19, 2011 <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2011/08/19/how-to-decorate-a-man-room/>

⁵⁷⁵ Aside from the very recent, emerging trend in backyard structures known as the “she shed,” there has been no female equivalent of the man cave because the private sphere has never been conceptualized as a labor free zone for women. See, for example, Alessandra Dubin, “Move Over, Man Cave! Women Escaping to ‘She Sheds,’” *Today*, May 12, 2015, <http://www.today.com/home/she-shed-what-it-how-you-can-make-one-t20601>

purposes.⁵⁷⁶ Similarly, Sydney entertains his divorcées in the main house, and the man-cave provides a space for entertaining male guests, as well as for pleasuring himself, whilst surrounded by photographs of his male friends and the stuff of teenage boys' dreams.

Although such arrangements and rituals may provoke suspicions of homosexual tendencies, Sydney appears smugly secure in his heterosexuality. Peter, on the other hand, appears noticeably disturbed, even threatened, by Sydney's frank sex talk and dogged interest in his sex life. As an intentional aspect of Segel's performance, this "dim shade of creepiness" was remarked upon in the film's press kit, in which Rudd describes Sydney as "someone who holds your gaze just a bit too long." Sydney, according to Rudd, "walks the line of creating a character you believe could either shower you with gifts or kill you in your sleep."⁵⁷⁷ As Rudd's description intimates, this so-called element of creepiness is most closely associated with Peter's unspoken fear of Sydney's homosexuality, which much like Andy's eccentric character in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, slips all too easily into suspicions of sociopathic tendencies.

In harkening back to the sense of awkwardness and violation Peter experienced after Doug's unexpected kiss, he grows increasingly uncomfortable when Sydney starts questioning him about his own masturbation habits. In addition to becoming something of a sacred ritual in the brom-com, the cycle has also marshaled male masturbation as a relatively safe way to engage the homoerotic desire underpinning the bromance.⁵⁷⁸ Typically, these homoerotic vibes are explored through a triangulation of desire with a woman (e.g. Arnold passionately kissing Judy at

⁵⁷⁶ Cohan, *Masked Men*, 271-275.

⁵⁷⁷ "I Love You, Man," Dreamworks Press Kit, p. 7.

⁵⁷⁸ In *The Change Up*, for example, the two male leads—a bachelor and a father of twins—magically switch bodies. In one scene, Jason Bateman masturbates while inhabiting his best friend's body (Ryan Reynolds), while said friend gives him tips over the phone on how to work his body for maximum pleasure.

the train station as a way to express his affection for her husband, George, in *Send Me No Flowers*). The discourse of jerking off, however, is one way the brom-com attempts to work around the female third term in the expression of homoerotic desire (e.g. David encourages Andy to jerk off to a compilation of his favorite porn clips in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*).

After Sydney assures him that the man cave is a “cone of silence,” Peter reluctantly admits to pleasuring himself over the weekend while Zooley went to the farmer’s market with her girlfriends. “Well, that sounds lovely,” quips Sydney, who pries for more details. “What’d you use? Internet or DVD?” he asks. Sydney’s so-called creepy interest in the way Peter pleases himself, however, is almost instantly diluted when the focus shifts back to Peter’s subpar heterosexuality, as well as Zooley’s role in the triangulation of desire. Peter sheepishly admits to using a photograph of Zooley in a bikini for visual stimuli, instead of using pornography. In barely restraining his shock and disgust, Sydney tells him, “There is so much wrong with that, I don’t even know where to begin. . .that is sick, man.”

While Sydney does not necessarily object to Peter’s inhibited sexuality, he does take issue with the respect and loyalty he shows Zooley, and with the pleasure and security he enjoys from their companionate relationship. Indeed, the fact that Peter loves a woman is, within the world of *I Love You, Man*, the most radical and undesirable aspect of his masculinity. As an heir of the playboy bachelor, the notion of desiring or using a woman for anything other than visual stimulation, casual sex, or a dirty joke is beyond his understanding; for Sydney, women merely provide him with another way to jerk off, only with more obligation. While Peter is very much a “girlfriend guy” who subscribes to a heteronormative narrative of progression and futurity, Sydney’s manhood, as well as his personal fantasy of the good life, is grounded in homosocial

communion and the short-sighted thrills of “adulthood.”⁵⁷⁹ Despite the awkwardness and uncertainty that arises from their different attitudes towards women, Peter soon finds himself bonkers in man-love with Sydney and enjoying the pleasures of living for the here and now.

Rushing into Things

The happenings of their budding bromance are condensed into a feel good montage structured by their intense, intimate jam sessions in the man cave, where they rock out to their favorite band, Rush, and rip their shirts open. Beyond the cave, Peter and Sydney walk Anwar along the boardwalk and ride around on Sydney’s Vespa scooter (à la *Roman Holiday*); Sydney even helps Peter out during his open houses at the Ferrigno estate and cheerleads for him during fencing practice. Unlike most other male pairings and group dynamics in the sex comedy and brom-com cycles, Sydney and Peter’s bromance is hardly influenced or tempered by the use of alcohol, marijuana, hallucinogenic drugs, or sexual forays with women. Rather, they develop authentic chemistry in the bright, sobering light of day.

In order to spend his afternoons with Sydney, however, Peter starts skipping out on work and the tedium of wedding planning (albeit with Zooey’s full blessing). To be sure, this montage of new man-love depicts bromance as a beautiful thing, but it is also a thing of privilege. While less privileged subjects have always had to rely on networks of family and friends for basic needs such as childcare and housing, homosocial courtships and friendship groups in the modern brom-com are a status symbol. Peter and Sydney, for instance, regularly indulge in pricey leisure activities, such as fencing, golfing, and concerts, while Barry and his friends regularly fly to Vegas, enjoy ski trips, and binge drink during weekly poker nights.

⁵⁷⁹ Cross, *Men to Boys*, 4.

Sydney, moreover, never seems to work, and aside from his open houses at the Ferrigno mansion, neither does Peter. *I Love You, Man*'s version of bromance thus names a lifestyle for the privileged few with claims to a heterosexual identity, financial security, flexibility, geographic capital, and few pressing needs beyond fulfilling one's own ego, emotional desires, and filling out one's wedding party. Just as Peter finally starts to realize what he's been missing going through life as a "girlfriend guy," he begins to question whether or not he can sustain this life change without jeopardizing his engagement and career—both of which underwrite his participation in the bromance.

Pleasure Giving

The situation starts to get messy when Zooley finally meets Sydney at her engagement party, where he makes a terrible first impression. In what is very much a clashing of the couple's separate worlds on the common, foreign ground of Hop Louie's Chinese restaurant (which also happens to be *I Love You, Man*'s only acknowledgement of non-white communities and establishments in Los Angeles), the party scene is characterized by a string of uncomfortable introductions and exchanges, none of which are more horrendous than Sydney's unsolicited toast to the couple. Much to the expressed horror and amusement of the guests around the table, Sydney describes Peter as a "pleasure giver," before addressing Zooley directly. "I'm here as Peter's friend, as Peter's confidant, just to say to you, beautiful Zooley, give it back," he says, adding a wink for extra creepiness.

