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Becoming What Women Want:
Formations of Masculinity in
Postfeminist Film and Television

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television
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DECLARATION

This thesis is submitted in accordance with the regulations for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. I confirm that the material contained within it is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

Parts of Chapter 4 have been submitted for publication as Thompson, Lauren Jade (2013) "Mancaves and Cushions: Marking Masculine and Feminine Domestic Space in Postfeminist Romantic Comedy" in Gwynne, Joel and Nadine Muller (eds) *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood*. London: BFI Palgrave.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis uses a range of recent television and film texts to interrogate postfeminist media formations of masculinity. In particular, this work focuses on increasingly prevalent media narratives that are about producing men as suitable romantic partners for postfeminist women. Arguing that existing literature on postfeminism ignores or trivialises the issue of masculinity, this thesis addresses new cultural formations of masculinity that are linked not only to postfeminist discourse, but also related cultural and economic shifts such as post-industrialisation and the rise of neo-liberal cultural politics. Analysing texts from the mid-1990s to 2012, the work argues that such representations are rife with tensions and contradictions. They represent in part an ungendering of previously feminine arenas (such as the makeover, and the home) yet are also marked by a discourse that requires the reassertion of sexual difference and the maintenance of heteronormativity. As such, the urge towards coupling becomes central to these formations, across the range of texts discussed within this thesis. The thesis argues that postfeminist media representations of masculinity are often characterised by an interplay between dominant, residual and emergent formations.

In the makeover show, the mission is to improve a man to satisfy his existing partner (perhaps as preparation for a proposal) or to ready him for entry into the dating market. In the lifestyle show, the advice given on how to manage domestic labour is committed to encouraging harmony between the heterosexual couple. The homebuilding sitcom focuses on the challenges of the transition between youth and the establishment of a family unit: finding the right partner, settling down, building a home, having children. The Hollywood romantic comedy, even in its recent, male-centred incarnations, still presents successful coupling as integral, essential, and inevitable, even if its attitude to the union is sometimes ambivalent. In all of these television and film genres, there is a considerable focus on how men must change in order to become, and stay, "marriageable".

This emphasis on coupling is paired with images of singledom as failure, a pathologisation which, this thesis argues, is rapidly becoming ungendered. The example texts' reinforcement of compulsory heterosexuality, their focus on a particular 'life-stage' (the early stages of independent living) and the increased focus on men's private lives means that domestic space and the home become key sites in which these tensions and battles are played out. This thesis examines the central role of the home, its decor, arrangement and labour, as both one of the major negotiations of coupling and as an aesthetic strategy for representing different formations of masculinity and postfeminist dilemmas of masculinity within this group of texts.

INTRODUCTION

In the romantic comedy film *What Women Want* (Nancy Meyers, 2000), chauvinistic advertising executive Nick Marshall (Mel Gibson) is overlooked for promotion to creative director in favour of a dynamic, strident female executive from a rival agency, Darcy Maguire (Helen Hunt). With much regret, Nick's boss, Dan Wanamaker (Alan Alda) informs him about the changed landscape of the advertising industry that has rendered his talents defunct:

The eighties were our glory days. They were all about alcohol, tobacco and cars. I was on top of my game. And then in the 90s, men simply stopped dominating how the dollars are spent. We lost our compass. Women between the ages of 16 to 24 are the fastest growing consumer group in the country. We're talking about girls who were born in the mid-80s who control our advertising dollars...the industry's been transformed.

Here, a shifted discursive context of gender and economics is explicitly invoked as background to narrative conflict. The agency's failure to respond to the changing gender cultures, economic conditions and representational paradigms of postfeminist, post-industrial and neo-liberal culture has led to them being 'left behind' by their competition.¹ Their advertising campaigns, described by Nick's female assistant as being 'T and A' (tits and ass), reflect a paradigm of sexualised female representation that, used without irony, the film critiques as being outdated and archaic. Nick, in the introduction to the film, is explicitly linked to a pre-second-wave-feminist

¹ I deliberately use the unhyphenated spelling 'postfeminist' throughout this work, as opposed to 'post-feminist', for reasons that are explored on page 28.

era through the use of a Rat Pack soundtrack and explicit references to 1960s sex comedies.

During Darcy's first meeting at the company, she introduces the staff of Sloane Curtis to the concept of 'female driven advertising', a '\$40 billion dollar pie' that the agency 'can't afford to not have a piece of'. To that end, she has produced a box of products looking for new representation, all of which are aimed at women. She runs through the contents of the kit, for the benefit of the bewildered men in the room. Each kit contains:

- anti-wrinkle cream
- mascara
- moisturising lipstick
- bath beads
- quick dry nail polish
- a home waxing kit
- a more wonderful Wonderbra
- a home pregnancy test
- hair volumiser
- pore cleansing strips
- Advil
- control top pantyhose
- a Visa card

Later in the film, an inebriated Nick is shown struggling to use the cosmetic products in the box (Fig 1.1). His lack of expertise with technologies of the self such as waxing means that his



FIGURE 1.1 – ATTEMPTING
MAKEOVER IN WHAT WOMEN WANT

attempt at 'makeover' fails, leaving him dishevelled and in pain. What is ironic about this scene is that, twelve years down the line, many of these products and treatments are now routinely marketed to and used by men as

well as women. Male versions of anti-wrinkle creams, hair mousses and pore-cleansing strips are readily available on the high street, and male versions of mascara, eye-liner and sculpting underwear have proven extremely successful for those canny enough to market them (Fig 1.3).² A rise in male-only salons indicates a booming market for treatments such as waxing and facials. And yet, a little over a decade ago, the image of a man being confronted and bemused by such a box of treats was not only credible, but a source of humour in a film aimed at a predominantly female audience.



FIGURE 1.2 – MARKETING IMAGE FOR ASDA'S BODY SCULPT VEST



FIGURE 1.3 – PRODUCTS FROM SUPERDRUG'S 'TAXIMAN' MAKE-UP RANGE

² A case in point here is UK supermarket chain Asda's £7 sculpting vest (Fig 1.2), which was so successful that the first batch reportedly sold out online within 4 minutes (Evans 2011, Internet).

In a documentary film released just four years later, a montage sequence illustrates a shift in the expectations, assumptions and routines of male self-care as presented by Hollywood cinema. *My Date With Drew* (Jon Gunn, Brian Herzlinger, Brett Winn, 2004) features a montage sequence in which the protagonist's masculinity is explicitly trained, tamed and trimmed into terms acceptable for heterosexual coupling. In a move that displays a progression from Nick's unfamiliarity and unease with aesthetic technologies in *What Women Want*, *My Date With Drew's* Brian Herzlinger is carefully led through a routine of self-improvement, under the supervision of a raft of female experts including a personal trainer, hairdressers and shopping assistants. This makeover montage begins as Brian receives a phone call confirming that Drew Barrymore has agreed to meet him for a date. A worried Brian notes that 'that gives me one week to prepare for this' as the soundtrack swells into Hall & Oates' 'You Make My Dreams'. As well as the perhaps more traditionally masculine activity of disciplining the body through physical training such as weightlifting and boxing (Fig 1.4), the montage shows Brian having his hair highlighted, cut and straightened (Fig 1.5), and being taken on a shopping trip for clothes. While Brian is still shown to need the expert guidance of women in order to undertake these procedures, and the montage is clearly tongue-in-cheek, a man undergoing this beautifying process is no longer the absurd and outlandish prospect that it was in *What Women Want*. It is this gradual shift towards the normalisation of cultures of 'male grooming' and concern with personal aesthetics that I am concerned with here, as well as the ways in which such activities are frequently framed within narratives of heterosexual coupling.

Brian and the filmmakers of *My Date With Drew* stage his makeover as an essential part of his preparation for his date, and thus one of the broad concerns of this thesis is the way in which postfeminist media texts construct stories about preparing masculinity for coupling.



FIGURE 1.4 – MASCULINE TRAINING
IN MY DATE WITH DREW



FIGURE 1.5 – 'MALE GROOMING' IN MY
DATE WITH DREW

Indeed, just over a decade after the release of *What Women Want*, there has been a notable rise in romantic comedy films that are concerned with encounters between masculinity and postfeminist space and culture. Though he might start off as a slobby, unsuccessful loser or a womanising bachelor, the narratives of films within this sub-genre frequently chart a man's transformation to the 'after' of a makeover and ideal romantic partner. Beyond Hollywood cinema, there is a raft of television programmes, advertisements and industries that promote the adoption of the aesthetic technologies of the self, so unfamiliar to Nick in 2000, as an emergent part of a culture of masculine self-care or 'male grooming'. The example of *What Women Want*'s narrative assuming, and drawing humour from, Nick's unfamiliarity with aesthetic technologies illustrates the cultural shift that has occurred even over this short period of time. *What Women Want* can be

seen as a precursor to a series of films that place a male protagonist at the centre of the rom-com. More importantly, perhaps, it foreshadows the proliferation of images of male makeover across a number of media forms, particularly in the lifestyle television genre, sitcom, films and advertising during the intervening decade, and the narrative of male transformation has formed the centre of an increasing number of Hollywood films, particularly in a sub-genre of the romantic comedy that Tamar Jeffers McDonald has dubbed 'the hommecom' (2006, p. 107). Taken as a group, these films and television texts can be seen to reflect cultural anxiety over the status of masculinity in the contemporary postfeminist society, especially in relation to heterosexual coupling.

These introductory textual examples, drawn from two very different recent films, share a common theme that is a central concern of an increasing number of film and television texts: the interaction between men and arenas of culture and consumption previously gendered as feminine. They also share a transformation narrative that is ultimately about producing men as suitable romantic partners for contemporary heterosexual women.

Broadly, this thesis is concerned with these changing images of masculinity and the formations of masculine identity that emerge within and through contemporary film and television. Aiming to provide a feminist analysis of an underexplored area in contemporary gender studies, this thesis works to understand the position of masculinity within the discourses of postfeminist culture and its paradigms of makeover, surveillance, gazing at the self, individualization, choice and empowerment. In particular, this thesis

examines contemporary audio-visual media's increasingly prevalent and prominent 'worrying at' images and representations of failing and/or deficient men (Wheatley 2005, p. 149). These texts are explored as part of a discursive context that can broadly be described as post-industrial, postfeminist, neo-liberal and characterised by a culture of normative heterosexuality.

