

KADIR HAS UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES



**EXPLORING GENRE'S NATURAL BORDERS: BROMANTIC  
COMEDY AS A SUB-GENRE**

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COMEDY AS A SUB-GENRE**

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“I, Esma Kartal, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.”

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ESMA KARTAL

## ABSTRACT

### EXPLORING GENRE'S NATURAL BORDERS: BROMANTIC COMEDY AS A SUB- GENRE

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Master of Arts in Cinema and Television

Advisor: Assoc. Prof. Melis Behlil

September, 2013

This thesis aims to investigate a recent trend in contemporary American cinema, which I call “bromantic comedy.” These comedy films have been increasingly coming out since the early 2000s. They are defined by their considerable use of gross-out humor, and their depiction of the average American male. Bromantic comedies direct their attention to homosocial interaction, or “bromance”, as well as heterosexual relationships. Since it is a fairly recent phenomenon, there is little relevant academic research conducted on the genre. Although many terms have been coined to refer to these films, they tend to cover various films from different genres that only share the bromance theme.

I identify such films as *Knocked Up*, *Superbad*, *Crazy, Stupid, Love.*, *Funny People*, *I Love You, Man*, and *The 40 Year Old Virgin* as bromantic comedies. To establish bromantic comedy as a sub-genre, this thesis relies heavily on genre theory while determining the former's conventions and characteristics. For bromantic comedies exclusively chronicle the lives of men, the stereotypical features of male characters and their relationships with one another have been discussed in detail. My main objective is to distinguish bromantic comedies from other male-centered comedies, as the latter often do not even have prominent female characters; as opposed to the former, in which heterosexual romance plays significant part in the narrative. I argue that bromantic comedy also makes use of romantic comedy conventions while at the same time adjusting some of those conventions on its own terms, which in turn proves the fluidity of genres.

Keywords: Bromance, Romantic Comedy, American Cinema, Genre

## ÖZET

### TÜRÜN DOĞAL SINIRLARINI KEŞFETMEK: BİR ALT-TÜR OLARAK BROMANTIC KOMEDİ

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Bu tez çağdaş Amerikan sinemasında “bromantic” komedi olarak isimlendireceğim yeni bir eğilimi incelemektedir. Muazzam ölçüde vücut mizahı kullanımları ve sıradan Amerikan erkeği tasvirleriyle diğer komedi filmlerinden ayrılan bu filmler özellikle 2000li yılların başından beri artarak görülmektedir. Bu tür filmler eş-sosyal etkileşime, ya da “bromance” temasına odaklandıkları gibi, heteroseksüel ilişkilere de yer verir. Oldukça yeni bir tür olması nedeniyle, çok az akademik çalışmaya konu olmuştur. Bu türe birçok farklı isim verilmiş olmasına rağmen, bunlar tek ortak noktaları “bromance” teması olan farklı türlerden çeşitli filmleri içermektedir.

Tez boyunca *Knocked Up*, *Superbad*, *Crazy*, *Stupid*, *Love.*, *Funny People*, *I Love You*, *Man*, ve *The 40 Year Old Virgin* gibi filmler bu türün özelliklerine sahip olarak nitelendirilir ve “bromantic” komedi yeni bir alt-tür olarak tanımlanır. Bu alt-türün belirleyici niteliklerini tespit ederken de ağırlıklı olarak tür kuramından faydalanır. Söz konusu komediler özellikle erkek karakterleriyle ön plana çıktığı için, filmlerdeki erkek karakterlerin genel özellikleri ve birbirleriyle ilişkileri detaylı olarak incelenir. Tezimdeki asıl amacım “bromantic” komedileri belirgin kadın karakterleri olmayan yukarıda bahsi geçen filmlerden ayırmaktır; zira “bromantic” komedilerde heteroseksüel romansın ne denli önemli rol oynadığı açıktır. Dolayısıyla “bromantic” komedi hem romantik komedi klişelerinden yararlanmakta, hem de türlerin değişkenliğini kanıtlarcasına bunların bir kısmını kendi özelliklerine göre yorumlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bromance, Romantik Komedi, American Sineması, Tür

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I feel that I have to pay my respects to the great Swede that is Ingmar Bergman, who has inspired me to pursue my love of film. Last but not least, I believe I need to express my gratitude to the creators of bromantic comedies – particularly Judd Apatow – for providing me with this great subject matter to study and making me laugh, each and every time. So thanks for all the inappropriate jokes, fellas. I guess “I’ll see you at the movies.”



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Abstract</b>	
<b>Özet</b>	
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 Defining Genre(s): The Impossible?</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1 Basics of Genre Theory.....	5
2.2 Bromantic Comedies amid an Abundance of Terms.....	11
<b>3 Bromantic Heroes and Heroines</b>	<b>15</b>
3.1 The Loser Stereotype.....	17
3.2 The Womanizer Stereotype.....	22
<b>4 Man’s Struggle: Love versus Bromance</b>	<b>26</b>
4.1 Boy-Meets-Boy: Emerging Bromances.....	30
4.2 Implications of Homosexuality: The Inevitable.....	33
<b>5 Bromantic Comedies: Messing with a Genre</b>	<b>35</b>
5.1 Romantic Comedy Clichés .....	35
5.2 All Is Well That Ends Well: Conservative Endings.....	41
5.3 Bromantic Comedy’s Contributions.....	43
<b>6 Conclusion</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Filmography</b>	<b>52</b>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 2000s have witnessed an abundance of male-centered comedy films with an emphasis on off-color humor – films the majority of whose cast include such actors as Seth Rogen, Paul Rudd, Jonah Hill, and Jason Segel. And most importantly, films whose crude and vulgar humor makes those offended by jokes about natural bodily fluids and body parts cringe in their seats. It is fairly easy to come up with examples of such films because they are practically everywhere. They are what one might call “guilty pleasures.” No matter how appalling what is happening on the screen may seem, it is quite easy to find oneself laughing out loud. Some notable examples would be Judd Apatow’s *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (2005) and *Knocked Up* (2007), *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (Nicholas Stoller 2008), and *I Love You, Man* (John Hamburg 2009).

Although a handful of related films have been coming out since the early 2000s, it is striking how little research has been conducted on them. In fact, these films are largely overlooked on account of their indecent humor, which is definitely not for everyone. They usually do quite well at the box office, though. This is perhaps because they feature protagonists to whom any average person can relate, whether he<sup>1</sup> is a teenager obsessed with “getting laid”, or a man-child, well, obsessed with getting laid.

These male protagonists are oftentimes paired with a sidekick with whom they form a homosocial bonding, or rather a “bromance.” This term is a mash-up of the words “brother” and “romance.” Merriam-Webster defines the word as “a close nonsexual relationship between men.” Elizabeth J. Chen’s definition is also noteworthy: “a form of friendship that channels intimate male friendship into narrow and well-defined boundaries” (2012: 242). The term was coined in the late 1990s by Dave

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<sup>1</sup> Non-use of the pronoun “she” is deliberate here.

Carnie, the editor of the skateboard magazine *Big Brother*. The representation of bromances on the silver screen is nothing new, though. Perhaps one of the most memorable cinematic duos, Laurel and Hardy starred in many films starting from the 1920s. These films later came to be called “buddy films”, which might be dubbed as the precursor of today’s films that deal with male friendship.

In contemporary cinema, the term bromance is used quite loosely as it covers many different films from different genres. Although I have encountered many articles that refer to the likes of *I Love You, Man* as bromances, I would not go so far as to describe bromance as a whole genre; but rather a theme which recurs in numerous genres and sub-genres such as science fiction, adventure, crime, and comedy. Some of these films have also been labeled as romantic comedies, which brings me to another group of films that have not been taken seriously by academics and critics alike, despite casting A-list actors/actresses and doing great at the box office. I deem this comparison inevitable since there is a hint of romance attached to the above mentioned films as they usually feature a female love and/or sex interest. Since simply calling them romantic comedies would be superficial, I will borrow from *Bright Lights Film Journal*’s Joseph Aisenberg, and henceforth refer to them as “bromantic comedies”, a term he uses in “Here Come the Bromides: Living in the Era of the Bromantic Comedy” (2009). Romantic comedy is already a hybrid sub-genre that adopts comic and romantic elements and blends them together, which makes bromantic comedies a combination of various genres.

The fact that I refrain from reducing these films to romantic comedies does not, however, mean that I do not believe there are similarities between the two. In fact, they have so much in common that bromantic comedies have been considered to be romantic comedies targeted at male audiences (Mortimer 2010). This thesis investigates how

closely bromantic comedies stick to the conventions of contemporary romantic comedies that have been maintained through the years. I demonstrate with specific examples how bromantic comedies adopt certain features from the sub-genre but at the same time challenge its allegedly immutable conventions. While identifying these conventions, I largely rely on the writings of Mortimer (2010), Celestino Deleyto (1998; 2003), and Steve Neale (1992). I argue that bromantic comedy, by playing with romantic comedy's conventions and accordingly adapting them to its narrative, proves that all genres including romantic comedy are subject to change.

I start the second chapter by covering how genre in general and in film specifically has been defined and demonstrate its complexities in order to determine where bromantic comedies fit as a sub-genre. Throughout the rest of the thesis, I draw to a great extent on genre theory as my theoretical framework and utilize such crucial concepts to my research as “sub-genre”, “hybrid genres”, and “genre mixing.” In the remainder of the second chapter, I find it vital to explain why I felt it necessary to define this particular sub-genre I keep calling bromantic comedy. I also elaborate on what these films have been called by critics and theorists. Films I discuss in detail throughout my thesis are *I Love You, Man*, *Funny People* (Apatow 2009) *Knocked Up*, *Superbad* (Greg Mottola 2007), *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, and *Crazy, Stupid, Love*. (Glenn Ficarra and John Requa 2011).