Understandably, Peter and Zooley's car ride home is filled with tension, much like the car speakerphone fiasco immediately following Peter's proposal in the opening scene. This time, however, the roles are reversed; Zooley is upset that Peter shared intimate details about their sex

life with Sydney, who she considers “a stranger.” Although both parties are indeed guilty of betraying one another’s trust, Zooey dishes on Peter’s sexual prowess and generosity with her girlfriends, while Peter only discusses Zooey’s sexual shortcomings with Sydney. As the brom-com’s quintessential cool girlfriend, however, Zooey reworks her hurt and frustration into sunny optimism and, better yet, the promise of blow jobs.

Though Sydney’s toast first comes across as a vulgar, selfish attempt to sabotage Peter’s engagement, he actually ends up giving his friend the gift of “blowies.” After their brief tiff about privacy and hypocrisy, Zooey confesses that she’s “always liked” performing oral sex, but an ex-boyfriend’s “intimacy issues” somehow convinced her that all men shared a similar aversion to the act. Peter gently convinces her otherwise, and expresses gratitude for Sydney’s unexpected interference in their love life. He tells Zooey, “If Sydney hadn’t asked me about our sex life, we wouldn’t even be talking about this.”

In what began as a conversation about jerking off in the man-cave, the barely disavowed homoerotic desire between Sydney and Peter reaches its physical limits in this implied transference of blow jobs from Sydney to Peter through Zooey. On the one hand, Sydney’s homoerotic gift of blowies paradoxically inches Peter one step closer to being considered “man enough”; and on the other hand, this milestone in Peter’s manhood remains a central source of tension within his triangle of intimacies.

After Sydney’s fateful toast to pleasure giving, both Sydney and Zooey demonstrate their willingness to get to know one another for the sake of Peter’s happiness. While they do make some effort to spend more time together, Sydney fails to redeem his first impression, and Zooey starts to feel like a third wheel. These feelings of insecurity and resentment come to a head when

Sydney tempts Peter into bailing, once again, on his Sunday night HBO viewing ritual with Zooey in order to attend a surprise Rush concert. Peter half-heartedly invites Zooey to tag along, even though she has never heard of Rush—“you mean, like, fast-paced rock?” she asks.

Fittingly, it is through Rush, a band so famously hated by women, that Zooey discovers a completely different side of Peter. Also known as The Holy Trinity, Rush sets the tone for the three-way tension among Peter, Sydney and Zooey, who makes a good effort to enjoy the performance in hopes of reestablishing a close connection with Peter. Her cool girlfriend charms, however, are no match for the seductive powers of Sydney’s air guitar. Much to Zooey’s offense and disgust, Peter becomes increasingly sucked into Sydney’s air jamming; at one point, Zooey catches him furiously air licking (with that prize tongue of his) Sydney’s air guitar. By the end of the scene, Peter is slapping his air bass while riding on Sydney’s shoulders, leaving Zooey to fend for herself in the crowd.

In contrast to her sex comedy predecessors, who were too busy avoiding wolves and worrying about their men having love affairs with other women, Zooey is put in an uncomfortable position where she admits feeling as though she is “losing” her fiancé to another man. “I’m totally weirded out about what’s going on between you two,” she tells him after the concert, adding, “We get there and it’s like I don’t even exist. You don’t even look at me. You’re licking Sydney’s bass guitar.” Zooey’s restrained disapproval of Sydney, and her one attempt to make Peter feel insecure about the appropriateness of his bromantic relationship, is ultimately less affecting than Sydney’s habitual undermining of Zooey’s worthiness as a sex and life partner. It is, for instance, much easier for Peter to answer Zooey’s question about what he and

Sydney do together “for like seven straight hours,” than it is for Peter to answer’s Sydney bomb of a question: “Why are you marrying her?”

Popping the Question

In addition to casting doubt on his partner choice, Sydney makes Peter feel self-conscious about his conservative fashion choices and insufficient swagger as they browse through an upscale menswear store for Peter’s wedding suit. In a tongue-in-cheek queering of the neo-traditional rom-com’s fashion show/makeover convention, which was first popularized in the sex comedy cycle (e.g. Cathy’s makeover in *That Touch of Mink*), Sydney takes over Robbie’s role as the gay best friend and offers feedback (“I’m not crazy about the drape”) while Peter awkwardly models an assortment of wedding day fashions.

Sydney then helps Peter work on his confidence and sex appeal by having him pose for photos. “Give me some James Bond!” says Sydney, as he tries to correct Peter’s awkward, pathetic attempts at masculine suaveness. Before sending him back into the dressing room with the winning suit, Sydney smacks Peter in the testicles and tells him, “You have no confidence... sack up, man!” “I can’t believe you just touched my balls,” says Peter, who is certainly no stranger to unwanted touching from other men.⁵⁸⁰

Doug just so happens to make a surprise reappearance when Peter and Sydney are wrapping up their fitting room fun. Peter offers a friendly greeting and scrambles for a label with which to introduce Sydney, but Doug immediately jumps to the conclusion that Sydney is Peter’s gay lover. He looks Peter in the eye and tells him, “I just wish I could take back that kiss, because I felt something that I haven’t felt in years. And now I know it was the taste of betrayal,

⁵⁸⁰ In a later scene, for instance, Tevin also grabs Peter’s crotch in order to get his attention.

you fucking whore.” Although Doug’s overdramatic reaction is played for laughs, Sydney and Peter’s fitting room antics are purposefully coded gay, which actually makes Doug’s misreading of the situation seem quite reasonable, and his sudden appearance seem all the more necessary.

As the requisite gay foil to Peter and Sydney’s bromance, Doug’s reappearance in the fitting room anticipates Peter and Sydney’s grandest, gayest moment, which involves Peter proposing best man honors to Sydney. As the most climatic moment in Peter and Sydney’s bromance, Peter’s best man proposal is more grandiose, sincere, and touching than his engagement to Zoey, though both proposals share similar principals. More specifically, both proposals combine declarations of love with promises of capital and consumerism. In grounding its notions of romantic love and manhood in the expectations set forth by the postwar breadwinner ethic, the brom-coms often situate the more romantic moments in their heterosexual courtships within commercial spaces and scenarios (e.g. *Knocked Up*, *Superbad*); their narratives also tend to posit good consumerism as an essential component in the grand quest for the heroes’ masculine redemption.

While Zoey’s proposal took place in the empty, dingy lot that promised future growth and earnings potential, Peter proposes to Sydney in front of a beautiful fountain display at the upscale Beverly Hills Grove shopping center—a fine establishment to be sure, but one which holds no real symbolic significance or future for Peter, or for his relationship with Sydney. Bromance, after all, flourishes in the here and now. Peter begins his proposal with a pledge to loan Sydney eight thousand dollars for a mysterious investment opportunity, adding “it’s the least I could do for my best man at my wedding.” He proposes, “I want you to stand up there with me. Are you cool with that?” Whereas Zoey’s reaction to Peter’s big question is kept offscreen,

Sydney's emotional response to the best man proposal unfolds in all its uninterrupted, sentimental glory. Overwhelmed and deeply honored, he drops his shopping bag and hugs Peter tightly, as the fountains "hyperbolically ejaculate" in the background.⁵⁸¹

In addition to the spectacularly phallic mise-en-scène, the scene's particular filming style emphasizes the climatic nature of the moment. In contrast to the sex comedies, where Rock Hudson and Tony Randall often occupied the same frame in order to emphasize their contrasting physiques, near constant physical touching, and Randall's erotic, upwards gaze at Hudson, the actors' performances in the brom-com are often heavily edited because of the cycle's emphasis on improvisation. Sydney and Peter's affecting embrace in front of the ejaculatory fountains, however, is allowed to linger in a long shot, which emphasizes their physical and emotional intimacy, as well as their contrasting physiques; Sydney towers over Peter as he squeezes him closer to his large, lumbering body.