'Postfeminism' is a contested cultural term in academic discourse, and a more comprehensive definition and overview of its implications and history will be outlined in the review of literature of this thesis. Fundamentally, however, I shall be using 'postfeminism' here in line with Rosalind Gill's definition, as a 'sensibility that characterises an increasing numbers of films, television shows, advertisements and other media products' (2007, p. 148). Like Gill, it is my firm belief that 'postfeminist media culture should be our critical object', and as such I am interested in 'the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them' as displayed by popular television and film (ibid., pp. 148-9).

The dynamics of the postfeminist discourses that Gill outlines are forcibly visible in *What Women Want* as elements of Nick's transformation. In order to use the products that promise self-improvement, Nick must first reform his subjectivity into one amenable to transformation – in this case imagined as a feminine position. He encourages himself to 'think like a broad', changing the diegetic music in his apartment from Frank Sinatra ('the perfect antidote to oestrogen') to a girl-rock anthem (Meredith Brooks'

'Bitch') stolen from his teenage daughter's backpack. He attempts to convince himself that 'this is supposed to be fun', reflecting Gill's observation that the strict routines of self-care that are normalized within postfeminist culture must always be experienced 'as "fun", "pampering" or "self-indulgence"' (2007, p. 155). This scene sees Nick learn how to gaze at the self, internalizing the 'self-policing and narcissistic' gaze of postfeminist subjectivity (ibid., p. 151). The beginning of his transformation is highlighted with a shot of Nick swinging around to view his reflection in the plate glass window of his apartment. In a soft, sultry voice, he repeats the slogan 'you go girl!' at himself (Fig. 1.6). The film then immediately cuts to another shot of Nick's reflection, this time in the bathroom mirror (Fig. 1.7). The process of Nick's 'makeover', in which he will attempt to use, with varying degrees of success, all the products in Darcy's box, is signalled very pointedly by two matched shots that emphasise the act of looking at one's self. Such a structure of representation supports Rosalind Gill's claim that contemporary femininity is characterised by subjectification and an urge to internalise a gaze at the self (ibid., p. 149). Already, then, we see men being brought into the postfeminist representational paradigm, and it is these increasingly common interactions between masculinity and aspects of culture that have been identified as emblematic of the postfeminist moment that I am interested in interrogating within this thesis.



FIGURE 1.6 – 'YOU GO GIRL': GAZING AT THE SELF IN WHAT WOMEN WANT



FIGURE 1.7 – THE MIRROR IN WHAT WOMEN WANT

Furthermore, I see postfeminist culture as inextricably linked to a number of other social contexts and material conditions of life in the early twenty-first century. Gill's work has already noted the significant intersections between postfeminist discourse and neo-liberal forms of governmentality, going as far as to suggest that 'the ideal disciplinary subject of neo-liberalism is feminine' (2007, p. 157). Indeed, many of Gill's 'stable features of postfeminism' could also be determined to constitute a neo-liberal discourse: the shift from objectification to subjectification, for example, and the emphasis on freedom of choice at the same time as self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline (ibid., p. 149). Both postfeminism and neo-liberalism share a concern with the 'conduct of conduct' (Rose 1999, p. 3). Much of the lifestyle and makeover television under consideration within this thesis has been discussed in these terms, framed as tools of governmentality under neo-liberalism. 'Reality' television programmes,

argue Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, operate within 'an analytic of government' which 'emphasizes television as a resource for acquiring and coordinating the techniques for managing the various aspects of one's life' (Ouellette and Hay 2008, p. 12). Similarly, Gareth Palmer argues that the 'market model – the idea that one can create oneself from a supply of commodities' is 'fundamental' to lifestyle television (2008, p. 2). Whilst I do see neo-liberalism as an important and formative discursive context for the makeover show and lifestyle television more generally, I would argue that to see these texts as products of neo-liberalism alone is too deterministic.

Ouellette and Hay's wish to view television as 'cultural technology' as well as 'cultural practice' or 'political economic practice' is one with which I am sympathetic, but neo-liberalism is but one cultural context in which these texts sit. I wish, therefore, to view these texts as being products of a particular historical moment, during which neo-liberalist ideology interacts with other social contexts, particularly a post-industrial labour economy, and other trends in media representations of gender, particularly those aspects that might be considered constitutive of a postfeminist sensibility.

It is also the case that post-industrialism, and the economic and material conditions that it entails, underpin *and* are used to legitimise the logics of neo-liberalism and postfeminism. The shift in the Western world to a service-based economy has also been read in many quarters as a feminisation of the workforce, with the 'soft' skills demanded by employers in these sectors seen as more aligned with femininity – empathy, interpersonal skills and communication, as opposed to the technical skills or

physical strength required by many primary and secondary sector jobs. Such jobs are also far more likely to be low-paid, part-time and/or offer little prospect of advancement or training. The decline of industry in the Western world and the divestiture of such operations to Majority World countries have contributed to these patterns. '[T]he prevalence of corporate restructuring and downsizing' has created a 'risk economy', where work is contingent and temporary, and Western economies are characterised by 'growing economic disparity between the rich and poor' (Leonard 2007, p. 106). The growth in the number of women who are economically active has also lead to a rise in dual-income households where both partners work full-time.³ In an example of how inextricably linked post-industrialism and postfeminist discourses are, recent newspaper reports have blamed a 'mancession' for the increase in the number of households with female breadwinners and stay-at-home 'househusbands': a figure which has, according to research carried out by the Office for National Statistics for *The Spectator*, tripled over the past 15 years (Brown 2012, Internet).

Most obviously, it seems to me, the shifts in these conditions have major implications for the formation and maintenance of heterosexual couples, a unit that is still presented as normative even in an age of civil partnerships, gay marriage and high divorce rates. The urge towards the formation and maintenance of heterosexual coupling is central to the narrative, thematic and representational logic of all of the popular film and television genres under consideration within this thesis. In the makeover show, the mission is

³ According to research published in *Social Trends 41*, the employment rate for women rose from 53 percent in Q2 1971 to 66 percent in Q1 2011 (Office for National Statistics 2011, p. 1).

to improve a man to satisfy his existing partner (perhaps as preparation for a proposal) or to ready him for entry into the dating market. In the lifestyle show, the advice given on how to manage domestic labour is committed to encouraging harmony between the heterosexual couple. The homebuilding sitcom focuses on the challenges of the transition between youth and the establishment of a family unit: finding the right partner, settling down, building a home, and having children. The Hollywood romantic comedy, even in its recent, male-centred incarnations, still presents successful coupling as integral, essential, and inevitable, even if its attitude to the union is sometimes ambivalent. In all of these television and film genres, there is a considerable focus on how men must change in order to become, and stay, 'marriageable' (McGee 2005, p. 12).

While most analyses of postfeminist culture to date have focused on women, many have been quick to note the highly prescriptive set of life choices presented as desirable, especially in relation to coupling. Postfeminist discourses 'relentlessly stress...matrimonial and maternalist models of female subjectivity' (Negra 2009, p. 5). 'The marital couple re-emerges as the favoured form of family life' and therefore the 'demarcated pathologies' of postfeminist culture include 'failing to find a good catch' (McRobbie 2009, p. 86; McRobbie 2007a, p. 35). Increasingly, this thesis will argue, postfeminist culture seeks to bring men into this paradigm too, where singledom is pathologised and the formation of a couple is seen as evidence of success and represents achieved personhood. The increasing number of mainstream Hollywood romantic comedy films that make men their central

characters, and the frequency with which a television makeover is carried out in order to enable a marriage proposal are just two of the most obvious indicators of this shift. However, given the material and social context outlined above, it is perhaps not unexpected that the formation of an on-screen couple is complicated by anxieties, tensions and paradoxes, especially in relation to masculinity and its status. In 2006, Tony Jefferson wrote that 'it is almost as if to succeed in love, one has to fail as a man' (p. 9). In many ways, what follows in this thesis is an extended analysis of how various contemporary forms have attempted to explore, examine, represent, negotiate and re-tell this paradox and the attendant cultural anxieties around masculine subjectivity that come with it.

The intensification of these discourses of heterosexual romance and coupling against an economic backdrop in which women are no longer necessarily financially dependent upon men has led to a growing promotion of the concept of a 'dating market', evidenced not just by a raft of services for singles (online dating, matchmaking, speed dating) but also a rapid increase in television shows about finding, selecting and/or producing the right partner. These can be as diverse as dating shows such as *Take Me Out* (2010-), to a whole range of 'reality' television shows such as *Celebrity Love Island* (2005-2006), game shows like *Playing It Straight* (2005; 2012) and *The Bachelor* (2002-), and documentaries like *Wife Swap* (2003-2009). In the makeover shows, sitcoms, and films discussed within this thesis we see men being required to undergo transformations in their appearance, skills and homes in order to attract and sustain a monogamous relationship. The

images, narratives, representations and, often, jokes, contained within these transformation media texts are a way of 'working through', or, as Helen Wheatley puts it, 'worrying at' the issue of postfeminist masculine subjectivity and identity (Ellis 2000, p. 79; Wheatley 2005, p. 149).

