



## “I Love You, Man”: Bromances, the Construction of Masculinity, and the Continuing Evolution of the Romantic Comedy

John Alberti

To cite this article: John Alberti (2013) “I Love You, Man”: Bromances, the Construction of Masculinity, and the Continuing Evolution of the Romantic Comedy, Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 30:2, 159-172, DOI: [10.1080/10509208.2011.575658](https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2011.575658)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2011.575658>



Published online: 05 Feb 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3106



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 6 View citing articles [↗](#)

## **“I Love You, Man”: Bromances, the Construction of Masculinity, and the Continuing Evolution of the Romantic Comedy**

JOHN ALBERTI

In 2003, Celestino Deleyto suggested that the romantic comedy as a genre had reached a key moment in its evolutionary development:

It is as if the new climate of social and sexual equality between men and women had rendered heterosexual desire less vital, as if the perfectly codified conventions that have been valid for so long had lost much of their meaning and become nothing more than picturesque museum pieces—to be admired but not believed. Disenchanted by this state of affairs the genre has started to explore other types of relationships between people and to consider their incorporation into their plots. . . . Friendships between men, between women, or between men and women have started to proliferate in the space of romantic comedy. (181–182)

In this observation Deleyto expresses both the views of those critics who worry that the romantic comedy is becoming “nothing more than picturesque museum pieces” and those who see this exhaustion of plots based upon the centrality and taken-for-grantedness of heterosexual desire as creating opportunities for generic experimentation, for seriously considering “other types of relationships between people” as the basis for romantic comedy.

What I seek to explore here is the contemporary sub-genre of the bromance—ostensible romantic comedies centered on confused homosocial/homoerotic relationships between putatively straight male characters—as examples of this generic exploration of “other types of relationships” not defined by the conventional codes of the heteronormative romantic comedy, explorations driven by and responding to the “new climate of social and sexual equality between men and women.” Following Rick Altman’s argument that we regard genres as “not just *post facto* categories” but instead as “part of the constant category-splitting/category creating dialectic that constitutes the history of types and terminology,” we can see the bromance as part of this dialectical process relating to the evolution of gender

John Alberti is Professor of English and Director of Cinema Studies at Northern Kentucky University, where he has taught since 1991. He has published in the fields of popular culture studies, multicultural pedagogy, and composition/rhetoric. He is the editor of *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture* and the author of two writing textbooks, *The Working Life* and *Text Messaging: Reading and Writing About Popular Culture*. Recent publications include articles on game theory, social networking, and writing. He received his Ph.D. from the University of California Los Angeles.

and sexual identities within the narrative framework of the Hollywood romantic comedy (64–65, emphasis in original); specifically, the search for new constructions of masculine identity appropriate to the “new climate of social and sexual equality.”

Although the subgenre of the bromance is still relatively recent, it has already produced an auteur of sorts in the person of Judd Apatow. A former stand-up comedian who worked as a writer and producer on the influential nineties television series *The Ben Stiller Show* and *The Larry Sanders Show*, Apatow gained media auteur status with his two critically-acclaimed if short-lived series *Freaks and Geeks*—a take on the high school ensemble comedy—and *Undecided*—another ensemble series set among college students. *Freaks and Geeks* also launched the careers of two comic actors who have become central to the Apatow-style bromance, Seth Rogen and Jason Segel, as well as James Franco, a gifted actor whose work ranges across a number of genres but who has also done a bromantic turn with Seth Rogen in *Pineapple Express* (Green 2008).

My primary focus is on Apatow’s influential diptych *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005) and *Knocked Up* (2007) as well as two related films in the “bromance” movie cycle—*I Love You, Man* (John Hamburg, 2009) and *Superbad* (Greg Mottola, 2007)—as examples of bromances that have achieved commercial success and that exemplify tensions and experiments concerning the evolution of masculinity in the romantic comedy. While critics such as Richard Corliss and Joseph Aisenberg view the bromance mainly as a reactionary, regressive response to the “new climate of social and sexual equality” referred to by Deleyto, I argue that these films can also be understood as engaging self-consciously with both the “perfectly codified conventions” of the traditional romantic comedy and with conflicting representations of masculine identity connected to these conventions. In these movies, we find male characters confused and even frightened by what they experience as destabilized codes of gender identity as well as the pathological nature of many of the more conventional versions of these codes. The Apatow-influenced bromance explores “other types of relationships” and other constructions of masculinity within the ostensibly heteronormative structure of the romantic comedy. That these films reach ambiguous and even contradictory conclusions suggests the ongoing nature of this evolutionary process and why these movies provoke such conflicting critical reactions.

A dominant critical narrative tracing the increasing destabilization of desire in the romantic comedy that Deleyto refers to begins with the emergence in the 1970s of a series of “nervous” romances, in Frank Krutnik’s phrase, movies marked by radical experimentation in both form and theme that developed in dialectical tension with the emerging second wave women’s movement. *Annie Hall* (Woody Allen, 1977) represents the exemplary turning point in this trend, a narrative that abandons the culturally dominant goal of the stable, long-term heterosexual romance and substitutes instead a nostalgic longing and wistfulness for the beauty but impossibility of the traditional romantic comedy. The last shot in the movie signals this abandonment, with the camera focused on a busy New York city street after both lovers leave the frame walking in different directions, away from each other and away from the narrative closure that historically marked the genre.

