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I Love You, Man: Gendered narratives of friendship in contemporary Hollywood comedies

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Abstract: This article begins with a simple observation: there are very few contemporary Hollywood films in which women are shown becoming friends. This is in contrast to the “bromance”, in which new connections between men are privileged, yet this pattern has gone largely unremarked in the literature. This article has two aims: to sketch this pattern and explore reasons for it **through comparing the “girlfriend flick” and “bromance”**. To do this, we first discuss those rare occasions when women do become friends on screen, using Jackie Stacey’s (1988) work to understand the difficulties this narrative trajectory poses for Hollywood. This raises questions about the relationship between the homosocial and homosexual which set up our comparison of female and male friendship films and provides the rationale for our focus on the beginnings of friendships as moments where tensions around gendered fascinations are most obvious. The films discussed are Baby Mama (McCullers, 2008), Step Brothers (McKay, 2008), I Love You, Man (Hamburg, 2009), Funny People (Apatow, 2009), Due Date (Phillips, 2010), and Crazy, Stupid, Love (Ficarra & Requa, 2011). The differences we identify hinge on issues of gendered representability and identification which have long been at the heart of feminist film scholarship.

Keywords: film, female friendship, bromance, homosociality, comedy.

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I Love You, Man: Gendered narratives of friendship in contemporary Hollywood comedies

This article begins from a simple, but somewhat surprising, observation: despite a wealth of Hollywood films dealing with female friendship, the origins of female friendship are rarely depicted. Moreover, despite a growing feminist scholarship interrogating the importance of intimate female friendships in Hollywood comedy and melodrama from the 1990s onwards (Tasker, 1998, Hollinger, 1998, Deleyto, 2003, Brook, 2011, Winch, 2012), that these films typically focus on pre-existing friendships has not been centrally discussed. In addition, those recent films most popularly celebrated (and critiqued) for their portrayal of female friendship---such as the Sex and the City (Patrick King, 2008, 2010) franchise, Mamma Mia (Lloyd, 2008), or Bridesmaids (Feig, 2011)---focus on groups of female friends. These “girlfriend flicks” (Winch, 2012) are contemporaneous with a group of comedies popularly labelled the “bromance” which focus on intimate friendships between men. If the “girlfriend flick” leans towards the ensemble, then---as the play on “romance” suggests---the “bromance” privileges dyadic relationships. The differences between these two categories of friendship comedies---“girlfriend flick” and “bromance”---raise interesting questions about gender, desire, and identification which we seek to investigate in this article.

In order to do this, we first discuss where female friendship---specifically, the origins of adult female friendship---appears on screen, returning to Jackie Stacey’s (1988) work on Desperately Seeking Susan (Siedelman, 1985) as a way of understanding the difficulties such a narrative trajectory poses for Hollywood. This raises questions about the relationship between the homosocial and homosexual which set up our comparison of female and male friendship films and provides the rationale for our particular focus on the beginnings of films (and friendships) as moments where tensions around gendered fascinations are most obvious. Given the relative dearth of contemporary narratives centrally focused on the beginnings of

female friendship, our discussion then narrows in on one film---Baby Mama (McCullers, 2008)---and considers how the women's developing friendship is managed, and contained, narratively and visually. **We then move on to analyse portrayals of the origins of male friendship and, here,** we have five films from the same time period to work with: Step Brothers (McKay, 2008), I Love You, Man (Hamburg, 2009), Funny People (Apatow, 2009), Due Date (Phillips, 2010), and Crazy, Stupid, Love (Ficarra & Requa, 2011), all of which frame their central pairings somewhat differently from Baby Mama. The differences we identify between these narratives hinge on issues of gendered representability and identification which have long been at the heart of feminist film scholarship.

Where the girls are

Alison Winch's analysis of "girlfriend flicks" focuses on four female-centred comedies from 2008 and 2009---Baby Mama, Sex and the City, The Women (English, 2008), and Bride Wars (Winick, 2009)---each of which privilege female friendship largely at the expense of heterosexual romance. With the exception of Baby Mama, which we return to, in each of these films the same-sex friendship is pre-existing. This is true, of course, of the whole Sex and the City franchise, perhaps the most written-about contemporary texts in relation to female friendship, and it is true of the majority of the films that both Yvonne Tasker (1998) and Karen Hollinger (1998) discuss in their analyses of female friendship films of the 1990s. Indeed, with her focus on female friendship in melodrama and romance, it is also notable that many of Tasker's films are about groups of female friends with these friendships being marked as life-long and frequently inter-generational. Hollinger's wider scope, and her consideration of films in which the erotic potential of female friendship is more explicitly marked, means that she is more concerned with dyadic relationships but, even

so, it is notable that narratives where women become friends (and not also lovers) merit little discussion in her book.

