“I Love You, Man”
Soft Masculinity and Male Homosocial Friendship in Bromantic Comedies

Master Thesis
Word Count: 16,478

Carien Vugteveen
1547062
Dr. A.L. Gilroy
February 26, 2012
# TABLE OF CONTENTS:

**Introduction:** The Popular Representation of Modern Masculinity and Male Homosocial Bonding ................................................................. 2

**Chapter 1:** *Knocked Up:* A “Soft Body’s” Journey from “Guyland” Into Male Adulthood ................................................................. 17

**Chapter 2:** *Superbad:* “Covert Intimacy” and the Bromance Between a “Geek” and a “Slacker” ................................................................. 31

**Chapter 3:** *I Love You, Man:* Exploring the Rules and Boundaries of Male Friendship ................................................................. 46

**Conclusion** ................................................................................................................................. 61

**Bibliography** ................................................................................................................................. 67
Introduction
The Popular Representation of Modern Masculinity and Male Homosocial Bonding

“Are You Man Enough To Say It?”¹

In a photo shoot for the 2009 *Vanity Fair* issue celebrating “Comedy’s New Legends,” comedy actors Paul Rudd, Jason Segel, Jonah Hill and Seth Rogen parody a former cover photo. The original cover pictured a well-dressed designer Tom Ford posing with nude actresses Scarlett Johanssen and Keira Knightley.² In the comedic photo featuring only men, Paul Rudd steps in as Ford, dressed in a handsome suit, leaning into Seth Rogen’s ear. The other men are not nude like the actresses in the original, but are dressed in nude body stockings. The men are lying very close to one another, and their body stockings show off their far-from-perfect figures. This picture raises a lot of questions concerning gender. What kind of masculinity do these actors embody? Is the picture funny because it shows men who seem comfortable being very close to one another physically? Is it a homophobic statement that the men do not appear naked together? Or does it portray the double standards concerning the male body and male closeness as opposed to the female body? The male body is on display here, but in a very different way than the female body is in the original picture. The sense of humor and the closeness displayed in the picture is also depicted in the genre films in which these four successful actors regularly star, namely bromantic comedies. In these films a new kind of soft masculinity and strong

---

¹ This is one of the taglines for the film *I Love You, Man*. It suggests that only a “real man” can utter those words to a male friend.
male homosocial bonding (a concept that will be discussed below) is portrayed that can be seen pictured in the *Vanity Fair* photo shoot.

The meaning of American masculinity is constantly changing, as is the representation of masculinity in the popular media. Popular film, for instance, represents changing ideas on masculinity in American society on screen while it at the same time influences these ideas themselves. The last decade has marked the appearance (and large commercial success) of a new genre that positions male friendship at its center: the bromantic comedy. A new kind of masculinity is portrayed in these films where it is accepted that men form very strong bonds of friendship and show their “guy love” for one another, as long as the people on the outside know that they are both straight. It is this kind of male homosocial friendship that is more and more visible in American popular film, as well as in American society itself.

A bromantic comedy is a comedic film that can be seen as cross between a romantic comedy and a buddy film that features a *bromance*. A bromance is a strictly heterosexual and platonic ‘romance’ between two or more ‘bro’s.’ These boys, guys, or men, are best friends and are not afraid to show their affection for one another and because their bond is so close they sometimes refer to each other as ‘brothers.’ There are some newly coined terms that relate to and help define bromance, such as “man-crush,” a heterosexual man having a platonic crush on another man, and “man-date,” two straight men going out for dinner, drinks, or a movie, thus effectively being out on a date

---

3 In the television show *Scrubs*, the extremely close friendship, or bromance, between characters JD and Turk is explained through song in a musical episode. They sing: “Guy love, that’s all it is. Guy love, he’s mine, I’m his. There’s nothing gay about it in our eyes. Just guy love between two guys.” The song was called “guy love.” To view the clip see: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IL4L4uv5rif0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IL4L4uv5rif0)

It seems men are finally starting to be able to show affection for one another without stigma in the way women have always been able to do. It is, however, telling that men need terms to describe their male outings and feelings towards each other. The term ‘bromance’ still remains informed by homophobia and the fear of being perceived as homosexual. Michael Rowin argues that the term is not a step forward to more acceptance of male-male platonic intimacy but is a self-reflective, ironic term used to deflect homosexual allusions. He writes it is “the perfect passive-aggressive salvo for the enlightened liberal homophobe.”

The arrival of the term “bromance” does not necessarily indicate a move away from the stigma attached to close male friendship but is rather a way to attach a “macho” and platonic meaning to the somewhat feminizing close friendship between two (heterosexual) men.

A male friendship is still in need of labels and definitions. As David Halperin states: “friendship is the anomalous relation, which exists, ‘outside the more thoroughly codified social networks formed by kinship and sexual ties; it is more free-floating, more in need of labeling.”

The creation and the quick popularity of the term bromance is an example of the importance of this labeling of male friendship. Furthermore, adding the term “man” makes a date with another guy seem more manly and less feminizing or gay. Saying “I love you, man” sends a different message than telling a friend “I love you.” The statement must at all costs be differentiated from being “in love.”

---

7 Men might as well just say: “I platonically love you, man,” as Sheldon (Jim Parsons) says to his best friend Leonard in season 5, episode 11 of The Big Bang Theory, as this literally spells out the intended meaning of the phrase. To view clip see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ziDwFd7MxQ0>.
“man” can then be seen as a cover-up to homosexual allusions, by making the saying more masculine and less vulnerable than the feminizing words “I love you.” The men in bromantic comedies do have very close friendships and are comfortable exchanging physical signs of affection, such as bear hugs and slaps on the shoulder, as well as feelings, secrets and anxieties with one another. The best of friends say those bromantic words to each other “I love you, man.” This is then what the title of my thesis refers to. Aside from it being the title of one of the films I will discuss, in all three films analyzed, these words are at one point uttered between male friends.

As noted, the representation of masculinity in American films has changed over time and has seen many embodiments. Susan Jeffords introduces the term “hard body” to describe the type of masculinity that was most popular in Hollywood films in the 1980s. In the article “Can Masculinity be Terminated?” Jeffords writes that:

[masculinity] was largely transcribed through spectacle and bodies, with the male body itself becoming often the most fulfilling form of spectacle. Throughout this period, the male body – principally the white male body – became increasingly a vehicle of display – of musculature, of beauty, of physical feats, and of a gritty toughness. The male body was on display in very popular film franchises such as Rambo and the Terminator. The “hard body” was personified particularly in actors Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. It was the outside, or what Jeffords calls “externality… the outer parameters of the male body,” that mattered in these films and drew the attention of

---

9 See Roland Barthes on “the lover’s discourse” and the feminizing effect of being in love, in: Kenneth MacKinnon, *Representing Men: Maleness and Masculinity in the Media* (London: Arnold), 32.
the audience.\textsuperscript{11} The questions that concern Jeffords are “whether and how masculinity can be reproduced successfully in a post-Vietnam, post-Civil Rights, and post-women’s movement era,”\textsuperscript{12} and “how does [the son] imagine his life as a man?”\textsuperscript{13} Jeffords thus wonders what American masculinity looks like in modern America and what kind of men boys see themselves growing into. What are the dominant images of masculinity they see themselves reflected in, or can aspire to live up to?

Jeffords shows that there is a strong connection between popular masculinity as represented in Hollywood films, the masculinity of the president, and national identity as a whole. The Hard Body era is therefore unconditionally tied to the Reagan era. Jeffords writes:

> to the extent that the president stands for the nation, and to the extent that a particular president constructs that standing in distinctly masculine terms, then national identity must itself be figured in relation to popular masculine models and narratives of masculine generation and power.\textsuperscript{14}

What it means to be a man is thus tied to what it means to be an American. The narratives, ideas and representations of masculinities provided in Hollywood films all contribute to the construction of a dominant image of American male identity. The young men portrayed in bromantic comedies mostly all deal with the men they are and the kind of men they pretend to be in front of other men. Bromantic comedies show men who fit the categories of soft and flawed masculinity. They fall outside the dominant idea of what...

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
a “real” man is supposed to be and are therefore considered humorous but perhaps are more realistic portrayals of American men than the overly masculine “hard bodies.”

American masculinity represented on screen started to go into a new direction as another president took office. Starting in the 1990s, the most visual “hard bodies” of the 1980s began to play in films that were at a far remove from the externality and violence of the action films they starred in during the 1980s. Arnold Schwarzenegger, for instance, played against type in films that focused on emotional development, such as *Kindergarten Cop* and *Junior*. Jeffords argues that the focus on spectacle and externality of the 1980s lost hold in favor of “a presumably more internalized masculine dimension” at the start of the 1990s.\(^\text{15}\) This male character with a focus on the internal as opposed to the external is, writes Jeffords, “a self-effacing man, one who now, instead of learning to fight, learns to love.”\(^\text{16}\) More important than being able to handle a machine gun now is being able to be a good family man and successfully deal with emotions and feelings. Instead of overpowering the bad guys, the former “hard bodies” were now focusing on emotional empowerment. This trend to portray an “internalized masculine dimension” has continued to develop and change over the last few decades.\(^\text{17}\) It is also one of the main focus points of bromantic comedies.

\(^\text{15}\) Susan Jeffords, “Can Masculinity be Terminated?” 245.
\(^\text{16}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{17}\) Ibid.
While in the 1980s the “hard body” was the most popular vision of masculinity presented on the screen, nowadays the more popular version of manhood comes close to what Jeffords calls the “soft body.” What we see more and more are films that portray the inner workings of young men and concentrate on their emotional dilemmas, their goals and dreams. These men, in opposition to action stars of the 1980s, are not obsessed with having hard bodies. These bromantic comedy heroes portray a flawed, or “soft” masculinity.\textsuperscript{19} Jeffords mostly refers back to the Carter administration in her definition of the “soft body.” The difference between the Carter administration and the Reagan administration is that Carter himself and his presidency were viewed as soft and therefore ‘feminine,’ whereas the Reagan years were ‘hypermasculine.’\textsuperscript{20} “Hypermasculinity,”

\textsuperscript{18} The picture of Rambo is from: \url{http://eu.movieposter.com/poster/MPW-33203/Rambo_First_Blood_part_2.html}. Segel’s picture is from \url{http://www.ew.com/ew/gallery/0,,20152193_20348210,00.html}. Jason Segel began his career by playing in the Judd Apatow and Paul Feig created series \textit{Freaks and Geeks} (1999) and stars in both \textit{Knocked Up} and \textit{I Love You, Man}. He is also known from the sitcom \textit{How I Met Your Mother}. He usually plays a goofy, sensitive and relatable “soft body.”

\textsuperscript{19} Susan Jeffords, \textit{Hard Bodies}, 24.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 38.
according to Kenneth MacKinnon can be defined as: “the exaggerated displays of what are culturally taken to be macho traits.”21 Whereas the hard body character was superior to “those of his enemies, his companions, and the audience,” the soft body that is portrayed in bromantic comedies is usually an everyman, not someone who is better and more fit than other characters and the audience.22 He is a sympathetic character that many can identify with.