Although the exceptional use of the long shot in this scene stresses the physical intimacy between the two characters and climatic importance of the moment, the not so intimate distance of framing also makes Sydney and Peter's moment vulnerable to interference and distraction. About half way through their embrace, Doug suddenly strolls into the frame. As he casually passes by their public display of man-love, he sneers, "you're a whore, Peter." When Peter goes to break the embrace and acknowledge the insult, Sydney gently turns his head around and folds him into his manful chest, thus wrapping him back into the special moment. Doug's sudden appearance both draws attention to and mitigates the gay vibes implied by their demonstrative

⁵⁸¹ Davis, "I Love You *Hombre*," 127.

physical affection—no matter how “gay” Peter and Sydney’s embrace may look and feel, the characters, as well as the viewer, are once again reassured that they are still not *that* gay.

Bro Loses Everything

It is not long, however, before Sydney starts overstepping the tacit boundaries of the best man role. While Peter accepts the strain Sydney puts on his romantic relationship with Zoey, he is less tolerant when Sydney interferes with his professional relationships. During another one of their strolls along the boardwalk, Sydney spots Lou Ferrigno having lunch with Pete’s competitor, Tevin, and snaps into one of his hotheaded fits of rage. The confrontation ends with Ferrigno putting Sydney in a “sleeper hold,” and Peter losing the exclusive listing upon which all of his big dreams were hinged.

Caught in a having-it-all struggle for the privileged millennial bro, Peter finds himself struggling to balance the intimate labors of heterosexual coupledness and bromance, along with the actual labor of breadwinning—a tricky triangulation of desire and labor. Just when Peter finally manages to get a best man, he loses his fiancée and livelihood. Zoey decides to pack her bags for Denise and Barry’s house after Peter confesses three blows to their relationship, all of which are directly traceable to Sydney’s influence. He confesses to losing the Ferrigno listing due to Sydney’s hotheadedness; he confesses to secretly loaning Sydney eight thousand dollars for an unknown investment; and lastly, he confesses that Sydney led him to reconsider whether or not they should be getting married in the first place.

Although her expressions of anger and resentment hardly compare to the meltdowns experienced by the sex comedy heroines or the ‘uncool’ Apatovian heroines who all expect something more from their boy-men, Zoey is more irked by the financial blows than she is by

Peter's emotional doubts. Much like the heterosexual couples in the sex comedies, whose breakups were always in part money motivated, Zoey is also forced to contend with the prospects of financial betrayal in an age still very much obsessed with consumerism and appearances. In addition, however, Zoey also faces the unique burden of competing with another man for her fiancé's emotional as well as financial resources.

The morning after his fight with Zoey, Peter discovers that the so-called confidential investment behind the eight thousand dollar loan to Sydney was, in fact, himself. On his drive to work, Peter notices a series of billboard advertisements featuring his photographic likeness and taglines advertising his real estate services. As Feil observes, the billboards are very much a materialization of Sydney's "idealized, bromantic vision of Peter."⁵⁸² The photos Sydney had taken of Peter in the fitting room are manipulated to depict him as a "a variety of male fantasy figures," including James Bond, a mustachioed cowboy, and a body builder showing off his six pack and Speedo-clad bulge ("LA's Biggest Realtor!").⁵⁸³ Even Sydney's likeness makes an appearance on one of the billboards, which features a thought bubble reading "Who's the Best Realtor?" Sydney's thought bubble is answered in the next billboard featuring Peter's face and a speech bubble reading, "I am, BIATCH." Lastly, a bus advertisement depicts Peter as a hip hop artist caressing a woman's thong-clad ass, though it is hardly enough to offset the homoeroticism informing the series of advertisements as a whole.

Beyond Sydney's "bromantic vision," however, these billboard images of Peter also speak to Rudd's complicated status a flexible, non-threatening sex symbol. In recalling the nature

⁵⁸² Feil, "From *Batman* to *I Love You, Man*," 180.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*

of Hudson's publicity photographs and film performances at the peak of his popularity in the fifties and early sixties, such images of Peter/Rudd trouble the male gaze. For instance, in beckoning a multiplicity of erotic gazes from women, gay men, and straight men, one billboard depicts Peter/Rudd as a sexy beefcake model lounging in a messy bed—his naughty bits barely covered by a sheet. In echoing Peter/Rudd's seductive, arresting look, the caption invites the viewer to "jump on in." As a star who owes a great deal of his fame and fortune to the false and flimsy promises put forward by post-closet discourses, Rudd's star images and publicity are often managed—much like Hudsons' in a fifties' context—in a way that neither confirms or denies suspicions regarding his sexuality.

When it comes to Peter's character, however, he is far more insecure about his public image, as well as his own heteromascularity. In filming the sequence with point of view shots from Peter's perspective, the viewer absorbs the cheesy, eroticized images through Peter's shock and humiliation. For Peter, these billboards feel like a public outing of sorts. Sydney has made their bromance public in an aggressively visible way—even more so than his confrontation with Ferrigno on the Venice boardwalk. In addition to the sense of private violation, Peter also views the billboards as an act of sabotage on his professional standards; for Peter prided himself on achieving business success without stooping to the kind of cheesy self-exploitation tactics that Tevin relies on. Tevin, for instance, brags about printing his face on urinal cakes in public bathrooms across the city—"I pissed on that guy's face at a Bennigans," says Sydney, in yet another one of *I Love You, Man's* casually homophobic twitches.

Fuming with anger and humiliation over the billboards, Peter drives to Sydney's man cave to blame him for ruining his marriage and his career, as well as for betraying his trust.

Their confrontation goes down in the doorframe to the man-cave, as to not desecrate the space's sacred significance for their bromance. Sydney turns the blame back on Peter by criticizing him for being so truthful with Zooney. "God I am so sick of your ridiculous rules," says Peter, adding, "I think you're threatened by what Zooney and I have because you're afraid I won't be able to hang out every night."

Just as Peter's proposals to Zooney and Sydney parallel one another, so too do their break-up conversations. Both Zooney and Sydney resent one another for laying claim to Peter's heart and time. With Zooney, Peter resents her expectations of full disclosure ("You can't just keep stuff like this from me"), with Sydney, he resents his expectations of secrecy and silence ("You can't have that talk with her"). As the central term in this lovers' triangle, Peter defends his relationships with both of his intimate partners. His forceful insistence on the pleasures and satisfaction he enjoys from his humdrum relationship with Zooney, however, are necessarily less convincing than his defenses of Sydney's friendship. There is, for instance, no montage of Peter and Zooney watching *Chocolat* (2000), making "summer salad," and drinking glasses of wine (the exact happenings of what Peter considers the "best night" he's had in years) to counterbalance the lengthy, spirited montage of Peter and Sydney's man-love in the man-cave. The falling out between Peter and Sydney, thus comes across as more heartbreaking and worrisome than Zooney's decision to leave Peter, not only because of the viewer's greater emotional investment in the bromance, but also because the brom-com is inherently hinged on the guarantee of the heterosexual couple's reunion.