Joseph Pleck's work on gender role strain addresses the problems of trauma, discrepancy, incongruity and dysfunction that arise as men attempt to live up to cultural ideas of masculinity (2006). It is these issues that the texts under consideration here work through, exacerbated by the paradoxes and contradictions outlined in the increasing address of postfeminism's governing discourses to men and around the production of masculine identities. Indeed, one might even argue that many of the texts under consideration here are *about* the issue of gender role strain itself. My aims here have much in common with Diane Negra's 2009 monograph, *What A Girl Wants*, which explores 'the role of the media in collaborating/fostering emergent shifts in social norms and behaviours' in relation to 'the ways which postfeminism conceptualizes home, work, time and the commodity landscape' for women. I am interested in addressing these same issues in relation to masculinity. Like Negra's work, the aim of this thesis is not to provide a definitive statement about what 'postfeminist masculinity' is (p. 8). Instead, I want to use this space to explore productively the tensions, anxieties and negotiations that are at play in emergent cultural constructions of postfeminist formations of masculinity. Like Negra, 'I am less concerned with producing a totalizing account than with mapping the paradoxes which so often emerge in postfeminist culture' (p. 6). As the

literature review that follows will demonstrate, to undertake this task in relation to masculinity is to address a large and significant gap in work on postfeminist culture; to begin to shed light upon the position of men in what is obviously a highly gender-conscious discourse.

My deliberate rejection of the possibility of a totalizing definition of postfeminist masculinity is informed by a belief that the discourses under consideration here are best understood as *in process*, rather than as being involved in the production of fixed identities. Following the model of exploring the ‘internal dynamic relations’ of cultural process put forward by Raymond Williams, I therefore see postfeminist formations of masculinity as moulded and shaped by not just dominant, but also ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’ characteristics (1977). In the light of this, I am choosing not to define ‘postfeminist masculinity’ as something distinct from ‘traditional masculinity’. Instead, I am interested in discussing the ways in which transatlantic postfeminist television and cinema tracks transformations in the role of men through formations that hold continuities with hegemonic, and even archaic, depictions of masculinity alongside ‘new’ emergent masculine images, emphases and values.

Postfeminist culture embraces the gains made by the feminist movement and uses the discourses of emancipation and choice to bring women into a consuming, self-surveilling, governmental mode of citizenship. Many commentators have argued that postfeminism operates this disciplinary regime with the aim of ‘re-stabilizing gender relations’ (McRobbie 2007b, p. 721). Importantly, and in line with Williams’ structure, such shifts do not

necessarily promote a return to the 'traditional' gender roles of nineteenth century industrialisation (although some prevalent postfeminist discourses, such as retreatism, do include this element). Rather, as McRobbie suggests, postfeminist discourses seem to be involved in the establishment of a 'post-feminist gender settlement', and the formation of 'a new sexual contract' (ibid.). While McRobbie's analysis focuses on the implications of the process for women, and its expression through female representations, a 'new sexual contract' must necessarily have another side to it. What position are men being secured into in this new sexual contract? How is *masculinity* being re-shaped to fit in with these emergent social and economic conditions?

This thesis will argue that 'gender restabilisation' is not just happening in relation to femininity. Indeed, it could not. As Imelda Whelehan noted in 2000, moral panics around an identity crisis in men could instead 'be regarded as a potentially healthy response; a recognition that a change in the lives of women would necessitate a change in the lives of men, as well as what being a man might mean' (p. 114). New formations of femininity that emerge in postfeminist discourse such as McRobbie's figure of 'the girl...endowed with economic capacity' seem to raise questions for the status and formation of contemporary masculinity (2009, p. 58). To point to patterns such as the decline in male employment rates (the proportion of men who are economically inactive has increased from 4.9 per cent in Q2 1971 to 17.1 per cent in Q2 2011) is not to align myself with backlash accounts, which blame feminism for men having been 'left confused, their

identity shattered' (Office for National Statistics 2011, p. 2; Coppock et al 1995, p. 3). Rather, I am interested here in how Shelia Rowbotham's hypothesis that 'the creation of a new woman of necessity demands the creation of a new man' is borne out within these texts, though not, perhaps, in the ways Rowbotham might have hoped (Rowbotham in Wandor 1972, p. 3). The films and television shows considered within this thesis and their representation of masculine identities through near-ubiquitous transformation narratives and often overt makeover paradigms suggest that they are in some way 'about' this process of creating 'new men'. Indeed, as Steve Cohan's tongue-in-cheek analysis of makeover show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007), suggests, 'successful straight coupling require[s] endless negotiation between alien creatures polarized in their libidinal, emotional and domestic needs', resulting in a need to 'mediate heterosexual difference' (2007, p. 181). The position of men within the new discursive arrangement of postfeminism is all too often unaccounted for in feminist writing. Gender is necessarily relational, and the way that men are constructed, represented and governed has specific implications for feminism and women too, especially when, as this thesis will argue, (non-elite) men are increasingly subject to the same individualizing, self-surveilling discourses of postfeminism as women.

McRobbie proposes that 'the post-feminist masquerade is a strategy or device for the restructuring of patriarchal law and masculine hegemony' (2007b, p. 723). I would argue that in order to achieve this end, aspects of hegemonic masculinity are being reformed in order to fit with postfeminist

and neo-liberal logics of gender. This includes practices that focus on aesthetic appearance, such as self-surveillance, makeover and self-improvement via the consumption of technologies like cosmetic surgery, services like hair removal and the leisuring of purchasing as in shopping for clothes. However, as well as the regulation of physical appearance, one of postfeminist culture's dominant areas of concern is domestic life. This encompasses not just the aesthetics of domesticity, but also its regimes and associated labours, such as housework, childrearing and even sexual activity, all of which are formulated into pedagogies by postfeminist discourses. Through an 'emphasis on showplace domesticity' and 'virtuoso parenting'; the prevalence of 'downshifting' or 'retreatist' narratives; and the continuation of sexual division of labour, 'home' has become a 'problematic place' within debates about postfeminism and indeed within postfeminist texts themselves (Tasker and Negra 2007, p. 7; Hollows 2006, p. 97).

If the home is, as Joanne Hollows states, a problematic space within postfeminist discourse and discourses *about* postfeminism, it is surely even more so in relation to masculinity within the postfeminist paradigm (2006, p. 97). The separation of home and work during industrialisation in the late eighteenth century meant that the roles of men and women 'were segregated into public and domestic spheres, respectively' (Hareven 2002, p. 35). The private sphere was imagined and constructed as a feminine realm, while masculinity became increasingly defined by its role outside the home, with young men encouraged to be 'responsible breadwinners whose

manhood was legitimated through their ability to secure the needs of their dependents' (Davidoff and Hall 2002, p. 17). This gendering of roles and space was formalised through the structure of the 1851 census in Britain, which focused on profiling the occupation of the male head of household. Such was the forcefulness of the gendered ideology of separate spheres that, despite sources which 'point to an intense involvement of men with their families', and evidence that 'men also took an active part in setting up the home', men's relationship to home remains a relatively under-examined area in the historical study of gender (ibid, pp. 329; 387). It is also an unexplored area of film and television studies, with works such as Kathleen Anne McHugh's *American Domesticity* (1999), for example, focusing solely on domesticity as an element of femininity. The relationship between men and home has, in many ways, been rendered invisible both in academic study, and in popular culture itself. This is an approach that, as Rita Felski argues, ignores 'the fact that men are also embodied, embedded subjects, who live, for the most part, repetitive, familiar and ordinary lives', and, I would add, live much of them *at home* (2002, p. 353).

Given the highly unequal gender structures enforced by the ideology of separate spheres, which made women economically dependent upon men and 'defined by their responsibilities as wives and mothers' (Gillis and Hollows 2009, p. 4), it is hardly surprising that one of second-wave feminism's biggest concerns was to dismantle these restrictions and ensure that women could have equal access to the paid work, power, status and political influence associated with a presence in the public sphere. However,

this is now largely recognised amongst feminists as an incomplete project. Although 'feminism has made huge advances in giving women the language and the confidence to make demands in the spheres of education, work and to a lesser extent, politics', Whelehan notes, 'no one could convince men it was in their interest to take up their share of the housework' (2000, p. 16). Thus, women are left with the dual burden of paid work and unpaid domestic labour, and men's relationship to, and role within, the home remains invisible, unspoken and therefore unsocialised.

With the transformations in the labour market outlined above, the rise in households where both partners work full time, and a small rise in households in which men who are economically inactive in order to care for children or home (increased by one percentage point since 1994, to 6% of economically inactive men) – it is perhaps unsurprising that the domestic sphere is a contested realm within postfeminist culture (Office for National Statistics 2011, p. 19). On the one hand, the feminist inflections within popular culture seem to recognise the act of 'leaving home' as a 'necessary condition of liberation' (Giles 2004, p. 141-2). As Hollows notes, feminist theory can often be seen to entail a rejection of domesticity and home, and, as a result, she has observed 'an increasing fascination with the domestic as a forbidden pleasure' (Hollows 2006, p 98). In other arenas of postfeminist culture, home has been re-affirmed as the 'proper' place for women.

Framed within the logic of postfeminism, home is presented in various media forms as a desirable choice, not an entrapment, and as expressive, not enforced and monotonous, labour. Diane Negra describes the prioritisation

of 'housewife chic' as one of the key features of 'chick flicks' of the 1990s and 2000s, a formation of femininity that is also highly visible on television in both fiction and non-fiction formats, and in women's magazines and advertising. All of this tremendously productive work on the 'contextual and historical' investments and meanings within the site of domesticity in postfeminist culture, however, *still* leaves us with the question men's meanings, roles and functions within domestic life for men. This is an especially pressing omission given that the available statistics suggest that men's role within the home is more involved than at any stage since the separation of spheres (Hollows 2006, p. 114). In undertaking the viewing for this project, I was struck by just how many contemporary media texts frame their male protagonists, whether the 'ordinary' participants of lifestyle television or the romantic comedy hero, within the domestic milieu. Very few of the texts in question focus on the men's public lives as anything other than a secondary concern, but the re-formulation of their domestic spaces, routines and habits is often the focus of entire shows. Writing about *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, Cohan suggests that 'the appeal of the series for many women lies in its mission of softening masculinity's rough edges for successful male-female cohabitation', even going as far as to describe the series as 'domestic rehabilitation...of straight men for the benefit of their women' (2007, p. 180). Throughout this thesis then, I am interested in what each text has to say about the relationship between men and domesticity, with the aim of making visible specific formations and themes that might help us to better understand the historical and emergent characteristics of male domesticity.