The following two chapters focus primarily on the textual analyses of the above mentioned films from which I provide specific examples. In order to establish bromantic comedy as a separate sub-genre I demonstrate what makes it different while concentrating on its characteristics and character stereotypes to which it faithfully adheres. The third chapter deals with the character stereotypes found abundantly in the sub-genre. I examine the male protagonists of the sub-genre, who form the backbone of

bromantic comedies, and its female characters who for the most part are not as visible as their male counterparts and yet bring about drastic changes in the latter. The hero in bromantic comedies tends to be depicted as juvenile and his actions immature and selfish. He is usually fond of women. If he is attractive the chances are he is a womanizer, if not it is evident that he incessantly fantasizes about them.

In the fourth chapter, I elaborate on perhaps the most important component of the sub-genre: bromance, which tends to be portrayed as incompatible with the hero's love/sex interest. The female character mostly seems to be interfering with the protagonist's relationship with his male friends. If he is attached, his wife/fiancée/girlfriend is portrayed as a "nagging" woman who constantly criticizes him not giving him a moment of peace. If he is unattached, he is often pursuing a love/sex interest. While *Knocked Up* and *Crazy, Stupid, Love.* feature married couples and marital problems, the other films I discuss here all have marriage somewhere in their narratives – except *Superbad* where the main characters are teenagers.

The fifth chapter further reveals how bromantic comedy borrows certain elements from conventional romantic comedies and how they challenge these only to create a whole new sub-genre. I aim to demonstrate in this chapter that genres are not stable structures with non-negotiable rules, but rather flexible patterns that are easy to mingle. However, it is crucial to establish what genre is and how it helps one interpret films before starting to deal with the very specific category of bromantic comedies.

## 2. DEFINING GENRE(S): THE IMPOSSIBLE?

### 2.1 Basics of Genre Theory

One's first reaction as soon as someone remarks they have just seen a film tends to be asking what kind of a film it is, which enquires the film's *genre*. The most basic yet practical definition of this overused term would be that it is French for "kind" or "type." No matter how effortless it may seem to define genre, it is virtually impossible to come up with a definition that will fully reveal its meaning. Identifying a specific genre and laying out its rules, so to speak, is even more tiresome; if one takes into account the inevitability of genre as each text must belong to at least one (Derrida 1980). For every person familiar enough with a film genre, there is a different definition of it. One also has to make a distinction between genres defined by film studios, critics and scholars as they may vary substantially considering the differences in their purposes.

Genre is one's first interaction with a film before seeing it – that is if one has not already seen the poster for it – so it determines one's expectations about the film. Thomas Schatz's language analogy, in which he compares genre to language, and the former's rules and conventions to grammar, helps one understand how these expectations are formed. In an identical way to how one learns new words in a language and recognizes them when later encountered in a text, Schatz proposes, one identifies a genre when they recognize certain generic conventions employed in a film (2004).

Even though this chapter's focus will be on genre in film, let us first introduce genre in literary studies, for it is with literature that genre began to be paid scholarly attention to. Aristotle's *Poetics* (circa 335 BC) – specifically the chapter titled "The

Origins of Tragedy, Comedy and Epic” – has often been cited as a cornerstone in genre studies. What makes this work significant is that so as to understand how genres work today, one has to establish how such classical genres as tragedy, comedy, and epic came to be. Aristotle underlines the differences between these three, but extensively elaborates on the characteristics of a successful tragedy; which are plot, character, thought, diction, music, and spectacle (2011). As easy as it might seem to draw a line between various literary genres in terms of their formal structures, it is relatively more challenging to do so with film genres. The primary purpose of film genres is to distinguish between diverse films. This process of categorization is expected to make film selection and consequent viewing easier. Nevertheless, the borders between genres have not been clearly drawn, which makes defining one highly difficult. When a specific genre is mentioned, one usually has more or less a general idea about how a film that belongs to that genre would be, or rather look like. As Rick Altman states “we all know a genre when we see one” (2005: 27). This accounts for the fact that one has unconsciously developed expectations related to certain film genres, and thus in turn anticipates seeing particular elements in films associated with them. However, those expectations might differ from one culture to another. In fact, Andrew Tudor emphasizes culture’s significance on one’s perception of genres: “*Genre* is what we collectively believe it to be”, which also implies that genres are merely human constructions (1974: 139).

One thing that needs to be kept in mind at all times when working on genre is to establish that genres are not stable structures, but rather they change, evolve in time and occasionally mix. This is probably why even the essence of such an established genre as the Western is still being discussed, whose conventions, Andrew Dix points out, may be challenged with a new addition to the genre (2008). This necessitates a historical

investigation of the development of genres, although it is usually dismissed, as criticized by Altman (2005). Therefore it is safe to say that a single film could make critics reconsider the conventions of a particular genre, which further demonstrates the notion that genres are constantly subject to change.

Sometimes films that may readily be labeled as part of a particular genre can inhabit unprecedented tendencies, but still remain within the borders of a “bigger” genre, forming sub-genres. Neale identifies romantic comedy as an example of a sub-genre in which romance and comedy combine (2000). As with everything else, the whole – genre in this case – alters when a new piece – a film – is added to it. Notwithstanding its participation in that genre, this new film might not always include that genre’s essential conventions in its entirety and sometimes happens to criticize it, as in self-reflexive genre parodies. Tzvetan Todorov argues “The fact that a work ‘disobeys’ its genre does not make the latter nonexistent” (1976: 160). Neale similarly points out the significance of difference in a genre as well as repetition (1980). Conversely, the instance of a film challenging the rules of its genre indicates that the former recognizes those specific rules, which as a consequence supports the validity of the genre in question, contrary to popular belief that the film rejects it.

In addition to their fluid and fluctuating nature, genres are inclined to overlap and therefore a film rarely belongs to merely one genre, which brings about terms like hybrid genres or genre mixing. Hybrid genres could be exemplified by the Western musical, which inherits the conventions of both the Western and the musical. This is especially commonplace in Hollywood, which has practically become synonymous with generic cinema. In fact, it is nearly impossible to speak of generic purity in Hollywood, which has made it its mission to mix as many genres as possible in one film. Todorov discusses that there is no such thing as generic purity (1976). He interprets the origins of



genres as a result of “the transformation of one or several old genres: by inversion, by displacement, by combination” (161). Hybridity in Hollywood, therefore, is often thought of as the rule, not the exception, as well as a significant hallmark of genre (Berry-Flint 2004).

Once the initiative to categorize genres is taken, it is sooner or later realized that there are multiple ways and perspectives to benefit from when dividing genres into smaller groups. One could, for example, define films by their writer/director/producer if the film is defined to a great extent by the artistic vision of its *auteur*, as in “Quentin Tarantino films.” However, films traditionally have been sorted according to their subject matter (the war film), their setting (the Western), or the effect they create on the viewer (horror, thriller, etc.). Nevertheless, the problem with defining a genre is that while some of these methods may work with certain genres it may not be applicable to some others. Iconography is one of these methods as observed by Edward Buscombe, who claims that as cinema differentiates as a visual medium, one must pay special attention to recurring props and visual elements predominant in films to define a genre (2005). Unfortunately some films are not equipped with defining visuals to tell them apart, which makes this iconographic approach’s applicability to certain films questionable. It is most certainly handy when dealing with such classic genres as the Western, which is “one of the richest genres for iconography” (Abrams, Bell and Udris 2010: 320). While iconography may easily be applied to certain genres, some genres clearly stand out with their unique characters and the relations between them – exemplified by bromantic comedy, the focus of my thesis.<sup>2</sup> This is emphasized by Schatz: “It is this system of conventions – familiar characters performing familiar actions which celebrate familiar values – that represents the genre’s narrative context”

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<sup>2</sup> This, however, should not mean that one has to choose only one of these approaches. In fact, Altman suggests that both views be used while defining genres (2005).

(695). Schatz also argues that character stereotypes should be examined while discussing a genre, which is the method I have employed in my genre analysis (2004).

Another significant problem inherent in genre studies is the grand question of how to determine the films to be examined when identifying any genre, a problem I painfully encountered during my research, as well. This dilemma is aptly pointed out by Buscombe with the Western genre as an example (2005). Tudor, amongst many other scholars, also deems the process of designating which films to discuss before defining a genre a bit problematic:

To take a *genre* such as the western, analyze it, and list its principal characteristics is to beg the question that we must first isolate the body of films that are westerns. But they can only be isolated on the basis of the 'principal characteristics', which can only be discovered from the films themselves after they have been isolated. That is, we are caught in a circle that first requires that the films be isolated, for which purpose a criterion is necessary, but the criterion is, in turn, meant to emerge from the empirically established common characteristics of the films (1974: 135-8).

I equally have struggled to decide which films to analyze while striving to isolate bromantic comedy as a separate sub-genre in my own thesis. At this point, Tudor's identification of four methods which may be used while categorizing films has been of help. These methods are, with Janet Staiger's terms, the "idealist", "empiricist", "a priori" and "social convention" methods (2005: 187). The empiricist method, which I apply in my genre analysis, entails the establishment of the common features of the genre at hand to see if a particular film belongs to it (2005).