In partial contrast, blossoming female friendships are more frequently the focus of teen and college films although, even here, existing friendship groups are arguably privileged. Where developing friendships are the narrative focus, these relationships are nevertheless marked by competition and sometimes antagonism, such that the friends are more accurately described as “frenemies”, a gentler version of the pathological adult girlfriends of Single White Female (Schroeder, 1992) or Black Swan (Aronofsky, 2010). Kat Hughes’ (2012) research---which considers the queer possibilities of representations of teenage relationships in contemporary cinema---identifies interesting patterns in the representations of male and female friendships which prefigure our concerns here. Comparing male and female friendships, she notes that films focusing on close, non-antagonistic relationships between girls feature much younger teens than those focused on boys. Both female and male friendship pairings are typically established before the opening of the film and the friends are separated by its end. However, the emphasis on the female friends’ relationship to childhood---whilst their male equivalents are nearing adulthood and exploring sexual relationships with women---suggests that a focus on new female friendships is narratively more of an impediment to the development of hetero-romance than equivalent male friendships. Where films focusing on adult female friends do include a friendship-origin story it is therefore interesting that these stories are also located in childhood: this is true of Fried Green Tomatoes (Avent, 1991), Mystic Pizza (Petrie, 1988), Now and Then (Glatter, 1995), and Mortal Thoughts (Rudolph, 1991),ⁱ as well as more recent examples such as Something Borrowed (Greenfield, 2011) or Bride Wars. All these films are centrally about shifts in women’s relationships---typically brought about by “growing into” heterosexuality--

-and locating the friendship in childhood arguably works to de-eroticise it and clear the path to heterosexual fulfilment.ⁱⁱ

Moreover, it is not just friendship which has its origins in childhood---many rom-coms are at pains to establish that the protagonists' goals and dreams go back to childhood too.ⁱⁱⁱ These narratives thus deal with the "problem" of female desire by effectively rendering it devoid of adult agency; the narrative leads them to the destination they have been fated to arrive at all along. Of course the very genericity of rom-coms arguably serves a similar function and contemporary female friendship films, with their twin focus on female friendship and heterosexual romance, can be fairly uncontroversially labelled rom-coms.^{iv}

At least insofar as it is seen as legitimate fodder for Hollywood film, friendship is often seen as a stage in women's lives. This was brought home to us recently when we were teaching a class on Bridesmaids. Reflecting on the ways in which the film resonated with female experience, a female student commented that same-sex friendship and rivalry is something that all girls/women deal with from when they are toddlers until they get married. Whilst we very much doubt that the student was suggesting that straight married women do not have female friends, her comment is revealing of the narrative position typically accorded women's friendship in popular culture (as well as its heterocentrism): there are few stories to tell about women's friendships that are not also, and centrally, stories about heterosexuality. Marriage represents an endpoint to that story---and so, also, to the story of female friendship--unless or until points of crisis in the heterosexual union bring women friends back into the picture, as in the Sex and the City films or The Women.

This is linked to traditions of gendered representation in narrative cinema more broadly. In this context, Mulvey's (1975) argument about the privileging of male subjectivity and female objectivity remains important. Our point is not to argue for a return to the pessimism of Mulvey's account for female spectatorship; indeed, the films we discuss here

offer---and are intended to offer---many pleasures for specifically-situated female spectators that cannot be accounted for within Mulvey's model. However, the legacy of the Hollywood-norm of associating women with "to-be-looked-at-ness"---visually and narratively---does perhaps shed some insight into the relative lack of origin stories for female friends. In this context, the absence of a male mediating gaze creates particular possibilities/ problems as the visual and narrative fascination, curiosity, desire and identification which drive the development of the friendship are associated with women as both subjects and objects. Given women's traditional status as object of a sexualised gaze, any intensity between women thus carries a potential homoerotic charge.

It is relevant here to turn to Stacey's (1988) reworking of Mulvey through her reading of Desperately Seeking Susan, a film which remains relatively exceptional in its representation of adult women becoming friends.^v For Stacey, what is key about the film is its privileging of difference between women and the way in which this is productive of desire and identification, both diegetically and for the female spectator. It is, she concludes, the interplay of desire and identification which Desperately Seeking Susan offers its female spectator through its portrayal of Roberta's (Rosanna Arquette) fascination with Susan (Madonna). Roberta's desire is for identification: she wants to be Susan---a desire which the film is able to play on through the mistaken identity plot. Yet, the desire is not simply a desire to become the object---to "look like" Madonna/Susan---it is a desire to occupy her subject position, to share her style, attitude, passions.

Most significantly for our purposes, the film shows the igniting of Roberta's desire: her fascination with Susan begins with her reading of the personals column and the juxtaposition between the passion and desperation it contains and her own mundane, married, suburban life. The spectator is encouraged to share that fascination and to "seek" for Susan. The narrative is propelled by Roberta's desire and the editing links our privileged visual and

narrative knowledge of Susan with Roberta's fascination: "through her desire we seek, and see" (Stacey, 1988: 375). It is this "seeing through" one woman's desire for, or fascination with, another as she---and we---get to know that character, that makes it difficult for Hollywood cinema to show adult women becoming friends, as it suggests that female friendship always carries a potential erotic charge structurally lacking in male friendship narratives. These arguments resonate with debates about gendered homosociality more broadly,^{vi} setting up the context for our comparison of female and male friendships.

In her influential work on male homosociality, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) argues that homophobia is an essential component of male homosociality and men's power precisely because homosociality and homosexuality are, structurally, dangerously close to one another. As she puts it: "to be a man's man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being 'interested in men'." (89) Homophobia is an essential mechanism for regulating and legitimating the behaviour of the many by the oppression of the few (87-8) and, as we will go on to demonstrate, the homosocial and homophobic typically go hand-in-hand in the bromance.