The focus on the male body in bromantic comedies is very different to the way it is used in “hard body” films. In a bromance it is usually for comedic reasons and to establish a character’s soft and insecure masculinity, that the male body is displayed in its full glory. Seth Rogen, an actor who often stars in bromantic comedies, often portrays characters who are overweight and unkempt. His body serves as a source of humor in Knocked Up because, as a not-so-fit guy, he is able to ‘hook-up’ with the beautiful Alison (Katherine Heigl). Rogen’s character even says to her when they are about to sleep together: “Whoa, you’re prettier than I am.”23 Ben’s statement is comedic as it indirectly also comments on the central uneven romantic pairing between their two characters. The out-of-shape, or sometimes just ‘regular guy-,’ bodies of the male lead characters are part of what makes them funny because it makes them insecure and “soft” and, measured against the dominant standards of masculinity, less than “real” men.24

The renewed visibility of male friendship in film (and television shows, such as Bromance, Scrubs and How I Met Your Mother) coincides with a growth of importance of

22 Ibid., 53.
24 For another example of a “soft body” on full display watch the opening scene of Forgetting Sarah Marshall (Nicholas Stoller, 2008), starring Jason Segel, Kristen Bell and Paul Rudd. In this scene Kristen Bell’s character Sarah Marshall breaks up with Peter Bretter (Jason Segel) while he is fully nude.
male friendships among young American men today. Bromantic comedies often portray young men, on the verge of adulthood, who are still caught in what Michael Kimmel calls *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. Kimmel’s extensive research shows a recent changing trend in the stages men go through before they enter into adulthood. Kimmel writes that Guyland “is a dramatically new stage of development with its own rules and limitations.”

One important change is that men get married a lot later in life than they used to, and in this period before settling down, male friendship is increasing in importance. Kimmel describes Guyland as:

> the world in which young men live. It is both a stage of life, a liminal undefined time span between adolescence and adulthood that can often stretch for a decade or more, and a place, or, rather, a bunch of places where guys gather to be guys with each other, unhassled by the demands of parents, girlfriends, jobs, kids, and the other nuisances of adult life. In this topsy-turvy, Peter-Pan mindset, young men shrink the responsibilities of adulthood and remain fixated on the trappings of boyhood, while the boys they still are struggle heroically to prove that they are real men despite all evidence to the contrary."

I will use Kimmel’s definition of these “guys” to describe the young men portrayed in bromantic comedies. As Kimmel writes, almost all the young men in Guyland, “call themselves – and call each other – ‘guys.’ It’s a generic catch-all term that demarcates this age group, setting it apart from ‘kids’ and ‘grownups.’”

These guys are part of a new generation of young men who are reluctantly and more and more slowly growing

---

26 Ibid., 4.
27 Ibid., 42.
into adulthood. As Guyland and the guys in it are becoming ubiquitous in the US, the
friendships they form are finding their way into the theaters through bromantic comedies.

Central in the lives of most “guys” are the relationships they form with other
“guys.” Guys in American society today go through a very different period of growing
into adulthood than young men did one generation earlier. Whereas middle-class men
used to graduate from college, get married, start a family, buy a house and thus become
an adult very quickly after college and all within a few years, nowadays these steps take
longer to occur and are much more separated from one another. There is a longer period
of time in which men can still behave like boys and hold off on growing up and becoming
adult men with all the responsibilities that brings.

In her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve
Sedgwick introduces several concepts that I will apply to my topic. Sedgwick describes a
fluctuating continuum of “male homosocial desire” that relates to the “structure of men’s
relations with other men” in society.\(^\text{28}\) The term homosocial has a connection with the
term homosexual but must be seen as a separate sphere. The male homosocial continuum
encompasses all male connections between homosexuality and homophobia. In a
patriarchal society, such as the US, the male homosocial bonds are what define the
structures of power. Another useful concept Sedgwick uses in her book is the (erotic)
triangle. This situates male homosocial desire “within the structural context of triangular,
heterosexual desire.”\(^\text{29}\) Triangular heterosexual desire is present in bromantic comedies
that feature a bromance between two men, and, in order to establish the heterosexuality of
at least one of the males, also features a female love interest. However, the bromantic

\(^\text{28}\) Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia
\(^\text{29}\) Ibid., 16
The triangle is different from Sedgwick’s in which the main rivalry is set between two males over one woman. The rivalries in the films I discuss are between a man and a woman, who are ‘fighting’ for the attention of a feminized male character. Moreover, the main focus is not the rivalry itself but again the relationship between the two men.

Homosexuality has increased in visibility in American culture and has therefore added to the fear of heterosexual men of being perceived as effeminate or gay. As gay people are becoming more and more accepted in American society, straight men continue to feel the need to prove their heterosexual masculinity. Seeing as these films center on very close male-male friendships, part of my thesis will focus on the homosexual subtext and homophobia that is present in these films and is the source of much of their humor. There is often a striking difference between the main male character’s masculinities that increases the homosexual subtext. It is very important to consider that it is specifically in comedic films that a new kind of masculinity and homosocial friendship is constructed and represented. Humor is closely connected with ideas about gender and masculinity, as they are a large source for comedic situations and jokes. Also, humor has the ability to put anxieties, insecurities and popular conceptions and ideas about gender on display.

Furthermore, I will show that the way in which male friends show their affection for one another in bromantic comedies is through “covert intimacy.” Scott Swain’s article “Covert Intimacy: Closeness in Men’s Friendships” provides a study of the “covert style of intimate behavior” of college-aged men, when showing affection to friends of the same sex. Swain calls this “covert intimacy,” “a private, often nonverbal, context-

---

31 Ibid.
specific form of communication.”

Men have different ways of expressing intimacy to their male friends than to female friends. Women express intimacy more through words and though men show it less through words this does not mean they do not have other ways of expressing intimacy to their male friends. Intimacy here means “behavior in the context of a friendship that connotes a positive and mutual sense of meaning and importance to the participants.” What some call “the inexpressive male” need not be considered as solely a negative idea. Men do express that they like their friends; they just express it through action. Crude language and humor are important aspects of expressing intimacy in homosocial male friendships, as they function as legitimization of the male’s masculinity as well as relaying the same world-view as one’s friend.

The godfather of the bromantic comedy genre is Judd Apatow. A very busy man, he writes, directs and produces successful comedy films, usually centered on men (the one exception being the 2011 film Bridesmaids which Apatow produced, which features a group of six female friends). Apatow has a band of young male actors who rotate from leading to supporting roles throughout his films. The most prominent members of “Apatown” are Jason Segel, Paul Rudd, Jonah Hill and Seth Rogen, who were featured on the cover of Vanity Fair previously discussed. Apatow created the television show Undeclared, which was well received by critics but was canceled after one season. The first feature film Apatow wrote, produced and directed, The 40 Year Old Virgin (2005), became a smash at the box office. His second film, Knocked Up (2007), became his

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 331.
34 Ibid., 334.
35 The 40 Year Old Virgin was made on a budget of $26 million and made a total of $109,449,237 in the US box office alone. For more box office information see: <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=40yearoldvirgin.htm>.
largest directorial box office success to date. That same year *Entertainment Weekly* named Apatow the smartest person in Hollywood. Owen Gleiberman writes, “[Apatow’s] name … is powerfully associated with a great many films that he shepherded but didn’t direct.” These films that bear the Apatow name have come to be known as films created by “The Apatow Factory.” Recent Apatow Factory movies include *Pineapple Express, Funny People, Step Brothers* and *Get Him to the Greek*. Apatow Factory films mostly are R-rated bromantic comedies that, underneath the raunchy humor and dirty language, all have heart and are intelligently written.

This study will analyze two films that have directly risen from “the Apatow Factory” and one that has been very much influenced by these films. The first film I will discuss is *Knocked Up* (Apatow, 2007). Its main male character, Ben Stone, is flawed and seriously devoted to spending all of his time doing nothing or smoking weed with his best friends, who are also his roommates. He is stuck in “Guyland” and the main plot line revolves around getting him to commit to a serious heterosexual relationship, and thus serious manhood when Alison (Katherine Heigl) becomes “knocked up” after their one-night-stand. The second chapter will focus on *Superbad* (Motolla, 2007). This film has a thinly-veiled main narrative of two young guys in high school trying to win over girls whereas the real love story of the film is about the fear of separation between the two friends, who love nothing more in the world than each other. The final film I will discuss is *I Love You, Man* (Hamburg, 2009), the only one not directly affiliated with Apatow,

---

36. As of the beginning of July 2011, the Apatow-produced film *Bridesmaids* has taken over the lead for biggest grossing “Apatow Factory” film to date.
39. Ibid.
which I would call the most self-consciously bromantic of the three. This film upholds the genre conventions established by previous Apatow bromantic comedies and primarily focuses on the (platonic) love story between its two main characters.

I will argue that these bromantic comedies portray similar visions of a new kind of masculinity and of men who share similar anxieties (especially about women) and are aimless and insecure. Finding acceptance among women is almost impossible and therefore they find great comfort and fun bonding with their best friends, away from the intimidating, judgmental world of women. On the other hand, they also desperately want to win over the hearts of these women and be good enough for them. These films illustrate a very real change in American culture where young men increasingly depend upon one another during and after college, as their turn into “proper” manhood is delayed longer and longer. Young men face a struggle between their internal feelings and their outward performance of “proper” manhood. The close male friendships these flawed “soft bodies” form require them to behave like “real men,” which often means behaving differently from who they really are. Contemporary American men grow up in “Guyland” and learn through interaction with other males what it means to be a man. It is then also towards these other males that a guy has to prove he is a “real man.” The films discussed in this thesis portray several sides of their main male character’s masculinities. Real insecurities and emotions are portrayed as well as the tough exterior, including dirty language and jokes, put on for the benefit of fitting in with the guys. Among male friends, the performance of masculinity is continually kept in check. In order to create many comedic moments, it often occurs that a male character acts outside the boundaries of the social codes of masculinity and has to be reined in by his male friends. The closeness
portrayed between two male friends in a bromance is still positioned outside of heteronormative codes of male homosocial bonding. The bond between men is therefore the driving comedic force of these films. The happy endings of these films, according to Hollywood conventions, make sure the heteronormative order is restored and the men are paired off with women, not each other. However, these women pose many threats to limiting a man’s freedom and ability to have fun. Throughout marriage and male adulthood, male friendship remains the social sphere to which a guy is able to escape to have fun and act like a “real man.”
WHAT IF THIS GUY GOT YOU PREGNANT?

KNOCKED UP
The next comedy from the director of
THE 40-YEAR-OLD VIRGIN

06/01/07 SAVE THE DUE DATE
Chapter 1

Knocked Up: A “Soft Body’s” Journey from “Guyland” Into Male Adulthood

Alison: “I’m pregnant.” Ben: “Fuck off.”