When it comes to genre, one cannot help but notice the distinction between generic cinema and what has come to be called auteur cinema, upon which I briefly touched earlier in the chapter. The latter is favored mostly by critics and film scholars alike as it is often equated with originality – a product of its creator – and nonconformity to any genre. People exhibit a liability to associate film genres with having to stick to certain unwritten rules, which they assume limit the creativity of the

filmmaker. This accounts for the reason why genre is considered to be at odds with auteurism.<sup>3</sup> Genre imposes laws, Derrida claims in his influential piece “The Law of the Genre” (1980). It implies negative connotations because it acknowledges the existence of rules. The difference between these two approaches to cinema is also obvious when one considers the distinction in their audiences. Leo Braudy states that genre attracts the masses whereas authentic auteur cinema appeals to the conscious audience (2004).

Generic cinema especially dominated Classical Hollywood,<sup>4</sup> where genres were formulas one could take and apply to films as opposed to today’s common approach that genres are sets of rules that can be observed in films. The practices of Hollywood in the studio era have been mentioned by many scholars, who draw attention to the fact that studios avoided labeling a film with a single genre (Schatz 1981; Altman 2010). Berry-Flint also describes the practice of genres in Hollywood as inconsistent and underlines studios made sure that their film posters displayed more than one generic keyword (2004). Obviously, back then there were not as much access to TV spots or film trailers as today; all people had to judge a film prior to viewing it were posters, word of mouth and reviews published by various papers and magazines. Posters often emphasized the genre-mixing present in films. The genres mixed were selected on the basis of their appeal to various audiences. Altman divides these genres into three groups: (1) “male genres” such as the war film; (2) “female genres” such as the musical; (3) “*tertium quid*” – a somehow neutral group – like fantasy (2010: 128). Studios oftentimes chose one genre from each group and this formula enabled, as Altman states, the film to attract all kinds of audiences. As a consequence of this strategy, the studio profited substantially because more people saw the film. This policy is further discussed by

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<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that there may also be instances of films where filmmakers interpret established genres on their own artistic terms.

<sup>4</sup> A term introduced to refer to the period in Hollywood cinema between 1927 and 1963 (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985).

Altman: “At every turn, we find that Hollywood labours to identify its pictures with multiple genres, in order to benefit from the increased interest that this strategy inspires in diverse demographic groups” (2010: 57). This profitable system makes one think of genres as recipes, into which certain elements are added to achieve the intended effect.

## **2.2 Bromantic Comedies amid an Abundance of Terms**

Based on the theoretical background provided in the first part of this introductory chapter, I believe it is time I turn to this particular sub-genre I have been naming “bromantic comedy.” As mentioned earlier, defining bromantic comedy has long been overdue. My focus here will be on male-centered awkward comedies featuring both a bromance and a traditional heterosexual romance. It is crucial to notify that the bromance theme is present in a large number of films belonging to various genres from adventure to crime. As Bordwell observes “any theme may appear in any genre”, therefore it is not healthy to categorize films merely according to their themes or subject matter (1989: 147).

Although bromantic comedies have emerged in the 2000s, it is clear that they bring together numerous elements from different genres and periods. These comedies have often been compared to the buddy film of the 1980s on account of their being told from a male perspective and presenting a bromance. Tamar Jeffers McDonald points out the connection between what she terms “homme-com”, “rom-com for boys” and “the teen sex comedy” that began in the 1980s with the emergence of the likes of *Animal House* (John Landis 1978); which she traces back to the sex comedies of the 1950s and 1960s notorious for their straightforward representation of sex and claims bromantic comedies have evolved from them (2007: 56). Such films as *Animal House* and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (Amy Heckerling 1982) have been dubbed as “animal

comedy” by William Paul (1994: 122) and “Hollywood Lowbrow” by Paul C. Bonila (2005:17). Farrelly brothers’ popular films released in the 1990s like *Dumb & Dumber* (1994) and *There’s Something About Mary* (1998) have also been considered precursors of bromantic comedy. Even though their role in the development of the sub-genre is immense – especially in terms of their inclusion of physical comedy and gross-out elements in their narrative – 1990s’ aforementioned comedy differs from the bromantic comedy of the 2000s since the former either does not include bromantic relationships or these relationships do not play a crucial role in the films plot-wise.

Perhaps the most important part in bromantic comedy’s formation, however, has been played by Apatow, director/writer/producer of many films associated with the sub-genre. Even in the films he only produces one can sense the Apatow feel, with his trademarks as having an average man-child as the lead and a great amount of body humor. In fact, even when he or Apatow Productions – his production company he founded in 1999 – has no relation to a bromantic comedy film, it is easily assumed by many that it is an Apatow production. Joel Stein underlines the characteristics of Apatow’s male characters and distinguishes them from those of the 1990s’ comedies:

Compared with the comedies that dominated the 1990s – movies by the Farrelly brothers, Jim Carrey and Adam Sandler in which over-the-top characters triumph over an evil dumb guy – Apatow’s movies are bildungsromans in which low-key guys push aside their comic books and triumph over themselves (2009).

Apatow’s male characters are usually assigned to a small group of actors, and other parts often to his own family members. When the audiences see the same actors play similar characters repeatedly, they associate those actors with the genre. This way of casting, thus, causes continuation and repetition, which in turn enhances the idea of genre, in a similar way to the relationship between John Wayne and the Western (Maltby 1996). If one contemplates the fact that most of these actors have been introduced to cinema by Apatow himself, his significance as a distinct figure in

bromantic comedy is further understood. In fact, such important bromantic comedy actors as Seth Rogen and Jason Segel both starred in Apatow's short-lived TV shows *Freaks and Geeks* (1999) and *Undeclared* (2001), after which they have become stars. Apatow's not casting big names in his films is demonstrated by Josh Tyler of *Cinema Blend* as such: "you [Apatow] make stars, you don't cast them" (2009).<sup>5</sup>

One of the reasons that have drawn me to do genre work on bromantic comedy is that there is confusion as to what films are included in this genre and what it should be called. A great number of the terms coined to describe these films emphasize the fact that they are about men and harbor a male perspective. The most common term used to refer to these films is possibly "bromance." Diana Sargent, for instance, describes *I Love You, Man* and *Superbad* as examples of the "bromance genre" (2013: 3). Aisenberg uses such terms as "male comedies", "bromantic comedy", "lame buddy-centered films", and "buddy-bromance" (2009). Richard Corliss of *Time* refers to these films as "guy-centric comedies" (2007a), "boy-meets-boy comedies" (2007b), and "bromance comedy" (2009), which he calls a sub-genre. "Dick flick" (Carbone 2008) and "dude flick" (Alilunas 2008) are two less formal terms coined for male-centered comedies. David Hansen-Miller and Rosalind Gill name these as "lad flicks" in which "masculinity itself is the central object" (2011: 36). Tim Dirks of FilmSite puts these films under a category of "guy movies." However, this category includes basically every film with a man as its lead. Dirks also lists a sub-category within guy movies labeled as "various comedies", which cover films from many different decades: *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (John Hughes 1986), *Dazed and Confused* (Richard Linklater 1993) and relatively more contemporary examples like *The Big Lebowski* (Joel Coen 1998), *Knocked Up*, and *Old School* (Todd Phillips 2003). Mortimer describes contemporary

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<sup>5</sup> Although Apatow is a pioneer in bromantic comedy; this thesis is not an auteur study based merely on his work, as I analyze films by other filmmakers, as well.

romantic comedy which directs its attention to its male characters as “homme-com”, “bromance” (2010: 116); and “male-centered romcom” or “bromcom” (2010: 134).

There are also a couple of terms that underline bromantic comedy’s vulgar and sexual humor. Some of these terms are “foulmouthed R-rated comedies” (Hiatt 2007: 89), and “gross-out comedy” (Dix 2008: 174). Moreover, John Belton talks about “a new comedy subgenre”, which he calls “geek comedy” and “romantic sex comedy” (2009: 193). However, throughout this thesis I use Aisenberg’s term “bromantic comedy” due to its demonstration of the sub-genre’s similarities to romantic comedy, which will be further discussed in the final chapter. But before jumping to conclusions regarding the relationship between these two sub-genres, one must first identify the characteristics and stereotypes of bromantic comedies.

### **3. BROMANTIC HEROES AND HEROINES**

Having already clarified that the method of iconography is not suitable for my purposes in defining bromantic comedy, I rely on Schatz's approach that when studying genres one should look for recurring character stereotypes in films (2004). The following two chapters, thus, demonstrate my attempts to discuss what kinds of characters and relationships are to be found in bromantic comedies, after which I compare them to romantic comedies. I also make use of Tudor's empiricist method, as discussed by Staiger (2005). With the help of this approach, I lay out the characteristics of bromantic comedy while analyzing certain films to determine whether they belong to the sub-genre. As bromantic comedies are almost exclusively about men, I largely focus on male characters, which I think is crucial as I have witnessed a still growing bulk of research conducted on the portrayal of women in film and yet little of men. But what about them? How are they depicted in contemporary cinema? Or perhaps more importantly, what does it mean to be a man in today's world? As of the 2000s, John Beynon points out, masculinity is now being observed more closely than ever, which he identifies as "a product of our times, in part a consequence of feminism and in part a reaction to it" (2002: 3).