Sedgwick's homosocial-homosexual continuum recalls debates about lesbian identity and identification in the broader context of women-centred relationships and, specifically, Adrienne Rich's (1980) notion of the lesbian continuum which finds echoes in Stacey's work. The most important difference between these gendered-continuums lies in the distinction---or lack thereof---drawn between the homosocial and the homosexual. If, for Sedgwick, this line is rigidly policed in male relationships precisely because of the closeness but---crucially, the difference---of the two terms, in female relationships the line is less distinct. Whilst this argument has been accused of marginalising the specificity of lesbian desire and identity,^{vii} in relation to representation it allows, as in Stacey's article, for the interplay of desire and identification in women's relationships with one another and with the screen. If the structure

of female homosociality in cinema always carries with it the charge of female homosexuality, this is because of a history of gendered and sexualised ways of looking. Whilst Desperately Seeking Susan admits the desire which structures women's identifications with other women, in doing so it remains unusual. The more common solution in contemporary Hollywood film is to dilute the intensity of the bond by focusing on female friendship groups and pre-existing friendships, with female homosociality in both contexts being pressed into the service of heterosexuality. But this is only possible when the relationships between women lack the intensity which might otherwise be associated with the foregrounding of romance and desire: that is, they either focus on the group (at the expense of the couple) or the established (at the expense of the new).

Baby Mama may seem to offer something different here, but---as we will argue---the denial of the possibility of the desire which structures female identification (on and off screen) results in the dilution of the intensity of the friendship itself.

Female friendship in Baby Mama

Baby Mama centres around the beginnings of a friendship between middle-class business woman Kate (Tina Fey) and Angie (Amy Poehler), the working-class woman she hires to be her surrogate. Having privileged her career over her personal life, Kate is worried she has left it too late to have a baby. This provides an important context for her developing relationship with Angie as there is no sense that the women are on an equal footing, socially or diegetically: this is Kate's story and Angie enters it as a womb-for-hire. This does not mean that the friendship is unsympathetically portrayed, but it does mean that it is driven not by fascination or desire, but, more mundanely, by economics and biology.

Kate's desire is for a child and not, initially, for a friend or a romantic or sexual partner. Indeed, the opening sequence establishes that some of these desires may be mutually

exclusive. The film begins with Kate's voice-over in which she worries that she has prioritised career over family: on screen, we see Kate leaving work with male colleagues, encountering a woman with young children, then making her way into a smart restaurant. Inside the restaurant, Kate is filmed in medium-close up, talking directly to camera about her desire for a baby. The comedy comes when---after acknowledging that meeting someone and getting married is something she aspires to but is simply too high risk ("I want a baby now. I'm 37.")---the film cuts to a slack-mouthed and terrified looking man on the other side of the table: "It's too much for a first date, isn't it?" she asks, and her date flees. Although Kate does meet someone, and their relationship becomes central to the film, her single-status and single-mindedness leave open other narrative possibilities at the beginning at least.

After her failed date, there is a montage sequence which aligns us with Kate's point of view as she watches seemingly endless streams of babies pass before her eyes, to a non-diegetic soundtrack of The Talking Heads' "Stay Up Late", a song that is explicitly about new-born babies. In this sequence, we see her exhaust a number of options for achieving her dream, including adoption, sperm donation and medical tests, before settling on surrogacy. Kate's desire for a baby thus drives the narrative and engineers her meeting with Angie.

Kate meets Angie after her visit to the surrogacy clinic run by Chaffee Bicknell (played by Sigourney Weaver, in her late fifties at the time of filming). Weaver's role seems to be to render surrogacy "natural" in juxtaposition to her character's "unnatural" fertility: Bicknell has a young baby when she first meets Kate and becomes pregnant again during the course of the film. Bicknell/ Weaver's maternal body is rendered comically abject, marking Kate's renting of Angie's womb "normal" by comparison. Kate's initial mis-readings of Bicknell---she assumes "Chaffee Bicknell" (also the name of the clinic) is two people and that Bicknell's baby is a result of surrogacy---also helps to establish that this is a comedy that hinges on misidentification.

Although Kate's first meeting with Angie immediately follows her visit with Bicknell, the two women meet not at the clinic but at Kate's home. Standing outside, talking nervously with her African-American doorman Oscar (Romany Malco), Kate's anticipation of Angie's arrival carries nothing of the charge of Roberta's first look at Susan. Oscar's function seems to be to displace any possibility of desire, or even fascination, between the women. Before Angie arrives, Oscar offers his own take on Kate and Angie's relationship, suggesting parallels with his relationships with his children's mothers. The very obvious differences between Oscar and Kate (and their "baby mamas") on the grounds of race, gender, and class suggests another failed attempt at identification. Oscar's presence also dilutes the intensity of Kate's look for Angie: when Angie's Suzuki comes into frame it is from Kate's perspective, but the next shot is of Oscar who is the one who rightly identifies that this is Kate's "baby mama". Similarly, our first sight of Angie is from her boyfriend Carl's (Dax Shephard) perspective and not Kate's. Mirroring Kate's first date at the start of the film, Angie is introduced in a heterosexual context marked as less than ideal---Carl is obnoxious, domineering, and ignorant, and he and Angie argue in their first scene. Yet, ideal or not, that context shapes Kate and Angie's first meeting. The first time the two women share a frame they are sandwiched between Oscar and Carl as Kate awkwardly tries to interrupt the couple's argument. Angie responds angrily to Kate's interjection and it is at this point---a moment of misrecognition and annoyance---that the two women are, briefly, visually isolated from the male characters. As Kate introduces herself, Angie's demeanour immediately changes. Whilst this sets up a question around Angie's authenticity which Kate (and the film) will become preoccupied with, it is not a question driven by the women's fascination with each other but about Angie's suitability as a surrogate.^{viii} The differences between the two--- and between Kate's expectations (fostered by the fecund, wealthy Bicknell) and Angie's

reality---are set up in this sequence and played on throughout, but they are productive of humour, not desire.