The tagline on one of the posters for Knocked Up (2007, written, produced and directed by Judd Apatow) reads: “What if this guy got you pregnant?” This question, positioned above a headshot of the film’s “soft body” and anti-hero, Ben Stone, suggests that such a situation should be considered problematic as well as humorous. Beside the love story between Ben and Alison Scott, and underneath the vulgar humor, is a story about this young guy’s winding journey into male adulthood. At the beginning of the film, Ben mainly spends his time hanging out with his four best friends with whom he shares a house. The group of friends are shown smoking weed, drinking alcohol, going to a theme park and jumping in their dirty half-filled pool. These are “guys” such as Michael Kimmel describes them in his book Guyland. Ben and his friends are living carefree, irresponsible lives and have no plans for the future. One night Ben goes to a bar with his friends to “hook up” with girls and Alison is at that same bar celebrating a promotion at work (The TV network E!).

Alison is a beautiful, career-driven young woman who wants to achieve things in her life. Through the influence of alcohol and Ben’s charmingly self-deprecating humor, the two end up sharing the night together. A miscommunication in the bedroom: Alison shouts “just do it already!,” which Ben, who is fumbling to put on a condom, takes a bit too literally. He foregoes the use of birth control and eight weeks later Alison realizes she

---

40 Knocked Up, Dir. Judd Apatow, Perf. Seth Rogen and Katherine Heigl, Universal Pictures, DVD, 2008. All subsequent references to the film are to this DVD. This scene takes place during the dinner where Alison tells Ben the news of her pregnancy.

41 The picture is retrieved from: <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/knocked_up/>. 
is pregnant. This situation is a problem for Alison because she is not at the stage of her life where she is ready to have a baby but also because the person she is about to have a baby with is not exactly her ideal man. Aside from not looking the part, with his un-groomed curly hair and adolescent wardrobe, Ben is also still stuck in “Guyland,” in a state of arrested development. After careful consideration, Alison decides she wants to keep the baby and Ben can be as involved as he wants to be. It is quite clear from the start that Ben will have to grow up and drastically alter his lifestyle if he wants to play an important part in Alison and his baby’s lives. Alison, on the other hand, also has some maturing to do and has to adjust her own vision of her future as well as her idea of the perfect partner and ideal man. Knocked Up portrays the identity crisis of a young and privileged male “Soft Body” who has to learn what it means to be a man, partner and father. When difficulties arise, Ben can turn to the safe zone of male friendship, also named “the dugout.” Here, he can discuss his problems or simply escape all the pressures of having to comply with the societal expectations of proper manhood.

The focus of Knocked Up on Ben’s crisis of masculinity can be seen as part of the ongoing trend in cinema that has shifted the focus from what Susan Jeffords calls the “externality” of the hard body era into a “more internalized masculine dimension.” This focus on the internal dimension of male characters includes “explorations of their ethical dilemmas, emotional traumas, and psychological goals” and has in recent years been mostly portrayed in comedy films centered on men. A large part of Knocked Up’s narrative is devoted to Ben’s emotional journey into adulthood. The following scene

43 Ibid., 245.
44 Peter Alilunas argues that it is in contemporary comedy films where the “internalized masculine dimension” is portrayed and explored.
takes place when Alison has broken up with Ben and he feels completely lost. He therefore calls his father for advice on how to fix his problems.

**Ben**: You screwed me dad. You said everything was going to be fine and nothing is fine.

**Ben’s dad**: Ben, I’ve been divorced three times, why did you listen to me?

**Ben**: Cos you’re the only one giving me advice, and it was terrible advice.

**Ben’s dad**: You can blame everyone else, but until you take responsibility for yourself, none of this is going to work out.

**Ben**: I don’t know how to take responsibility for myself. I just smoked less pot.

I’m an idiot. I don’t know what to do. Tell me what to do. Just tell me what to do. Ben does not know how to make the situation better by himself and asks his father for advice. He is portrayed as weak and insecure and as a result his character is feminized and can therefore be called “soft.” His character is a stark opposition to the spectacle and toughness associated with “hard body” masculinity. Ben’s father has not been much of a role model for him and this has left Ben in the precarious situation of having to figure out himself, with the help of only his male peers, what it means to be a man.

Bromantic comedies create comedic situations and jokes around the ways in which male characters fail to live up to traditional masculinity. Most bromantic comedies can be said to fall into the category of what Peter Alilunas calls “dude flicks.” Alilunas writes that “dude flicks” “feature desperate, anxious white men – are nearly always comedies, and construct their humor from the inadequacies and failures of white male
masculinity." All three bromantic comedies discussed in this thesis can be referred to as “dude flicks.” One of the most important aspects of these films is that the male characters, according to Alilunas, always feel the women in their lives are judging them. Therefore these men have the feeling that they are never good enough for the women they desire. The female characters in *Knocked Up* generate humorous situations by judging male characters as they point out their (physical) flaws and unacceptable behavior. In one scene, for instance, Ben is playing in the backyard with the two young daughters of Debbie, Alison’s sister played by Judd Apatow’s real-life wife Leslie Mann. Debbie and Alison are standing in the doorway watching and judging his appearance and the way he interacts with the children. Debbie says to Alison:

He’s playing fetch with my kids. Who plays fetch with kids? … He is overweight. When does that end? Imagine how much bigger he is going to get. Your kid is going to be overweight.

The humor in this scene thus stems from the way in which Ben fails to live up to the expectations of the female characters that immediately judge his flaws. Debbie and Alison believe a proper man should have a healthy physique and an ability to appropriately entertain children. Ben represents a humorously flawed masculinity. It is when Ben enters Alison’s world that he is confronted with the ways in which he fails to be a “real man.” In these comedic situations his insecurities are fueled, as he simply does not know what to do in order to become a proper man.

---


46 Ibid.
Physically, as well, most bromantic comedy heroes are very different from the muscled “hard body” men of the 1980s. Ben Stone, for instance, is overweight, has what Debbie calls “man boobs” and looks and lives like a slob. He is also arguably a lot less attractive than Alison. This contributes to Ben’s insecurities and whether or not he is good enough for a girl like Alison. As Seth Rogen puts it: “People don’t understand why we feel awful about ourselves. Because I don’t think that feeling really goes away.”

Traditionally, the most important aspect a female was supposed to contribute to a relationship was beauty, whereas the men held the power. In a post-feminist world it is possible for a woman, such as Alison, to have power as well as beauty. This means that for the male there is more pressure to live up to the desires of the female gaze. The pressure is high on Ben because he has neither beauty nor wealth and is thus doubly disabled in the masculinity stakes. In a patriarchal society in which what Adrienne Rich has termed “compulsory heterosexuality” reigns, it is expected that this man and woman form a family together. It is also expected that the man hold the dominant role in this heterosexual relationship. The trouble is that Ben has to step into the appropriate male gender role and prove he is a proper man before Alison can accept him. To achieve this, Ben finds out during the course of the film, he must grow up, get a job and a house and become the traditional male provider of the family.

According to sociologist Erving Goffman, there is one “dominant image of masculinity” that American men strive for but most may never achieve, therefore at one

---

47 Seth Rogen in audio commentary on Knocked Up DVD.
time or another leaving them to feel like they are not good enough, or not “real men.”⁴⁹ Goffman writes:

In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports … Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself - during moments at least – as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior.⁵⁰

Such a dominant vision of “perfect American manhood” leaves the major part of American men often feeling like flawed and not “real men.” Furthermore, this is also the image that women imagine their men should fit into, which provides even more pressure for men to be better than they are. At the beginning of the film Ben is at a stage in his life where he is not concerned with living up to the standards of proper American manhood but rather strives to live up to the standards of his peers and be accepted by his group of male friends. It is not until Ben is immersed into a new world of male adulthood that he is faced with his own failures as a man. He sees how he falls short in the eyes of Alison and Debbie but also for his own sake he wants to become a better man. Without a proper male role model - his father is of little help and neither are his friends - Ben has no idea how to enter proper male adulthood even though he does want to change. This is what ultimately makes Ben’s character relatable and sympathetic to the audience. Young men can recognize the pressures of living up to the dominant image of American masculinity and male adulthood and that the road to getting there is not clearly marked out for them.

⁴⁹ Michael Kimmel, *Guyland*, 54.
In *Knocked Up* the world of women is presented as equivalent to the world of adulthood and responsibility. Guys can escape this social sphere by retreating to the safe haven that is male friendship, which David Greven names “the dugout.” Ben’s new romantic relationship with Alison is not only about having fun, it is about seeing if they can enter into a long-standing romantic relationship together. When the pressures of the female world become too much, Ben retreats into “the dugout.” He can go to his male friends whenever he needs their advice, support or just wants to have fun and get away. Alilunas writes:

> The ‘dugout’ might best be understood as a place to resolve the anxieties of ‘failed’ masculinity through the safe exercise of conventionally feminine traits. In other words, if these men cannot be conventionally masculine, perhaps they can succeed at being feminine.

The men featured in “dude flicks” and bromantic comedies have thus incorporated feminine traits traditionally positioned outside of American male masculinity, which they apply to particular male problems in an exclusively male social sphere. Women themselves are excluded from the dugout, but femininity is now used as a means of tightening the bonds between men.

Ben and Pete, Debbie’s husband played by Paul Rudd, who become good friends in the course of the film, run away to Las Vegas together after they have both had fights with Alison and Debbie. Initially, they go there to act like “real men,” as they drink, gamble and even take mushrooms. However, they end up in a hotel room together,

51 David Greven, “Dude, Where’s My Gender? Contemporary Teen Comedies and New Forms of American Masculinity,” *Cineaste* 27, no.3 (Summer 2002) Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed September 12, 2010), 16. As Greven writes: “male friendship seems to be the dugout where the boys catch their breath during the game of heterosexual conquest.”

52 Peter Alilunas, 5.
discussing their feelings, the women in their lives and how much they like each other. They thus are performing feminine traits associated with “the dugout,” in order to resolve their problems at home. Ben and Pete become friends as they have the same male perspective on life and the same sense of humor. These two male friends bond more strongly than their characters do with their female partners. When in Las Vegas Ben tells Pete:

   You can’t believe people love you?! I love you, man! Debbie loves you.
   You can’t accept love? Love?! The most beautiful, shiny thing in the world? You can’t accept it? … You can’t accept Debbie? She picked you as her life partner. I could accept it man… Debbie wants to give her life to you and Alison doesn’t want to do that with me and it makes me sad all day.

In this scene, that still occurs while Ben and Pete are under the influence of mushrooms, the two men are very open to each other. “The dugout” is a safe place to share your feelings because other men understand where those feelings are coming from. The scene above, on the other hand, is also meant to be comedic. It must be humorous in order to convey that it is still considered not entirely proper for two men to have this type of conversation together.