Bromantic comedies in this respect set a great example for what Beynon underlines. These male-centered comedies enable the audience to become aware of how men are pressured to behave in certain ways, which is only natural since these films are recounted from the point of view of their male protagonists. Kevin Johns interprets this condition as "an almost desperate cry for help from a generation of men insecure in



their masculinity, confused as to what the modern woman expects of them, and totally unsure of what it even means at all to be a man in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” in his article where he looks at masculinity in contemporary comedy (2009).

One reason why bromantic comedies are so popular could be that they tell the story of the average white heterosexual American male and emphasize his problems. We are accustomed to watching macho, muscular men saving lives in films featuring male protagonists exemplified best by Michael Bay’s action-packed filmography. The bromantic hero, on the other hand, is usually far from being good looking and is sometimes unemployed. His unappealing appearance is constantly emphasized, both by himself and other characters. His most notable characteristic, though, is that he is a man-child with a carefree attitude towards life. He may have grown up physically, but remains a child with respect to his outlook on life. Apatow, whose characters usually belong in this group of men, states “I don’t imagine that American men ever found it easy to grow up... But now you can delay it your whole life” (Mortimer 2010: 63). The man-child represents the wild side, the *id*, as opposed to women in bromantic comedies who symbolize a much more civilized, reasonable side of human psyche.

Much as bromantic heroes are, without fail, juvenile in nature, bromantic comedies also demonstrate two contradicting trends in their display of male characters: the hero either has plenty of sex or none. The former is what I call the “womanizer” stereotype, which is an attractive, wealthy and successful man. He preys on women to have sex with them only to never see them again. The latter group of male leads can be described as a “loser” or “nerd” who is slightly overweight and has no luck with the ladies. These losers are inclined to have an obsession over marijuana, collectibles, comic books, etc. In both cases, however, the juvenile and irresponsible lifestyles of

both types of heroes are soon to be challenged and changed forever by outside forces in disguise of women or male friends.

### **3.1 The Loser Stereotype**

Apatow's *Knocked Up*, which chronicles the harsh consequences of a night gone wrong, is home to a great number of losers. The film's protagonist Ben (Seth Rogen) impregnates Alison (Katherine Heigl) during a one-night stand. They both want to keep the baby although they barely know each other. The remainder of the film revolves around the couple as they struggle to figure out whether they should be together. A great amount of the hilarity of the film comes from this struggle since Ben and Alison could possibly be the most unlikely people to be involved in a romantic relationship. This is probably why David Denby has classified *Knocked Up* under the category of films "slacker-striver romance" (2007). While Alison is depicted as the ultimate career woman who has just been promoted, Ben does not even hold a steady job. He shares a house with a couple of his male friends, who are no different than him. Their commune-like lives in this chaotic house include smoking marijuana pretty much all the time, mocking one another, and working on a website whose sole purpose is to provide its users with the precious information concerning which film involves what kind of female nudity. Just like the other losers in other bromantic comedies they talk about sex excessively and incessantly even though they make it obvious that they are not having sex anytime soon.

As opposed to everything wrong with Ben, Alison seems to be the ideal woman in every sense of the word – despite the fact that the film portrays her as uptight at times. She is attractive as in "she would never have sex with Ben unless she was drunk out of her mind." Ben's friends are not even jealous of him because he was able to sleep

with an attractive woman. In fact, one of them confesses “I think it’s awesome that you had sex with her. If a goofy guy like you had sex with her, I feel like I had sex with her also.” Furthermore, chances are that Ben would not be able to end up with a woman like Alison if she was not pregnant with his child. Probably aware of this fact, he sees the whole situation as an opportunity and desires a romantic relationship with her (Hoerl and Kelly 2010).

Bromantic heroes often face the fact that they have to change, and by change it is usually meant “growing up.” Hansen-Miller and Gill argue that these films “offer a compelling ‘invitation’ to men to ‘put aside childish things’ and join the adult heterosexual world” (2011: 47). This invitation is oftentimes made by a female character the hero meets during the course of the film. Women in these films are, therefore, usually plot devices. They either function as testaments to the heroes’ heterosexuality or they cause the men they are involved with to change and grow up. *Knocked Up*’s Ben, for instance, is encouraged to change his ways with the introduction of Alison and the unborn baby into his life. The film is really about the transformation Ben experiences rather than a love story. After the couple decide to have the baby and stay together, Ben talks to his roommates about the site and convinces them to launch it as soon as possible so he can earn a living. He buys loads of books about pregnancy and child birth. Meanwhile, Alison learns to cool down and be less judgmental about Ben’s slacker lifestyle. She even helps them out with their website. This is clear in the scene where she lets the male pack know when she encounters nudity in a film, even though she was disgusted by their attempts to launch such a website when she first heard about it. Later in the film, however, she finds out that Ben has not read any of the baby books, after which she begins having second thoughts whether Ben will be able to take care of them once the baby arrives. At one point she complains “It just shows your lack of

commitment, Ben. That you're not in this with me." Nevertheless, towards the end of the film he realizes how much Alison means to her, reads all the books, starts a desk job and rents an apartment. He soon becomes an average working adult and proves himself to be worthy of Alison.

The loser stereotype described above is also evident in another bromantic comedy: *Superbad*. Produced by Apatow, it is the only film amongst the films that is discussed here that handles teenagers – in very much a similar way to his acclaimed TV series *Freaks and Geeks*. The two protagonists of the film, Seth (Jonah Hill) and Evan (Michael Cera) are very close friends who have known each other since they were kids, which constitutes the bromance at the heart of the film and makes it stand out among many teen comedies. They also hang out with Fogell (Christopher Mintz-Plasse) to whom they are not as close. All three can be identified as losers, although it is not as excruciatingly painful as they are not grown-ups as opposed to the losers of *Knocked Up*. Neither has had sex yet but is determined to change that by the time they graduate high school since “The point is to be good at sex by the time you get to college.” They rather graphically talk about sex and genitals *a lot*, which might make one uncomfortable at times: on their way to school, and at a supermarket cash register where the cashier can clearly hear them. Seth also seems to think that all men have to be interested in porn and accuses Evan of not doing so: “Don't make me feel weird cuz I like porn. You're the weird one for not liking porn.”

As might be anticipated from teenagers who think about sex this often, it is no wonder they are chasing girls. Seth wishes to sleep with Jules (Emma Stone) who seems to be too good for him as she is an attractive girl. Unlike many other female characters in bromantic comedies, she has a sense of humor and even makes a sexual joke during

cooking class in which she was partners with Seth. Evan likes Becca (Martha MacIsaac), a timid girl who appears to like him back. Fogell fantasizes about a girl he saw at the school hall, although they do not even know each other. The three boys think of a plan when they learn that Jules is throwing a party, for which they cannot get alcohol due to their being all minors. Fogell assures everyone that he will obtain a fake ID so he can purchase drinks for the party. Seth and Evan ask Jules and Becca if they would like anything special and promise the girls they will cater whatever they want, which they hope will impress them and provide the two friends sex at the end of the night. Nonetheless, things do not go as planned but both Seth and Evan come to a realization by the end, which is discussed in the following chapter.

Another Apatow production in which sex – or lack thereof – plays a crucial role in defining the identity of the loser protagonist is *The 40 Year Old Virgin*. The titular character Andy (Steve Carell) works at Smart Tech and leads a lonely, quiet life which causes his elderly male neighbor to say “That guy needs to get laid” behind his back. He rides a bicycle to work as well as owning innumerable superhero collectibles in their original packaging, or “toys” as often referred to in the film. The virgin seems to have been stuck in his childhood. It is hinted that he does not have any friends except his colleagues who do not strike us as very fond of him. These are Cal (Seth Rogen), a slacker who grows marijuana in his garden; David (Paul Rudd) who is still not over his girlfriend with whom he broke up two years ago; and finally Jay (Romany Malco), a legitimate representative of the womanizer stereotype who cheats on his girlfriend. Nevertheless, they are not depicted as superior to Andy because they are “deflowered.” In fact they appear to be somewhat inferior in terms of their treatment to women. Deleyto discusses that Andy’s colleagues’ immature view of women have made them remain children while the former’s virginity and consequent unfamiliarity with women

have helped him become an adult (2010). His difference is further underlined when Andy and Cal exchange how their weekend was. Cal enthusiastically tells about his wild weekend, whereas Andy talks about how he made himself an egg salad sandwich.

He has obviously managed to keep his virginity a secret until the day his colleagues invite him to a poker game at their workplace after hours only because they need someone to fill in the seat. Before inviting him over, however, Cal speculates “He’s a really nice guy and all but I’m pretty sure that he is a serial murderer” – once again demonstrating how strange Andy looks from the outside. However, his whole relationship with them alters during the poker game where they talk about their sexual experiences thus far. When it is Andy’s turn, he makes the fatal mistake of comparing a woman’s breasts to a “bag of sand”, which the others find quite odd. They first assume he is gay, because how could a 40-year-old man not know how a woman’s breasts felt? As soon as he guarantees that he is heterosexual they immediately understand that he is a virgin.

Right after this confrontation, Cal and company make it their priority to set Andy with women so he can lose his virginity. He experiences a series of unfortunate events as he is introduced to several women but never gets to have sex with any of them. During this whole process, he meets Trish (Catherine Keener) at Smart Tech who gives him her number. Andy feels that he really likes her and calls her up after a couple of unsuccessful attempts. The second half of *The 40 Year Old Virgin* focuses on their relationship. Trish is portrayed more in depth, resulting in a three-dimensional character, as opposed to the other female characters Andy interacts with. It is later shown that she is a mother of three, one of whom has her own kid. Moreover, she is

depicted as a strong woman who has set up her own business. Andy's change occurs after he starts a relationship with her because he is in love with her.