In another tongue-and-cheek jab at the predictable, scripted moments in the romantic comedy genre, Peter musters up the courage to break-up with Sydney—"I think we should spend

some time apart,” he says, regretfully. Peter also revokes Sydney’s best man honors, and his invitation to the wedding, which may be called off if he fails to man up. The decision to break off his bromance with Sydney thus marks Peter’s first initiative in his quest for masculine redemption; for up until this point, Sydney’s coaching and manipulation had been directly responsible for Peter’s growth (e.g. blow jobs and bass slapping). This moment, however, also marks a turning point for Sydney, who has purposefully avoided self-examination and opportunities for his own growth and improvement. Before parting ways, Peter and Sydney share a cold, awkward hand shake, and Sydney closes the man-cave door. The scene then cuts to a shot of Sydney standing alone among his panoply of regression, looking distraught, confused, and ready to make a change.

Time Apart

After the break-up, Peter works on repairing the markers of adulthood destabilized by his bromance with Sydney. He makes amends with Zooney, who fulfills her duties to smile, nod, forgive, and support. Up until this point, the only answer *I Love You, Man* provided to Sydney’s unsettling question about “why” Peter was marrying Zooney was that of generic convention. While Zooney is never given a chance to answer the question for herself, Peter eagerly shares the following epiphany: “You want me to have friends for me, not you. It’s, like, one of the most romantic things I could ever think of,” he tells her.

Indeed, this statement sums up the hallmarks of the cool, new brom-com heroine; her willingness to back off, give blow jobs, and support her man in forming a more emotionally intense and honest relationship with another man. Despite the significant gains in women’s rights that separate the sex comedy and brom-com cycles’ respective versions of lifestyle feminism, the

coolest, post-feminist heroine of the millennial brom-com is not far removed from the proto-feminist sex comedy heroines, who served in a similar capacity within their male dominated triangulations of desire, albeit with a greater emotional range and more symbolic value.

Regardless of how “romantic” Zooey’s limitless tolerance and empathy for Peter’s feelings and actions may be, *I Love You, Man* does not treat the couple’s reunion to more than a moment’s worth of sentimentality. Their make-up kiss is rudely interrupted by one of Barry’s poker buddies, who walks between them and belches—a condensed metaphor for the brom-com’s aggressively vulgar attacks on the feminized pleasures of the romantic comedy genre, despite its bromantic appropriations of its most sentimental and conservation conventions. Predictably, *I Love You, Man* saves all its romantic and sentimental energy for Peter and Sydney, who remain separated while Peter focuses on rebuilding his engagement and career.

In its third and final montage sequence, *I Love You, Man* sets happenings from Sydney and Peter’s trial separation to the appropriately titled, sentimental track, “You are the Best Thing,” performed by Ray LaMontagne. While Peter and Zooey make the finishing touches on wedding plans, Sydney goes through an existential crisis, where his carefree bachelorhood starts resembling the heartbreaking singleness of Ernest Borgnine in *Marty* (1955) more so than that of the glittering Don Juanism of Frank Sinatra in *The Tender Trap* (1955). Sydney appears to have lost the will to bathe, let alone the determination to prey on rich divorcées; he’s even lost the nerve to engage the angry passersby who step in his dog’s waste. His desperate pleas for companionship are rejected by his other male friends, who prioritize work, marriage, and family obligations over homosocial bonding. As Peter warned Sydney during their break-up talk, these

friends are “growing up,” which means the same thing for the characters in *I Love You, Man* as it did for those in the sex comedies.

For Sydney, however, the only real effort he puts into “growing up” during this montage of self-improvement, involves watching and being moved by one of Peter’s favorite chick flicks, the romantic drama *Chocolat*. In keeping with the modern bromance’s “smiling self-awareness,” Sydney’s scenes in the separation montage snicker at the clichéd change-of-heart segments so familiar to the romantic comedy genre. After watching *Chocolat*, Sydney comes to realize how much he misses and loves Peter for, and not despite of, the effeminate man he is. In learning to appreciate sentimental women’s culture, Sydney’s redemption marks an important caveat in the brom-com’s repulsion towards all things feminine. In requiring Sydney to mirror and value Peter’s more effeminate tastes and sensibilities as a marker of his self-improvement, *I Love You, Man* refuses an outright, abject rejection of the feminine.

While Sydney’s only real means of growth and self-improvement involve his learning to become a humble and sensitive consumer of sentimental chick flicks, Peter’s journey into proper manhood is a bit more involved. He returns to his office thoroughly humiliated and convinced that his career is destroyed in light of the billboard campaign. Much to his surprise, however, Peter discovers that his voice mailbox is flooded with eager and praiseful messages—all but one are from men. Although *I Love You, Man* grounds Peter’s redemption in the brom-com’s neo-liberal, self-improvement narrative, Peter’s most outstanding markers of growth, including the blow jobs, the full commission on the decisive Ferrigno estate, and a host of new clients, are almost entirely underwritten by Sydney’s initiatives. One day at the office, however, Peter takes it upon himself to slap Tevin across the face when he makes yet another push to “tag team” the

Ferrigno listing. While such physical demonstrations of brute force and masculine aggression were a crucial marker of the playboy's redeemed manhood in the sex comedies (e.g. George bullying Arnold and punching Burr in *Send Me No Flowers*), Peter's 'bitch slap' is decidedly more effeminate than the he-man actions of his sex comedy predecessors.

Though Peter's effeminate act of physical intimidation suggests that brute force is losing its value as a testament to one's virility and value, the slap is nevertheless considered a crucial turning point in Peter's ability to prove his masculinity independently from Sydney's approval and influence. In running parallel to the masculine redemption narratives in the sex comedy, it is only after Peter cuts ties with his homosocial bonds, achieves business success, and physically dominates another man (no matter how mildly), that Peter proves himself ready and worthy of marriage—the official stamp of adulthood.

“Rush” to the Altar

On the day of their wedding, however, both Peter and Zoey feel that something is amiss. From her bridal suite window, Zoey spots Peter standing alone, wearing the unconventional blue suit Sydney selected for him. She continues to spy on him as he stares into the ocean, slapping his trusty air bass. It is immediately obvious to Zoey, as well as the viewer, that the pain of Sydney's absence has clouded the joy of the occasion. Peter's melancholic moment then cuts to Sydney speeding on the freeway on his Vespa, wearing a tux. A phone number from the resort calls his cell phone, and he tells the mysterious person on the other line that he might be able to make the end of the ceremony. In parodying the romantic comedy genre's leaping trope of the rushed wedding day rescues (e.g. *The Philadelphia Story*, *Lover Come Back*, *The*

Graduate), *I Love You, Man* creates a mixed sense of anxiety and reassurance over the two bromancers' last minute reconciliation.