This abandonment led in 1979 to Brian Henderson’s famous prediction of the death of the romantic comedy, a prediction belied by the emergence (or better, resurgence) in the 1980s and 1990s of what are sometimes called “Neo-traditionalist” romantic comedies, movies that almost atavistically insist on the teleology of heterosexual romance and marriage in spite of the social evolution represented in a film like *Annie Hall*.<sup>1</sup> As Tamar Jeffers McDonald argued in reference to *You’ve Got Mail* (Nora Ephron, 1998) (itself a remake of the “classical” romantic comedy *The Shop Around the Corner* [Ernst Lubitsch, 1940]), “the current evolution of the romantic comedy has largely chosen to ignore the advances made

by the genre in the 1970s, self-consciously reverting instead to more traditional textual strategies" (*Romantic Comedy* 4). Rather than seeing the Neo-traditional turn as itself a last gasp for the genre, she suggests that "the genre itself is waiting for a new impetus which will renew its energies and lead it in more interesting directions" (17).

The Neo-traditional turn likewise signaled a turn in the marketing and reception of the romantic comedy, as producers, critics, and the entertainment media began seeing these movies as primarily or even exclusively films for women, who may or may not drag reluctant men along with them. The emergence within the last ten years of what Jeffers McDonald calls the "homme-com" ("Homme-Com"), or alternatively what have been (inaccurately in my view) labeled as "gross out" romantic comedies, of which the bromance is a key exemplar, suggests that this marketing turn towards predominantly women viewers resulted not from any essential qualities of male viewers that prevented them from connecting emotionally with romantic comedies but from an ongoing crisis involving the construction of masculinity within the genre. This increasingly gendered marketing of romantic comedies in the last two decades of the twentieth century begged a question directly connected to this crisis: if (people coded as) men don't need to be in the audience, why do they need to be in the story?

That romantic comedies have long expressed anxieties over the function and purpose of masculinity is now a commonplace, from the gender inversions (to use Kathleen Rowe's phrase) of the screwball comedy through the masquerades involving gender and sexuality in the Doris Day/Rock Hudson sex comedies to the pessimism of the nervous romances. For example, Claire Mortimer references Rowe in describing the emergence within more recent romantic comedies of the "'melodramatized man' who appropriates stereotypically feminine character traits, seeming to break with more traditional representations of men as emotionally repressed" (49). She then later incorporates the emerging subgenre of the bromance into this decades-old strain within the romantic comedy genre:

The bromance is an ironic take on the romantic comedy, which can appeal to both genders at the box office, reaching out to the male audience that would regard the romantic comedy as a "chick flick." These films work to reclaim masculinity for a generation that sees feminism as a historical movement and is familiar with conflicting representations of men in popular culture, ranging from the metrosexual icon of David Beckham to the macho posturings of many hip hop stars. (135–136)

The very examples Mortimer chooses of these "conflicting representations"—an international soccer star with a reputation for fastidious grooming and the "posturings" of pop musicians—underscore the narrative evolution and experimentation discussed here. These roles/representations/constructions of masculine identity can be read as ornamental and ceremonial rather than fundamental and intrinsic, mere symbols and "icons" of male identity that in the classic deconstructive sense seem supplementary, nonessential, almost quaint holdovers. They are signifiers of an empty patriarchal logic built on the centrality of masculine identity. Put most simply, they raise the question: do we really need metrosexual soccer stars and cartoonish macho pop performers? Why do they remain part of our cultural logic?

It's not surprising, then, that our most persistent genre dealing with courtship and marriage—the romantic comedy—registers these concerns in terms of its own narrative, cultural, and ideological structure. As Rowe reminds us in exploring the "persistence of films which posit the romantic couple as the source of all happiness and reinscribe women into traditional notions of femininity—long after the sexual changes of the sixties," our

culture's "sexual mores often changed faster than do patterns of either gender or genre" (130). Or, I would add, the genres of gender. It is this fixation on the "patterns of either gender or genre"—the dissatisfaction with "perfectly codified conventions" of masculine identity—that we see at play in the Apatow bromance subgenre.<sup>2</sup>

Significantly, the question of the purpose and function of characters coded as male in the romantic comedy—the question of "why do we need to be in this movie?"—represents a central concern within bromance narratives among the male characters themselves.<sup>3</sup> These concerns express a meta level of awareness within these films about the instability of the supposedly "perfectly codified" genre and gender conventions relating to the construction and even possible obsolescence of masculinity within the heteronormative romantic comedy. That is, although many bromances feature a version of the traditional "battle of the sexes," this conflict operates less as an argument between women and men or a complaint of women against men than as an internal struggle of the male characters with their understanding of their identities and roles as men.

Take, for example, the pivotal Las Vegas hotel room scene from Apatow's *Knocked Up*. The characters of Pete and Ben, played by bromance regulars Paul Rudd and the aforementioned Seth Rogen, have fled to Las Vegas following key crises in their romantic relationships, and the scene triggers our narrative expectation for an epiphanic moment of self-awareness that will lead to the ultimate resolution of these crises. In the scene, the two characters are dealing with the aftereffects of a combination of peyote and a Cirque de Soleil performance when Pete expresses his amazement to Ben, the putative hero of the movie, that his wife could possibly love him and want him around:

Ben: You think they'll take us back?

Pete: Yes, but I don't know why. Do you ever wonder how somebody could even like you?

Ben: All the time, man. Like everyday. I wonder how even you can like me.

Pete: She likes me. She loves me. The biggest problem in our marriage is she wants me around. She loves me so much that she wants me around all the time. That's our biggest problem, and I can't even accept that? Like that upsets me?