### **3.2 The Womanizer Stereotype**

The second group of male leads in bromantic comedies exemplifies the womanizer stereotype. These characters tend to be portrayed as well-groomed and strong-willed men confident in their appearance as, for a man having sex is mostly associated with masculinity, which equals "control of a woman's body" (Patterson 2008: 3). For instance, *The 40 Year Old Virgin's* Andy completes the process of growing up when he sleeps with Trish. In a similar respect, the boys in *Superbad* are treated as losers largely because they are virgins, or more precisely they seem to believe so. In both films losing one's virginity is considered a rite of passage at the end of which one becomes a fully grown man. The womanizer, as a consequence, treats women as pieces of meat to prove and enhance his masculinity and has made it his objective to sleep with as many women as possible until he meets the "game changer" who will make the bromantic hero question his ways and eventually stir a change in his personality and lifestyle.

*Crazy, Stupid, Love.'s* Jacob (Ryan Gosling) is perhaps the most illustrative example of the womanizer stereotype so commonly observed in the sub-genre. He is remarkably attractive, and seems to take good care of himself, in fact so much that later in the film one of the female characters yells "It's like you're photoshopped!" when he takes off his shirt. He hits on women at a bar every night and never walks out alone, until he meets Hannah (Emma Stone), a woman who at first rejects him but later comes to have sex with him having just broken up with her boyfriend. They go to his place but do not consummate that night. They rather converse for hours in bed and get to know

each other until Jacob falls asleep. It is clear that he likes Hannah because his trick to seduce women is, as he reveals earlier in the film, to get them to talk about themselves and make them feel important while he talks little about himself. Nevertheless, all he does is tell about his personal life and family when she lies in bed with her. Hannah is a “game changer” to put it in Jacob’s own words.

The film’s actual protagonist is, however, Cal (Steve Carell) who is quite different from Jacob. Cal is a married man with children whose wife Emily (Julianne Moore) has just asked for a divorce. To make things worse, she confesses that she cheated on him, after which he frequents the very same bar where Jacob picks up women. He drinks alone and talks to the bartender or whoever is around him. In the meantime, Jacob watches and overhears Cal and invites him to his table. He offers to help him “rediscover your manhood” by turning him into someone like him. Cal, with the help of Jacob, learns how to dress properly and to hit on women. Despite the fact that he encounters minor setbacks, he basically becomes a womanizer himself. But of course the film does not end there because Cal realizes that she wants to reunite with Emily while Jacob needs his advice about his relationship with Hannah, who to both their surprise turns out to be Cal’s eldest child. This unfortunate revelation consequently suspends Cal and Jacob’s friendship until the very final scene of the film.

*I Love You, Man*, possibly one of the cornerstones of the sub-genre in terms of its honesty in depicting male friendship, is a boy-meets-boy film where Peter (Paul Rudd) meets the best man of his dreams, Sydney (Jason Segel). Peter is a calm, “girlfriend guy” who is about to get married to her fiancée Zooey (Rashida Jones). Only there is a slight problem: he does not have a best man, let alone any close male friends. Peter strikes one as a gay man women love to spend time with, which is evident in the scene where Zooey’s girlfriends demonstrate how much they love him. What is more, at



a family dinner his mother explains that Peter “always connected better with women” to which Zooey responds “You know, I can see that because he’s a great boyfriend.” In this sense, Peter differs dramatically from other bromantic heroes whose approach to women tends to be appalling.

To find a best man for his wedding Peter goes out on “man-dates” as suggested by his gay brother Robbie (Andy Samberg) even though he does not seem to be compatible with any of the men he “goes out with.” And then one day rather unexpectedly he meets Sydney – the one – at an open house showing he holds. They appear to get along really well. Nevertheless, Sydney makes it clear that, in a rather honest manner, he is not interested in purchasing the house, but rather he is there to pick up women. At this point, and several times later in the film Sydney identifies himself as a true womanizer although he has a kind heart. He is quite honest and straightforward when it comes to talking about sex. During a conversation when Peter shies away from giving details about his sex life, Sydney states “Look, it’s something we think about on a second-to-second basis, and yet we’re not supposed to talk about it? Why?” Since this is not a typical boy-meets-girl type of story, the change Peter experiences is not the result of meeting a woman, but rather a man. Sydney teaches Peter to have fun like a man and become tough while rocking out to Rush and jamming. It is thanks to Sydney that he learns how to “be a man.”

Considerably different in the way it deals with the love life of its protagonist, *Funny People* may be the most personal Apatow film to date, and has a darker tone due to its subject matter as opposed to other Apatow productions. "I see all the movies as dealing with my personal problems, whether it's about virginity, bad sex, marital issues, unplanned pregnancy or, in the case of *Funny People*, death" says Apatow (Walker 2009). The film’s protagonist George (Adam Sandler) is a rich and famous but bitter

comedian who recently finds out he has a terminal illness. The film is very much inspired by the director's near-death experience and his background as a stand-up comedian. After George watches two struggling comedians who happen to be roommates - Ira (Seth Rogen) and Leo (Jonah Hill) – he calls up the former and says he wants them to write jokes for him. Ira enthusiastically accepts his offer and tells him Leo is too busy, after which he starts to live in George's mansion.

During his stay in the mansion, Ira learns about George's disease and more importantly how miserable and lonely he is. He sleeps with two women on the same night and does not even need to hit on them because he is a celebrity. Although he has kept his disease a secret so far, with a little encouragement from Ira he begins telling his family members one by one and his ex-girlfriend Laura (Leslie Mann), who he cheated on and now is married to someone else. He finally starts spending some quality time with his family which he has seemingly neglected for a long time. In a similar way to *I Love You, Man, Funny People*'s main character goes through a transformation by a man he meets and bonds with during the course of the film. Therefore, it can be inferred that the nature of the relationships between male characters in these male-centered comedies is a significant characteristic of the sub-genre and needs further investigation.

#### 4. MAN'S STRUGGLE: LOVE VERSUS BROMANCE

Apart from its excessive use of R-rated humor and stereotypical characters discussed in the previous chapter, bromantic comedy's most distinctive feature is its inclination to embody a bromance – a close friendship between two heterosexual men. However, since the bromantic hero is traditionally paired with a woman a conflict comes about which forces him to make a decision between her and the male pack, which forms the central story of the films. Heterosexual relationships, most notably marriage, in bromantic comedy tend to be portrayed as incompatible with male friendships. The female character essentially seems to be interfering with the homosocial interactions of the hero. Even though these films spend most of their time portraying the female lead as a nagging “no-fun-bitch-wife” who constantly criticizes and judges the hero, which implies the offensive “bros before hoes” catchphrase, they end on a more conservative note with him choosing the love interest over the best friend or managing a balance between the two (Johns 2009).

Bromances in bromantic comedy may loosely be divided into two: one which is formed during the course of the film, the other already existing. The first kind of bromance can be observed in *Knocked Up*, *Crazy, Stupid, Love.*, *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, *Funny People* and *I Love You, Man*; while the latter can be spotted in *Superbad*, *Knocked Up*, and *Crazy, Stupid, Love*. *Knocked Up* and *Crazy, Stupid, Love*. are listed in both groups as their protagonists are in multiple bromances some of which have existed before the films' starting points and the others have developed as the films progress. Whether they have just met or have known each other for a long time, men in these bromances create the impression that they can be whoever they are when they are

around their male friends – their natural environment – but they feel that they have to behave themselves when they are with their partners. It is almost as if men have to exist in two parallel worlds, one being the heterosexual world which serves as a prison, and the other the homosocial world which provides an escape from that imprisonment.

Male characters in these films are inclined to do fun but irresponsible things when they assemble, and needless to say when they are “unattended” by women. The more they get away from the latter, the closer they get to their id. Terri Carney discusses this situation in relation to Todd Phillips’ *The Hangover* (2009), which is precisely about “a night of uninhibited, drug-induced debauchery, which according to Phillips’ filmography, is the gateway to reconnection with some primal, old-school masculinity (2011: 7). Bromantic heroes, therefore, are depicted as desperate men stuck in between submission to marriage or resistance to norms. In this sense, Laura Mulvey’s interpretation of the Western hero may be of use here:

The tension between two points of attraction, the symbolic (social integration and marriage) and nostalgic narcissism, generates a common splitting of the Western hero into two, something unknown in the Proppian tale. Here two functions emerge, one celebrating integration into society through marriage, the other celebrating resistance to social standards and responsibilities, above all those of marriage and the family, the sphere represented by women (1989: 34).

Similarly the bromantic hero hesitates to leave his male friends behind and enter the restricting adult world of marriage, children, and responsibilities.