In the meantime, Peter looks around at his eclectic group of all-white groomsmen (including Doug and Lou Ferrigno), and selects Robbie to serve as his best man. Robbie is deeply honored, to say the least, and hugs his brother with the same intensity that Sydney showed him during their moment in front of the fountain. In addition to Robbie's affections, Oz also offers his approval as the family patriarch. "You're both my best friends," he tells Robbie and Peter, before pointing out his other best friend, Hank, who sits in the crowd next to Peter's mother. This exchange of loving approval between Robbie, Oz, and Peter is an overlooked, albeit crucial cap on Peter's masculine redemption, which also happens to set *I Love You, Man's* version of proper masculinity and adulthood apart from those put forth in the sex comedies and most other brom-coms.

While most romantic comedies eschew the influence of family members (especially elders), who typically serve as miserable counterpoints, omens, or as representations of outmoded and oppressed belief systems, Robbie's love and support inches Peter closer to the coveted post-closet status of "honorary homo," and his father's approval binds him to both a patriarchal past associated with the breadwinner ethic, as well as a promising bromantic future. Though Peter and Sydney's intense albeit precarious bromance is haunted by the fate of Sydney's married-with-children friends, who can barely set aside a few hours for a guys-only hike, there is more hope to be found in Peter's father, who has successfully balanced bromance and breadwinning for decades. Oz thus joins the likes of Ben Stone's father (Harold Ramis) in

Knocked Up, as both father figures embody a flexible, soulful, and satisfying version of the breadwinner ethic that allows for pursuits of pleasure outside of heterosexual coupledness.

If Peter is destined to follow his father's lead, Zooley is set to follow in the path of Peter's mother—a sweet, loving wife and mother who sits quietly in the background. With no family members present, Zooley is escorted down the aisle by Denise and Haley, who wear Zooley's signature shade of bright, sunshine yellow. At the altar, Zooley symbolically leaves her own triangulation of desire between Denise and Hailey, to become the third term in Peter and Sydney's bromance. As soon as her girlfriends pass her off to the groom, Zooley finds herself giving her groom away to Sydney, who stumbles onto the scene moments after she arrives at the altar.

Much to Peter's surprise, Zooley summons Sydney to the altar, which he nervously approaches as if he were a blushing bride. As more of a secondary character and symbolic influence than a female lead, Zooley's realization that Peter is incomplete without his best man marks her only moment of growth in the film. She sweetly declares that she was the one who called and invited Sydney to attend the wedding, but her grand, romantic gesture of coolness is immediately rendered null by Sydney's long-winded, passionate confession at the altar.

After some light coaxing by Peter, Sydney admits, "I was on my way when Zooley called. Invite or not, there was no way I was gonna miss your wedding." Though Peter is touched by Zooley's selfless gesture, her most significant action in the entire film is ultimately inconsequential. In the end, Zooley is a white dress—the nice, but nearly superfluous monument before which Sydney and Peter profess their love for one another. She smiles and nods as Sydney first testifies to his worthiness as a best man and bromantic partner. In contrast to Peter's self-

improvement journey, which is multifaceted and motors the narrative action, Sydney's masculine redemption is twofold and to the point.

In addition to admitting his newly awakened feminine side that came to life after watching *Chocolat*, Sydney also reveals that he is not, in fact, an actual bum, but a self-described "pretty successful investor," who simply chooses to live like a bum. As a wedding gift, he presents Peter and Zoey with a check for \$8,000, which repays Peter's loan for the billboards that were directly responsible for his business success. Sydney's last minute economic redemption is thus in step with similar acts of last minute, economic rescue in the other millennial brom-coms, such as Andy's instant success in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, and Ben Stone's unlikely, gainful employment in *Knocked Up*, which played to the social and economic fears surrounding the looming "Man-Cession" in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

What is exceptional about Sydney's economic redemption, however, is that it is seen as a marker of maturity necessary for a rewarding, lasting bromance, rather than heterosexual coupledness. *I Love You, Man* thus proposes a more mature model of bromance for its heroes than those found in other brom-coms—one implicitly modeled after that of Oz and Hank's mature friendship. After Sydney proves himself a worthy best man once and for all, Peter begins a heartfelt exchange of "brommunication" with Sydney, consisting of variations on the titular, affecting phrase "I love you, man."

Though the heavily improvised nature of their exchange necessitates the use of separation editing during the culminating moment of their bromance, Peter and Sydney's intense fixation on one another keeps their public exchange of vows feeling deeply intimate. The camera switches from a medium shot of Peter to a medium shot of Sydney repeating Peter's affirmation, which is

followed by a close up of Zooey giving her final and most enthusiastic nod of approval. While this brief, triangulated montage between the three characters provides the most explicit, visual confirmation of the triangulation of male homosocial desire in the film, Zooey is promptly dropped from the remainder of the exchange. In addition to eliminating Zooey from the montage, Peter and Sydney's brommunication slides into a private language of sorts, one that Zooey—nor anyone else in the crowd, for that matter—does not speak or understand.⁵⁸⁴

This honest, affectionate exchange between two men within the *mise-en-scène* of matrimony stands apart from other bromantic climaxes within both the sex comedy and brom-com cycles because it is given the moving, emotional treatment and narrative importance reserved almost exclusively for the heterosexual romance. To be sure, Peter and Sydney's bromantic wedding helped ease popular audiences into a new level of comfortability with, what was at the time, the looming legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States. Within the narrower context of genre, however, the most exceptional element about this ceremonious moment in *I Love You, Man*, is that such a bromantic exchange is posited as the definitive milestone for the hero's *mature* masculinity, and thus, his gateway to heterosexual matrimony.

This heterosexual aspect of the occasion, however, proceeds with more than a little “if only” regret; it is only after interference from a fourth party—the officiant (Larry Wilmore)—that Peter and Sydney eventually break their locked, loving gaze. Even after being summoned back to face his bride, Peter's gaze lingers on Sydney for a few seconds before he finally turns to Zooey and says, “I so wanna marry you”—just in case his bromantic vow exchange with Sydney

⁵⁸⁴ Peter and Sydney continue to repeat the “I love you's” to one another, but instead of using the “man” term of endearment, they try to outdo one another by making up ridiculous, mildly clever plays on words (e.g. “Broseph Goebbels”). While their word choice is played for laughs, these are, without a doubt, sincere expressions of love—at the very least, these are not the kind of casual “I love you's” that Peter and Zooey say to one another to end or fill an unremarkable conversation.

gave anyone in the crowd or audience pause for concern that he did *not* want to marry Zooey. Just as their proposal bliss was cut short in the film's opening scene, the camera immediately tracks away from the altar as the officiant proceeds with the ceremony, leaving Zooey and Peter's comparatively unimportant exchange of marriage vows off screen and out of audible range.

The camera cranes up over the ceremony and heads straight for the sky, where a small plane carries a congratulatory aerial banner for Peter and Zooey, followed by a second banner featuring one of Sydney's billboard designs. In playing on one of their inside jokes, the billboard features Peter as a deranged looking leprechaun holding a pot of gold, out of which shoots a rainbow. The banner serves as a playful reminder that Peter's business success—the foundation of his “having it all” fantasy—was, in large part, made possible by Sydney's influence. The heavy-handed use of the rainbow, however, closes the narrative action with the typical post-closet joke that validates gay liberation while at the same time subtly mocks homosexuality. On the one hand, the banner serves as a flamboyant tribute to Sydney and Peter's idyllic bromance, but on the other hand, the same rainbow design element—the most widely recognized symbol for the gay pride movement—reminds the viewer that, even after their unabashed declarations of love at the altar, Peter and Sydney are still not *that* kind of gay.