Before I outline in brief the structure of the thesis, I would like to take some time to discuss issues of corpus selection and definition. As the work undertaken in this introduction might have indicated, broadly, my focus is upon texts that could be characterised as ‘postfeminist’ and that make the interactions between masculinity and feminine culture their object. In particular, I am interested in texts that place emphasis upon transformation of a male protagonist or utilise, to whatever extent, some formulation of a makeover paradigm. The term postfeminist itself imparts an imprecise historical periodization, but more specifically, I am interested in texts that emerge *after* the period usually conceived of as presenting an overt media backlash against feminism. Lad culture, which emerged in Britain in the early 1990s is, for example, largely excluded from this study. Instead, my focus is on emergent formations of masculinity that express a concern with the positioning of men within postfeminist governance. Diane Negra noted in 2009 that it is in ‘roughly the last 15 years’ that ‘postfeminist concepts/definitions of women’s interests, desires, pleasures and lifecycles [have] become thoroughly persuasive and ideologically normative’ (Negra 2009, p 8). Another socio-cultural context that I believe is instructive here is the market launch in 1998 of Viagra, a drug to treat erectile dysfunction. Viagra’s launch and promotion has specific implications for temporal conceptions of masculinity and virility that will be explored further in the last chapter of this thesis. Taking all of these factors together, I believe that a focus upon texts produced within the period between the mid-1990s and the writing of this thesis in 2012 provides a satisfactory temporal demarcation of where we might chronologically expect to find ‘postfeminist’

texts, although I do not, of course, shy away from the analysis of earlier television programmes and films should their consideration prove instructive to the arguments within.

Similarly, in line with existing scholarly work on postfeminism that sees the sensibility as a broadly Anglo-American one, my focus here is upon both British and American texts, viewed within a British cultural context. As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra highlight, 'postfeminism is a pervasive phenomenon of both British and American culture, often marked by a high degree of discursive harmony evidenced in... "transit" texts' (2007, p. 13). It is not only, then, that this thesis is concerned with both British and American texts, but also that their 'decidedly transatlantic' address and construction, and their position within a global film and television economy, informs their inclusion and my analysis of them (Tasker and Negra 2007, p. 13).

Finally, and again in common with Negra, I am interested in both film *and* television texts, believing that a discursive context as visible, buoyant and prominent as postfeminism exists not in one medium, form or genre, but through repetition of its key messages, concerns and formations across a number of different media outputs. As Negra writes, 'in a synergistic media environment, analysis of a single medium holds less explanatory power for any account that seeks to explain the complex relations between social life and media representation' (2009, p. 9). Therefore, what follows is a study that embraces cross-media analysis as a way of understanding the "echo chamber" of repetition and reinforcement' that makes postfeminism such a

virulent discourse in contemporary culture (ibid.). However, I also hope to attend within these discussions to the specificities of the different media forms and genres under consideration here, and how their specific inflections, formats and structures might affect or enhance their presentation of postfeminist formations of masculinity.

This thesis uses close textual analysis as its primary methodology. The audio and visual constructions of each text are examined closely in order to unpick the meanings, messages and representations that are offered to the viewing audience. Much as a poem would be analysed by focusing on the significance of lexical choice, its syntactical arrangement, or its meter, close textual analysis provides a way of accessing not just the meaning of a text, but also the ways in which it conveys those meanings to its audience. The three television and film genres analysed within this thesis are notable for their repetitive nature. Textual analysis allows us to access and understand the significance of both the repetitions and patterns, and the specific iterations of gender in individual texts.

In the first chapter, I examine the production of ideal postfeminist masculinities within makeover and lifestyle television. Underpinned by an explicit narrative of heterosexual coupling, such programmes attempt to reform deficient masculinity across a wide range of aspects of 'lifestyle', including appearance, domestic skills and interior life. As well as the application of the previously feminine paradigm of makeover to men, I am also interested in exploring here the numerous ways in which the male makeover show represents the intensification of postfeminist discourses

and their increasing application to masculine formations of identity.

Television's situation of these lifestyle interventions within the home sparks off an investigative strand that will continue throughout the thesis into the other genres of film and television texts discussed; an enquiry that is concerned with the relationship between men and private space, and the ways in which postfeminist media increasingly seek to problematise and then 'fix' men's relationships with the domestic sphere.

It is this project that is extended in my second chapter, which focuses on postfeminist formations of masculinity in the contemporary homebuilding sitcom. This is explored through close textual analysis of the significance of the expressive studio sets that represent domestic spaces. In the homebuilding sitcom, the private spaces of apartments are not only re-presented to the viewer each week, but are also frequently foregrounded by the narrative conflicts that occur within individual episodes. This chapter also examines the workings of narratives of male transformation in a genre that has repeatedly been characterised as narratively static. I argue that the episodic 'reset' function of the sitcom enables it to act as a space in which emergent masculine identities, or aspects of these, can be 'tried out' and worked through without the threat of destabilisation to the gender order.

Finally, I examine a genre of film that seems almost to be born out of a desire to explore these emergent postfeminist formations of masculinity – the romantic sex comedy. Itself an example of an emergent form that represents the encounter of masculinity with a generic area previously gendered as feminine, the romantic sex comedy, or male-centred romance

has provided a space for the articulation and interrogation of numerous anxieties and tensions over the role of men in contemporary society. In this chapter, I examine the various formations of contemporary postfeminist masculinity that emerge as key character types within the genre and the thematic continuities that these present when considered in the light of makeover television and the situation comedy. In the romantic sex comedy, men are placed as protagonists, and it is their transformation and conversion into an ideal romantic partner that forms the narrative focus. Once again, men's relationship to the home is explored in this intensely suburban, domestically-located subgenre.

Although my focus here is upon the recent past, in an era that I find particularly compelling in terms of the new (sometimes conflicting) demands and requirements of masculine identity, I am also interested in attending to the historicity of such discourses. As I have mentioned, I am always aware that what is under discussion in this thesis is not the final product of postfeminist masculinities, but rather masculinity in process, an ever-shifting and diverse compilation of images, representations, values, roles, norms and ideals. Nonetheless, there are strong and resonant patterns to be found in the media representations and texts discussed within, patterns that are only made stronger by paying attention to their historical precedents. Following Williams' model, the cultural process of this repositioning of gender involves interaction between residual, dominant and emergent elements of masculine identities. The work that follows is an

exploration of how men are being recruited to the postfeminist project within and through film and television texts.

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A SUBJECT FOR THE NOUGHTIES: AN UNMARRIED MAN

In my examination of homebuilding situation comedies in the previous chapter, I argued that paying close attention to production and set design allows us to observe paradigms and patterns of masculine domesticity as presented by popular media forms. Masculine domestic spaces may initially appear to be organised around dysfunction, but actually work to provide spaces for male bonding and leisure, and freedom from domestic labour. Single men's homes are contrasted to feminine or coupled homes, and spaces must change in order to accommodate women and heterosexual relationships. Men's homes simultaneously display and closet the heterosexual identities of their inhabitants. The expressive function of domestic space in relation to masculinity will continue to be a thread of concern as I progress into analysis of a recent contemporary sub-genre of Hollywood film.

The previous chapter also examined the ways in which Raymond Williams' concept of dominant, residual and emergent elements of cultural process can be mapped onto representations of masculinity in the contemporary homebuilding sitcom. This chapter will expand this by identifying and analysing several formations of masculinity that emerge from key character types of the male-centred romantic comedy film. Within this genre, we can see the prioritising of several key formations that are used to map wider cultural anxieties about masculinity over a range of life-stages. As my work

on lifestyle television and the sitcom has suggested, a focus on life-stage, in particular early adulthood, emerges as a key theme of texts concerned with formations of postfeminist masculinity. Anxieties about masculinity in postfeminist texts are frequently articulated in relation to these key life stages, and men's adherence to the norms and expectations of their gender at this stage. The romantic comedy films that I discuss within this chapter bring this to the fore, through their persistent reiteration of key formations of masculinity such as the 'playboy bachelor' and the 'man-child'. These repeated figures are also placed within narratives that repeat a trajectory of change and growth in order to achieve appropriate (adult) masculinity through coupling. This can be read not only as a repeated generic narrative structure of contemporary romantic comedy films, a significant finding in itself, but also a reiteration of this story *across* genres and media forms, expressing the same concerns and anxieties about masculinity as articulated in the lifestyle television shows and situation comedies already discussed. This chapter will examine the ways in which figures such as the playboy bachelor and the man-child are represented as 'bad cases' of masculinity in need of reformation, and examine the narratives of transformation that are applied to the characters. Like the men in the lifestyle makeover shows, the romantic comedy narrative demands that these men become 'choosable' by postfeminist women, and ready for long-term heterosexual romance. As in the lifestyle makeover show, several key areas emerge as being significant in relation to these transformations, and across the two seemingly disparate media genres there are strong overlaps in what is reformed within the course of the narrative. Aesthetic makeovers, alterations to domestic space,

and training and acquisition of new skills all play a part within narratives in both genres. The extended running-time and fictional nature of the cinematic text allows for more in-depth character development, and thus the subjectivity of characters is given more space. Therefore, part of my focus will be on how men's feelings and emotions are represented, expanding upon the emergent discourse identified within lifestyle television that indicated that men too are increasingly required to perform emotion-work both publicly and privately.