*Knocked Up* features bromances that already exist prior to the narrative of the film and one bromance that takes shape during the course of the film. As mentioned earlier, Ben shares his house with a group of his male friends with whom he smokes marijuana, babbles about sex and women, whilst working on an utterly pointless website. However, his whole fraternity-like life is threatened when Alison announces that she is pregnant with his child. Since being a parent brings about a great many

responsibilities, Ben realizes he has to cease to be a child himself and kill time with the male pack doing basically nothing productive. *Knocked Up*, thus, is more about Ben's transformation and ending his bromances than his relationship with Alison. Hansen-Miller and Gill comment that "it is generally the female love interest who voices the demand for change while the protagonist's male friendship group represents the inclination to resist" (2011: 40-1). However, Ben's friends seem to have grown up in the process as well, who wind up in the hospital to visit Alison while she is in the delivery room. They all look like they are excited about the baby, which is quite obvious when one of them remarks "*We* are having a baby."<sup>6</sup>

In the meantime, Ben befriends Pete (Paul Rudd), the husband of Alison's sister Debbie (Leslie Mann). In spite of the fact that Pete is now a family man, he turns out to have a lot in common with Ben, with whom he even goes to Las Vegas at some point in the film. As Corliss observes in his review of the film, "Ben and Alison are the odd couple, but in Ben and Pete the movie has found its ideal couple" (2007a). Even though Pete seems pretty happy when he is hanging out with Ben it is clear that he and Debbie are having problems on the marriage front. Debbie is depicted as an authoritative woman who continually judges her husband. Her quite sexist approach to romantic relationships is underlined as she advises Alison to "train" Ben. Mortimer calls attention to the sharp contrast between the tense atmosphere of Pete and Debbie's house and the laid back surroundings of Ben's place (2010). While Ben and Alison discuss their marriage Ben refers to Debbie as "a pain the ass", and to Pete as "awesome." In fact, Pete expresses his unhappiness with his marriage and life as follows: "I wish I liked anything as much as my kids like bubbles... Their smiling faces point out your inability to enjoy anything." It is implied in *Knocked Up* a couple of times that Pete and Debbie

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<sup>6</sup> Emphasis mine.

got married because she got pregnant, which is a familiar situation for Ben and Alison. Moreover, during a dinner the four of them are having, Pete points out that one has to give up on his dreams once he has a baby. Also the fact that Pete lies to Debbie about meeting his male friends to play fantasy baseball is quite telling, which she interprets as an escape from his familial responsibilities to enjoy the company of his friends.

*Superbad* completely and utterly revolves around the bromance between teenagers Seth and Evan. At the beginning of the film, we are informed that the two will go to different colleges, which threatens their bromance. Everyone around them assumes they are unhappy because of that but they both try to act as if it will not make any difference in their lives. Evan's mother asks them whether they will miss each other to which he replies "No, thank you. I don't 'miss each other.'" Later at school, Becca inquires whether he is worried because they are starting different colleges and Evan claims that they "are not dependent on each other." So there is this constant denial of the fact that they really care about one another until it is revealed to them after the wild night they go through. This denial seems to be peculiar to men as two female friends would seldom hesitate to declare their true feelings towards each other. Robert A. Strikwerda and Larry May comment on how men are forced to act in certain ways by the society:

Yet males in contemporary Western culture are encouraged not to show their feelings; indeed, from the dispassionate reasoner model of the philosopher to the Clint Eastwood image of manhood, males are encouraged not to let their feelings interfere at all with the conduct of their lives (1996: 86).

As Seth and Evan struggle with the expression of their emotions, a quarrel breaks out between them, at the end of which Seth makes it clear that he is bitter because they "were supposed to go to college together." His anger grows when he finds out that Evan is going to be sharing a room with Fogell at college. Evan also has some

issues with Seth as it turns out. During their fight, he complains he has “wasted the last three years of my life sitting around talking bullshit with you, man. Instead of chasing girls and making friends.” Seth’s reply is even stranger: “Is this about some girl? She’s a fucking girl.” This dialogue strengthens the notion that bromances come before romances as Seth points out the triviality of a girl when compared to a male friend. But of course as in all classic love stories the two have to come back together and appreciate what they have. This realization starts when Seth grabs the very intoxicated Evan and carries him outside the party house because two cops are about to raid the party. They spend the night together at Evan’s place sleeping in the same sleeping bag. Nonetheless, what is more important is the conversation they have prior to falling asleep. This moment is almost too romantic to happen between two heterosexual men. They declare their love for each other – just like Peter and Sydney do at Peter’s wedding in *I Love You, Man* - with slow music in the background. They agree that they are not embarrassed to say “I love you” to each other, after which Seth touches Evan’s nose in a very intimate manner and hugs him. As the film closes with two heterosexual couples at the mall – Seth is paired with Jules and Evan with Becca – the two friends look at each other longingly as their girlfriends talk to them, although there is never any implication of homosexuality.

#### **4. 1 Boy-Meets-Boy: Emerging Bromances**

*I Love You, Man* is one of those bromantic comedies where a bromance is yet to be formed. The film’s protagonist Peter is an interesting character in that he does not have any close male friends. His gay brother Robbie attributes this to the fact that he has always spent more time with his girlfriends, which has resulted in his not keeping up with any of his friends. After he meets Sydney and gets his number, he grows quite

nervous about calling Sydney up for the first time because, as Robbie brilliantly explains, he really likes him. Robbie becomes an important figure here since he mentors Peter through terrifying man-dates as well as his flourishing relationship with Sydney. Peter and Sydney usually have fun in the latter's man-cave where no woman is allowed. At this point Peter begins to rediscover his manhood, very much like *Crazy, Stupid, Love.*'s Cal does with Jacob's help. As Sydney teaches Peter how to yell at the top of his lungs he states "I'm a man, Peter. I've got an ocean of testosterone flowing through my veins. Society tells us to act civilized, but the truth is we're animals, and sometimes you gotta let it out", which also emphasizes man's internal conflict as to whether to give in to social expectations or not. The more he hangs out with his new friend the less Peter spends time with Zoey. Fully aware of this situation, she jokingly inquires "So when am I gonna meet this guy who's stolen you away from me?" The long understanding fiancée who has been supportive of Peter's bonding with Sydney gradually turns against him, which forces him to make a choice.

In a similar way, *Funny People* is all about the budding friendship between George and Ira, although earlier in the film the former confesses to the other "You're my closest friend and I don't even like you." George does not get what he wants love-wise in the end – his ex-girlfriend decides not to leave her husband after all – but befriends Ira, which is the whole point of the film. The very last scene exhibits the two chatting and laughing at the restaurant where Ira works. George even says he wrote jokes for him this time – it was normally the other way around – which proves that he is changing for the better.

In *Crazy, Stupid, Love.* Cal and Jacob find themselves in an unlikely bromance. As they spend more and more time grooming the former they become friends. Since Cal has lost his best friend because he and his wife had to choose either Emily or Cal to stay



friends with and chose Emily – although she cheated on Cal, if you will - he seems to enjoy the company. As his friend explains him the situation, Cal asks him “Are you breaking up with me?” as if he is talking to a romantic partner. Cal’s bromance with Jacob only indirectly influences his future with his wife due to the fact that he becomes more and more like Jacob as they bond. The introductory scene with Cal and Emily at the restaurant is quite telling at this point. The film opens with a montage of the feet of various couples underneath their tables. In all of them the feet or legs of these couples constantly caress each other proving their affection for one another. Nevertheless, the last shot cuts to the feet of our married couple, which are standing still, let alone touching. This entire scene is a short but to the point and acute representation of their troubled marriage and the fact that they have lost the spark.

Lastly, *The 40 Year Old Virgin* is a great example of how bromances work. Although it is primarily about Andy’s relationship with Trish, if it were not for his fun-loving colleagues he would never have the courage to confront her. His approach to women is a lot different than that of his male friends. David thinks Andy looks younger than all of them “because he’s never had a relationship. No she-devil sucked his life force out yet.” Andy explains his non-existent relationship with women as such: “You know what, I respect women, I love women. I respect them so much that I completely stay away from them.” Nevertheless, it goes without saying that David, Cal and Jay represent the wild nature of manhood. David’s comment before the night they play poker “I just wanna get drunk, fucked up, and play some cards” summarizes their life and reminds one of *The Hangover* series, in which male characters lose control. Their child-like attitude to life is further accentuated in the scene where David and Cal act like mischievous children at work, breaking things and hitting each other.

#### 4. 2 Implications of Homosexuality: The Inevitable

The issue of homosexuality is constantly on the agenda in bromantic comedies since they spend so much time showing what bromance is or more importantly what makes a man. In fact, homosexuality is mentioned so often that a trademark of these films is to make considerable use of homophobic discourse to assure the male characters' heterosexuality. This most probably explains why the male characters talk so much about sex and engage in homophobic discourse. These characters experience firsthand what Chen calls "the phenomenon of 'straight panic'", "in which individuals experience anxiety about how others perceive their sexuality, and thus feel the need to reassert their heterosexuality" (2012: 248). This anxiety is especially conspicuous in *Superbad*, *Crazy, Stupid, Love.*, *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, and *I Love You, Man*. *Superbad*'s Seth reveals to Evan that he had a habit of drawing pictures of penises obsessively as a kid, which Evan calls "messed up" and "super gay." If he did not comment on it, it could have meant that he thinks it is normal for a boy to draw pictures of penises, which in turn would make him gay.

*Crazy, Stupid, Love.* contains a few instances where the question of homosexuality comes up. The most notable is, though, the one where Jacob stands fully naked right in front of Cal for minutes and says "If it's not bothering you we got a bigger problem." Apparently Jacob thinks of homosexuality as a "problem." Moreover, one of Peter's man-dates in *I Love You, Man* turns out to be gay and kisses Peter on the mouth at the end of their date. Later, as Peter tells Zooey about it, he makes it clear that he was disgusted by the kiss and disinfects his mouth. Finally, *The 40 Year Old Virgin*'s Andy gets his chest waxed, carrying out Jay's suggestion. Although Jay finds it to be a heterosexual thing, Cal believes waxing one's chest is "like the gayest thing you could possibly do." Not to mention the entire "do you know how I know you're gay?"

conversation between Peter and Cal in which they talk about nonsensical indications of homosexuality is a proof of how hard they are striving to confirm their heterosexuality.