Ben’s insecurities as a man are furthermore fuelled by the few examples of manhood in his life. The visions of the future that might await him if he decides to commit to fatherhood, and possibly marriage, are very discouraging. Having to grow up and become a father are the things that scare Ben the most. In Las Vegas Ben is confronted with the problems he has run away from. While he is watching the film *Cheaper by the Dozen* in his hotel room Ben says:
This isn’t funny. This guy’s got twelve kids. That’s not funny. That’s a lot of responsibility to just be... laughing about. This is sick. This is a sick movie. I gotta turn this off. It’s freaking me out.

What the image on the screen conveys to Ben is that there are many responsibilities and sacrifices associated with manhood. To Ben, and other young men of “Guyland,” it feels like they will leave behind the possibility to have fun when they become proper adults. This is one of the reasons why the period before adulthood is being stretched out longer and longer. Young men are unwilling to leave the fun part of life, the part that they associate with boyhood, behind. To them, Kimmel writes, adulthood is “the negation of fun:”

After all, to a guy, growing up is no bargain: It means being a sober, responsible, breadwinning husband and father. It means mortgage payments, car payments, health insurance for the kids, accountability for your actions. Therefore, young men keep drifting along in “Guyland” for as long as they can, avoiding the accountability of manhood. They want to have their fun while they still can. Ben and Pete’s trip to Las Vegas is just a temporary escape into “the dugout.” They know eventually they will have to face reality and accept their roles as men.

Television shows and popular movies help perpetuate this bleak image of what a guy can expect from male adulthood. In these scenarios, men are shown to expect judgmental wives who make all decisions concerning their sex life and will constantly make their men feel bad about themselves. Debbie even says to Alison: “You criticize them so much, they get down on themselves, and then they’re forced to change.” If a guy

---

53 Susan Jeffords, “Can Masculinity be Terminated?” 26, 25.
commits to a woman and a family it means that the woman has won. Kimmel writes that what these kinds of representations of adult commitment in the popular media do is:

remind men that marriage and parenthood are women’s victories over the guys of Guyland, and that once they are permanently attached to nagging wives, they’ll never again have sex or any other kind of fun.  

The following scene between Pete and Debbie portrays how Debbie manipulates Pete and their sex life and how she makes big life decisions without consulting Pete about it first, such as deciding to become actively involved in helping Alison raise her child.

**Pete:** So what do you think, should we have sex tonight? **Debbie:** Ugh, it sounds awful. I am just really constipated. Do you really want to? **Pete:** Not now! … **Debbie:** We’ll help her raise the baby.

**Pete:** Well fuck!

One of the threats women pose to men in “dude flicks,” according to Peter Alilunas, is their “power to limit male sexual freedom,” which is exemplified in this scene.  

Debbie makes it seem like she still gives Pete a choice, but she has already taken away the possibility of having sex when she told him she is really constipated. If young guys are to believe all the negative portrayals of marriage, such as shown in *Knocked Up*, it is no wonder they will rather linger in Guyland than rush into serious relationships and manhood.

Films portraying very close male platonic friendships must always contend with the “male homosocial continuum” and decide how to depict “male homosocial desire.” A genre that also focuses on male camaraderie and most resembles the bromantic comedy

---

genre is the buddy cop genre. One of the most famous renditions of the buddy cop genre are the *Lethal Weapon* films, which feature the close friendship between police sergeants Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover) and Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson). The friendship between two males “must always deny and fulfill … ‘male homosocial desire,’ the continuum from homosexuality to homophobia and back again,” writes Cynthia Fuchs, referring to Sedgwick’s work, in her article “The Buddy Politic.”

The buddy film cannot portray explicit homosexual desire between the two heterosexual male leads; these friendships must remain platonic and yet very close. This is why a buddy film, just as a bromantic comedy, plays with the two extremes in the homosocial continuum.

Fuchs argues that the buddy cop film uses the “marriage of racial others” to displace homosexual anxiety. The close friendship portrayed in *Lethal Weapon* is between two men, but here the fact that one of them is African American and the other white displaces homosexual anxiety. With the release of the first film in 1987, the fact that Murtaugh and Riggs are very close friends is less of a social transgression than one of the two friends being black and the other white. The one social transgression, which is also visually more present, thus displaces another. A similar type of displacement is used in bromantic comedies, as they displace homosexual anxiety as well as homophobia through humor. One of the ways this displacement is achieved is by making homophobia the aim of the joke. Bromantic movies sometimes use comedy to deflate homosexual anxiety. According to Samuel A. Chambers, America operates under a system of “heteronormativity.” As he writes, “heteronormativity means, quite simply, that

---

57 Ibid.
heterosexuality is the norm – in culture, in society, in politics.”\textsuperscript{58} In popular film, heterosexuality also operates as the norm and therefore characters are assumed to be straight, unless specifically shown to be otherwise. The comedic tone of a scene can help affirm this heteronormative assumption. For instance, in \textit{Knocked Up}, Ben answers a phone call from Alison, and all his male friends start making graphic sexual movements and motions with one another; this is assumed to be heterosexual masculine behavior, and thus homosexual panic can be avoided. This is why it is important that it is precisely in comedic films where this new kind of American masculinity and bromances are portrayed.

In \textit{Knocked Up}, Debbie plays an important role in Ben’s final transformation into manhood. Ben accepts his responsibility and takes his “rightful place” as a man by stepping up to Debbie. According to Peter Alilunas, the presence of female characters in “dude flicks” is required in order “to further men’s journey towards successful ‘manhood.’”\textsuperscript{59} Ben has to overcome his fears of adulthood and feelings of inferiority in order to become a “real man.” Debbie has always made Ben feel like he is not good enough for her sister. In order for \textit{Knocked Up} to have a happy ending, Ben must prove he is a man who deserves to be with Alison, thereby re-establishing the traditional gender role dynamic. \textit{Knocked Up} does not resist providing its audience with the happy ending it craves and expects. Ben finds a real job, gets his own apartment and decorates a room for the baby and is thus ready to become the traditional provider and head of the family. Then he takes away Debbie’s power and thereby completes his transformation into proper manhood. When Alison is about to give birth, Debbie and Pete come into the delivery

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 6.
\end{footnotes}
room with a camera and Debbie tells Ben that he should leave the room. Ben asks Debbie if he can speak to her in the hallway. The scene below follows:

**Ben:** I’d like to be in there with Alison, without you.

**Debbie:** Okay, but this isn’t up to you.

**Ben:** Debbie, you are high off your ass if you think you’re coming into that room. That’s my room now: back the fuck off!

**Debbie to Pete:** Ben just kicked me out. He told me to leave.

**Pete:** Oh.

**Debbie:** I guess it’s good, right? 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.

**Pete:** I wish I had gotten that on tape.

In the commentary, Seth Rogen says: “He is being a man, getting it done.” Debbie “is kind of happy he did it,” because “he’s showing backbone.” In this scene, Debbie finally accepts Ben as a “real man.” She thus functions as a means for Ben to assert his rights as father of the baby and worthy partner of Alison. Also, in this scene the traditional gender hierarchy is restored. After this scene, Ben goes back into the delivery room to act as birth partner and is later very proud to announce to his group of friends “it’s a girl.” Afterwards he takes Alison and the baby with him to move into his new apartment. In the end *Knocked Up* thus gets a traditional romantic comedy happy ending.
Chapter 2
Superbad: Covert Intimacy, the Bro Code, and the Bromance Between a Slacker and a Geek

“I just wanna go to the rooftops and scream: I love my best friend Evan!”60

Superbad (Greg Motolla, 2007) tells the story of two best friends’ last days of high school. Seth and Evan, played by Jonah Hill and Michael Cera, have been friends since they were eight years old and are inseparable. However, Evan has been accepted into Dartmouth College whereas Seth has not. Seth will go to a less prestigious college, as he does not do very well in school. The two friends have to face the fact that they will be separated and starting different lives when they leave for their different colleges. The film was written by Knocked Up star, Seth Rogen, and his best friend Evan Goldberg. The two main characters are based on and share names with the writers. The characters Seth and Evan are not part of the popular high school crowd. Their high school careers are almost over and they have not been invited to any graduation parties nor have they succeeded in ‘hooking up’ with the girls they like. During a home economics class, Seth is teamed up with Jules (Emma Stone), a ‘cool girl’ he really likes, and she invites him and Evan to her party that night. Seth brags about getting a fake ID and therefore is asked by the girls to buy all the alcohol for the party. Thus begins the boys’ quest to score alcohol and girls before their final chance has passed them by.

Seth believes that the only way he and Evan can get girls is to get them drunk. He desperately pleads with Evan: “You know when you hear girls saying, ‘oh, I was so gone last night, I shouldn’t have fucked that guy.’ WE could be that mistake!” The two young

60 Superbad, Dir. Greg Motolla, Perf. Jonah Hill and Michael Cera, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, DVD, 2010. All subsequent references are to this DVD. This is a quote from Seth during the scene in which Seth and Evan finally voice their feelings of “guy love” for one another.
guys, together with their mutual friend Fogel (Christopher Mintz-Plasse), get into a lot of trouble between the liquor store and the time they finally arrive at the party and learn how much their friendship means to each other along the way. I will use Scott Swain’s term “covert intimacy” to describe the close male homosocial relationship between the main characters in *Superbad*. Seth and Evan are embarrassed to say out loud how much they care about each other, even though their friendship is the most important relationship in their lives. Instead of voicing their feelings, the two friends try to follow the social guidelines of the “Bro Code” and show their closeness in the way they interact and the humor and specific male language they use to communicate. *Superbad* sheds a light on these two guys’ inner anxieties and moral dilemmas as they try to negotiate this role of the “real guy.” This role is not a natural fit for every young guy, yet it is a necessary role to play in order to be accepted, not by women, but by other men. “Covert intimacy” and the “Bro Code” thus uphold those significant, strong male homosocial bonds of friendship and seemingly also keep homosexual panic at bay. However, in *Superbad* there is a gender imbalance between Seth’s queered “slacker” and Evan’s feminized “geek” persona’s, which promotes in their bond something more than mere friendship and invites comedic homosexual allusions.

*Superbad* is focused on what Susan Jeffords calls the “internal dimension” of masculinity. Both of the main characters are regular high school boys and the film portrays their insecurities and fears. One of the things that makes the two friends insecure is the fact that they will be going to two different colleges and in effect thus must ‘split up’ and become their own men. Next year they will not be able to lean on their friendship for comfort and safety. Although the two friends do not speak about their feelings with
each other, all the people in their lives know how strong their friendship is and are amazed they will be “cutting the cord,” as Jules puts it. Evan’s mom remarks: “I can’t imagine what your’re gonna do without each other next year.” When Becca (Martha MacIsaac), the girl Evan has a crush on, hears the news, she says: “That sucks” and Evan responds: “Yeah, I mean, it’s not too bad. It’s okay. I’m not too worried about it. I wouldn’t worry about it. I’m not worried. I’m not worried at all.” The repetition makes it clear that Evan is actually very worried but feels it would seem uncool or unmanly to confess his feelings about his best friend to the girl he likes. The boys’ internal struggles with the fear of losing each other’s friendship is emphasized by the many times it is remarked upon as well as the irritation and tension between the two friends that results from them not confronting each other with their feelings of insecurity.