Is Man Enough Ever Enough?

While Peter and Sydney prove to themselves, and to one another, that they are men enough to “say it,” on the altar of legally sanctioned heterosexual matrimony, as well as beneath the rainbow banner of post-closet liberation, there is still a great deal of uncertainty regarding the long-term compatibility of their bromantic relationship with the version of proper manhood endorsed by the narrative. During the brief intermission between the rainbow banner and the

bonus credit sequence, the viewer is left with the familiar sense of doubt so integral to the romantic comedy genre's purportedly happy endings, especially those involving a white wedding resolution.

As an important and highly anticipated feature of the millennial brom-com, the bonus credit sequences, such as those in *Superbad*, *The Hangover*, and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, are typically used as safe, distanced dumping ground for the narrative's bromantic and regressive excesses. Since *I Love You, Man* already elevates the bromantic subtext from earlier brom-coms to the status of primary narrative motor, the closing credit sequence is comparatively tame in spirit, and conservative in its narrative verisimilitude. Set during Peter's wedding reception, the brief sequence features a montage of happenings that repeat the exact same thrills, reassurances, and dirty jokes already conveyed in the main text and, in so doing, mystifies the viewers' lingering doubts about the characters' futures.

For instance, the credit sequence continues the wedding ceremony's consecration of Peter's triangulated desire between Zooey and Sydney by revisiting the notorious blow job discussion Sydney first initiated during Peter and Zooey's engagement dinner. During the reception, Peter sits between Sydney and Zooey, who leans over and tells Sydney, "for the record, I like giving blow jobs." As a look of humiliation washes over Peter, Sydney replies, "Good to hear. . . I was just looking out for my buddy. I had to make sure that he's getting blowies on a regular basis."

Indeed, as the quintessential film bromance of the twenty-first century, *I Love You, Man* consummates the bromantic vows between a groom and his best man with a celebratory, symbolic transference of blow jobs from Sydney to Peter through Zooey. By the same post-closet

logic, however, *I Love You, Man* also shrinks away from the idea of two gay characters kissing or even engaging in mutual flirtation. One vignette from the credit sequence, for instance, shows Robbie shunning Doug's attempt to initiate a kiss. Despite *I Love You, Man*'s fashionable, post-closet comfortability with gayness, the dirty joke—i.e. homosexuality—has remained unchanged from that of the closeted connotation in the midcentury sex comedies. As a gay man who desires other gay men, Doug is once again made out to be the film's dirtiest joke, as well as a last ditch defense of Peter and Sydney's essential heterosexuality.

Though Doug may be *I Love You, Man*'s dirtiest joke, he is not necessarily the biggest loser, nor is he the most repulsive version of masculinity in the film. Similar to the parallel “bad tastes” Doug and Barry leave with Peter during the man-dating montage, Doug's rejected kiss in the credit sequence is counterbalanced by a vignette featuring Denise vomiting on Barry during the reception. Although Denise parlays the grotesque incident into a surprise pregnancy announcement, the revelation comes across as more of a punishing, embarrassing moment for Barry, rather than a call for celebration. As the only couple subjected to compulsory reproduction in the film, Denise's pregnancy announcement hardly remedies the dysfunctional nature of their relationship, nor does it redeem Barry's toxic machismo—“Try to make it a boy,” he tells Denise, after a brief moment of shared joy.

While Denise and Barry's off-putting pregnancy announcement likely foreshadows the next stage in Peter and Zooey's commitment, the film's final moments remain far more concerned with the fate of the triangle over that of the heterosexual couple. Sydney, in fact, is one of the rare secondary characters in the brom-com cycle, who remains gleefully uncoupled and unburdened by any additional responsibilities by the time the credits roll. Instead of flirting

with the bridesmaids, Sydney clings to Peter during the reception; in continuing their man-cave jam session, the two bromancers join the wedding band and “Rush-ify” Zooey on stage.

In forming their own “Holy Trinity” of sorts, Sydney and Peter jam out to “Limelight” (the same song that moved them to lick each other’s air basses during the fateful concert) while Zooey enthusiastically air drums along, thus proving her cool factor once and for all. After the number, Sydney grabs the microphone and proposes another toast, but Peter intercepts the microphone in the nick of time, and the scene cuts to black. *I Love You, Man* thus ends on an abrupt note of uncertainty, leaving the viewer haunted by what is left unsaid, as well as the work left to be done.

To be sure, *I Love You, Man*’s concluding scenes featuring the three main characters on an altar/stage engaged in harmonious communion, with a supportive audience of family and friends, certainly read as more hopeful and progressive than leaving the heterosexual couple with sketchy plans for a three person grave, and a male second banana indefinitely trapped in a shipping bin, as in *Send Me No Flowers*. For all its self-congratulatory newness and liberal worldview, however, *I Love You, Man*’s most cautiously hopeful solution of adding a third wheel to an otherwise static conceptualization of proper adulthood is actually grounded in patriarchal nostalgia.

Steeped in nostalgic fantasies for past masculinities, for lost boyhood adventures in tree houses where no girls are allowed, and for whitewashed postwar optimism, *I Love You, Man*’s less rigid model of maturity, as figured through Peter’s father, is deeply imperfect and exclusionary. In reprocessing the romantic comedy genre’s leaping complaint against the totalizing myths of heterosexual coupledness through the contradictions of post-closet and post-

feminist discourse, *I Love You, Man* not only leaves its characters' privilege unexamined, but also takes women for granted as the narrative causalities that allow for such bromantic optimism in the first place.

EPILOGUE: 40-YEAR-OLD VULGARIANS

The ambivalent messages surrounding these central conflicts of virginity, marriage, reproduction, and bromance, respectively, point to a broader, persistent cultural aching over what it means to be an adult, and whether or not such an aspiration is worth the trouble. Whereas the sex comedies questioned the culture's attachment to an historically unprecedented construct of the good life, as defined by the expectations set forth by the postwar breadwinner ethic, the brom-com cycle reveals a different sort of aching in regards to a similar set of expectations. Shifting in response to clusters of social and economic change, the brom-com cycle speaks to what Berlant describes as an "aching about being in the middle of detaching from a waning fantasy of the good life."⁵⁸⁵

This "aching about being in the middle" is taken to its most explicit and despairing extremes in Judd Apatow's fourth, final, and least lucrative directorial endeavor to date: *This Is 40* (2012).⁵⁸⁶ In purporting to capture "what it takes for one family to flourish in the middle of a lifetime together,"⁵⁸⁷ the director's most "embarrassingly personal,"⁵⁸⁸ and cruelly optimistic film put the Apatovian brom-com cycle to bed on alarmingly cynical terms.

Evasively marketed as a "sort of sequel" to Apatow's now canonical brom-com, *Knocked Up*, *This Is 40* follows up with Debbie and Pete five years after the birth of their niece. In this painful, meandering comedy, which feels very much like watching the "unfunny episode of

⁵⁸⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 263.