In a metanarrative sense, Pete and Ben not only question why anyone could value them as human beings, let alone romantic partners, but also their function within the movie itself, almost forestalling by consciously articulating the question that may be occurring to the audience: why would anyone desire these characters? Pete and Ben themselves represent examples of Mortimer's "conflicting representations of men," and neither seems particularly functional nor even desirable. In Seth Rogen's Ben, a character type found throughout the bromance and often played by Rogen himself or the younger surrogate Jonah Hill, we find the perpetual adolescent slacker, uninterested in and seemingly incapable of adult ambition or responsibility, whose main interests are pot and pornography. While Paul Rudd's "melodramatized male" Pete appears more conventionally functional, maintaining roles as gainfully employed husband and father, he registers as depressed, emotionally distant, and almost paralyzed with a self-loathing related to his perceived lack of "masculine" assertiveness.

Rather than leading to a moment of clarity, then, this scene only deepens their confusion about their roles in the narrative. Pete's realization of his wife Debbie's love for him triggers both further self-loathing but also an implicit negative judgment of Debbie: what is wrong with her that she would want to be married to me?<sup>4</sup> Instead of a naturalizing reinforcement

of the traditional conventions of the romantic comedy, this scene foregrounds our awareness of the absurdity of these conventions in relation to increasingly unstable constructions of masculine identity and purpose.

In reading the bromance as reactionary, critics such as Corliss point to the substitution of the emotional relationships between these conflicted and confused men for the traditional heterosexual relationship between a man and a woman as part of a trend to isolate and even banish women from romantic comedies through the combination of homosocial longing with homophobic panic: "In this all-guy world, girls are the mysterious Other. . . . But they are only the goal: get the girl because of the challenge. They are not only unknowable, they're hardly worth knowing." I think this is a valid line of analysis as far as it goes, but it discounts the self-loathing and gender confusion demonstrated in the scene above that accompanies this fear of women. Corliss is writing in specific reference to *Superbad* (discussed further below), but both that movie and *Knocked Up* feature this connection between self-hatred, the uncertain function of constructions of masculinity within the genre, and the marginalization of female characters (the bromantic pair in *Superbad* assume their only chance of arousing the sexual interest of the young women they are pursuing is by becoming "mistakes" that might result from a night of binge drinking). These observations are not meant to deny the androcentric and even misogynist cultural logics at play in these movies but to suggest another way of understanding their particular versions of objectification and gender panic in terms of the current moment: as part of a project of reconstructing the heterosexual romantic comedy male hero, a hero who preserves the logic of heterosexual desire but who also questions the very subject position of masculinity itself within the romantic comedy.

Part of the traditional narrative conflict within the heteronormative romantic comedy—and part as well of its implicit subversive potential—relates to the need to form a romantic relationship that ultimately reaffirms, if only symbolically, the inherently unstable construction of masculine dominance, a symbolic construction I will refer to through the critical shorthand of the Alpha male. The hetero-normative, marriage-centered plot structure of the pre-1970s romantic comedy and of the more contemporary Neo-traditional romcoms (still the dominant expression of the genre) may have represented "men and women willing to meet on a common ground and to engage all their faculties and capacities in sexual dialectic," according to Brian Henderson (321), but it also functioned as a containment strategy, a strategy that facilitated a wide range of gender non-conformist behavior among women characters—from the screwball comedy to the American bedroom farces of the early 1960s—without seriously challenging the larger stability of gender roles themselves, particularly the construction of dominant masculinity.

No matter how subversive or androgynous a woman's behavior in these movies (to cite an iconic example, Katherine Hepburn's sexually aggressive Susan Vance in *Bringing Up Baby* [Howard Hawks, 1939]), the inevitable containment of these transgressive energies within the confines of patriarchal marriage acted as both a cultural and narrative safeguard against the larger subversive implications of these energies. The "sexual dialectic" Henderson referred to resolved itself into the mythic unity of the stable marriage, and even if both filmmakers and audience members implicitly understood this unity as ultimately preposterous, the dominant social and narrative codes governing the representation of romance in the movies made sure this understanding remained implicit.

It is exactly this implicit suspicion of the ability of patriarchal heteronormative marriage to successfully contain the energies generated by the sexual dialectic that has become increasingly explicit since the late 1960s. Marriage, of course, still operates as a crucial structuring device in contemporary romantic comedies, but a deep ambivalence marks its role as object of women's desire, an ambivalence that troubles the identification of romantic

comedies as “chick flicks” within the highly stratified niche marketing strategies of modern Hollywood. Indeed, the emergence of the subgenre of “wedding movies” within the Neo-traditional romcoms over the last ten to twenty years (as well as the current proliferation of wedding centered reality programming on US television) expresses this ambivalence by overtly fetishizing every material aspect of the wedding ritual.

Movies such as *The Wedding Planner* (Adam Shankman, 2001), *27 Dresses* (Anne Fletcher, 2008), and *Bride Wars* (Gary Winick, 2009) conjoin hyperconsumerism with contradictory desires/anxieties over affirming the wedding not simply as the logical conclusion to romantic pursuit but virtually the central defining moment of the female protagonist’s identity. In this light, the *Sex and the City* franchise represents a kind of parallel development to the bromance as the quartet of women at the center of this multitext narrative wrestle with the contradictions created by the wedding movie subgenre, contradictions arising from the tangle of consumer and sexual desire, romance, pleasure, and marriage that define the central narrative conflicts in the series, a point I will return to below.

If the question of “what do women want” haunts much of contemporary Neo-traditional romantic comedy in general and the wedding subgenre in particular, bromances ask the even more potentially disturbing question, “what do men (really) want?” The male characters within bromances constantly foreground this question, assuming that the answer must obviously be “sex,” as certain popular culture constructions of Alpha masculinity keep insisting, with sex functioning as a surrogate for power and mastery. At the same time, they constantly question their own inability to access and perform this supposedly innate desire, a confusion expressed in the very title of Apatow’s *The 40 Year Old Virgin*. This destabilizing of desire in the romantic comedy has complicated and confused Henderson’s binary ideal of the sexual dialectic.