Homoerotic desire is never a serious possibility. It is invoked in this first meeting, not least in the parallels Oscar draws between his situation and Kate's, but played for laughs. Later, Angie tells Kate that she will be her surrogate when the two are on Kate's balcony at sunset. As Angie holds her hand out to Kate and tells her, "I want you to put your baby inside me", a long shot from inside the apartment captures the women facing each other in the door frame, sunlight streaming in behind them as the non-diegetic strains of Diana Ross and Lionel Richie's "My Endless Love" begin. This song carries over into the following scene, a pastiche of heterosexual romance, in which Kate and Angie are filmed in slow motion, gazing lovingly at each other as Angie undergoes artificial insemination (Winch, 2012: 76). The humorous discrepancy between the clinical procedure and the emphasis on loving looks between the women set against romantic music, deflects the intensity of their friendship and so the possibility of homoerotic desire. Same-sex desire is similarly rendered visible and quickly denied in a later scene in which Kate and Angie both emphatically shout "no!" when mistaken for a lesbian couple in an antenatal class.

The "threat" of desire between the two women is further contained through a reinscription of their differences in class terms. The class distinction between Kate and Angie is rarely explicitly stated. Instead, and in common with Tasker's (1998) reading of female friendship in *Beaches* (Marshall, 1988), it is constructed through a series of oppositions, including messy/neat, unhealthy/healthy, ignorant/intelligent, child-like/adult, creative/business-oriented, laid-back/controlling, and further conveyed through differences in dress, taste, speech and their respective apartments. For example, Kate's apartment is spacious, quiet, clean, and ordered, her fridge stocked with organic food. In contrast, when Kate visits Angie's apartment, a lingering close up of Angie's fridge reveals festering junk

food and take-away containers. Cramped shots evoke a sense of chaos and claustrophobia and close ups of Kate's facial expressions register her disgust, whilst Carl is visible in the background through the open bathroom door. At points, Kate's upper middle-class lifestyle is also mocked---through the inclusion of her ludicrously hippy boss and a scene in which she is ripped off buying a top-of-the-line pushchair, for example---but this is more gentle than the association of Angie and Carl with dirt, noise, and ignorance.

Reflecting the portrayal of female friendship in other contemporary romantic comedies, these class differences result in conflict between the two women that ultimately takes narrative precedence over friendship and cooperation (Winch, 2012: 72). The film also reinforces another narrative trope of the girlfriend flick, namely betrayal, when the viewer finds out that Angie is lying to Kate about being pregnant with her baby (Winch, 2012: 76). This means that brief moments in which the women identify with one another---for example, a scene in which they bond over their regrets about failed romantic relationships---are undermined. In turn, Kate's discovery of Angie's betrayal brings class difference explicitly to the fore, causing Kate to exclaim bitterly that Angie is "an ignorant, white trash woman", and leading to their temporary separation. Notably, it is biology which reunites them, their reconciliation made possible less by Kate's support of Angie during labour and more by Kate's discovery that she too is pregnant (with boyfriend Rob's child), erasing the fundamental difference which had brought them together in the first place.

By the end of the film, both Kate and Angie are subsumed into a discourse of middle-class parenting. As the credits roll, the characters celebrate Angie's daughter's first birthday in a children's play centre. Although this sequence does include a variety of types of "families"---Oscar is there with his children but not his "baby mamas", and Angie and Carl have separated---the values of middle-class parenting which Kate has espoused are broadly those which are celebrated, not least as it is Kate's family and friends who are in attendance.

The women are visually more alike here than at any other point (Angie's hair is neatly styled and she wears a shirt in a similar style to Kate's) and are framed side-by-side in a number of shots, usually with their daughters to emphasize the context for their ongoing relationship. Non-diegetic upbeat music from Zach Gill featuring Jack Johnson further emphasizes the importance of family: "you know, sometimes we say things we don't mean, but that don't mean that we're not still family". As the lyrics suggest, all differences and conflict between the women have been rendered invisible in favour of (class) sameness and the validation of heteronormative family life, solidified by Kate's engagement to Rob (Greg Kinnear).

Thus, as Winch maintains, "the girlfriend flick reinstates conservative principles as each girlfriend slips into the seeming security of the middle class heterosexual matrix" (2012: 79). What is particularly significant for our purposes here, however, is that the denial of the possibility of same-sex desire between the two women---achieved through a mixture of comedy, conflict, betrayal as well as by the heteronormative ending---also works to dilute the intensity of their friendship and to render the leads curiously asexual in the contexts of their heteroromances. To the extent that the narrative and formal marginalisation of desire goes hand-in-hand with the marginalisation of the homosocial in this film, this would support arguments about the permeability of these terms in relation to representations of women at least. In contrast, whilst the male friendship films we will discuss below are chary about the possibility of sexual desire between their protagonists, they openly admit and, indeed, celebrate, men's fascinations with one another in a context where the line between the homosocial and homosexual may at times be rendered visible, but is more rigidly policed.