Firstly, however, I would like to give some space to discussion of why I believe this specific genre of film, the male-centred romantic comedy, should be a central object of study in relation to the issue of postfeminist masculinities. Indeed, it is the case that many genres, from many different periods of film history, deal with the theme of male transformation – a protagonist's journey, both literal and metaphorical, is of course one of the oldest narrative structures, as highlighted by Joseph Campbell in his study of the monomyth (1949). In this chapter I am interested in not just aesthetic transformations, but also transformation of the protagonist's skills and values, a strategy that undoubtedly situates these romantic comedies within a much longer tradition of Hollywood films with male central protagonists. It is also significant that the films under consideration here emerge and gain popularity at the same time as the superhero film, another genre that deals with male transformations (in possibly a more literal way), enjoys a massive resurgence. In isolating the romantic comedy, then, it is not my wish to deny that other genres might prove fruitful territory for the analysis of

postfeminist masculinities. The romantic comedy, however, particularly in the noughties, has exhibited some interesting generic transformations that have put not just men, but *masculinity*, at its centre. The genre's emphasis on heterosexual coupling aligns it with many of the other texts discussed within this thesis, where a monogamous relationship with a member of the opposite sex is positioned as the goal. Recent studies of romantic comedy have noted that the genre can be seen as providing 'an imaginary way of dealing with real issues, often by the imaginary reconciliation of real and/or intractable oppositions faced by a particular culture and society' (King 2002, p. 55). The romantic comedy provides a space for the types of negotiation around gender and society that this thesis has argued are particularly intensified in the current moment. Frank Krutnik argues that 'the various historical cycles of Hollywood romantic comedy are all driven by a process of negotiation between traditional conceptions of heterosexual monogamy and an intimate culture that is constantly in flux' (Krutnik 2002, p. 130). This chapter is interested in how the most recent cycle, the romantic sex comedy, attempts to work through these tensions through its focus on potential postfeminist formations of masculinity.

DEFINING THE ROMANTIC SEX COMEDY

I would like to take some time here to grapple with issues of corpus definition and, more specifically, my own personal struggle over what to call these male-centred romantic comedy films. Tamar Jeffers McDonald, who

first identified this shift in her 2006 genre study of the romantic comedy, uses the term 'hommeecom' (p. 107). However, 'hommeecom' is not a recognisable term to the vast majority of film viewers (or even academics). I would argue that to employ a term as a generic descriptor it has to be, or have the potential to be, picked up in the vernacular. Six years have passed since the publication of McDonald's book, and I have yet to see the term appear in the popular or trade press, much less be used as a marketing category for these types of film. Furthermore, other academics working on this group of films have chosen not to employ McDonald's term. In a recent book chapter, David Hansen-Miller and Rosalind Gill analyse a similar corpus of films that they label 'lad flicks' or 'lad movies'. However, the term 'lad' has a national and temporal specificity that links it to British masculinity in the 1990s, and thus I find their application of the term directly onto a Hollywood-dominated genre problematic (Hansen-Miller and Gill, 2011, pp. 36 – 50). Though I do agree with much of their analysis of the films involved, and indeed many of their definitions of corpus, in the absence of any evidence that 'lad' is a culturally significant or recognisable category within American popular culture, I would suggest that using it as a generic descriptor for films like *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005) and *Role Models* (David Wain, 2008), as Hansen-Miller and Gill do, is unhelpful.

Concise Oxford English Dictionary © 2008 Oxford University Press:

lad/lad/

►noun 1. Brit. informal a boy or young man.

(**lads**) Brit. a group of men sharing recreational or working interests.

Brit. a boisterously macho or high-spirited man

2. Brit. a stable worker (regardless of age or sex)

– DERIVATIVES

laddish adjective,

laddishness noun.

‘Dick flick’ has been suggested to me, which makes a useful phonetic link to the ‘chick flick’ (presumably the counterpart to the films under discussion here) but divorces the films from any suggestion that women might want to watch them, and overlooks the rather significant role of the romance/coupling plot that is at the centre of the films under discussion.⁹¹

‘Bromance’, a neologism referring to a close male homosocial bond, is a term popular in the trade and critical press, frequently being used by writers for *Variety*, *Film Comment* and *Sight & Sound* to describe films such as *The Change-Up* (David Dobkin, 2011), *I Love You, Man* (John Hamburg, 2009), and *The Muppets* (James Bobin, 2011) (Chang 2011, p. 15; Brunick 2009, p. 69; Mayer 2012, p. 75). While ‘bromance’ clearly emerges as an important element of many of these films, the degree to which male bonding is privileged varies widely, and again the term erases any notion of the sub-genre’s (rather insistent, as I will argue) preoccupation with heterosexual coupling. A study of the DVD cases for these films makes things no clearer: the generic descriptor most commonly employed on the DVD covers/cases for these films is the blank and rather unrevealing ‘comedy’ which, arguably, is a mode, not a genre. Key films in the sub-genre are described on their

⁹¹ Gary Needham, amongst others, has suggested this.

packaging as: 'a laugh-out-loud comedy classic', 'outrageous comedy', 'hilarious hit comedy' (*Knocked Up* [Judd Apatow, 2007]); 'hysterically funny' (*Forgetting Sarah Marshall* [Nicholas Stoller, 2008]); 'outrageous comedy' (*She's Out of My League* [Jim Field Smith, 2008]), while the DVD packaging for *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* makes no written reference to any generic category at all. Those that do mention the romance elements of the films do so in terms that frame them as a 'new' or 'funnier' take on an old genre: e.g. 'the coolest rom-com of the year' (*The Switch* [Josh Gordon, Will Speck, 2010]); a 'romantic comedy with a brain' (*How To Lose A Guy in 10 Days* [Donald Petrie, 2003]). Early precursors to the genre are also interesting in their choice of description – 2002's *40 Days and 40 Nights* (Michael Lehmann) describes itself as 'America's first no-sex comedy' and *About A Boy* (Chris Weitz, Paul Weitz, 2003), released the same year, specifically highlights the 'newness' of its male-centred approach: 'must have hit comedy but this time it isn't about a girl but *About A Boy*'.

What is significant about my difficulty in finding the appropriate terminology to describe these films is the contrast with the familiar and established nomenclature of feminine culture. The phrase 'chick flick' can encompass a wide variety of films across genres, yet, as Ferriss and Young argue 'we know one when we see one'; as a marker of tone, theme, content and address, the term is extremely evocative (Ferriss and Young 2008, p. 2). I am struck here, therefore, by the ease with which names emerge and are established for 'girl' culture but not for masculine culture. This is perhaps due to the status of the feminine as 'other' within Hollywood – films for

women are 'chick flicks' (and, before this, woman's films), whereas films for men are just 'films'. What this as-yet-undefined subgenre - and my desire to find for it a name that somehow reflects its gendering - highlights is the shift towards a problematising of this structure. The problems that I am experiencing with naming these films is perhaps appropriate given that one of the substantive concerns of these films is 'the confusion and instability of masculinity as a category' (Hansen-Miller and Gill 2011, p 42).

The films with which I engage in this chapter are themselves at least a partial ungendering of a genre, a project with which they actively and self-reflexively engage. For example, in *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past* (Mark Waters, 2009), protagonist Connor (Matthew McConaughey) asks the ghost of his first kiss, Allison (Emma Stone) 'what's next?', to which she replies 'well, now we're going to watch a romantic montage of you and Jenny (Jennifer Garner) set to Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time"'. Connor groans, and instructs Allison to wake him 'when there's an action sequence'. This scene offers a self-aware nod towards gendered conceptions of film genre and audience pleasure, commenting not only on the conventions of the romantic comedy as a genre (the romantic montage set to wistful popular music), but also acknowledging that Connor/male audience members will enjoy the montage, but only *despite* themselves and the expectations of their gender. Hansen-Miller and Gill go as far as to suggest that what he calls 'lad flicks' 'signal movement away from the subjective pleasures of masculine identification and towards examination of objectified masculinity as a troubled cultural category' (2011, p. 37). This has been an overriding trend

in all texts considered within this thesis, and thus the films selected here are designed to extend this focus on media representations that call attention to the construction of appropriate postfeminist masculine identities.

While I might not agree with the terminology that McDonald or Hansen-Miller and Gill use, their observations have been helpful in working through the tropes and iconography of this genre. Broadly speaking, the films in which I am interested are romantic comedies that place a male character at the centre and are in some way concerned with masculinity, especially, 'deficient/dysfunctional single masculinity' as identified by Diane Negra (2006). They are generic hybrids, mixing elements of the conservative, female-centred romantic-comedy of the 1990s with gross-out comedy and the buddy movie. These elements suggest a partial, though not total, ungendering of the genre, as reflected in the marketing material and aesthetics of promotion, which are remarkably standardised throughout the sub-genre. The selection of DVD covers and posters in Appendix 1 displays the conventions of marketing these romantic comedy films – the gender-neutral colour schemes using black, red and white, the block capital letters and the prominent positioning of images of the genre's male comedian stars. While retaining associations to love and romance through the use of the colour red, most, though not all, of the films in this genre reject the pinkness, cursive lettering and romantic iconography of more neo-traditional, female-centred examples of romantic comedy films in favour of an aesthetic that celebrates boldness, the contemporary, and the comedic excesses of its male stars.

These shifts in romantic-comedy marketing suggest an attempt by producers to solidify the date-movie appeal of such films by removing stigmatised 'girly' or 'feminine' signifiers and re-positioning romantic comedies as films that can be watched by both genders. As well as moving the male protagonist to its centre, the 'new' romantic comedy typically features a greater emphasis on comedy and slapstick than its predecessors. In these films, the 'sexual question' that Brian Henderson posited as being central to the romantic comedy takes centre stage (Henderson 1978, p. 21). Ultimately, however, the sexual and immature excesses of the (male) protagonists are ultimately recouped within a traditional structure of heterosexual monogamy within which almost all of these films end. As with many of the other texts discussed in this thesis, then, the romantic comedy seeks to appeal to both genders, by combining the traditional focus on coupling, romance and relationships with elements of gross-out and a more obvious comic mode.⁹² This does of course rely on some rather unwarranted assumptions about gendered pleasures, ones that Hollywood romantic comedy films perpetuate as much as cater to. As McDonald notes in her conclusion:

If...the homme-com seeks to reinject sex into the genre, and the homme-com is aimed at attracting a male audience, it logically follows that sex is being assumed to be a male interest, prerogative and goal. Male audience members may like to take issue with the fact that they are assumed to find toilet humour funny, to like slapstick and mess, to be obsessed with sex. Women viewers may in turn object to the notion that such topics are not fitting subject matter for them either to laugh at or obsess over.

(McDonald 2009, p. 158)

⁹² Such transformations can usefully be compared to the impact of *American Pie* (Paul Weitz, 1999) on the teen movie genre.