Seth and Evan interact with one another through the social codes of male homosocial behavior which Scott Swain terms “covert intimacy.” In accordance with “covert intimacy,” Seth and Evan’s close friendship is mostly reflected in the way they interact with one another. Men have different ways of portraying closeness with male friends than with female friends. Whereas women show intimacy more through words, men show this more through action. In this sense, male homosocial intimacy is “covertly” expressed. This particular type of male intimacy is, as Scott Swain writes “a private, often nonverbal, context-specific form of communication.” The differences between male and female homosocial friendships arise during childhood, when separate boy and girl social spheres emerge. Throughout their childhood and adolescence boys learn that there are specific types of behaviors as well as values connected to male homosocial friendship.61 Beside the non-verbal forms of male communication associated with covert intimacy are

61 Scott Swain, “Covert Intimacy,” 330.
the “language patterns” young men develop during their adolescence. The social sphere of boyhood is “rugged” and “dirty” and the language patterns developed through boyhood are accordingly also “dirty.” This male-specific “dirty language,” according to Swain, relies on “crude and explicitly sexual terms.” Using crude language among male friends legitimizes a guy’s masculinity through the tough masculine tone of conversation. A specific type of masculine “harsh humor” usually accompanies this male homosocial language.\(^2\)

In *Superbad*, Seth and Evan communicate with each other through such “dirty language” and “harsh humor.” The two friends talk about girls and sex in explicit terms. This specifically male form of conversation enhances and underwrites their bond of friendship. Seth for instance tells Evan: “The point is to be good at sex by the time you get to college. You don’t want girls to think you suck dick at fucking pussy, okay.” In this conversation Seth and Evan are talking about their past (lack of) experience with girls as well as their sexual frustrations. Evan, for instance, says to Seth: “Just imagine if girls weren’t weirded out by our boners and stuff, and just like wanted to see them. That’s the world I one day want to live in.” Throughout adolescence, young males are taught that using explicit language is a sign of masculinity and required in male social spheres. Here, Seth’s macho tone of speech and use of crude language affirms his masculinity. Evan, on the other hand, is feminized by his choice of words and tone of phrase. His vocabulary is markedly less dirty than Seth’s and hereby Evan shows that using dirty language does not come naturally to all guys.

One of the most important aspects of closeness in male friendship according to Swain is a particular, shared sense of humor and “joking behavior.” Through joking with

\(^2\) Ibid., 334.
one another, male friends “communicate closeness and similar ways of viewing the world.” This way, friends can share intimacy and show how well they know each other. This is also the case with Seth and Evan, who are aware of the subjects and type of jokes the other finds funny and know how and when they go too far. They are extremely well attuned to each other’s comic rhythms, which shows they are very familiar with each other’s personalities. For instance, they poke fun at each other when Seth says: “I’m truly jealous you got to suck on those tits when you were a baby.” And Evan replies: “Yeah, well at least you got to suck on your dad’s dick.” Seth and Evan can make jokes at each other’s expense precisely because their bond of friendship is so strong and it is what guys are supposed to do.

As a film that focuses on the bromance between two young male characters, *Superbad* uses certain characterizations in order to enhance the homosexual subtext for comedic purposes but it also has to avoid actual homosexuality and outright homophobia at all costs. In other words, the film plays along the border of Sedgwick’s “male homosocial continuum.” Seth and Evan can be seen as a “slacker” and “geek” duo, whereby Seth is the queered slacker persona and Evan the feminized geek. In his PhD dissertation “Falling out of the closet: Kevin Smith, Queerness and Independent Cinema,” Carter Michael Soles focuses on the importance of filmmaker Kevin Smith and his films during the rise of independent “slacker” cinema in the 1990s. Smith’s films and other independent “slacker” films focusing on male friendship and American masculine identity can be seen as the direct precursors to big studio bromance films such as those discussed in this thesis.64 Drawing on Eve Sedgwick’s ideas on male homosociality,

---

63 Ibid., 342.
64 *Knocked Up* also falls under the heading “slacker film.”
Soles argues that Smith’s films center on Generation X male slackers and geeks “as they negotiate the culturally enforced gap separating male homosociality… from explicit male homoerotic desire.”

Many independent “slacker” films, like bromantic comedies, feature a pair of male best friends. These are usually “odd couples” consisting of one “geek” and one “slacker.” “Geeks” and “slackars” are quite new types of American masculinity that are tied to the emergence of Generation X and Y males. According to Soles, Generation X males who “embrace these new, more emotionally vulnerable forms of masculinity” were faced with “extreme destabilization of [their] gender and sexual status.” American men face a crisis of masculinity when it is no longer certain what it means to be a ‘real man.’ This problematizes the male homosocial relationships of American men and their representation in popular media. Bromantic comedies use this destabilization of American masculinity to create humorous buddy couples consisting of two conflicting masculinities.

In the first scene of Superbad the differences between the two main characters’ masculinities are immediately emphasized. Evan can be put into the feminized masculine type of the “geek.” Soles describes the geek as feminized, as he “refuses classical masculinity in favor of increased emotional sensitivity.” As Seth is driving to Evan’s house to pick him up to go to school the two friends are talking to each other on the phone and are discussing which porn website to subscribe to. In this scene the differences

---

65 Carter Michael Soles, “Falling out of the Closet: Kevin Smith, Queerness, and Independent Film,” (PhD. Diss., University of Oregon, 2008), iv.
66 Ibid., 5.
67 Ibid.
between the two guys’ “emotional sensitivity” and masculinity is made clear. When Seth expands on all the particular fetishes available on different sites, Evan responds:

That’s disgusting, you’re like an animal.

Seth: I’m disgusting? You’re the weird one, man. Don’t make me feel weird because I like porn. You’re the weird one for not liking porn. I’m normal as shit…

Evan: You could always subscribe to a site like Perfect Ten. I mean that could be anything, it could be like a bowling site.

Seth: Yeah, but it doesn’t actually show dick going in which is a huge concern.

Evan: Right, I didn’t realize that.

This conversation puts the two friends in two different characterizations of masculinity. Seth is the sexually deviant one, whereas Evan here seems quite feminized, fazed by Seth’s perverseness and uncomfortable with his hypersexualized language. This scene also portrays the depth of the friendship as the two friends share information with each other on quite intimate topics. A “geek” is “whiny, effeminate, yet intelligent and creative,” which fits Evan’s character.68 Evan is effeminate in his looks and movements (he is skinny and a very poor athlete) and he is also sensitive and sweet. He is extremely awkward around the girl he likes, Becca. He stammers when he talks to her and at one point in the film accidentally punches her in the breast. Near the end of the film, when Evan finally arrives at the party, Becca is drunk and wants to ‘hook up’ with him. He is shocked to see her so sexually aggressive and is unsure how to react. He says to Becca’s friend: “but she’s totally hammered and if I get with her and I’m not drunk isn’t that like unethical?” The fact that Evan, a male high school senior, would turn down sex because he believes it would be unethical while the girl is drunk, marks his emotional sensitivity

68 Ibid., 4.
and feminized masculinity. His geek personality is furthermore underlined by him being more intelligent than Seth, highlighted by the fact that he has been accepted to a prestigious university and Seth has not. Whereas Evan is a humorous character through his lack of traditional masculine traits, Seth is humorous because of his extreme crassness and queered masculine personality.

Seth is the “slacker sidekick” who is over-obsessed with sex and, opposed to Evan’s feminized masculinity, still adheres to a more classic masculinity. According to Soles, the slacker should be seen as sexually deviant, or “queer,” because his sexuality “spills over the boundaries of the heterosexual.”69 This is also where he is contrasted with the geek character, as the geek is “more conservatively heterosexual.”70 In the following conversation, Seth acts out his part as a guy’s guy by speaking crudely about sex and women. Evan, on the other hand, responds with indignation and vocalizes his feelings about Seth’s hypersexualized dirty language and denigrating way of speaking about Becca.

**Evan**: I’m tired of you talking about her like that, man.

**Seth**: … I’m just saying that she looks like a good fucker. She looks like she could take a dick. Some women pride themselves on their dick taking abilities.

**Evan**: Do you think that’s a good thing to say about somebody?

The two friends often fight about Becca, the subtext being that Seth is jealous of Evan’s heterosexual desire for Becca, which means he will receive less attention from his best friend. Through his excessive use of “dirty language” and obsession with sex, Seth is queered and is the character that can say things like: “Matt Muier! He’s the sweetest guy

---

69 Ibid., 5.
70 Ibid., 46.
ever. Have you ever stared into his eyes? It was like the first time I heard the Beatles.” In
*Superbad*, both main male characters’ masculinities are constructed in a way that enlarges
the homosexual subtext of the film, which serves as a source for comedic situations and
jokes. The female characters they desire are narratively indispensable as they serve to
make Seth and Evan’s homosocial desire acceptable, as the two must not be seen as
actual homosexual characters.

The most important function this distinction in masculinities serves is to create an
unequal gender power balance that validates the homosocial desire between the two male
lead characters. America is, as Carter Soles writes, a “heterocentrist culture” which
demands “some kind of inequality between the partners in order to make the relationship
legible in the first place.”71 The problem with depicting homosexual relationships is that
this inequality is missing. According to Richard Dyer, two homosexual partners “in terms
of sex caste, are equals.”72 A relationship consisting of one man and one woman is one in
which a sex caste imbalance exists. This relationship is recognized as valid in a
heterocentrist culture. Homosexual, as well as homosocial, relationships are rarely
portrayed on the screen consisting of two men with perfect sex caste equality. To portray
a relationship that is credible to a heterocentrist culture, there must be a gender inequality
portrayed between the two ‘partners,’ whether it is homosexual or bromantic. The
differences in the main characters’ masculinities in *Superbad*, emphasized by a difference
in class status, thus function to create a culturally-mandated gender inequality that, as
Soles argues about the two main characters in *Clerks*, (and which counts for Seth and

71 Ibid., 65.
Evan in *Superbad* as well), “helps render… their homoerotic bond legible.” The homoerotic bond between Seth and Evan is both touching and funny because it is *almost* gay, and importantly, because it is between two still relatively innocent and unaffected high school seniors.

Furthermore, the guys in *Superbad* can be seen as outside of the realm of dominant masculine identities, and fitting into a soft vision of masculinity, since they have difficulty complying with what Michael Kimmel calls the “guy code.” This code can be boiled down to the motto of Guyland: “bros before hos.” Male friendships are the most essential relationships in a guy’s life. Kimmel writes that almost every guy is aware of the “Bro Code,” and “knows that his ‘brothers’ are his real soul mates, his real life-partners.” Kimmel interviewed young men across America to compose a list of the ten rules of modern masculinity. These rules vary little from a list composed in 1976 by social psychologist Robert Brannon. The dominant ideas on what it takes to be a ‘real man’ thus have not changed drastically over the last few decades. Kimmel’s “Real Guy’s Top Ten List” encompasses the following ten rules:

1. ‘Boys Don’t Cry’
2. ‘It’s Better to be Mad than Sad’
3. ‘Don’t Get Mad – Get Even’
4. ‘Take It Like a Man’
5. ‘He Who has the Most Toys When he Dies, Wins’
6. ‘Just do it,’ or ‘Ride or Die’

---

73 Soles, 100.
74 “Hos” is a rather degrading term for women derived from the word “whores” which symbolizes women’s lower status as mere sex objects within male social spheres such as “Guyland.”
Most men are aware of these dominant rules associated with American masculinity.