Buds and Bros: Male Friendship Films

In Baby Mama, the friendship between Kate and Angie is a means to an (heterosexual, maternal) end. In contrast, in contemporary comedies that focus on dyadic

male friendship, the friendship marks a beginning, existing in its own right and largely outside of heteronormative rituals. This differentiates the group of films we discuss here not only from the rom-com negotiations of Baby Mama but also from traditional buddy movies where, even when the male pair are the central relationship in the film, their friendship exists to help the men achieve a set goal (e.g. defeat a common enemy, avert a disaster of cataclysmic proportions). Instead, in their adoption of generic elements from both the romantic comedy and the buddy movie, Due Date, Step Brothers, I Love You, Man, Crazy, Stupid, Love, and Funny People fit more easily with David Hansen-Miller and Rosalind Gill's definition of "lad flicks". As these scholars argue, "Lad flicks are compelling texts for film theorists as they signal movement away from the subjective pleasures of masculine identification and towards examination of objectified masculinity as a troubled cultural category" (2011: 36).

This broader cultural context in which masculinity is a troubled category at least in part because of its objectification (also Faludi, 1999) is an interesting one in which to investigate the portrayal of the origins of male friendships as it suggests that these films may have to negotiate some of the same terrain as female friendship films. However, Hansen-Miller and Gill also note that the films "deploy classical techniques of scopie pleasure and identification" (*ibid*: 36-7). Although they do not expand on this, in relation to the bromances we will discuss, the interplay between fascination and identification which typically attends the male friends' first meetings and structures their relationship as the film progresses, recalls aspects of Steve Neale's (1983) arguments about masculinity as spectacle. However, the bromance makes diegetically explicit the ambivalence that can structure identification with another male character. Significantly, Hansen-Miller and Gill also note that the structure of lad flicks depends "upon a dynamic of homosociality and homophobia" (37) as opposed to the structural balancing of hetero-romance with friendship in female-centred films, recalling

Sedgwick's arguments. Thus, whilst in Baby Mama the development of Kate's relationship with Angie and her relationship with Rob exist side-by-side, diluting the intensity of Kate and Angie's interactions, in the bromances we discuss here the heterosexual relationships more often exist before the male friends meet for the first time. This convention enables the films to, at least partially, assuage any homosexual anxieties from the outset, while also allowing them to relegate female characters largely to the side-lines and concentrate on the dyadic male relationship.

The clearest example of this is Due Date, which centres on a road trip taken by two very different men, Peter (Robert Downey Jr) and Ethan (Zach Galifianakis). Peter and Ethan are strangers to one another at the beginning of the film, their shared road trip necessitated when they are both placed on the "no fly" list after an altercation on a plane, and Peter loses his wallet and all forms of identification along with his luggage. The trip is given urgency---and heterosexual framing---by the **imminent** arrival of Peter's first child. The film begins with an intimate close-up of Peter lying in bed. We assume the camera is taking the position of his female partner as he talks to her about his dream about the birth of their child. However, as he reaches the end of the dream---a story which prefigures his relationship with Ethan---he rolls over in bed revealing his earpiece. Peter's telephone conversation continues as he packs for his journey home, but it remains one-way (it is later revealed that he was leaving a message). In the next scene, Peter's wife returns his call and we see her for the first time. Their relationship is solid and is only of interest narratively as a structuring device, the scheduled birth providing a timeframe for the homosocial adventures in much the same way as the wedding functions in The Hangover (2009) and The Hangover Part II (2011), director Todd Phillips' other male-friendship movies from the period.^{ix} These films also start with a woman on the end of the phone, establishing a literal distance between women and men in

distinction to female friendship films like Baby Mama (and even Desperately Seeking Susan) where these worlds overlap narratively and visually.

Whilst Due Date may be the most clear-cut in its use of the heterosexual relationship as little more than an alibi, heterosexuality is still established at the outset in the other four films. I Love You, Man begins with Peter's (Paul Rudd) proposal to Zooey (Rashida Jones), but their forthcoming nuptials are subsequently of interest because of Peter's quest to find a best man. **Peter is identified as a man who has always put his energy into relationships with women (particularly girlfriends) and it is against this backdrop that his search for a male friend is legitimated.** In Funny People---which becomes focused on the relationship between ailing comic George (Adam Sandler) and emerging comedian Ira (Seth Rogen)---George's medical diagnosis at the beginning of the film leads him to melancholy reminiscences of his relationship with his ex-wife, whilst Ira's infatuation with his female neighbour is also established early on. The men-children of Step Brothers may seem too immature for relationships, nevertheless the opening sequence still provides a heterosexual-alibi as Brennan (Will Ferrell) masturbates to the female fitness instructor on daytime TV. Finally, Crazy, Stupid, Love---an ensemble piece, with the bromance between middle-aged Cal (Steve Carell) and playboy Jacob (Ryan Gosling) at its centre---opens with Cal's wife Emily (Julianne Moore) asking for a divorce and confessing infidelity, before introducing Jacob as he attempts to seduce Hannah (Emma Stone).