McDonald's analysis here highlights the gendered assumptions around generic pleasures that underlie the content of these romantic comedy films, as well as suggesting that audiences may negotiate and reject the gendered spectator positions offered to them by the text. Whatever the intention of producers however, such elements do form a set of relatively stable generic characteristics for the sub-genre.

Given these generic characteristics, I would like to suggest that it might be productive to think of these films as 'romantic sex comedies'. This phrase, like the films under discussion, literally puts sex at the centre of the romantic comedy. As with the films, however, if you take away the 'sex', you are left with a romantic comedy – with all the generic expectations that come with that. The 'sex' element adds to but does not totally transform the genre. My invocation of the generic determiner 'sex comedies' is also intended to speak to the 50s/60s cycle of Hollywood romantic comedies that focused on a battle of the sexes over the withholding of sex, most closely associated with the star pairing of Rock Hudson and Doris Day. Indeed, it is not insignificant that one of the precursors to the films that I am interested in here was *Down With Love*, Peyton Reed's 2003 pastiche of that generic moment. In my earlier work on these films, I suggested that Henderson's 'sexual question' takes centre stage, articulated not only within the films' narratives but often becoming the protagonist's main goal (Thompson 2009, p. 14-15; Henderson 1978, p. 21). However, far from being radical, these texts integrate this question within a conservative

romance narrative that ultimately upholds the value of monogamous, heterosexual coupling.

It is obviously beyond the scope of this project to offer a detailed genre study of the romantic sex comedy. Indeed, it is my belief that reading these texts solely from a genre studies angle limits our interpretation of them.

McDonald, for example, repeatedly talks about the films in terms of refreshing or 'making new' the 'generic basics' of the romantic comedy by 'considering them from a male point of view' (2009, p. 147). Her findings, however, are always restricted by the project that she has set up for herself. Her conclusion that 'we might therefore deny that there is a transformative urge at work within the male-centred comedy' is made because their conservative endings are seen to close off their potential to be an 'alternative take' on the genre. What is of interest to me, therefore, is not how new or otherwise the generic elements of these films are, but in investigating how central the project of masculinity is to their narratives and aesthetics. I am also intrigued by how closely these images of masculinity resonate with constructions of postfeminist masculinities across other media texts, such as those discussed within earlier chapters of this thesis. Therefore, I would argue that there *is* a transformative urge at work in these texts – not necessarily within genre, but in the representations and articulations of masculinity that this chapter will seek to analyse.

Like Hansen-Miller and Gill, I am interested in the way that these romantic sex comedies 'enunciate distinctive constructions of contemporary masculinity' (Hansen-Miller and Gill 2011, p. 37), making masculinity itself the central object (Hansen-Miller and Gill 2011, p. 36). They write that:

The source of dramatic tension and humour is the protagonists' struggle with competing definitions of what it means to be a man, and their own ability to live up to that category.

(Hansen-Miller and Gill 2011, p. 36)

This chapter therefore aims to bring my examination of the representations of male transformation and male encounters with postfeminist cultural space to the romantic sex comedy. As with the other parts of this thesis, I place emphasis here on the significance of life-stage, the different ways in which different 'types' of single masculinities are marked as deficient, and analyse the areas of the 'self' of the protagonist that are changed in order to bring about transformation and, ultimately, coupling, for each character figure. Coupling in these films is key to the generically determined ending of the romantic comedy but also essential in retelling the cultural myth of heterosexual marriage as the signifier of the achievement of an adult identity and success. As with the other texts that I have studied within this thesis, the primary themes guiding my analysis will be aesthetic transformation, lifestyle transformation and the importance of domestic space. Through the exploration of the representation of figures such as the playboy bachelor, the man-child, and the ageing bachelor, the chapter will

examine what these texts reveal about attitudes towards and anxieties around single masculinities, picking up some of the threads raised in previous chapters about the figure of the 'new single man' and the bachelor/spinster dichotomy, all of which continue to be problematic and problematised figures in postfeminist media texts.

Indeed, the title of this chapter is a deliberate reference to Charlotte Brunsdon's work "A subject for the seventies", in which she discusses a group of 1970s films that she argues 'can be read to be concerned with the conflicting demands on, and contradictory and fragmented nature of, femininities constructed within masculine hegemony' (1997, p. 54). The women represented in, and addressed by, these films - a group that Brunsdon dubs 'Cosmo girls' - are, she argues, to be understood in relation to a complex and interrelated set of changes in the social, cultural, political and economic structures of Western society.⁹³ The Cosmo girl's position, though, is a contradictory one. While aspiring to sexual satisfaction and career success, and moving into traditionally masculine roles, the Cosmo girl must retain femininity. There is therefore, Brunsdon states, a 'constant tension in the way she must always already be desirable (feminine) as well as desiring' (ibid., p. 55). In this chapter, I would like to make a similar argument in relation to this group of films that make men and masculinity in transition their subject. Like the Cosmo girls of the late 1970s, the position of men within the period in which this thesis is interested is affected by a

⁹³ "[F]or example, changing patterns of women's employment and education; increasingly effective and available contraception; the fall in the birth rate, with changing patterns of marriage and divorce; the impact of the women's liberation movement itself" (Brunsdon 1997, p. 54).

series of material and non-material shifts in lived culture (some of which are the same as, or intensifications of, the shifts that Brunsdon identifies as underpinning the construction of her 'seventies feminine subject). The new subject position that men are being manoeuvred into in this case also reflects similar tensions to those experienced by the Cosmo girl. As we have seen repeatedly in the examples cited throughout this thesis, refinement of masculinities in postfeminist discourse requires retaining 'masculine' characteristics while moving into traditionally feminine roles. Whereas Brunsdon's subject struggled to remain feminine while being also 'alert, aggressive [and] ambitious', the postfeminist male subject of this thesis must remain masculine while also being caring, soft and domesticated (ibid.). There is thus a constant tension in the way he must always already be desiring (masculine) as well as making himself desirable.

Like the films under discussion in Brunsdon's work (such as *An Unmarried Woman* [Paul Mazursky, 1978], *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* [Martin Scorsese, 1974], *Three Women* [Robert Altman, 1977], and *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* [Richard Brooks, 1977]), the romantic sex comedy explores gender through an otherwise 'unmarked' protagonist, one who is almost exclusively white and middle-class (Brunsdon 1997, p. 57).⁹⁴ This cycle also mirrors the 1970's films' concern with 'femininity, sex, romance and marriage', although here it is masculinity, rather than femininity, that is made 'narratively meaningful' (ibid.). To tease out this comparison further, we

⁹⁴ This was also the case with the sitcoms and many of the lifestyle television shows.

might consider Brunsdon's work on the title of *An Unmarried Woman*. She writes:

An Unmarried Woman offers, as its title, the description of a woman in relation to the central heterosexual institution of marriage. This, we might assume, is a film about a woman who is not married. The derogatory cultural term, with its connotations of "not-having-been-able-to-get-married", is spinster – or even old maid. So the more neutral "unmarried" seems immediately to suggest either that this is a position of choice, or that there is still "hope".

(ibid.)

The title of the film sees its central female protagonist defined through her relationship to heterosexual monogamy. It is also important, as Brunsdon's analysis goes on to suggest, that the text's relationship to marriage as an institution is negotiated – Erica's (Jill Clayburgh) 'unmarried' status is not (yet) considered a failure.⁹⁵ Consider, then, the title of one of the earliest and most emblematic examples of the romantic sex comedy cycle – *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. Like *An Unmarried Woman*, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* defines its protagonist Andy (Steve Carell) through its title in relation to the matrix of heterosexual coupling. In this case however, the protagonist is male, and his relationship to coupling is defined (initially) in sexual, not legal, terms.⁹⁶ The title reflects cultural and gender shifts that have taken place in the 27 years between the release of the two films, but ultimately can be read as conveying a similar message to that of *An Unmarried Woman*, in which 'femininity [and now, masculinity] remains a condition which is "neurotic" if

⁹⁵ As if to reinforce the links between these two cycles, Jill Clayburgh also has a major cameo role in one of the key texts of the romantic sex comedy cycle, *Bridesmaids* (Paul Feig, 2011). The film clearly draws upon Clayburgh's star persona, and the characteristics of Erica from *An Unmarried Woman* in particular. Clayburgh plays the lonely divorcee mother of the film's protagonist, Annie (Kristen Wiig).

⁹⁶ The narrative of *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* does not, ultimately, allow Andy to engage in successful sexual activity until he is married first.

uncoupled' (Brunsdon 1997, p. 60). All of the films in this cycle offer a picture of single masculinity as deficient and in need of reformation, a concern with and anxiety around the stability of 'heterosexuality' just as pressing an issue now, it would seem, as in the 1970s, although with a different gendered inflection.



FIGURE 5.1 – AN UNMARRIED WOMAN



FIGURE 5.2 – THE 40-YEAR-OLD VIRGIN

Unlike Brunsdon's analysis, however, where she is able to identify one key figure of femininity addressed by and represented within the text, the romantic sex comedies express anxiety around a range of mediated figures of postfeminist single masculinity. Figures such as the playboy bachelor, the man-child and the ageing bachelor, which are closely related to issues of 'life stage', are resonant with similar feminine figures of postfeminist culture such as the Bridget Jones singleton, the tween, the career girl, the yummy mummy and the MILF/cougar.⁹⁷ All of these categories reflect gendered conceptualisations of identity in relation to the heterosexual matrix, biological femininity/masculinity, and age. In fact, as Diane Negra has argued, 'one of the signature attributes of postfeminist culture is its ability to define various female life stages within the parameters of "time panic",'

⁹⁷ See 'Chapter 3: Time crisis and the new postfeminist lifecycle' in Negra, Diane (2009) *What A Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of the Self in Postfeminism* for more detail on some of these female demographic and representational categories.