## **5. (B)ROMANTIC COMEDIES: MESSING WITH A GENRE**

I have already touched upon the relationship between bromantic comedy and the relatively better known romantic comedy. This relationship is also the reason why I have found it fitting to call this emerging sub-genre bromantic comedy, which is clearly reminiscent of the latter owing to its emphasis on heterosexual love. As mentioned earlier, two of the numerous terms that have been put forward to refer to these comedies are “male-centered romcom” (Mortimer 2010: 134) and “rom-com for boys” (McDonald 2007: 56). In fact, bromantic comedy may be thought of as an alternative to romantic comedy, targeted largely at male audiences. Romantic comedies have often been accused of merely sticking to generic formulas and not manifesting any originality or creativity on the part of its creators. Deleyto, who has written substantially on romantic comedy, disagrees by claiming while still sticking to basic generic rules, Hollywood romantic comedy has appropriated its content to represent the times and the society it deals with (1998). Bromantic comedies also prove that there are actually no limits to romantic comedies as well as confirming they are open to change and variety contrary to popular belief.

### **5.1 Romantic Comedy Clichés**

The most significant characteristic that distinguishes bromantic comedy from romantic comedy is most probably the difference in their points of view. Romantic comedy is almost exclusively associated with a female perspective, Mortimer implies, which is quite ironic since it chronicles stories of romantic relationships between men and women (2010). Bromantic comedy, on the other hand, is the exact opposite as it

makes use of a male point of view. As a result, the conventional romantic comedy hero is completely different from that of a bromantic comedy. The former tends to be attractive, successful and domestic, the “Prince Charming”, so to speak, with whom male audiences might not easily identify. But in bromantic comedies the male protagonist is an everyman and does not possess any of those qualities, which is probably why male viewers find it easier to identify with bromantic comedy heroes and find a piece of themselves reflected in these films.

Romantic comedy heroines fantasize about meeting the aforementioned “Mr. Right” and usually are provided with him by the end of the film (Mortimer 2010). Needless to say, this union rarely takes place in an ordinary way. The future romantic couple never fails to start off with an extraordinary “meet-cute”, a stock situation in which their lives intersect in a quite romantic way. Albeit not a traditional romantic comedy film, *(500) Days of Summer* (Marc Webb 2009) features a meet-cute in which the couple of the film – Tom (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) and Summer (Zooey Deschanel) – meet in an elevator. Tom is wearing headphones listening to The Smiths, which Zooey cannot help but overhear, and not surprisingly it turns out that she is a fan of the band, too. She sings along for a while and right there they have their “cute” moment.

Likewise, this longstanding romantic comedy convention is maintained by bromantic comedies. Although they recognize the practice of meet-cute, they interpret it on their own terms only to come up with something more original. *Knocked Up*, for instance, is probably the closest out of the films discussed here to romantic comedy conventions, so it is no wonder it introduces its main characters to each other in a meet-cute. The film’s unlikely duo Ben and Alison meet at a nightclub, with Alison celebrating her promotion with her older sister and Ben just having fun with his male friends. Alison wants to get another round of drinks for herself and her sister, but the bar

is so crowded that the bartender cannot even see her. Meanwhile, Ben manages to grab two drinks and gives both to Alison, after which they begin to dance and talk while heavily drunk. Even though these may not seem like the first moments of a grand love story, the way they meet each other and their interactions make it a definite meet-cute.

In *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, although Andy and Trish meet at Smart Tech, his workplace, and Andy treats her as a customer, the way Andy's colleagues set the two up so that they can be alone has a childish feel to it. This is notwithstanding the fact that Andy's first impression of her is some woman he can lose his virginity to. *Crazy, Stupid, Love.* differs from *Knocked Up* and *The 40 Year Old Virgin* as the hero's interest in the heroine is unrequited at first. Jacob approaches Hannah the same way he would with all the other women he meets at the bar and showers her with compliments. Although her best friend is impressed by Jacob and tries to convince her to meet him, Hannah rejects him. Nevertheless their second encounter in which they truly meet ends with her going to Jacob's house. Again, in all three cases these characters only think of one another as people to sleep with until they realize there is something more to it than physical. This contradicts considerably with romantic comedy's relatively more innocent meet-cutes.

*I Love You, Man* presents a rather unexpected meet-cute quite unlike those of the other films. Because Peter and his fiancée Zoey already know each other and the film provides no flashbacks concerning how the two met, the meet-cute of the films belongs to that of Peter and Sydney. After all, the film is about how their bromance begins. As mentioned in earlier chapters, Peter and Sydney meet at the former's open house showing to which Sydney has come, as he later confesses, to pick up women. Peter notices him from afar standing and eating by the table and approaches him as he falsely believes he is interested in buying the house. But as their conversation proceeds they

realize how much they have in common and say goodbye only to see more of each other frequently later throughout the film.

Another common recurring element in romantic comedies is the striking differences between the members of the couple and occasionally their “initial hostility” towards one another, which sometimes make their relationship impossible (Neale 1992: 290). To illustrate, last year’s romantic comedy *Silver Linings Playbook* (David O. Russell) features a couple Pat (Bradley Cooper) and Tiffany (Jennifer Lawrence) who at first glance hate each other due to the differences in their personalities, which later turns to love. This romantic comedy tradition may be observed in bromantic comedies, as well. *The 40 Year Old Virgin*’s couple, for example, does not seem to be the best fit. Andy is, as the title of the film suggests, a 40-year-old virgin resembling a boy, whereas Trish is a mature, sexually experienced woman who has never dated a “good guy” like Andy. Andy’s befriending his colleagues also seems rather improbable at first as he is nothing like them. They all like to boast about their sexual encounters with various women while degrading them in the meantime. Unlike them, Andy is not interested in women sexually and mostly “stay[s]away from them.”

*Superbad*’s bromantic couple also brings together two contrasting individuals in that Seth appears to be a lazy and irresponsible teenager, while Evan strikes one as more hardworking and mature. *Crazy, Stupid, Love.*’s Jacob and Cal form an unlikely friendship, as well. Their distinctions are chiefly based on their opinion of women, for Jacob objectifies them as opposed to Cal who confesses to Jacob that his ex-wife is the only woman he ever slept with – that is prior to his becoming a womanizer himself. This is further reflected in their outfit choices. As a true womanizer, Jacob is always wearing a smart suit, whereas Cal’s outfits usually consist of loose-fitting clothes and sneakers, which is harshly criticized by the former.

Nevertheless, of all the bromantic comedies discussed here, the film with the most obviously mismatched couple is undoubtedly *Knocked Up*. As previously stated, this film has been called a “slacker-striver romance”, in which case Ben is the slacker while Alison is apparently the striver (Denby 2007). Their differences are emphasized throughout the film as a laughing matter. In fact, the humor of *Knocked Up* largely depends on the contradicting features between its lead characters, especially in their looks, which further accentuate how unlikely they are as a couple. Ben is often portrayed enjoying his life with his roommates while Alison is shown to be struggling at work as a pregnant woman.

Romantic comedies traditionally employ unrealistic events or instances so that their couple stays together, but they also have to set their lovers apart as a result of various conflicts in terms of their opinions, beliefs, etc., so that they can bring them back together again, in a way almost as unlikely as their meet-cute. Similarly, bromantic comedies maintain this tradition; however in some films this situation takes the form of bromantic breakups. Since *Superbad*'s primary relationship is that of Seth and Evan, the aforementioned incident takes place between the two. In fact, *Superbad* could be considered a romantic comedy, except its couple being two male friends instead of a man and a woman. Despite being best friends for years, Seth and Evan have a big fight in which they reveal what they have been refraining from telling each other through the years. However, towards the end they both come to terms with the fact that they love each other as friends no matter what in an emotion-filled scene, which is discussed in further detail in the fourth chapter. Likewise in *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, Andy and Trish quarrel since he refuses to tell her about his condition and does not sleep with her. But in the end they compromise and work it out.



*I Love You, Man* includes two incidents like this. The first one is Peter's brief breakup with Zooey due to his close relationship with Sydney; while the second one is Peter and Sydney's fight after Sydney spends all the money he borrowed from him on awkward billboards with Peter on them, to help his business. Both of Peter's relationships are in danger because of the existence of the other. This also coincides with another trend in today's romantic comedies, as observed by Deleyto:

a rather unexpected new tendency has arisen within the genre over the last fifteen years or so in a growing number of contemporary romantic comedies, heterosexual love appears to be challenged, and occasionally replaced, by friendship" (2003: 168).

Even though Peter is faced with a decision he has to make between heterosexual love and homosociality, he eventually manages to establish a balance between the two.

In *Funny People*, George and Ira's growing companionship comes to a halt when George fires him and tells him in a rather humiliating manner that he is merely his employee. Nonetheless, after the friendless George understands his mistake and the value of Ira's friendship, he visits Ira in his workplace and makes up with him. The married couple Cal and Emily separate at the very beginning of *Crazy, Stupid, Love.*, only to reunite in the end. Cal also breaks off his friendship with Jacob when he comes to find that he has been dating his daughter Hannah. But after Jacob proves him that he has changed and cares for his daughter, they continue their friendship. *Knocked Up*'s Ben and Alison take a break from their mandatory relationship because they believe they are not meant for each other. But Ben surprises Alison with his dedication to change and desire to be there for her and the baby, and the film ends with the three forming a little family.