Young men are expected to keep their feelings and weaknesses in check and not let the outside world, or their friends, know how they feel on the inside. In fact, Kimmel writes that “boys feel effeminate not only if they express their emotions, but even if they feel them.” The guys in Superbad try to abide by the Guy Code, but they show it is extremely hard to keep up with as these rules are often at odds with their personalities and their actual feelings.

The pervasiveness of Guyland and the restrictions of the Bro Code ensure that most guys express fears, anxieties and feelings in a covert way, or not at all. Superbad exemplifies how young guys are afraid to share their feelings with their male friends and why this is problematic. Seth is angry and upset with Evan for “bailing on [him] next year” (a.k.a. leaving him to go to a different college) but for most of the film acts out his feelings, which is the more masculine thing to do, instead of voicing them to Evan. Male intimacy is restricted in the sense that showing, or even having emotions, is usually not accepted in male social spheres. However, in Superbad, when Seth and Evan have reached the level that they cannot hold it in anymore, they confront each other with their bottled-up feelings about their friendship. Evan tells Seth: “I’m not gonna let you slow me down anymore, Seth.” When there are obstacles in the way of a friendship it might

---

76 Ibid., 44.
77 Ibid., 53.
seem more manly to keep feelings bottled inside but as Seth replies to Evan: “Don’t keep it inside for ten years, say it like a fucking man!” It actually takes more guts to share your feelings with your best friends. After their heated confrontation, the two realize how much their friendship means to them. When the police show up and put an end to the party, Seth and Evan escape and have a sleepover in Evan’s basement. It is here, and only while heavily intoxicated, that the two friends say to each other:

Seth: I love you. I love you. I’m not even embarrassed to say it. I just love you.

Evan: I’m not embarrassed.

Seth: I love you.

Evan: I love you

Evan: Why don’t we say that every day?

The two friends acknowledge they should be feeling embarrassed to say “I love you” to another guy. The feelings are real, but it also must remain comedic when two young men share this level of out-in-the-open intimacy. The morning after has the two friends waking up and feeling embarrassed and not mentioning to each other what they shared the night before.

The struggles of Seth and Evan to comply with the Bro Code demonstrate the performative nature of male masculinity. In accordance with Judith Butler’s ideas on “gender performativity,” which she outlines in her influential book Gender Trouble, Michael Kimmel writes that the performance of masculinity is not natural or biological, it is “coerced and policed relentlessly by other guys.”78 Kimmel continues:

[M]en subscribe to these ideals not because they want to impress women, let alone any inner drive or desire to test themselves against some abstract standard.

78 Ibid., 51.
They do it because they want to be positively evaluated by other men. American men want to be a ‘man among men,’ an Arnold Schwarzenegger-like ‘man’s man,’ not a Fabio-like ‘ladies’ man.’ Masculinity is largely a ‘homosocial’ experience: performed for, and judged by, other men. They do it because they want to be positively evaluated by other men. American men want to be a ‘man among men,’ an Arnold Schwarzenegger-like ‘man’s man,’ not a Fabio-like ‘ladies’ man.’ Masculinity is largely a ‘homosocial’ experience: performed for, and judged by, other men.79

Starting in high school, the pressures of subscribing to the Guy Code are very high. Guys who are somewhat effeminate, like Evan, quickly get called “faggot” by other guys to put him in his place.

*Superbad* portrays some of the ways in which other guys, through emasculating name-calling, keep masculinity in check. According to Kimmel, homophobia is ubiquitous in “Guyland.” A male homosocial sphere needs to be monitored in terms of the performance of masculinity, which can be achieved through active homophobia. One of the sentences that is the most used as a put-down in Guyland is “that’s so gay”.80 Calling a guy gay is a very easy way to question his masculinity and to try to put him on the ‘straight’ masculine path. In *Superbad*, much derogatory feminizing and/or homophobic name-calling occurs. These are all ways in which the male characters are confronted with their non-masculine behavior. They are called and call each other “faggot,” “supergay,” “pussy” and “vagina.” This happens when they are angry with other guys or when a friend is showing signs of weakness i.e. femininity. The underlining idea here is that guys use these terms to convey to other guys that their behavior is outside of the social requirements of masculinity. They are not acting like a man. Seth and Evan understand what the dominant rules associated with masculinity are, and that they are expected to behave accordingly. However, their apparent flaws as men make

79 Ibid., 47.
80 Ibid., 9.
them all the more realistic characters and shows that the social construction of proper
American masculinity restricts young guys in expressing themselves to one another.
Chapter 3:
I Love You Man: Exploring the Rules and Boundaries of Male Friendship

“I hate this, there are no rules for male friendships”

Through the blossoming friendship between Peter Klaven (Paul Rudd) and Sydney Fife (Jason Segel) I Love You, Man, directed by Jamie Hamburg, explores the rules of modern male friendship. As Dennis Lim, reviewer for the New York Times, writes, I Love You, Man is a film “in which the love-between-men subtext of the Apatow movies becomes text.” The “love-between-men” is always a vital presence in Apatow’s films but is never put as front and center as in I Love You, Man. Though Judd Apatow was not directly involved in this film, his influence is substantial, particularly through the focus on male friendship and the type of American man portrayed. Also, Rudd and Segel have starred in many of Apatow’s previous projects. When I Love You, Man was made, the bromantic comedy had already become a very popular genre at the American box office. This film is particularly designed to push all the right bromantic buttons and appeal to a large audience. In order to do this a bromantic comedy must try to appeal to gay friendly, as well as homophobic audiences. The plot of the film revolves around the bromance between the two main male characters, the insecure and feminine Peter and the uber-confident and macho Sydney. Peter has just gotten engaged to his girlfriend Zooey (Rashida Jones) but there is one problem. While she has many girlfriends who can be her bridesmaids, Peter has no male friend who can be the best man at their wedding.

---

81 I Love You, Man. Dir. Jamie Hamburg, Perf. Paul Rudd and Jason Segel, Paramount Home Entertainment, DVD, 2010. All subsequent references are to this DVD. Peter Klaven speaking to his brother Robbie about his frustrations in finding a new male friend.
Ashamed of being unable to bond with men as well as he can with women, and wanting to please his fiancée, Peter goes in search of a “same-sex soul mate,” as Lim calls it.83

Peter is a relatively successful, but insecure realtor. Though he is heterosexual, he is not traditionally masculine as he is quite sensitive and effeminate. This leads other characters to either conclude he is not much of a “real” man (i.e. not masculine and tough enough to be “one of the guys”) or that he might be homosexual. His feminine masculinity is one of the reasons why he has trouble making male friends. As more of a girl’s guy, someone who finds it easier to bond with girls than guys, Peter has no idea how to go about finding a best man for his wedding. He is especially confused about the ‘rules’ of male bonding. Peter first tries to become friends with Barry (played by Jon Favreau), the husband of Zooey’s best friend, but is not accepted into Barry’s group of male friends. Peter’s gay brother Robbie (Andy Samberg) then enlightens him on the rules involved in heterosexual male bonding. Peter is ‘set-up’ with many guys, including one who turns out to be gay, but does not click with any of them. At one of his open houses (the house of The Hulk star, Lou ferrigno) he meets Sydney Fife.

Sydney, whose masculinity is almost a complete opposite to Peter’s, is not at the open house because he is interested in purchasing a house, but for the free sandwiches and the chance of meeting “hot divorcées.” The two instantly ‘hit it off,’ start meeting each other for drinks, dinner and walks with Sydney’s tiny dog, named Anwar Sedat, and soon become best friends. The tagline of the film “Are You Man Enough to Say It?” claims that only a real man is able to tell his best friend: “I Love You, Man.” In order to attain this condition Peter also undergoes some lessons to shore up his masculinity. He learns that in order to be friends with a guy, he needs to become more of a man and act

83 Dennis Lim, “Isn’t he Bromantic?”
less feminine, or, as Sydney sarcastically puts it during one of these ‘man-up’ lessons: “now gently remove your tampon and try again.” The performative nature of masculinity is thereby highlighted in such scenes where Peter is taught how to ‘act’ like a proper man. The friendship between Peter and Sydney is purposely constructed to resemble a romantic relationship, where Peter plays the part of the ‘girl’ and Sydney that of the ‘man.’ As with other bromantic comedies, the nearly homosexual friendship between the two men is the emotional as well as comedic heart of the film. Zooey’s presence in the film is necessary to balance out the male desire and friendship as well as to heterosexualize Peter. Sydney and Zooey then compete for Peter’s affections, creating a somewhat queered erotic triangle, in which the feminized Peter is the object of desire. Peter’s femininity is ridiculed to create comedic situations and it also establishes him as a perfect platonic other half for Sydney. Their relationship must be kept within the boundaries of platonic male friendship but for laughs gets awfully close to breaking those rules.

Seeing as the film focuses mainly on the nonsexual but loving friendship between two male characters, the storyline devoted to the relationship between Peter and his fiancée Zooey Rice is mostly secondary. However, Zooey’s character is indispensible in the establishment of Peter’s failed masculinity. Peter’s biggest flaw is his lack of male friends, which signifies a lack of proper masculinity. Zooey, for instance, is the first one who notices how strange it is that Peter does not have anyone to call about the engagement besides his parents. In a scene where Zooey is having a ‘ladies night’ at their home, Peter arrives early and accidentally overhears the women’s conversation:

**Zooey:** Peter is not a freakazoid!
Friend: I don’t know. A guy without friends can be really clingy. ‘When are you coming home?’ ‘What am I gonna do?’

Zooey: Peter’s not like that.

Friend: It’s gonna be a little weird if he’s walking down the aisle alone.

Friend: So who’s gonna be his best man?

Zooey: I have no idea. I honestly think that his best friend is his mom.

Friends: Eww.

Zooey: No, no, not like that. Peter? Honey?

Peter: (awkwardly) Hey!

This scene shows that women expect a man to have his own male friends and even call Peter a “freakazoid” when they hear he does not have any friends. The most embarrassing aspect of Peter’s flawed masculinity follows when Zoeey reveals Peter’s best friend is his mother. Had this been his brother, or even his father, it would have been considered much more masculine. Peter, overhearing this conversation, immediately starts to feel insecure about his own masculinity and feels it is necessary to start looking for his best man.