In the Apatow school of bromances—both those he has written and directed and those he has produced and/or inspired, as in the case of *Superbad* and *I Love You, Man*—the Alpha male has been rigorously excised from the plot, a recognition of how traditional representations of a dominant male character, dominant in terms of conventional male attractiveness, physical power, and social status, have themselves become a radically destabilizing force in even more apparently conventional romantic comedies. Gerard Butler’s star identity in the decidedly non-bromances *The Ugly Truth* (Robert Luketic, 2009) and *The Bounty Hunter* (Andy Tennant, 2010) is a case in point. His almost cartoonishly overdetermined representation of the Alpha male identity forms a kind of dialectic counterpart to distinctly “Beta” bromance regulars such as Rudd, Seth Rogen, and Michael Cera.

Again, in *Sex and the City*, the character of Mr. Big foregrounds the degree to which this conventional Alpha male character disrupts the emerging algebra of the post-patriarchal romantic comedy, as a core topic of conversation among the four lead women in the show focuses on whether a long-term relationship with such a throwback construction of masculinity (echoed in the form of Don Draper from *Mad Men* as well as in the main romantic conflicts between mature women and aging Alpha males in Nancy Meyer’s popular more Neo-traditionalist romantic comedies, *Something’s Gotta Give* [2003] and *It’s Complicated* [2009]) could ever be viable, however nostalgically attractive such a relationship might seem. Indeed, in discussing the first movie version of *Sex and the City* (Michael Patrick King, 2008), Claire Mortimer points out the almost vestigial role that Mr. Big plays in the movie: “the rather dull figure of Mr. Big is unconvincing and almost redundant in comparison to the compelling female characters” (39). This redundancy—echoed in the character’s ironic name—suggests that the Alpha male is a mere placeholder in the movie, a part of a generic algebra that struggles to maintain relevance even as the women characters

in *Sex and the City* register the same generic self-consciousness we see at operation in the bromances.<sup>5</sup>

In the Apatow cycle of bromance movies, we see male characters wrestling with the personal inadequacy and social anachronism of the Alpha male. In Janet McCabe's words, these men are "struggling to express desire, to react differently even, beyond heteronormative cultural performances that praise particular models of male achievement and heterosexual masculinity, because [they are] speaking *in* and *through* a representation that has limited language to offer something different, to utter something new" (164, emphasis hers). The bromance approaches the challenge of the Alpha male from the unlikely direction of the buddy movie, the counter feminist reassertion of Alpha male supremacy that emerged in the eighties and that was most archetypally expressed in the *Lethal Weapon* series.<sup>6</sup>

In the Apatow bromance, conflicts over heterosexual bonding derive from what are seen as the more fundamental conflicts surrounding homosocial bonding. With the exception of *Superbad*, a high-school coming of age variation on *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973) that ends with a shopping date at a mall, all of the movies under discussion here lead to marriage. From a conventional patriarchal perspective, women are indeed regarded by the male characters in these movies as the mysterious Other, and the men endlessly, graphically, and, most important, anxiously discuss women's sexuality and anatomy. Their efforts at sexual boasting and claims of sexual mastery are subjected to endless ridicule, both from their other male friends and situationally from the plot situations they find themselves in. In a key sense, male sexuality is the real mysterious Other for these characters, a source of inexplicable desire and humiliation and an aspect of identity that renders them almost useless as functioning members of society.<sup>7</sup>

In these movies, the male characters seem actively in flight from the construction of Alpha male dominance as "a representation that has limited language to offer something different, to utter something new." These "men" are not only romantically unattached and even alienated (again, as in the evocative title, *The 40 Year Old Virgin*) but also socially unattached and isolated as well. Under or unemployed, the state of perpetual adolescence associated with the Ben/Seth Rogen character type derives not so much out of selfishness as aimlessness; specifically, the lack of clearly defined social roles that are necessarily encoded for masculinity.

The title sequence from *Knocked Up*, which introduces us to the character of Ben, exemplifies this situation. As the music of the Wu-Tang Clan plays under the production company logos, signifying the exaggerated and parodic forms of hip hop hyper-masculinity that Mortimer referenced, the movie opens on a group of unkempt and unfit young men, apparently in their twenties (although their wardrobe has not appreciably changed since junior high school), engaged in adolescent horse play around a half-filled, stagnating suburban swimming pool. The music provides the only sound track to a montage of what we take to be their typical daily activities—roughhousing, smoking dope, visiting theme parks—all played in slow motion as if they were exciting action sequences. The movie positions these young men as classic examples of arrested development (to allude to the postmodern television situation comedy that began the career of the melodramatized Beta manchild Michael Cera), and unless the viewer recognizes Seth Rogen as the star of the film from the credits, there is nothing in this opening sequence to label any of these characters as the potential hero of the story.

Again, these characters are not just positioned as ugly ducklings or diamonds in 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. The compensatory rhetorical move being made here, however, is a claim for radical honesty. Within the larger genre of the romantic comedy, a genre by definition based on fantasy and wish fulfillment, and in the case of *Knocked Up* within a movie whose plot resolution exemplifies an almost ludicrously unlikely male fantasy, the bromance subgenre appeals to both men and women in the audience with the claim that male desire and insecurity will be exposed with ruthless candor. I emphasize the appeal to both men and women, because the key to the marketing success of these movies stems from their ability to combine the box office appeal of both chick flicks and buddy movies, to create a date movie with cross-gender appeal.<sup>8</sup>

This candor extends as well to the representation of the pathology implicit within the comic situation of these isolated male characters. Early in *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, for example, Seth Rogen's character of Cal remarks to his other dysfunctional male co-workers that he seriously wonders whether the melodramatized title character of Andy, played by Steven Carell, might be a serial killer. The hyperbole behind this joke turns more serious at the crisis point of Andy's relationship with Trish, played by Catherine Keener, when Trish learns that Andy's odd behavior and reluctance to consummate their relationship stem not from psychosis but from his embarrassment over his sexual inexperience. Again, as with the similar turning point scene from *Knocked Up*, the bromance self-consciously undermines the expected revelation that will resolve the central romantic conflict:

Trish: What are you, some kind of sex pervert, or are you a deviant or something?