## 5. 2 All Is Well That Ends Well: Conservative Endings

These happy endings in which couples stay together no matter what circumstance they are in has come to be romantic comedy staple (Deleyto 1998). These endings, therefore, tend to be on the conservative side and are considered “to support the status quo in terms of intimate relationships” (Deleyto 1998: 40). This convention of presenting optimistic finales has endured mainly because it is demanded by the audience. Jill Nelmes writes that “each genre implies its own set of desires, expectations and pleasures” (2012: 197). It is a known fact that people watch romantic comedies partly to see that they were right about the ending of the film to be a happy one. After all, in this optimistic sub-genre it always turns out that “love conquers all.”

Bromantic comedies, to one’s surprise, continue this tradition of conservative endings. It is astonishing especially considering how crude and vulgar the humor of these films is besides its honest representation of sexual matters. As pointed out by Sonia M. Livingstone “different genres are concerned to establish different world views” and the view proposed by bromantic comedies is generally a conservative one (1990: 155). However vulgar and progressive these films may seem on the surface, they tend to have a conservative feel at the end. Rogen, who appears in many bromantic comedies describe them as “extremely right-wing movies with extremely filthy dialogue” (Stein 2007: 66). *Funny People*, for instance, chooses marriage over infidelity. George’s ex-girlfriend Laura stays with her husband rather than running away with George, and does not ruin her marriage and family. The couples of *I Love You, Man* and *The 40 Year Old Virgin* get married despite all the problems they have encountered throughout their relationships. In a similar way, both *Superbad*’s teenagers launch heterosexual romances ultimately.

Although *Knocked Up* deals with such a controversial issue as unplanned pregnancy, the option of abortion is not even given serious consideration. Ben's male roommates avoid uttering the word "abortion", which highlights the film's conservative undertone. The only character in the film that encourages Alison to have an abortion is her mother, who is depicted as a soulless woman looking out for her daughter's career. Her reaction to the pregnancy is contrasted with that of Ben's father, who thinks of the baby as a blessing. The film's reactionary politics is also summarized by Debbie's explanation of the natural progress of romantic relationships to her daughters: "People who love each other get married and have babies." Although both romantic and bromantic comedies are inclined to end with a happy couple, one never gets to see what happens after the narrative ends. In fact, Apatow's comments on *Knocked Up*'s ending reveal the couple's uncertain and probably shaky future: "The movie has a happy ending, but you leave thinking they could break up in three days" (Hoerl and Kelly 2010: 373). However, the film manages to get its message across and that is what counts.

What else contributes to the conservative outlook of bromantic comedies is that each character learns a lesson in the end, mostly the hero. Neale recognizes this realization as a crucial aspect of romantic comedies, but also discusses that it is usually the heroine who learns more and takes a lesson in romantic comedies so it is usually not mutual (1992). *Knocked Up*, for instance, differs in this sense from romantic comedies because even though Alison changes her ways, it is Ben who makes life-changing decisions and learns to live like a responsible human being. This is true of other bromantic comedies, as well. *Crazy, Stupid, Love.*'s Jacob stops being a womanizer and starts a serious and caring relationship with Hannah because, McDonald claims "as the men grow wiser they seem 'naturally' to grow more monogamous" (2009: 158). Men

have the liberty of doing whatever they want but one day they will meet a woman who will encourage them to grow up. Therefore, this change is triggered by a woman, meaning heterosexual love. Billy Merrit talks about this situation in romantic comedies and emphasizes the narrative is driven by how love influences the protagonist (2001: 17). For instance, in *Knocked Up*, it is at first the baby that keeps them together and their relationship begins out of obligation but they start having feelings for each other towards the end. Similarly, Jacob's feelings towards Hannah in *Crazy, Stupid, Love.* and Andy's love for Trish in *The 40 Year Old Virgin* show how important a role love plays in bromantic comedies as it does in romantic comedies.

### **5.3 Bromantic Comedy's Contributions**

While it is clear that bromantic comedy has adopted and manipulated many elements and conventions generated by romantic comedy, the former has contributed to the latter as well. I believe one of bromantic comedy's biggest contributions to romantic comedy has been giving the comedy element as much importance as romance.

Contemporary romantic comedies are oftentimes inclined to suck the comedy out of the sub-genre. However, bromantic comedies do a considerable job of balancing romance and comedy, sans sacrificing comedy for the sake of romantic elements. Secondly, bromantic comedy's frank manifestation of sexuality is innovative. Romantic comedy as a sub-genre oftentimes engages in hypocrisy when it comes to making its characters talk about sex, let alone depicting it. This is observed by Brian Henderson as such:

Although romantic comedy is about fucking and its absence, this can never be said or referred to directly. This is perhaps the fascination of romantic comedy. It implies a process of perpetual displacement, of euphemism and indirection at all levels, a latticework of dissembling and hiding laid over what is constantly present but denied, unspoken, unshown. (1978: 22).

Bromantic comedies, however, break this rule of thumb and boldly manifest sexual relations between couples. In fact so much that “One is tempted to call them sex comedies even though they incorporate the long-standing conventions of romantic comedy” as pointed out by Leger Grindon while referring to such films as *The 40 Year Old Virgin* and *Knocked Up* (2011: 63). This reminds one of the fact that it is only natural for genres to borrow from and mix with each other, especially considering the impossibility of generic purity.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Since my main objective in this thesis has been to establish bromantic comedy as a separate sub-genre, I have relied considerably on genre theory. I have found out as a result of what I have observed that defining genre in general, or individual genres for that matter, is a challenging task. This difficulty automatically doubles when one takes into consideration the fact that one has to choose some films that they assume to belong to a genre before identifying its conventions and characteristics (Buscombe 2005; Tudor 1974). There are also complications concerning what qualities one should examine in films while defining a particular genre. Buscombe claims that because cinema is a visual art, one has to adopt an iconographic approach and thus search for cinematographic devices and “icons” in order to determine if a certain film belongs to a genre or not (2005). Although this method may seem useful at first glance – and it is for some films in which there are plenty of visual elements that give away its genre – it is not applicable to all films. Some films do not rely on visual aspects as much as others, but rather focus more on characters and their relationships which, Schatz proposes, are what needs to be analyzed (2004). Similarly, bromantic comedies pay special attention to their characters and how they interact with each other, which has led me to observe their character stereotypes and recurring themes. Tudor’s empiricist method, as termed by Staiger, has also been of help in my genre analysis, in which I have first strived to identify bromantic comedy’s characteristics and then determine if certain films belong to it (2005).

Genres are dynamic structures as opposed to what is usually assumed. They change and from time to time mix with each other, or form sub-genres. Even though a

sub-genre may seem to defy its “bigger” genre, it also demonstrates that it recognizes the conventions of that genre. This is also what happens with bromantic comedy, as it utilizes certain features of romantic comedy. At this point I would like to make it clear that my focus remains on those films which include both a bromance and a heterosexual love/sex interest. This is due to the fact that there exist a great number of films in various genres that employ bromance and crude humor such as *The Hangover* franchise (2009; 2011; 2013), and *Due Date* (2010), and David Gordon Green’s stoner film *Pineapple Express* (2008). However, these films also belong in other major genres some of which include adventure, crime, fantasy, and science fiction among many others with little to no attention to female characters. As well as this confusion as to how to categorize these films, there are also various terms coined to refer to them. However, I have gone by Aisenberg’s “bromantic comedy” on account of its apparent reference to romantic comedy (2009).

Since bromantic comedies are male-centered films and often adopt a male point of view, I have looked at how male characters and their relations are portrayed. The bromantic hero is often an immature man-child who prefers to spend time with his like-minded male friends. Nonetheless, the man-child stereotype comes in two varieties: while the first one frequently has sex, the second one has practically none. I call these stereotypical characters found in bromantic comedy respectively the “womanizer” and the “loser.” Both types of heroes, however, are expected to change during the course of the film, either by a female love/sex interest or a close male friend.

This brings me to the most defining feature of bromantic comedy: its depiction of bromances. The bromantic hero oftentimes has a group of close male friends with whom he spends a considerable amount of time. Nevertheless, he is divided between the male pack and his wife/fiancée/girlfriend, which creates the shared conflict of bromantic

comedies since he has to make a choice between the two. Therefore, bromantic comedies tend to present heterosexual relationships, especially marriage, as incompatible with homosocial bonding. Bromances in these films manifest two distinct tendencies: they are either formed during the course of the film, or they already exist prior to the starting points of the films. Either way, bromantic heroes make it rather clear that they have to act according to their company. When they are in their natural environment hanging out with their male friends they do not have to hide their childish and irresponsible traits, whereas when they are around their female partners they have to act civilized.

It is safe to say that bromantic comedies follow a long tradition of conventions used countless times by romantic comedies. However I find no harm in proposing that they differ enough to be separated as a sub-genre. They do a considerably good job of playing with an established sub-genre's rules that has often been overlooked. My aim is also to clarify that not all films that share a similar theme have to be in the same genre or sub-genre and distinguish bromantic comedies from those films that do not deal with romance but have been squeezed under the same category because they possess a common theme. Bromantic comedies, therefore, offer so much more than toilet humor and farces; as they reflect elaborately on what it means to be a man in today's world and how such essential things to human existence as friendship and love are perceived.



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