We have grouped these relatively diverse films together because they show the origins of male friendship in a generic context where long-standing female friendships have attracted the most critical commentary. The first meetings between the male friends thus take on a particular importance for our developing argument, and our central observation here is that the films do admit the men's fascinations with one another---both narratively and visually---but this means a variety of things (admiration, pity, repulsion) so that identification and

difference, but never straight-forwardly desire, are structuring elements of their first encounters. In other words, the homosocial is more easily established in these films than in female friendship films because the men's initial fascinations with one another exist in a representational system where one man's look at another can carry multiple meanings. To be on the safe side, however, and in line with Sedgwick's arguments, the homosociality of these films hinges, at least in part, on an at times violent repudiation of homosexuality. As this plays out differently in each of the films, we will discuss the first meetings in turn.

Cal and Jacob formally meet on Cal's second visit to the bar Jacob frequents, although Cal is aware of Jacob's suave presence on his first visit. On that occasion, it is female laughter which draws Cal's attention to Jacob and we see the playboy commanding the attention of the women around him through the depressed Cal's eyes. This brief moment is significant not only in establishing the differences between the dejected, rumpled Cal and the confident, stylish, and heterosexually-successful Jacob, but also because of Cal's response which is to dismiss Jacob as "gaaaaay". This "verbal ejaculation" (Fuchs, 1993: 199) of homophobia may be brief, but it follows a well-worn convention of homophobia serving as a cinematic alibi for straight male homosociality (Russo, 1981). Notably, Jacob performs a similarly deliberate mis-reading of Cal when they do meet, suggesting that his straw-sucking carries connotations of fellatio. Whilst these moments are fleeting, both Funny People (in which stand-up comedy appears synonymous with homophobia and misogyny) and Step Brothers (which is littered with infantile name-calling in which associating men with homosexuality and femininity remains the ultimate insult) offer more sustained examples. As Fuchs' ironic use of "ejaculation" to describe equivalent moments in action movies already suggests, these jokes admit that which they ostensibly repudiate (i.e. the homoerotic potential of the homosocial), but they do this "while nonetheless leaving the denigrated status of homosexuality completely intact" (Hansen-Miller and Gill, 2011: 45).

If Cal and Jacob's heterosexuality is assured (at least at a surface level) through their relations with women and willingness to trade homophobic insults, the film nevertheless allows for their mutual fascination. On his second night in the bar, Cal's look again brings Jacob into view, the narrowing of his eyes signalling his voyeuristic scrutiny of the other man, whilst his facial expression demonstrates his sense of resigned inadequacy and recalls Neale's (1983) arguments about the male spectator's fraught identification with the idealised male movie star. As Jacob stands to leave the bar, he catches Cal's eye. Caught looking, Cal looks away, embarrassed. Jacob's response is a wry smile and slight shake of his head, suggesting pity. Later, we see a distracted Jacob, sitting with yet another beautiful (and anonymous) woman, watching Cal from afar, unseen. In a series of four shots, we are brought closer to Jacob as he overhears an oblivious Cal's ongoing narration, his look at the other man suggesting embarrassment as well as pity. He literally eyes Cal up and down and the camera follows his gaze, taking in Cal's worn sneakers, shapeless and mismatched jacket and trousers, and defeated demeanour.

In addition to generation, the difference between the men is sex---their sexual attractiveness and, relatedly, their success as sexual subjects. Cal fails to grasp the extent to which the rules of the game have changed: grooming and styling are now vital tools in the male heterosexual subject's arsenal. Whilst the film ultimately critiques the shallowness of Jacob's playboy lifestyle---both men are happiest when they are in monogamous relationships---his groomed, wealthy, and self-objectified masculinity is nonetheless celebrated. When the two meet to go shopping, for instance, we approach Jacob from Cal's perspective but in slow motion, allowing us to linger on Jacob/Gosling's appearance and confident nonchalance. Similarly, the sequence in which Cal learns the techniques of seduction from Jacob involves him---and us---simply watching Jacob in action. However, the relationship and the pattern of fascination and identification suggested in their initial meeting

is not entirely one way. As Jacob falls in love with Hannah, it is Cal's knowledge, experience, and maturity which becomes valued.

Due Date also involves a central male couple whose differences are immediately established. The pair first meet at an airport after the car in which Ethan is travelling causes a collision with Peter's taxi. Before Ethan appears on screen, the differences between the men are suggested by their modes of transport: Ethan is driven by a male friend who wears a checked shirt and baseball cap and drives a beige station-wagon; Peter's driver wears a dark Armani Exchange suit and drives a sleek, black "town car". As the drivers argue, Peter watches Ethan emerge from the car. This brief sequence is interestingly marked in a way which would be more familiar for a heterosexual encounter: the diegetic sound fades as non-diegetic instrumental music swells and, as we follow Peter's gaze, Ethan emerges from the car in slow motion, his hair blowing softly in the breeze. As Ethan turns to smile at Peter, Peter---like Cal, caught looking at another man---frowns back, looking confused and irritated. A conversation ensues, marking the contrast between Ethan's relaxed, friendly, and off-beat attitude and Peter's uptight, aggressive stance. The casting is also significant: Galifianakis is a familiar figure from The Hangover and plays essentially the same character here---a socially-inept man-child who mis-understands or abuses social conventions in a somewhat desperate attempt to make male friends. Ethan/Galifianakis' physicality also becomes a recurring source of humour. The physical differences between the two actors underline Ethan's failure to live up to contemporary standards of groomed, toned masculinity whilst highlighting the femininity in aspects of his self-presentation---his soft, permed hair contrasts with Peter's short, functional style; his long tassled scarf with Peter's tie; and he carries a small dog in an oversized bag whilst Peter is without luggage. The excessive nature of his physicality is also marked by his inability to observe personal space. For example, as he tries to put his bag in the overhead locker on the plane, he climbs on Peter's seat, his protruding