Andy: No! I'm not a sexual deviant.

Trish: What is all this?

Andy: I haven't even tried to have sex with you, so . . .

Trish: What are you trying to do? What are you buttering me up for?

Andy: Ah, c'mon.

Trish (backing away): You aren't going to try and kill me, are you?

Andy: Look, Trish.

Trish: You didn't get a new carpet.

Andy: I'm not trying to kill you. I love you. I love you.

Trish: Oh, God! (runs away).

While Trish is eventually relieved to learn that Andy does not plan to kill her, we are meant to understand her initial fear here as real. And while the movie plays off the comic juxtaposition of Andy's declaration, "I'm not trying to kill you. I love you," the real edge to the humor comes from how closely both Andy's unfamiliarity with sex and his adolescent hobby of collecting action figures in their original packages fits the cinematic pattern of the Oedipally-damaged serial killer, the pathological horror movie equivalent of the Alpha male (in a similar way, the television series *Dexter* fits a romantic comedy plotline into a serial killer story line). The character of Trish directly poses the question, "what do men—or at least Andy—want," and the references to deviance and perversion only underscore the instability and insufficiency of culturally available answers and exemplify Andy's "struggling to express desire, to react differently even."

This is an astonishing scene to find within a mass-market romantic comedy, acknowledging and even foregrounding the threat of sexual violence that usually remains scrupulously suppressed within the conventional patriarchal heterosexual romance (the *ur*-bromance *There's Something About Mary* [Bobby and Peter Farrelly, 1998] explicitly thematized this connection between the conventions of romantic seduction and sexual

violence, as the main character Ted [played by Ben Stiller, himself a bromance forerunner discussed further below] joins a group of stalkers pursuing the title character. He is likewise mistaken at one point in the movie for a serial killer). This relentless focus on male pathology recurs in all the movies discussed here, as in the morning after breakfast scene in *Knocked Up* where Ben reveals to a horrified Alison his aspiration to become a successful Internet pornographer, or in the repeated concerns about sexual “normalcy” that pervade the dialogue in *Superbad*. In all these cases, the underlying social and sexual inadequacies and anxieties of these characters become a strangely compensatory virtue in that they prevent the male characters from displaying the Alpha aggression or ambition to ever realize these obsessions, a point underlined by Andy’s almost ashamed admission that “I’m not trying to kill you.”

So what construction of masculinity can take the place of the Alpha male in the romantic comedy? There have been several possibilities offered by scholars of the genre, including Deleyto’s that the lover may be replaced by the friend in certain romantic comedies, an idea he derives from a close reading of the Neo-traditionalist *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (P.J. Hogan, 1997). In many ways, though, the alternative of the gay best friend only defers the question of masculine identity and function within the romantic comedy without fundamentally challenging the “perfectly codified conventions” of the form and of constructions of masculinity. In the Apatow bromance, we see the emerging strategy of creating not a single replacement for the Alpha male but the beginnings of a splintering of the idea(l) of a unified construction of masculinity itself towards, in essence, a bifurcated model of male identity. In the Apatow bromance, this bifurcated model appears in two forms, neither of which proves wholly successful, in part explaining the deep critical ambivalence over these movies. The first, more potentially utopian model features a single male character who embodies a radically destabilized gender and sexual identity. The second, more dystopian version, offers competing versions of post-Alpha male identity that ultimately both founder within the confines of heteronormative marriage.

The more utopian version builds on the implicit logic of the buddy movie to offer a literally bifurcated hero, two parts that go into making a single, whole main character. This is essentially the logic of *I Love You, Man*, a movie neither written, directed, nor produced by Apatow but which shares a genealogy with Apatow’s films through the director John Hamburg’s work on Apatow’s cult television series *Undeclared* and their mutual connection to the work of Ben Stiller, a comic actor who, as alluded to in the mention of *There’s Something About Mary*, has pioneered the version of the melodramatized Beta male we see in the four movies we are looking at here.<sup>9</sup>

As with Corliss’s negative review of *Superbad*, many of the reviews, whether positive or negative, of *I Love You, Man* focused on the substitution of the “bromance” between the two main male characters, Peter and Sydney (played by Paul Rudd and Jason Segel) for the more conventional heterosexual romance between Peter and Zooey (played by Rashida Jones). Potentially overlooked, however, is the central act of agency on Zooey’s part that impels the narrative logic of the movie: her desire to “fix” Peter, a standard plot complication of patriarchal romance in both movies and sitcoms, but with a twist. If the post 1970s romantic comedy often hinged on the need for consciousness-raising on the part of the conventional male hero and his need to develop a greater sensitivity to the needs of the woman he is seducing, *I Love You, Man* can be described as a consciousness-lowering movie. Zooey’s frustration lies in Peter’s status as a conflict-free male hero. Sensitive, polite, responsible, and gainfully employed, a utopian version of the Beta melodramatized male, Peter’s character contains the seeds of a radical deconstruction of the romantic comedy beyond the substitution Deleyto describes in *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, where

Julia Roberts's character cannot achieve a union of friendship and sexual fulfillment but instead loses her sexual love interest and remains platonically bonded to her gay male best friend.