(Negra 2009, p. 47). I would like to argue here that the character types observable within these films, clearly delineated by temporalities of gender and in relation to coupling, suggest a shift in the paradigm of postfeminist temporality so that it now increasingly seeks to define men's lives in these terms too. Negra writes that:

Postfeminism has accelerated the consumerist maturity of girls, carving out new demographic categories such as that of the "tween"; it has forcefully renewed conservative social ideologies centering on the necessity of marriage for young women and the glorification of pregnancy; and it has heightened the visibility of midlife women often cast as desperate to retain or recover their value as postfeminist subjects. Crisis and fulfilment in virtually all these life stages center upon the discovery of personal destiny, the securing of a romantic partner and motherhood, and the negotiation of the problem of paid work (seldom its rewards). Those women who cannot be recuperated into one of these life-stage paradigms generally lose representability within a popular culture landscape dominated by postfeminist definitions of femininity.

(Negra 2009, p. 47)

This chapter will demonstrate that representations of men in the romantic sex comedy speak very clearly to this paradigm of time panic and emphasise fulfilment and crisis in many of the same areas. This is particularly apparent in the representations of ageing bachelors as unstable figures, as a later section of this chapter will demonstrate.

In her study of the sub-genre, McDonald suggests that there is a 'dichotomy' of 'available male positions', which she labels as 'priapic versus pro-monogamous' (2009, p. 156). She also recognises the 'inevitable' end result of the monogamous 'final couple'.⁹⁸ I am arguing that the positions available to men at the beginning of these films are certainly more multiple than the

⁹⁸ The phrase 'final couple' here comes from the work of James MacDowell on the Hollywood 'happy ending' (2011).

binary division set out by McDonald, yet still attached to specific cultural formulations of masculinity, and that even the endings are less clear-cut than her description might suggest. The figures that I am interested in within these films, then, are all focused around "life stages" and, crucially, figured according to their relationship to heterosexual normativity and monogamous coupling. The protagonists under discussion here then, are discussed according to the following formulations of character type:

- The playboy bachelor
- The man-child
- Men who have "let themselves go"
- The ageing bachelor

As my analysis of the differing characterisations of the protagonists in *How I Met Your Mother* began to explore, the happily married, and still "striving" man is the "neutral" category against which other masculinities are measured, but this figure is largely absent from the textuality of the romantic sex comedy, perhaps because he presents no interesting narrative problem or dramatic incitement, and, of course, because he represents the 'ideal' figure into which the man is required to transform by the end of the film text.

It is important to stress that these 'types' are not necessarily exclusive categories, that is to say, a character may inhabit more than one type of masculine identity, and, indeed, many films chart shifts in their male protagonist from one identity to an other (or others). Fluctuation, transformation and change is possible – and encouraged. Rather than

functioning as a restrictive taxonomy of character types, the distinctions that I have drawn here are to allow me space to consider the representational tropes of these different types of masculinity as they emerge from the romantic sex comedy, in order to gain a clearer understanding of the anxieties that these figures point to. As well as showing transformations between these types of masculinity, the films also frequently offer audiences the comparative 'pairing' of masculinities, a strategy that is most obviously exemplified in body swap examples such as *The Change-Up*. Indeed, these comparisons seem to me to deliberately make visible Connell's conceptualization of a 'plurality of masculinities, between which relationships of "alliance, dominance and subordination"' exist (1995, p. 37).

These 'types' that I have outlined all represent the 'bad cases', the 'befores' of the makeover – masculinity that is deficient, unachieved, immature, unrealised, anxious, and failing. During my analysis of the ways in which these character types are represented in the romantic sex comedy, I will be examining the design and deployment of gendered domestic spaces, the use of actors, bodies and costume and themes of selfhood in relation to each figure of postfeminist masculinity. These traces of elements of 'makeover' that are visible within the representations of these postfeminist masculine archetypes will be a concern of this chapter, woven through my discussion of these different but related figures of masculinity.

As in the sitcom, the relationship between masculinity and domestic space forms a largely unspoken but present theme in the romantic sex comedy.

Like the sitcom, masculinity in this genre emerges as being disruptive to feminine domestic norms, but able to create and adapt spaces that are specifically gendered as masculine. Through production design, the gendering of domestic space is aesthetically foregrounded, and the frequency with which domestic space impacts upon the narrative, character development and dialogue of these films highlights it as a key concern. This centrality of gendered domestic space to the contemporary romantic comedy suggests its importance as one of the key negotiations of heterosexual coupling. Each character type that I will be discussing within this chapter is closely aligned with a particular aesthetic of interior design or space of leisure. Thus, though the relationship between masculinity and domestic space and design remains largely untheorised, the representations within these films suggest that the semiotics of masculine domestic space are actually clearly established and understandable within popular media forms and spectatorship. There is a clear link between each of these identifiable formations of masculinity and a specific topography of domestic space.

There is also a specific ensemble of Hollywood 'talent' around whom the romantic sex comedy is focused, including stars such as Steve Carrel, Jason Segel, Paul Rudd and Seth Rogen, and director/producers such as Judd Apatow. Many of the actors most strongly associated with the genre were comedians before they were film actors, part of an informal network of performers around the show *Saturday Night Live* (1975-, NBC), and are frequently cast in ensemble comedy performances together. Many actors

appear in more than one film under discussion here, and a culture of homosocial bonding is clearly as much a part of the off-screen relationship between actors and directors/producers as it is within the films themselves. It should also be noted that these actors are, therefore, frequently cast for their comic skill rather than for the conventional aesthetics of the traditional romantic comedy lead. Each figure under discussion here has different conventions of casting, which will be explored further later in this chapter.

As noted above, the figures of masculinity that are at the centre of the romantic sex comedy coalesce around different 'life-stages', and thus will be dealt with in this chapter in an order approximating their chronology in male lives. The first two categories under examination, the man-child and playboy bachelor, both deal with 'younger' (both physically and mentally) forms of masculinity, both terms speaking as they do to ideals of extended youth. They are differentiated, however, by the characters' and films' attitudes to sexual promiscuity. Both categories represent single masculinities, but the playboy bachelor is defined through the ease of his access to casual sex, whereas the man-child is primarily defined through his lack of achievement of sexual maturity. The chapter will then move on to consider a figure of middle-age 'broken' masculinity – the previously coupled man who has 'failed', being divorced or dumped by a long-term partner – as a figure of masculinity in transition. Finally, I will consider representations of ageing bachelors, figures that have extended their youthful pursuits of sexual excesses well past the stage deemed appropriate by the postfeminist heterosexual matrix. I am interested in how these

representations interact culturally with images of the spinster, and how the figure is at once celebrated and recouped.

THE PLAYBOY BACHELOR

This section of the chapter is interested in a specific formation of masculinity that has shown remarkable persistence within filmic representations of masculinity. The figure of the playboy bachelor has a representational history both within Hollywood (e.g. the James Bond films) and beyond (e.g. Hugh Hefner), which is especially interesting in relation to the new representational paradigms of masculinity that emerge within the romantic sex comedy. Once again, I might suggest that the playboy bachelor is a representation marked by elements of residuality. As if to speak to this history, casting is carried out according to the conventions of Hollywood attractiveness, unlike other figures that will be described in this chapter.

The bachelor in Hollywood film is characterised by: the casting of an attractive, star actor; the espousing of an attitude that rejects monogamous commitment in favour of multiple, casual unions with attractive women; and a home designed in a sleek modernist style. It is, as this analysis will demonstrate, still clearly a powerful and potent cultural image linked to modernist, urban, public masculinity, but one that these films seem to recognise the impossibility of. In another move that suggests the residual nature of the figure, the bachelor representation in postfeminist texts is frequently treated as pastiche. This can occur throughout the whole film, as

is the case in *Down With Love*, which explicitly models itself on the sex comedies of the early 1960s, or through internal self-referentiality, such as the scenes in *Friends With Benefits* (Will Gluck, 2011) in which the audience's expectation of the coupled resolution is played with as the characters themselves watch a romantic-comedy on DVD and mock its predictability and conventions. We might therefore note that another convention of the representation of the playboy bachelor within the romantic sex comedy is, in contrast to figures like Bond, his eventual transformation and realisation of the value and satisfaction in monogamous commitment.

The playboy bachelor figure is represented as being at a similar life-stage as the man-child, but is, in some key areas, more 'successful' than his counterpart. He is financially affluent, either through employment or inheritance. He is well-groomed, well-dressed, and conventionally attractive. His domestic space is a modern, sleek, well-maintained urban apartment that showcases his wealth and freedom. A comparison to my analysis of Barney from *How I Met Your Mother* in the previous chapter seems inevitable here. Like Barney, these men are financially stable, well-presented, and in possession of a showplace bachelor pad. In short, they appear, on the surface, as the after of the makeover. Furthermore, the texts seek to emphasise the ease of the lifestyle by focusing on play, leisure and consumption and erasing labour either at work or in the home.



FIGURE 5.3 – THE PLAYBOY
BACHELOR IN GHOSTS OF
GIRLFRIENDS PAST (MATTHEW
MCCONAUGHEY)

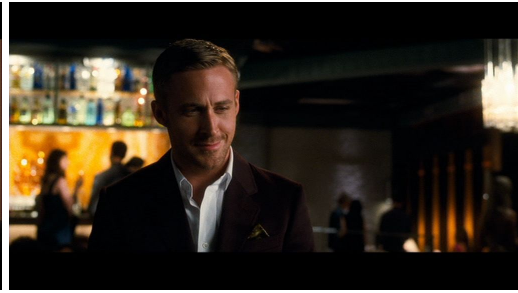


FIGURE 5.4 – THE PLAYBOY
BACHELOR IN CRAZY, STUPID, LOVE
(RYAN GOSLING)



FIGURE 5.5 – THE PLAYBOY BACHELOR IN
HOW TO LOSE A GUY IN 10 DAYS
(MATTHEW MCCONAUGHEY)

An early scene in *Crazy, Stupid, Love* (Glenn Ficarra, John Requa , 2011) illustrates the focus on the polished, stylish, groomed appearance of the bachelor. Jacob (Ryan Gosling) is introduced first through a slow motion tracking shot of his feet walking across the floor of the bar. In what should be a setting with lots of background noise, the only diegetic noise that the audience can hear is the exaggerated sound of his footsteps. This, combined with the slow motion movement and the careful track of the camera, which follows his feet, serves to emphasise his agency, action and direction towards his goal. This is exaggerated by the pause that the actor takes at the ‘top’ of each step, which emphasises the deliberateness of the movement. The focus on his feet displays his shiny, polished brown leather designer

shoes (Fig. 5.6).⁹⁹ The camera then continues to track along as he walks but also moves higher, to a shot of him buttoning his suit, the lighting tightly focused on his hands to highlight the character's relationship to his dress and his interaction with it (Fig. 5.7). This camera movement visually references the 'upward tilt', a convention of cinematography commonly used to suggest the surveying and approval (or otherwise) of the makeover of the female protagonist by her leading man and the audience, as in, for example, *She's All That* (Robert Iscove, 1999). However, the *mise-en-shot* here does not imitate this fully, instead combining the upward tilt with a decisive and active forward movement that emphasises the character's agency as he strides. Rather than waiting for an approving gaze, he encourages the gaze to follow him. The male body is fragmented, but brought together by the smooth, seamless arc of the camera track. Jacob's shoes and clothes are highlighted, but not isolated, suggesting an effortless completeness of aesthetic and persona.