Zooey believes Peter will become a happier man if he has male friendships in his life. Later in the film, however, Zoeey becomes jealous because she is not a part of the special bond that Peter and Sydney share, which she feels is inappropriately close. She tells Peter: “I’m kind of weirded out by what’s going on between you two.” With Zoeey becoming jealous of Peter and Sydney’s friendship, she adds to the implications that their bond is nearly homosexual. In this comedic situation it is understandable that Zoeey should get jealous; it is almost as if Peter is cheating on her with Sydney by becoming so close to someone else. This closeness is humorous because it is still considered to be
somewhat inappropriate as it borders too closely on the homosexual. At one point Zooey says: “when do I get to meet the man who stole you away from me?” Sydney and Peter share feelings, stories and intimate details about their sex lives with one another. The two men have gotten ‘feelings’ for one another and have in a sense become platonic lovers. This is where Zooey plays her most important part: she is the proof that Peter is not gay. Because of her character, the male love story can be the center of the plot as in the end, Peter will end up with Zooey, not Sydney.

Peter is feminized through his association with Sydney and his brother Robbie. Next to these two men, Peter seems especially effeminate. Sydney is a complete opposite to Peter and therefore his perfect bromantic counterpart. Sydney is a guy’s guy who is very secure with his own masculinity and sexuality. In his garage he has what he calls a “man cave,” a place where no women are allowed, with videogames, DVDs, instruments and even a “jerk-off station.” He never apologizes for his behavior and explains it this way: “Peter, I am a man. I have an ocean of testosterone flowing through my veins.” This is a remark that Peter has a very hard time relating to. Peter is furthermore feminized through the comparison with his macho gay brother, Robbie. Robbie is a homosexual but he is much more traditionally masculine than Peter. He is also in much better shape as he works in a gym. By means of this, he is put into a somewhat stereotypical gay role as his job in the gym is portrayed as convenient to him because here he can pick up gay, as well as heterosexual men, because he likes a challenge. However, he represents a much more successful and even a more traditional masculinity compared to Peter.

One of the ways in which Robbie can be considered to represent a more successful masculinity is his knowledge on how to connect with other men and make new
friends. Robbie has some advice for Peter on how to become platonic friends with a straight man and outlines the rules of ‘dating’ potential male friends. These rules are necessary because none of these dates should turn into actual dates, meaning homosexual man-man dates. Rules must be followed to steer clear of homosexual confusion:

**Peter:** So what do I do? How do I make friends?

**Robbie:** If you see a cool looking guy, strike up a conversation and ask him on a man date.

**Peter:** Ok

**Robbie:** Do you know what I mean?

**Peter:** No

**Robbie:** Casual lunch or after work drinks. You’re not taking these boys to see *The Devil Wears Prada.*

**Peter:** Oh God I love that movie... No I won’t.

It is Peter who loves romantic comedies and Robbie who knows how to become friends with straight men. Peter is heterosexual and society expects him to be more traditionally masculine. Having successful male friendships is a sign of successful masculinity, something that Peter obviously lacks. Reviewer Manohla Dargis notes that Peter having only ‘girlfriends’ and no male friends makes him “something less than a man and somewhat more of a woman: a semi-man or, if you prefer, a femi-man.” It is far more acceptable in today’s society to laugh at a feminized heterosexual man because he is acting against the expectation of what a “real man” is supposed to act like, than at

---

84 Dargis, “Best Man Wanted. Must be Rush Fan.”
stereotypically effeminate gay men. Peter’s quest for a best friend is really a quest for his own “true” masculinity.

Peter’s education in acceptable masculine behavior continues with the help of Sydney. Sydney shares his vision of masculinity with Peter, who he thinks can afford to “man up” a bit more often. The two bond over things proper men should like, such as jamming on their music instruments and the band Rush, which they both love. During the film Sydney tries to transform Peter from a girl’s guy into more of a guy’s guy, as in a scene where Sydney takes Peter under a bridge to get him to scream out loud and let the frustration out of him for once.

**Sydney**: Society tells us we’re civilized but the truth is we are animals.

Sometimes we just have to let it out. Try it.

**Peter**: Blaaaah!

Sydney here acts as something of a “gender police” by letting Peter know his behavior is not at all considered manly. In a sense, Peter is pulled back into the manners and ways of “Guyland” in order to become a guy’s guy.

*I Love You, Man* portrays several out-gay characters and though they are sympathetic, they are also the target of several jokes and the reason for a few awkward misunderstandings. There is a moment of gay panic in the film when Peter is set up with a man who turns out to be gay. The man in question, Doug, kisses Peter fully on the lips at the end of what he believed to have been a real date. Peter’s masculinity is so feminine that a gay man would also mistake him for a homosexual. When Peter comes home and kisses Zooey she looks confused and asks why his mouth tastes like an ashtray:

---

85 Ibid.
Peter: Well, I don’t think I’m gonna meet anybody by June 30th so our wedding party’s going to be uneven.

Zooey: I don’t care; I just want you to be happy, and to stop kissing strange men.

Peter: Yeah, he got up in there.

Zooey: You wouldn’t mind brushing your teeth?

Peter: No, I’ve already done it a couple of times, I’ve gotta go with chemicals on this. I might use comet.

Although at the moment of the kiss Peter does not get angry or even pull away, the film suggests that this kiss left such an aftertaste it has to be chemically scrubbed away. Robbie even mentions the kiss later in the film. His comment makes it seem like Doug sexually assaulted Peter, as he says: “No dinner. You don’t want another tongue fucking.”

Furthermore, the presence of this gay character, Doug, makes it possible to create a few comedic situations where he mistakes the closeness between Peter and Sydney as a homosexual relationship. As Peter and Sydney are shopping for tuxedos for the wedding they share a moment of intimacy and half embrace each other. Just then Doug runs into them.

Doug: Peter?

Peter: Doug! This is my, uh…

Sydney: Sydney.

Peter: Sydney, this is… Sydney.

Doug: You know, it takes a lot of nerve to spend a beautiful evening with someone and then never call them again.
Peter: Doug, I can explain.

Doug: I just wish I could take back that kiss.

Sydney: Whoa!

Doug: Because I felt something that I haven’t felt in years. And now I know it was the taste of betrayal.

Peter: It wasn’t the taste of betrayal.

Doug: It was the taste of betrayal.

Peter: No, it really wasn’t.

Doug: It was the taste of betrayal, you fucking whore.

In the next scene, Peter finally explains to Sydney that he was actively searching for a best friend, which was how he met Doug. Sydney is very understanding and Peter asks him to be his best man. Sydney gladly accepts and the two friends, standing in front of a fountain, hug each other. At that moment, Doug walks by them saying “you’re a whore, Peter.” In both scenes, a moment of intimacy between Sydney and Peter is comically interrupted. This interruption focuses attention on the idea that their closeness (a hug between two men) could be, and for comedic reasons should be, construed as gay. At the same time, Doug provides an example of an actual gay man and by contrast the male bonding between Sydney and Peter is quite innocent. As Carter Michael Soles argues, secondary characters, such as the stereotypically gay Doug, can “serve to shore up the alleged non-queerness of the principle male characters… by being more queer than they are.”

Doug is very clearly a homosexual: as one YouTube user writes, Doug makes his comment and “looks sideways while [walking gay].” The opportunity for homosexual

---

86 Soles, 48.
87 To view clip and read comment see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiLIEfH9pvc>.
panic within the bromantic relationship between Sydney and Peter is thus defused by the presence of Doug.

One of the ways in which to establish a near-homosexual male friendship but remain within the boundaries of the heterosexual is to create a heterosexual triangle within the narrative. Homosocial male desire is often portrayed through the triangle, according to Eve Sedgwick. The erotic triangle places male homosocial desire in a schematic relationship of “triangular, heterosexual desire.”88 Sedgwick based the erotic triangle on the Oedipal triangle, schematized by Freud. In relation to bromantic comedies, the erotic triangle can be used to schematize the complex relationship between two main male characters and their connection to the main female character. Carter Soles adapts Sedgwick’s theory of the triangle to Kevin Smith’s film *Clerks* to “schematize the rivalries and homo/heterosocial bonds played out between the characters in the film.”89 What Kevin Smith’s 1994 film *Clerks* does, according to Soles, is to re-assign traditional gender characteristics of male and female characters. Male characters are not necessarily aligned with masculinity and have more feminine traits, and vice versa with the female characters who might show more traditionally masculine traits than feminine ones.90 A similar gender reversal is created in *I Love You, Man*. This makes for a somewhat different heterosexual triangle than the one Eve Sedgwick originally described. In most bromantic comedies, the erotic triangle is complicated through the feminization of the protagonist geek character and the masculinization of female characters.91 Because of this gender contradiction between the two male buddies - one shows masculine gender

89 Soles, 68.
90 Ibid., 35.
91 Ibid., 46.
characteristics and the other mostly feminine ones - “same-sex desire can be depicted indirectly through its appearance in the register of gender but not sexuality.” In the register of sexuality both Peter and Sydney are heterosexualized and the homosocial desire they have for one another here is separated from homosexual desire through this switch in gender assignment.

In the picture above, the trio is at a Rush concert, the two men are laughing together while standing embraced and Zooey is standing on the outside with crossed hands, excluded from the male bonding. One of the males, the feminized one, Peter, becomes the focus of desire for both a man and a woman, Sydney and Zooey. Peter is the top of the triangle and the rivalry for his affections then is between Sydney and Zooey, who constitute the other points of the triangle. Zooey remains a vital part of this construction. Without her character, the closeness between Peter and Sydney would be much harder to accept. Sedgwick argues that the most potent relationship was often between the two male rivals in the erotic triangle. Here, the strongest bond is again

---

92 Ibid., 46.
93 Picture retrieved from: Dargis, “Best Man Wanted.Must be Rush Fan.”
between two males, yet it is a bond of friendship that threatens the bond of heterosexual desire between a male (Peter) and a female (Zooey).

One final aspect that *I Love You, Man* has in common with most bromantic comedies is the final (symbolic) separation of the male friends in the form of heterosexual pair-offs. In *I Love You, Man*, this occurs immediately after Sydney and Peter have declared their “guy love” for one another, when Peter gets married to Zooey, thereby symbolically ending his proto homosexual ‘relationship’ with Sydney. Robin Wood writes in *Hollywood: From Vietnam to Reagan*, that in buddy (road) movies of the 1970s there are several recurring plot points that reveal the ways in which these films can be considered as “Male Love Stor[ies].” Bromantic comedies have many points in common with buddy movies, but here I will focus on Wood’s last point: namely “Death.” Here, one of the two male buddies is “either literally or symbolically killed,” a plot point also used in *Knocked Up*, *Superbad* and *I Love You, Man*. According to Wood, the buddy film must always end with an actual death or a symbolic death because “the male relationship must never be consummated (indeed, it must not be able to be consummated), and death is the most effective impediment.” In bromantic comedies, the actual death of one of the main characters is never used. The symbolic death of the bromantic love affair, on the other hand, often is. This is achieved through the heterosexual commitment, or pairing-off, of one or two of the main bromantic leads. In *Superbad*, this occurs in the very last scene, the morning after Seth and Evan have (drunkenly) admitted how much they love one another. While in a shopping mall, the boys run into Becca and Jules and ‘split up’ by deciding to spend the rest of the day with

---

95 In this quote, Carter Soles is paraphrasing Robin Wood, in Soles “Falling out of the Closet,” 57.
the girl they like instead of in each other’s company. Seth goes down an escalator and sadly looks back at Evan, as if he knows things are never going to be the same for them. This scene represents the two boys growing up as well as the symbolic death of their male love story.