Instead, almost out of loyalty to maintaining the logic of heterosexual desire and the plot structure of the conventional patriarchal romantic comedy, a plot structure based on an inherent conflict between what are seen as the immutable differences between men and women, Zooey encourages Peter to seek out male companionship in order to accentuate and perhaps thereby stabilize their gender differences. In his friendship/bromance with the androgynously-named Sydney, Peter forms a kind of yin/yang dyad repeated in the adolescent buddies of *Superbad* and prefigured in the friendship between Ben and the identically-named Pete (also played by Paul Rudd) in *Knocked Up*.

The persistence of this dyad within the Apatow bromance cycle is reflected in the repetition of the casting, with Seth Rogen and Jason Segel repeatedly portraying slovenly ids to Rudd's well-groomed but depressed superego. More technically in terms of psychoanalytic theory, Rogen and Segel's characters depict versions of what Glitre identifies in the screwball tradition as

a positive "return of the repressed"—the pre-Oedipal energies of polymorphous sexuality. For the pre-Oedipal child, masculine and feminine do not exist; the opposition only comes with the Oedipal crisis and submission to the Law of the Father. The resurgence of pre-Oedipal energies and childlike play in screwball comedy work with gender role reversal, signaling a further breakdown in the binary hierarchy of masculine/feminine. (56)

Again in Lacanian terms, these characters resist incorporation into the Symbolic Order, a resistance marked in the bromantic preoccupation with phallic humor and the phallus itself, as in the character Seth's childhood obsession with drawing anthropomorphized penises in *Superbad*, literally enacting an attraction to/shame over entering the Symbolic Order.<sup>10</sup>

If Rogen and Segel have specialized in the pre-Oedipal, Rudd's career itself mirrors the crisis over the Alpha male in contemporary romantic comedy, especially in terms of how his characters also fall short of incorporation into the Symbolic logic of the patriarchal romantic comedy narrative structure. Possessed of leading man looks, Rudd first appeared in movies as the aspirational heterosexual love interest in *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995), even "rescuing" the character of Cher from an office bully. Since then, his roles often involve using sarcasm and irony to undermine his attractiveness, while playing both gay and straight characters within romantic comedies.

The panic over the crisis in romantic comedy plotting that seems to impel *I Love You, Man* thus in part explains the obsession with gay sexuality and the mixture of homophobia and homophilia that runs throughout these movies and that has given rise to the term "bromance" itself. The final sleeping bag scene in *Superbad* is exemplary in this regard. After a long night where the two (bifurcated) heroes, the slovenly, id-like Seth and the melodramatized, androgynous Evan, played by Jonah Hill and Michael Cera (and named after the screenwriters of the movie, Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg), search for alcohol to bring to a party where they claim their goal is to use intoxication as a means to initiate sexual relationships with the two young women they desire, the shaggy dog narrative ends with them sleeping over at Evan's house and confronting the real crisis driving the narrative: their impending separation after the summer when Evan goes away to college. The two characters, whose dialogue throughout the movie exemplifies the anxiety over "what men want" through overdetermined protestations of heterosexual desire along with an obsessive

fixation on penises (clinically so in Seth's case), end the movie declaring their love for each other, an admission each makes with a sense of relief and which ironically allows them to successfully negotiate Deleyto-style friendship-based relationships with the young women they had been pursuing:

Evan: I can't believe you saved me. You saved me. I owe you so much. You carried my. . . I love you. I love you, man.

Seth: I love you. I love you. I'm not even embarrassed to say it. Just, I love you.

Evan: I'm not embarrassed.

Seth: I love you.

The comedy in this scene in part derives from producing a homophobic anxiety its male viewers over the two young characters engaged in emotional and physical, even playful, expressions of love and intimacy, but the scene also exemplifies what Jeffers McDonald identified as a feature of the chick flick Neo-traditional romantic comedy: the appeal not just for laughs but for tears as well (*Romantic Comedy*). Just as Zoey and her friends in *I Love You, Man* are depicted as viewing Pete's budding friendship with Sydney as its own mini-romantic comedy, *Superbad* likewise presents the bromance not just as a rom-com for boys but as a homophilic romantic comedy for women. Rather than stabilizing their adolescent anxiety over their sexuality, the sleeping bag scene suggests that the very instability of their sexual identities makes them in fact more amenable to heterosexual desire, more available and less frightening as straight sexual partners. Similarly, the conclusion of *I Love You, Man* likewise ends not with a more secure Alpha identity for Paul Rudd's character of Peter, although he does develop more "dominant" gender performance styles particularly in his business dealings, but with an ambiguous wedding scene, featuring Peter at the altar flanked by both his "partners," Zoey and Sydney, and expressing his love for both.

The ambiguity and ambivalence of the wedding scene in *I Love You, Man* points to the second more dystopian example of the bifurcation of masculine identity in the bromance, one that highlights the difficulty of reconciling "other types of relationships between people" within the traditional teleology of marriage. If the nervous romance abandoned marriage as unworkable and the Neo-traditionalist romance offers an atavistic obsession with marriage, the Apatow bromance explores the question of what new configurations of masculinity as *masculinity* might still salvage the logic of heterosexual marriage or whether masculinity itself remains inevitably tied to the logic of patriarchy. We can see this tension embodied in the doppelganger marriages and masculine heroes of Apatow's *Knocked Up*.