belly and crotch thrust into the other man's face. Job done, he stops to talk to Peter, cleaning his glasses with his shirt to again expose his hirsute belly which is then pushed into Peter's face as an air steward squeezes past. Although both Peter's discomfort and the close-ups of Ethan's excessive body mark these moments as more repulsive than Jacob's lingering assessment of Cal, both of these examples denaturalise masculinity, rendering the body a "project", and marking those who fail to maintain it appropriately as (comically) failing in their manhood. Such "failures" render the men unlikely figures of desire.

By this measure, Brennan and Dale (John C. Reilly) in Step Brothers are similarly marked as "failed" and undesirable men, their immaturity signalled by dress---underwear, jeans or sweat pants teamed with youthful t-shirts---and by their failure to observe social niceties around bodily conduct (as when Brennan masturbates on the sofa, or places his scrotum on Dale's drum kit as a mark of defiance). Unlike the other films discussed here, in Step Brothers it is the similarity between the two leads which defines their relationship, yet their first meeting is still characterised by suspicion and conflict, emphasised through a long shot that highlights the distance between them as they stand facing each other confrontationally until the film's title fills the space between them.

Like the step brothers, Ira in Funny People is trapped in perpetual adolescence, sleeping on a friend's couch and working a dead-end job whilst he dreams of comic success. Whilst Seth Rogen presents a new, lean physique in the film, for his character this is a double-edged sword as his body no longer "works" for comedy in the way his friend Leo's (Jonah Hill) does, nor does he have the looks which help Mark (Jason Schwartzman) achieve mainstream and sexual success. His attempts to mine his average-ness for comedy fails miserably. In contrast, George has a long and successful history in comedy. That said, he is also marked as something of a failure. Lonely and miserable, George takes to the stage as a way of venting his emotions and, understandably, this bombs with an audience paying to be

entertained. It is this performance that brings the two men together: watching from the sidelines, Ira is initially in awe, but the George-on-stage is not an appropriate figure of identification or desire. When Ira takes to the stage he turns his usual comic failure into success by making George the object of his jokes. This performance is, in turn, watched by George who becomes the ultimate arbiter of Ira's comedy. Thus, despite the very clear differences between them, this initial meeting plays on their shared experiences of comic failure, and makes clear that one man's success is another's failure. As such, their relationship---like all the male relationships in the film---is characterised by a barely concealed antagonism and competition from the outset, and remains structured by inequality throughout.

Finally, we turn to I Love You, Man. By the time Peter meets Sydney (Jason Segel), we have already witnessed Peter's failed attempts at male bonding. Interestingly, these are set in comic contrast to his openly gay brother Robbie's (Andy Samberg) ease with both gay and straight men. Moreover, Robbie is able to tell the difference by just looking, whilst Peter notably fails to pick up far more obvious signals in the "date" which precedes his meeting with Sydney. Whilst Peter and Sydney's eventual friendship is marked by none of the homophobic ejaculations which pepper the other films, Robbie's openly homosexual identity provides an alibi for the central couple: if they were gay Andy would know it, and so, then, would we. The film is still at pains to establish the heterosexuality of the male leads---with Sydney steering the content of much of their first two conversations towards women and heterosex---but the film is more relaxed about the potential homoeroticism of their relationship. Whilst, as in Baby Mama, this is largely played for laughs---indeed, the scene in which Peter finally asks Sydney to be his best man is reminiscent of Kate and Angie's balcony scene in its pastiche of heteronormative romantic conventions--- there is an emotional sincerity underwriting many of their exchanges which Kate and Angie are denied.

Moreover, like the other male friendship scenes discussed here, the men's first meeting admits Peter's fascination with Sydney in a way which Baby Mama cannot.

The men meet at an open house in the house of former Hulk Lou Ferrigno which, Peter, who is a realtor, is trying to sell. This is something of an over-determined space, with posters of Ferrigno's muscled body adorning the walls and an over-sized bronze emphasising his posed physique looming over the pool. Within the film, muscled bodies are associated with the gym in which Robbie works and with male cruising, therefore Peter and Sydney's failure to meet up to that particular ideal is, if anything, a marker of their heterosexuality. Sydney still looks out of place though: everyone else at the open house---including Peter---is smartly dressed and well-groomed, whilst Sydney wears ill-matching casual clothes and his hair is unkempt. Yet Sydney occupies the space with confidence, playing Peter's role (offering assistance to a single female viewer) and eating the food which the others ignore. Peter's first look at Sydney is thus marked with curiosity. As Peter joins Sydney outside, the physical difference between the men is marked. The persistent use of two-shots emphasises Segel's height as well as his character's styling and expressive physical movement in comparison to Rudd/Peter's smaller stature and more buttoned down performance. Still, they strike up an easy rapport, which is something of a relief after Peter's previous attempts at male bonding, and the camera moves in, closing the distance between them in a series of ever more intimate shots. In the first meetings in all five films then, the men look at each other---and we follow their looks---with none of the third-party mediation identified in Baby Mama.