⁵⁸⁶ Judd Apatow had "the worst opening of his directorial career by far" with *This Is 40*, which "started with an unimpressive \$12 million." Amy Kaufman, "Ho, Ho, Hum at the Box Office," *Los Angeles Times*, December 24, 2012, *This Is 40* File, Herrick.

⁵⁸⁷ "This Is 40," Universal Production Information, *This Is 40* File, Herrick.

⁵⁸⁸ A.O. Scott, "Happy Birthday, You Miserable Achievers," *New York Times*, December 21, 2012, *This Is 40* File, Herrick.

Everybody Loves Raymond’ that Pete likened their marriage to in *Knocked Up*, audiences find that not much has changed between these two bold and flawed personalities, or with Apatow’s misanthropic worldview. As operatives in the symbiotic complaint genres of romantic comedy and melodrama, the question that Debbie and Pete ask over and over again, but can never answer, is the same question that informs Berlant’s prolific scholarship on sentimental culture: Why do people stay with forms and fantasies of life that just don’t work, especially “when evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?”⁵⁸⁹

In reusing the same toxic dynamic that informed Debbie and Pete’s unworkable marriage in *Knocked Up*, *This Is 40* wallows in the privileged victimhood of its middle-aged hero. Pete’s record label is failing because he refuses to recruit artists who appeal to younger, more mainstream, and female tastes—like those enjoyed by his wife and two daughters. Pete’s feelings of irrelevance in his professional life translate to his home life, where he feels unappreciated and resentful as the only man in the house. “Sometimes I wish just one of you had a dick,” he tells his family. Debbie, on the other hand, complains that the men around her, including her husband, her dead-beat father-in-law (Albert Brooks), and her own absentee father (John Lithgow), have “no balls.” Either way, Debbie and Pete individually loathe and mourn a pronounced albeit unidentifiable failure of masculinity in their family life.

As in *Knocked Up*, *This Is 40* reserves most of its sympathy for Pete’s day-to-day dealings with his wife’s persistent, and often downright mean-spirited dissatisfaction with herself and the people around her. As the beautifully frazzled and often woefully misunderstood embodiment of the brom-com’s female complaint, a number of critics agree that Debbie’s character achieves

⁵⁸⁹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.

something truly exceptional within the cycle. Her sharp wit and foul mouth, for instance, provided a much needed counterpoint to the so-called cultural debates over whether or not women could be funny—a bogus conversation that gained momentum around the time of *Knocked Up*'s release.⁵⁹⁰ What's more outstanding than Debbie's ability to get a laugh, however, is that her character is as "honest," "engaging," and "fucked up" as the butthurt boy-men in this cycle.⁵⁹¹

When bromance hit both a sentimental and sexual a tipping point with *I Love You, Man* and the indie brom-com, *Humpday* in 2009, respectively, Apatow looked to capitalize on these seemingly radical concepts that women—much like his own wife—could be as funny, unhinged, and successful at the box office as the boys. In 2011, the Apatow produced hit comedy, *Bridesmaids*, not only featured funny, quirky, foul-mouthed, pants-shitting women, but also considered the possibility that women's same-sex friendships could rival and/or compliment heterosexual coupledness and proper adulthood.⁵⁹²

Like *Bridesmaids*, however, most mainstream film comedy continued to shy away from granting female characters equal access to the kind of loutish, male immaturity dominating the romantic comedy genre in the twenty-first century. As film critic A.O. Scott remarks in his 2014 *New York Times* essay, "Death of Adulthood in American Culture," this "freedom" for female

⁵⁹⁰ For an overview of this cultural conversation about whether or not women can be funny, see Alessandra Stanley, "Who Says Women Aren't Funny," *Vanity Fair*, April, 2008, <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/04/funnygirls200804>.

⁵⁹¹ A.O. Scott makes the following observation that applies to Debbie's character in *Knocked Up* and *This Is 40*: "The real issue, in any case, was never the ability of women to get a laugh but rather their right to be as honest as men." A.O. Scott, "Death of Adulthood in American Culture," *New York Times*, September 11, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/magazine/the-death-of-adulthood-in-american-culture.html?_r=0 And another critic notes that "Debbie is the first female character in an Apatow film as engaging and fucked up as the boys." Alan Scherstuhl, "*This Is 40*," *Village Voice*. December 19, 2012, *This Is 40* File, Herrick.

⁵⁹² Although the more recent "womance" phenomenon is beyond the scope of this project, see Tania Modleski's brief overview of *Bridesmaids* as situated in relation to modern bromance conventions in "An Affair to Forget," 139-140.

characters “to be idiotic, selfish and immature as well as sexually adventurous and emotionally reckless. . . is less an imitation of male rebellion than a rebellion against the roles it has prescribed.”⁵⁹³

In *This Is 40*, Debbie does not seek this sort of “progression” through “infantile refusal” that Scott describes as the sole privilege of the brom-com’s lovable louts. Instead, her midlife crisis manifests as an overzealous micromanaging of family wellness and togetherness; she struggles to strengthen her own commitment, and the waning commitment of the men around her, to the same privileged form and fantasy of adulthood circulating throughout the brom-com and sex-comedy cycles. Her efforts, however, only produce more pain, disappointment, and breakdowns for everyone involved.

While the characters in *This Is 40* are ultimately confused and vexed by the historical moment’s lack of satisfying, flexible, aspirational models of adulthood for men and women, the film’s most surprising and reactionary element concerns its curious downplaying of the cycle’s familiar and pleasurable avenues of escape—namely, same-sex friendships. Such an omission is made all the more confounding and cruel considering the precedent set by *I Love You, Man* and *Bridesmaids*, as well as the importance of same-sex intimacies in *This Is 40*’s prequel, *Knocked Up*. With Alison and Ben completely written out of this “sort of sequel,” Debbie and Pete find themselves lacking close and genuinely rewarding relationships with people outside of their marriage.

Escapism for Pete has essentially been reduced to eating gourmet cupcakes out of the

⁵⁹³ Scott notes that “television, the monument of the dying patriarchs, may be where the new cultural feminism is making its most decisive stand.” In this essay, he references more recent television programs, such as the Apatow produced HBO series, *Girls* (2012—Present) and the Amy Poehler produced Comedy Central series, *Broad City* (2014—Present), as notable examples in the “cultural feminism’s” push for female leads who are as “rebellious, as obnoxious and as childish” as the boys. Scott, “Death of Adulthood.”

garbage and sitting on the toilet with his iPad, while Debbie smokes the occasional cigarette and dances with professional hockey players at a nightclub. Neither character's escapist behaviors or fantasies, however, revolve around sex or infidelity (even the fantasy baseball kind, as in *Knocked Up*). Instead, Debbie and Pete bond over their secret, elaborate plots to slowly kill one another, as well as their ambivalent feelings towards parenthood.