Within the wish fulfillment fantasy of the reclamation of Seth Rogen's infantile Ben and his building of a relationship with Katherine Heigl's successful career woman Alison, Apatow inserts a kind of compressed John Cassavetes film in the form of the strained marriage between Paul Rudd's melodramatized Beta male Pete and Leslie Mann's Debbie (that Mann is also Apatow's spouse lends extra cogency to this relationship, a cogency Apatow explores even further in his subsequent casting of Mann as a frustrated wife in his film *Funny People* [2009]). A bourgeois yuppie couple raising two young daughters, Pete and Debbie experience the deterioration of their marriage as the romance develops between Ben and Alison. Pete begins to envy what he sees as Ben's freedom and Debbie what she sees as the youth and sexual attractiveness of her younger sister Alison.

More to the point, they both feel trapped not only by marriage but also by their adoption of atavistic gender roles—the smothering stay-at-home mom; the bored, increasingly distant dad—drawn from the most conventional situation comedies. Whereas most of the arguments between characters in *Knocked Up* are leavened by jokes and exaggeration, the conflicts

between Pete and Debbie bring the movie to a halt, both thematically and also in terms of the plot momentum, as Ben and Alison become stand-ins for the audience, awkward witnesses to moments of potentially irreconcilable anger and resentment. Two scenes between Pete and Debbie are exemplary. In the first, Debbie expresses her concern to Pete over her discovery that a convicted sex offender has moved into the neighborhood.

Instead of sharing her concern, Pete mocks in a passive aggressive way what he sees as Debbie's overprotectiveness—"You're so concerned with stuff, like don't get them vaccinated, don't let them eat fish, there's mercury in the water. Jesus, how much *Dateline NBC* can you watch?"—which leads to her own complaint about Pete's lack of engagement: "If I didn't care about these things, you wouldn't care about anything. Care more." The scene begins as a comic, sitcom-style interplay based on how these two characters have fallen into stereotyped gender roles, but the tone changes from banter to outright hostility as Debbie angrily hurls obscenities at an increasingly defensive Pete: "Because I want to rip your fucking head off because you're so fucking stupid. This is scary. These are our children, you fucking dipshit." Later, their marriage reaches a crisis point when Debbie discovers that Pete, instead of having an affair, has been lying to her in order to participate in a fantasy baseball league. Rather than the merry mix-up of traditional farce, this misunderstanding leads to a poignant expression of despair from Debbie over what seems to be the impossibility of their relationship, a despair rooted in Pete's performance of a kind of post-Alpha masculinity: "You just think because you don't yell, you're not mean. But this is mean." The conclusion is tragic rather than comic: "You know what? I don't want you at the house anymore. Okay?"

In both scenes, Ben stands by as an awkward, uncomfortable witness, a surrogate for the equally uncomfortable viewing audience. Instead of progressing towards a dialectical resolution of their divergent performances of masculinity, as in *I Love You, Man* or *Superbad*, the bromantic connection between Ben and Pete comes to a dead halt. Pete and Debbie's misery begins to function as the main impediment to Allison's final commitment to a relationship with Ben, and although Pete and Debbie achieve a kind of rapprochement after the trip to Las Vegas alluded to above, the conflict is never finally resolved. Ben and Alison finally bond over the birth of their baby, submerging Allison's never explicitly resolved reservations about the example set by her sister and brother-in-law, but as an audience we are left with an uneasy sense of the long-term implications of their relationship.

Towards the end of the movie, the narrative momentum of the plot tries to revive the dialectical resolution of the bifurcated male hero as Ben begins to adopt—impersonate might be an even more resonant word—the trappings of Pete's more conventional gender roles of husband and father, landing a "real" job and moving into an adult apartment while Allison warms to the idea of having a father figure in her child's life. During the birth scene, Ben even takes on aspects of the Alpha male, demanding that the male obstetrician treat Allison with more care and sensitivity. The birth of the baby functions magically not so much to resolve the plot as to suggest that the further progress (if that's the right word) of the relationships under examination are a kind of *fait accompli*. Caught up in the moment, Debbie even suggests a longing for another child, an idea that scares Pete but that also ominously points to the inefficacy of assuming that parenthood will automatically create a lasting bond between the characters. Ultimately, the question posed by Pete in that Las Vegas hotel room—"How can Debbie like me?" is never answered and haunts the movie's conclusion as well as the utopian possibilities of the bifurcated male hero.

Here we see the reverse of the more optimistic plot line of *I Love You, Man*. In that movie, the "melodramatized" Beta male Peter begins by supposedly learning from the more traditionally "Alpha" Sydney, but each character turns out to be more fluid in their performances of masculinity than they at first seemed, with Peter displaying from the beginning an ambitious career orientation and Sydney comically spouting a clichéd version

of therapy speak. The movie evades the question of the post-marriage prospects for their romance in the grand tradition of the romantic comedy by ending with the marriage itself. *Knocked Up* directly engages the question of the long term viability of these alternate forms of masculinity by juxtaposing the pre-marriage romance of Ben and Alison with the post-romantic trials of Pete and Debbie, trials that underscore both Apatow's anxiety over the possible obsolescence of conventional constructions of masculinity within the logic of the romantic comedy and the dubious viability of the various bromantic experimental alternatives of the bifurcated male pairs that define the subgenre. In this way, the Apatow bromances contain a logic of generic self-consciousness and self-critique that belies readings of them as simply reactionary or regressive.

The reconstructions of masculine identities and roles within the Apatow bromance remains a source of crisis but also a source of vitality and manifests a particular response to the crisis within the larger genre of romantic comedy that Deleyto describes. This crisis—the potential narrative obsolescence of traditional versions of masculine identity—affects the narrative logics of a number of other contemporary genres as well, perhaps nowhere more than in the action adventure genre, where constructions of the ideal (masculine) hero range from the muscle bound septuagenarian Sylvester Stallone to the boyish Matt Damon to genre/gender inversion stars such as Angelina Jolie and Uma Thurman. The idea of the obsolescence of masculine identity may initially seem counter-intuitive in reference to contemporary mainstream American cinema, where critics have rightly noted the virtual disappearance of women from central roles within key genres, including of course the bromantic comedy, but this obsession with male narrative function is itself a sign of anxiety over male identity. The title *I Love You, Man* evokes how the Apatow bromance exemplifies both this obsession with and anxiety over the narrative viability of the genres of masculinity within the romantic comedy. The simultaneous critical ambivalence and marketing popularity of these movies locate them at the crossroads of efforts to “explore other types of relationships” between people within a “new climate of social and sexual equality”: the question of what role(s) constructions of masculinity will play within the continuing evolution of the romantic comedy.