Over the course of all five films, the men are mutually transformed by their friendships. As in Baby Mama, the same-sex friendship operates as a catalyst for self-discovery, forcing at least one of the pair to reflect upon their life choices and try to make amends as necessary. The narrative resolution is largely configured in heteronormative terms, with at least one of the pair becoming involved in a monogamous, heterosexual relationship

and embracing adult responsibilities. This is most marked in Crazy, Stupid, Love---the film where female characters have the largest part to play---but even here, the continuation and, indeed, the development, of Cal and Jacob's relationship is assured. Indeed, in all of these films we would argue (somewhat against Hansen-Miller and Gill's account of lad films) that the heteronormative ending is not accompanied by a sense of loss for the male friend. Part of the reason for this is that the male friendships are the new relationships in each of these films and so it is the heterosexual relationships which have to be reconfigured in their wake (rather than the other way around, which is the more common structure in the female friendship film). Whilst both Ethan (in the labour suite) and Sydney (at the altar) are integrated into their friends' respective hetero-rituals, the final image of each film---Ethan's television appearance and Sydney's gloriously tasteless wedding gift---provide evidence that they remain essentially unreconstructed. Similarly, Funny People ends with the men bonding over jokes, with not a woman in sight. The conclusion of Step Brothers also reassures that---despite assuming some of the trappings of responsible adulthood---Brennan and Dale remain unreconstructed, and that their families now value their selfish, infantile pleasures, and indulge their sense of entitlement. For men in film (as in society), the homosocial is the norm.

Conclusion

In this article we have sought to illustrate and investigate some of the differences which structure female and male friendship narratives with a particular focus on those films which centre on new friendships. Our first observation, the one which really started us on this project, is that narratives which focus on new adult friendships between women are extremely rare, whilst the "bromance" is flourishing. Of course, new friendships between men on screen do not originate with the bromance---there is a long cinematic history to men's friendships which cuts across a variety of genres. At its most basic, this difference speaks to the enduring

marginalisation of women within Hollywood, particularly women who are not centrally concerned with men. In contrast, whilst the contemporary narratives of male friendship certainly make reference to heterosexual partnerships or desires, these relationships are not necessarily afforded narrative prominence: they can be “com” without the “rom”. There are female friendship films about which a similar argument could be made, but these typically focus on groups of women with shared histories, diluting the intensity of the homosocial bond and its homoerotic potential. As such, the dominant narrative is of the reconfiguration of female friendship groupings in the light of heterosexual romance and ritual (Winch, 2012; Brook, 2011), and whilst Baby Mama may seem to buck this trend in its focus on the founding of a female friendship, this is a friendship lacking in intensity and undercut by humour. Whilst the male friendship films we have discussed still work hard to displace the possibility of sexual desire between the men---deploying homophobia and/or comedy as, perhaps overanxious, defences against homoeroticism---the men’s (sometimes mutual) fascination and (at times wishful) identification with one another is set up from their first meetings in a way which remains uncommon in representations of female friendship. We have suggested that the lack of distinction between the female homosocial and homosexual---and so between identification and desire---may offer an explanation for this, particularly in a cinematic context where women have historically been aligned with a sexualised “to-be-looked-at-ness”.

Reading these films collectively leads us to suggest that, in contemporary comedy at least, whilst girls must become women (other-oriented, hetero-focused), boys can be boys. In these contemporary films, heterosexuality comes with no obligation for men to change their relationships with one-another, largely because narratives of friendship and romance can be kept structurally distinct (if inter-dependent). This is not, necessarily, a bad thing, for men.

However, in the terms set out in these comedies, it is certainly not a progressive one and it leaves women perpetually on the margins.

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ⁱ See Tasker (1998) and Hollinger (1998) for fuller discussion of these films.

ⁱⁱ This is not to deny the homoerotic potential of these films: see, for example, Brook (2011) and Hollinger (1998: 158--67).

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, 27 Dresses (Fletcher, 2008), The Wedding Planner (Shankman, 2001) and Bride Wars which all begin with female protagonists as girls, participating in---or playing at---weddings; or Jennifer Garner's characters in Ghosts of Girlfriends Past (Waters, 2009) and 13 Going on 30 (Winick, 2004).

^{iv} On the internet movie database, for example, Baby Mama is identified as "comedy romance". The male friendship films are arguably less "generic" in this sense--- the five films we focus on here are all labelled "comedy" on IMDB but the emphasis placed on romance and drama varies, their family resemblances hinging more on authorship (broadly conceived) and performance, with Judd Apatow (writer-director of Funny People, producer of Step Brothers) and associated performers (including Seth Rogen, Paul Rudd and Steve Carrell) often seen as the reference point for contemporary male comedy (Hansen-Miller and Gill, 2010: 40).

^v Stacey also discusses All About Eve (Mankiewicz, 1950), a film in which the central female relationship is marked more by antagonism than friendship and which finds parallels in Single White Female, Black Swan and the "frenemy" teen films discussed by Hughes (2012).

^{vi} Merl Storr (2003: 39-54) provides an accessible summary of these debates.

^{vii} See Cameron (1993) for a concise summary.

^{viii} Tellingly, the film's tagline is "Would you..... pay her to have your baby?"

^{ix} We do not discuss The Hangover films as they focus around groups of pre-existing friends, although Alan's (Zach Galifianakis) fascination with Phil (Bradley Cooper) parallels arguments we develop in this article in many ways.