It is precisely their shared, contradictory desire to escape and protect their girls (who they agree are "assholes") that occasionally brings them together. The happiest moments for Debbie and Pete involve a weekend away from their children, which they spend getting high and pigging out in bed. And on a different occasion, they use their eldest daughter's fragile emotional state as an excuse to join forces in bullying a fourteen year old boy and his mother (Melissa McCarthy), who is the only character willing to call them out for the loathsome narcissists they are.⁵⁹⁴

Aside from these isolated moments of supportive togetherness in the face of criticism from their children and McCarthy, however, Pete and Debbie find no joy in their marriage, or in the many other trappings of elite privilege that they take for granted. This overpowering element of unexamined, upper crust white privilege is by far the most vulgar, and surprisingly compelling, aspect of *This Is 40*. By all accounts, Debbie and Pete are no doubt living the *very* good life; they are precisely the sort of couple who comes to mind when Hannah Rosin and Brad Wilcox talk

⁵⁹⁴ In surprising contrast to the bonus credit sequence of *Knocked Up*, which featured a deluge of sentimental photographs and footage featuring the characters' raising their child, as well as baby photographs from the cast and crew, *This Is 40's* credit reel consists of outtakes from McCarthy's improvised, vicious lambasting of Debbie and Pete. These outtakes offer a last ditch, tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of the privilege that goes vulgarly unexamined by the narrative, as well as by the characters' themselves. Considering most popular press reviews scoffed at Debbie and Pete's lifestyle, several critics urged audiences to remain attentive through the credits: "Under no circumstances should anyone leave before the end credits, as McCarthy's extended riff from her second scene is perhaps the most hilarious-ever example of an outtake included in a final roll-up since the practice began. It leaves you with an exceptionally good taste in your mouth, even if you'd been tempted to send the meal back two hours earlier." Todd McCarthy, "This Is 40: Film Review," *Hollywood Reporter*, November 30, 2012, *This Is 40* File, Herrick.

about marriage becoming “yet another class privilege in America, the gated community of human relationships, the ‘private playground of those already blessed with abundance.’”⁵⁹⁵ More specifically, Debbie and Pete’s relationship fits the profile for the type of “high investment parenting” marriages (also known as “HIP” marriages), concentrated at the top of the social ladder, which recent statistics project are the best hope for “saving” the kind of traditional institution of marriage rooted in the postwar breadwinner ethic.⁵⁹⁶

On the one hand, the characters’ largely unexamined privilege is rendered grotesque by the film’s refusal to consider any sort of perspective outside of the couple’s tiresome neuroses and their Brentwood milieu. Most critics, for instance, described Pete and Debbie’s affluent “west of the 405” lifestyle with a modicum of disgust, as if they were presenting potential audiences with a disclaimer of sorts—a warning not to take the characters’ “Hollywood” problems or anguish too seriously.⁵⁹⁷ On the other hand, the fact that Debbie and Pete’s shared misery is grounded in the emptiness of their consumption-driven lives makes for a rather forceful case against the good life fantasy the film ultimately upholds. If Debbie and Pete are permanently and profoundly miserable, what hope does this fantasy hold for the vast majority of Americans who have not been “blessed with abundance?”

While *This Is 40* offers a rather unsympathetic, largely ulterior critique of this leaping,

⁵⁹⁵ Rosin, *The End of Men*, 49.

⁵⁹⁶ For more on HIP marriages, see Reeves, “How to Save Marriage in America.”

⁵⁹⁷ According to Todd McCarthy’s review, for instance, the film “examine[s] a species of people (many of them in the upper realms of show business) who live in a bubble of extreme affluence in the Brentwood vicinity and seem to devote all their time to their appearance, diet, exercise regimens, status and neuroses without exhibiting any regard for or awareness of the outside world.” McCarthy, “*This Is 40*: Film Review.” Another critic notes: “For the most part, Pete and Debbie’s problems are Hollywood problems—that is to say the kind that only a certain amount of money can buy. It’s a gluten-free, macrobiotic land of bike lanes, \$4,000 birthday bashes, personal trainers, couples therapy and debates with the kids on the artistic merit of *Lost* versus *Mad Men*.” Betsy Sharkey, “Marital Blitz: Judd Apatow’s *This Is 40* Finds Truth and Laughs in a Pair’s Midlife Crisis,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 2012, *This Is 40* File, Herrick.

packaged fantasy of heteronormative privilege and upward social mobility, the film is most hateful in its refusal to learn or detach from its own toxicity. Even though Pete and Debbie are “cushioned by comforts that most of their fellow citizens can scarcely imagine,”⁵⁹⁸ these characters are faced with a shocking lack of choice—one that becomes especially apparent when Debbie discovers she is pregnant (against all odds and intentions) with her third child at the age of forty. When she tries to get a feel for how Pete will react to the baby news, he more or less admits that the thought of having another child makes him want to kill himself. He eventually accepts it, but admits “It’s not what I would choose.”

In typical Apatovian fashion, *This Is 40*’s last minute character redemptions are primarily grounded in an overvaluation of father-figures, with Debbie serving as the vessel for their changes of heart. Debbie’s father and father-in-law are redeemed in a more soulful, sentimental capacity as loving grandfathers, and Pete eventually demonstrates a renewed commitment to breadwinning. But first, he winds up in the hospital after fleeing from Debbie’s meltdown during his fortieth birthday party. As Pete rests in his hospital bed with a toned-down and supportive wife by his side, the couple admits that the best upshot they can hope for is to keep trapping each other through pregnancy every ten years or so. *This Is 40* thus leaves its characters and audiences with little more than “optimism for optimism.”⁵⁹⁹

By the time of *This Is 40*’s release in 2012, the characters’ strained acquiescence to this doctrine of no choice settling certainly came across as more reactionary than hopeful or charming, both in terms of generic trends and cultural attitudes. But as Berlant observes in her

⁵⁹⁸ Scott, “Happy Birthday, You Miserable Achievers.”

⁵⁹⁹ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 196.

own investigation of such cruel optimism in sentimental culture, “it is awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working,” regardless of whether or not “an image of a better good life” is available to sustain one’s optimism in the first place.⁶⁰⁰ As the concluding text in this comparative engagement of the the brom-com and sex comedy cycles, *This Is 40* reminds us that normativity functions as an “evolving and incoherent cluster of hegemonic promise,” and that the processes of detaching/attaching to such promises are thus similarly jumbled.⁶⁰¹

As the overlapping complaints and fixations on the male revolt between the brom-com and sex comedy cycles demonstrate, the films’ shared attempts to reconsider our collective attachments—in this case, those connected to an ephemeral impression of postwar optimism—are primarily reinvented through stagings of intimate failure beneath the banner of patriarchal capitalism. When consumed as singular texts, the individual characters in these film worlds are often held responsible for such failures (e.g. Debbie’s midlife crisis, or Pete’s refusal to sign new talent in *This Is 40*), but an aggregate approach to the sex comedy and brom-com cycles allows the more systemic ideological fractures and power struggles within the intimate culture to come into view.

Though the representations of alternative intimacies and lifestyles described in this project are imperfect, fearful, and constrained by the limits of genre and cultural consensus, they are nonetheless evocative of possibility in their expressions of discontent, and in their so-called failures of gender, romance, heterosexuality, maturity, and consumerism. In presenting narratives

⁶⁰⁰ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 263.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 167

of settling than could not be more unsettling, the brom-com and sex comedy cycles refuse to accept their respective eras' similar, hegemonic models of normativity, or even their own generic conventions, as stable, natural, or ideal.

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