### Notes

1. For a definition and discussion of the Neo-traditional romantic comedy, see Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*.
2. And if we add to Mortimer's list the “aging male celebrity womanizer,” we can see how Apatow's work on *The Larry Sanders Show* anticipates the bromance.
3. This narrative crisis within the romantic comedy is part of what Yvonne Tasker (quoting Barbara Creed) refers to as “The ‘current crisis in master narratives.’” According to Tasker, this crisis stems not from an “inability to tell a good story, but in terms of the failings of the key terms around which stories are constructed, terms which include a coherent white male heterosexuality along with the rationality and binary structures it is often taken to propose” (232).
4. Pete's confusion hearkens back to Alvy Singer's quotation of Groucho Marx in *Annie Hall* to diagnose his own neurotic inability to maintain a stable relationship: “I would never want to belong to any club that would have someone like me for a member.” In this way the bromance represents a contemporary version of the nervous romance.
5. Both the characters of Mr. Big and Don Draper, as well as the actors who portray them (Chris Noth and Jon Hamm), feature facial structures—prominent foreheads and jaws—that function as retro signifiers of Alpha masculinity. Both as well are meant to register as “the way leading men used to look,” in the case of Mr. Big, anachronistically, and in Don Draper as the representation of an extinct species.
6. For a cogent reading of the anxieties over the construction of identity in the buddy action movies of the eighties, see Fuchs.

7. Peter Lehman's groundbreaking study, *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of Male Identity*, similarly analyzes how anxiety over male identity is connected to anxiety over representations of the male body. Obsessions with and fears of penis size, a staple of bromance humor, suggest the fragility and instability of Phallic dominance as well as the subversive potential of laughter to deconstruct the logic of Phallic patriarchy: "The pervasive anxiety that underlies the entire spectrum of imagining the male body is, then, not surprising. . . . Within this fear-riddled masculinity, the real or imagined sound of laughter rings persistently" (218).
8. The cross-gender appeal of these movies represents a useful modification of Jeffers McDonald's insightful discussion of the *homme-com*, or "romantic comedy for boys." The conventional thinking in Hollywood is that while male viewers are reluctant to attend "chick flicks," female viewers are much more willing to accompany male viewers to "guy films." In the case of the bromance, the idea is to appeal to both men and women. *I Love You, Man* even features a scene that models the ideal behavior envisioned for women in the audience, as the character of Zooey and her women friends gush like high school girls while listening in on her fiancé's Peter's phone conversation as he attempts to set up a "man date" with his new found friend Sydney.
9. Stiller's performance in *Greenberg* (2010), Noah Baumbach's romantic comedy appropriation of the thematics of mumblecore, adds to identification with this culturally decentralized version of masculinity. The subgenre of mumblecore itself has particular resonance for the question of the obsolescence of masculine gender roles in contemporary movies focused on heterosexually-identified romance and relationship, a theme I plan to explore further in a longer version of this study.
10. Again, see Lehman.

### Works Cited

- Abbott, Stacy and Debbie Jermyn, eds. *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*. New York: I.B. Taurus, 2009.
- Aisenberg, Joseph. "Here Come the Bromides: Living in the Era of the Bromantic Comedy." *Bright Lights Film Journal*. August 2009. Web. October 27, 2010.
- Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. London: British Film Institute. 1999.
- Corliss, Richard. "Superbad: A Fine Romance." *Time*. 17 August 2007. Web. October 27, 2010.
- Deleyto, Celestino. "Between Friends: Love and Friendship in Contemporary Hollywood Romantic Comedies." *Screen* 44.2 (2003): 167–182.
- Evans, Peter William and Celestino Deleyto, eds. *Terms of Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and 1990s*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.
- Fuchs, Cynthia J. "The Buddy Politic." *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in the Hollywood Cinema*. Ed. Steve Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. London and NY: Routledge, 1993. 194–210.
- Glitre, Kathrina. *Hollywood Romantic Comedy: States of the Union 1934–1965*. Manchester and NY: Manchester UP, 2006.
- Henderson, Brian. "Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible?" *The Film Comedy Reader*. Ed. Gregg Rickman. New York: Limelight, 2001. 310–326.
- Jeffers McDonald, Tamar. "Homme-Com: Engendering Change in Contemporary Romantic Comedy." *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*. Ed. Stacy Abbott and Debbie Jermyn. New York: I.B. Taurus, 2009. 146–159.
- . *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*. London: Wallflower, 2007.
- Lehman, Peter. *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of Male Identity*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2007.
- McCabe, Janet. "Lost in Transition: Problems of Modern (Heterosexual) Romance and the Catatonic Male Hero in the Post-Feminist Age." *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*. Eds. Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn. London: I.B. Tauris and Co Ltd, 2009. 160–175.
- Mortimer, Claire. *Romantic Comedy*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Rowe, Kathleen. *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1995.
- Tasker, Yvonne. "Dumb Movies for Dumb People: Masculinity, the Body, and the Voice in Contemporary Action Cinema." *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in the Hollywood Cinema*. Eds. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. London and NY: Routledge, 1993. 230–244.