In *I Love You, Man* the symbolic death also occurs immediately after the two friends have shared their confessions of love for one another. The following scene takes place at the altar of Peter and Zooey’s wedding.

**Peter**: I love you, man.

**Sydney**: I love you, too, bud.

**Peter**: I love you, dude.

**Sydney**: I love you, Bro Montana.

**Peter**: I love you, holmes.

**Sydney**: I love you, Broseph Goebbels.

**Peter**: I love you, muchacha.

**Sydney**: I love you, Tycho Brohe.

**Minister**: Okay, okay, right, let’s continue here.

**Peter**: I so wanna marry you. I’m going to.

**Zooey**: I, Zooey Rice…

In *I Love You, Man*, at first the two male love leads announce their guy love but immediately afterwards this love is trumped by the heterosexual commitment Peter makes to Zooey by marrying her. The wedding ceremony that follows serves as a symbolic death of the male-male love story, which in essence, is what the film is all about. This symbolic death facilitates the classic happy ending that follows: the
heterosexual commitment between a man and a woman who live happily ever after. This ending which, as Wood notes, promises “the continuance of the nuclear family,” is a type of ending that is specifically avoided in 1970s buddy movies. These films undermine what Robin Wood calls the dominant American ideology: “marriage, family, home.” This ideology is very much supported by the manner in which most bromantic comedies end, or drastically alter, the relationship between the male characters.

Michael Rowin judges the “obligatory unveiling of the film’s title” followed by the dialogue in which the confession of love is “properly qualified” over and over by the addition of “dude,” “holmes,” etc. to be “pathetically apologetic and insecure.” The gap in the homosocial continuum between homophobia and homosexuality must always be bridged in order to remain comedic without becoming offensive to homosexuals or become homoerotic. The confession of love with the addition of ‘man’ fits into the way that American men nowadays connect and share intimacy with one another. It falls under the header of ‘covert intimacy.’ In front of all these people, it is the manly thing to do to add the word ‘man’ or ‘holmes.’ It distinguishes their kind of love as ‘guy love,’ that special sort of love shared between two regular, straight ‘guys.’ I Love You, Man has explored the boundaries of the bromance and this is how far the film can take this male love story.

97 Ibid., 228, 227.
**Conclusion**

“Do you know how I know you’re gay?”

The mere existence of the term *bromance* says a lot about the state of masculinity in America today. Male friendships are extremely important in the lives of the guys occupying “Guyland,” and remain important throughout their lives. The motto “bros before hos” is ingrained into the American male psyche. Men bond strongly and show affection to their friends. However, dangers are connected with these close male friendships. Homosexuality is becoming more accepted, yet cultural gay stereotypes are stronger than ever. Young men are kept in check by each other in their performance of acceptable masculinity. For a straight guy to like something stereotypically effeminate i.e. ‘gay,’ is ‘dangerous’ because other men might start to think he actually is gay. As Michael Kimmel writes, “[h]omophobia – the fear that people might misperceive you as gay – is the animating fear of American guys’ masculinity.”

This fear becomes more intense when the closeness between straight guys becomes stronger and is therefore compensated by rude language and dirty humor. Bromantic comedies depict strong male homosocial friendships, yet characters use ironic humor as a self-defense against accusations of effeminacy and as a means to keep homosexual panic at bay.

---

99 *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, Dir. Judd Apatow, Perf. Paul Rudd and Seth Rogen, Universal Pictures, DVD, 2006. This is a quote from a running gag throughout Judd Apatow’s first feature film *The 40 Year Old Virgin* between Paul Rudd and Seth Rogen's characters. The two friends jokingly bash one another for being gay because of several reasons such as: “Because you’re gay and you can tell who the gay people are.” / “You like Coldplay” / You like the movie *Maid in Manhattan*” / “I saw you make a spinach dip in a loaf of sourdough bread once.” / “You have a rainbow bumper sticker on your car that says, ‘I love it when balls are in my face.” This improvised scene playfully comments upon the stereotypical (feminine) traits associated with male homosexuality. This scene alludes to the silliness of the idea that these traits should be avoided at all times by heterosexual men for fear of male friends one day telling them: “do you know how I know you’re gay?”

100 Michael Kimmel, *Guyland*, 50.
In recent years, extra attention has been paid to the terminology, rules and boundaries of modern male friendship in American society as well as American film. Bromantic comedies focus on these same issues and draw their humorous situations and construct their character’s identities from these issues of masculinity. Comedic situations for instance arise when effeminate “soft bodies” bond with more traditionally masculine guys and form an almost romantic friendship. In these films there is an openness about sex but it remains unclear “where straightness stops and gay-ness begins,” writes Colin Carmen. These films thus play with the culturally enforced ideas and rules of traditional masculinity and male friendship and present male characters that are not always markedly assigned straight or gay gender roles. One of the things a film such as The 40 Year Old Virgin comments upon is that there is no ‘straight’ line that divides heterosexual masculinity from homosexual masculinity. Social spaces inhabited by men, such as “the dugout,” are threatened by the possible presence of homosexuality. In order to negate this threat the performance of masculine heterosexuality remains essential.

Men seem to be engrossed by the idea that gayness can be spotted from the outside and thus often try very hard to show that they like filthy humor, dirty language and going after girls, thus to prove to their male friends that they are ‘real men.’ As Judith Butler argues, that which some might see as an “internal essence of gender” is actually culturally produced and sustained through gender performativity. Ideas on what it means to be a “proper” man alter through time; some aspects are quite constant whereas others change.

**Notes**


102 As Samuel A. Chambers argues in “Telepistemology of the Closet:” “[this] is precisely why the performative character of heterosexuality is most clearly apparent in those spaces and places where it is most precarious, or where homosexuality poses the greatest perceived threat…” (38).

The act of being a proper man is just that, it is a continuous performance rather than an essence of the male gender.

Several aspects of contemporary American masculinity are represented in bromantic comedies. Judd Apatow’s bromantic comedies for instance, often portray, as Manohla Dargis puts it, “the divide between what a man says – and what he thinks he should say, especially to other men – and how he really feels inside.”\(^{104}\) His films thus show that masculinity is a performance, and how men act around other men does not necessarily reflect how they actually feel or who they actually are. Boys learn from a very young age, writes Michael Kimmel, that:

being a man means ‘not being like a woman.’ This notion of anti-femininity lies at the heart of contemporary and historical conceptions of manhood, so that masculinity is defined more by what one is not rather than who one is.\(^{105}\)

Men in bromantic comedies often struggle with certain feelings and emotions because they believe communicating these feelings to others shows weakness and feminizes them. According to David Greven, the constant pressure on men to prove their real manhood by demonstrating masculinity to other men actually shines a light on the “illusory status” of masculinity.\(^{106}\) The men depicted in the three films discussed in this thesis all “man up” and thus act the way they think real men should when they are around other guys. A male character, such as *I Love You, Man’s* Peter Klaven, who loves the films *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Chocolat* is immediately feminized through his love of romantic comedies. Peter thus has many feminine traits that several male characters in the film comment


upon, telling him that he should become more of a man, that he has to “man up” (which is a different way of saying, “don’t act like such a girl or sissy”). The fine thing about these films is that the “internal dimension” of the male characters’ masculinity is also dealt with as their insecurities and “soft” side are highlighted.

The highest grossing R-rated bromantic comedies to date are *The Hangover* (Todd Phillips, 2009) and *The Hangover: Part 2* (Todd Phillips, 2011). These films focus on the wild escapades of a group of male friends in Las Vegas and Bangkok. The men in *The Hangover* do outrageous things because they are away from their wives and girlfriends, on one of the most masculine outings possible: the bachelor party. Because they are ‘accidentally’ drugged, their actions - stealing a tiger, marrying a stripper, stealing money from the casino - are portrayed as forgivable male folly. It is what men do when they escape the restrictions of adulthood and marriage. As Pete says in *Knocked Up*: “Marriage is like a tense, unfunny version of *Everybody Loves Raymond*, only it doesn't last 22 minutes. It lasts forever.” In *The Hangover’s* logic, these men were not accountable for their actions and therefore should be forgiven. Interestingly, these films, just as *I Love You, Man* and *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, end with wedding ceremonies. This is something regular romantic comedies are also known for, and is thus one of the aspects that transfer from the one genre focusing on women to the other focusing on men. Even though bromantic comedies are very much male-centered films, they often end very traditionally with heterosexual bliss.

“Guys” currently occupy a dominant position in American society and culture. Not only the guys of Guyland but also everyone around them, such as parents and girlfriends, need to contend with this social sphere. Guyland, “the world of everyday
'guys,' has become its own demographic” that, as Michael Kimmel notes, “is now pretty much the norm.”107 The flawed boys, guys and men portrayed in bromantic comedies now represent the regular American guy. These men portrayed on the screen are points of identification for the main target audience for bromantic comedies. Guys who, bombarded with all the images of manhood that show them losing their power to women, and having to become responsible adults whose main means to have fun remains spending time with male friends, rather choose to linger in the in-between, the time span called “Guyland.” However, many rules and expectations are associated with this life stage, as well with the number one rule that denotes: “bros before hos:” male friendship before everything.

The Hollywood industry that produces these popular bromantic comedies remains one of the most patriarchal institutions in America today. Hollywood’s objective thereby remains to generate large revenues, thus pleasing large audiences with the films it decides to make. Bromantic comedies, therefore, do not upset the status quo of gender hierarchy in American society. These films take a step forward in portraying the weaknesses and flaws of American manhood, as well as men more in touch with their emotional, and thus feminine, side. However, to offset this portrayal of weakness, i.e. femininity, in men, the male characters in these films often use very coarse language and dirty jokes. The humor in these films sheds light on issues of gender. Besides the humor in the jokes told by the characters themselves, much comedy is achieved through the portrayal of flaws in masculinity and extreme close male bonding. An audience is thereby allowed not to take a bromance entirely seriously, as it is a *comedic representation* of a close male friendship. Robin Wood writes that the popularity of the 1970s buddy film signified an

incredibly strong need on the part of the male heterosexual audience to “validate love relationships between men.” This need that existed in the 1970s seems only to have grown over the subsequent decades and found a safe home in bromantic comedies. Within this new genre the “love relationships between men” flourishes, while making sure the boundary into the homosexual is never crossed. Comedy is the perfect genre to play host to the bromance, as, accompanied by laughter, “guy love” can remain innocent, platonic and, most importantly, humorous.

---

BIBLIOGRAPHY


“Guy Love” Song from the TV show *Scrubs*. Found at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lL4L4Uv5rf0>. (accessed September 13, 2010).