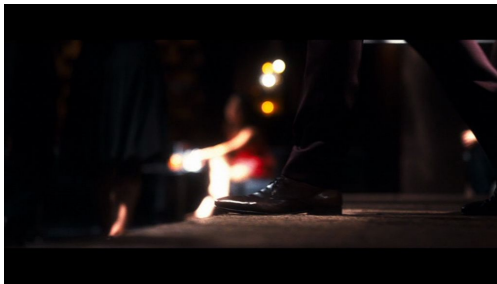


FIGURE 5.6 – CLOSE-UP OF JACOB'S SHOE

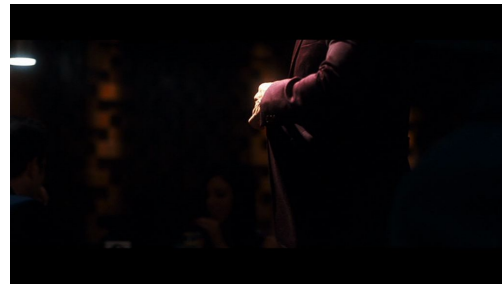


FIGURE 5.7 – THE UPWARD TILT

The music used over this shot has a tribal theme, with a female vocal chanting primal, non-verbal sounds. This makes links between Jacob and

⁹⁹ It also visually references the entrance of Charlotte (Bette Davis) in *Now, Voyager*, considered by Ford and Mitchell (2004) to be one of the foundational texts of the Hollywood makeover film.

uncivilised, wild, natural, raw (residual) masculinity, and presents the set of the bar as his hunting ground. This brings us to the one area in which the playboy bachelor is presented as dysfunctional, and the element of his persona that is highlighted to the audience as requiring change. This is, of course, in his endless stream of meaningless sexual relationships. There is an observable tension in films that position the playboy bachelor as their central figure, in which casual sex is both glamourized and celebrated (usually during the narrative set-up of the film) but ultimately presented as unfulfilling and as a failure of the character to connect emotionally with himself or others. The casting of Ryan Gosling in *Crazy, Stupid, Love* can be read as an attempt to alleviate some of these tensions. Gosling is a desirable heartthrob that fits the conventions of attractiveness demanded by the bachelor persona, but his star image is also closely tied up in public perception of him as a sensitive, talented, feminist icon, due in no small part, as Jane Martinson noted in *The Guardian* article 'Why feminists love Ryan Gosling' to the 'Hey Girl' Internet memes featuring the star which have been circulating since 2008 (2011).¹⁰⁰ He has also been lauded by feminist publications such as *Ms. Magazine*, especially for his anti-sexism comments regarding the MPAA's rating of his film *Blue Valentine* (Derek Cianfrance, 2010).¹⁰¹ The actor's extra-textual status as feminist 'hero', then, clearly

¹⁰⁰ The meme was started by website 'Fuck Yeah! Ryan Gosling' (<http://fuckyeahryangosling.tumblr.com/>) in 2008, and now has countless imitators including Shakespearean Ryan Gosling (<http://fuckyeahgoslingshakes.tumblr.com/>) and, most notably, Feminist Ryan Gosling (<http://feministryangosling.tumblr.com/>), which is about to be released as a book (Fig. 5.8).

¹⁰¹ Gosling is quoted as saying:

You have to question a cinematic culture which preaches artistic expression, and yet would support a decision that is clearly a product of a patriarchy-dominant society, which tries to control how women are depicted on screen. The MPAA is

feeds back into the character of Jacob. An audience with knowledge of Gosling's star persona would recognise the deliberate contrast between this and the otherwise overt misogyny of Jacob's womanising lifestyle, and thus view the character as parodic.¹⁰²



FIGURE 5.8 – AN IMAGE FROM 'FEMINIST RYAN GOSLING'

Patterns of *mise-en-scène* and editing are used to represent womanising as a fun, energetic and exciting activity. In *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, Jacob instructs his recently separated friend Cal (Steve Carell) to observe his pick-up techniques. As well as the diegetic audience of Cal, however, the spectacle of womanising is also performed for the cinema audience. A rapidly edited sequence of shots is shown of Jacob talking to different, attractive women, with his pick-up lines 'do you wanna get out of here?' and 'let's get out of

okay supporting scenes that portray women in scenarios of sexual torture and violence for entertainment purposes, but they are trying to force us to look away from a scene that shows a woman in a sexual scenario which is both complicit and complex. It's misogynistic in nature to try and control a woman's sexual presentation of self. I consider this an issue that is bigger than this film.

See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/10/feminist-ryan-gosling-blog_n_1004158.html ; <http://msmagazine.com/blog/blog/2010/11/19/we-heart-ryan-gosling-actor-and-feminist/> for further details and links.

¹⁰² The significance of the casting decision here might once again remind us of *How I Met Your Mother*'s use of Neil Patrick Harris's star persona.

here' isolated and repeated again and again. The editing process here isolates the 'sealing of the deal' moment in his sexual encounters, and reduces both the process of seduction that leads up to this and the assumed sexual intercourse that follows to one key moment, which is essentially the same with each woman. This reflects the practice and formula, rather than 'artistry' (a term which is incongruously often applied in popular culture to the process of ensnaring women), of his coupling. Indeed, what makes Hannah (Emma Stone) stand out within the diegesis of the film as Jacob's 'right' partner is her resistance to these lines and his failure to woo her with them. She is distinguished from the homogeneity and anonymity of his other sexual encounters.

A similar strategy is used to represent casual sexual behaviour in *Wedding Crashers* (David Dobkin, 2005). As McDonald notes 'skilful editing... matches the men attending successive events and repeatedly performing the same sequence of actions (arriving and announcing aliases; toasting the bride and groom; cutting the cake; dancing)' in a way that 'conveys the habitual and calculating nature of their behaviour' (2009, p. 156) This is most noticeable, however, during the montage that completes the sequence, which features a series of repeated shots of each of the men twirling their dance partners, cutting on the movement to show the women falling back onto a bed, topless. Here the shots are graphically matched, and the editing patterned to display the polish of the routine that the men have worked out. The upbeat music, rapid movement and fast-paced editing gives the scene a vibrant and exciting feeling, but the jarring interruption of the cut that changes the

location and removes the costume is at once surprising and uncomfortable for the spectator. As in *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, the 'right girl' is differentiated, and does not become part of this pattern. Indeed, protagonist John (Owen Wilson) is expressly shown as needing to break their standard wedding crashing 'rules' in order to pursue her.

The pattern of womanising in *Wedding Crashers* is presented through a series of graphic matches, whereas in *Crazy, Stupid, Love* the matching is an aural one. Both texts, however, emphasise the routine, pattern, and process of the activity. Both take place in the public arena, in bars and at weddings. The rhythm of the patterns produced here is pleasing and upbeat, but the anonymity of the women leads to a feeling of uneasiness. The logics of Hollywood storytelling, and the romantic comedy in particular, tell us that these patterns established at the beginning are likely to be broken.

McDonald argues that:

[t]he priapic excess that rules for most of the film must, seemingly, be abandoned in order for the resolution of the plot to be attained. The narratives then have to work quite hard (and at times to unconvincing results) to explain why the men should decide to give up their promiscuous and immature ways, in order to have meaningful sex with just one woman.

(2009, p. 157)

However, within my argument, which sees the romantic sex comedy as a transformation narrative, the conversion of the hero is built into the audience's generic expectations. This is particularly suggested by the way that, in both *Wedding Crashers* and *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, editing creates an excessive and stylised representation of womanising that suggests it as fantasy, giving a temporary, dreamlike quality to the sequences. As both of

these scenes occur during the set-up of the films, they are narratively placed as the status quo that will be interrupted by the generically-determined arrival of the 'right girl' and the hero's ensuing realisation and transformation.

Like the representation of womanising, the design of the home of the playboy bachelor has a remarkably standardised aesthetic within this sub-genre. This character type most frequently lives in an urban apartment space (often in New York), characterised by a sleek modernity of design. The 'bachelor pad' aesthetic characterises the domestic space of the male protagonists of several of the films within this subgenre, including Ben (Matthew McConaughey in *How To Lose A Guy in 10 Days*, Fig. 5.9), Dylan (Justin Timberlake in *Friends With Benefits*, Fig. 5.10) and Jacob (in *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, Fig. 5.11). Presented to the audience as an aspirational space, there is remarkable consistency in the design scheme of the bachelor pad across these films: open-plan apartments with floor-to-ceiling windows, wooden floors, sleek stainless steel kitchens, grey colour schemes and exposed brickwork.



FIGURE 5.9 – BEN'S BACHELOR PAD IN HOW TO LOSE A GUY IN 10 DAYS



FIGURE 5.10 – DYLAN'S BACHELOR PAD IN FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS



FIGURE 5.11 – JACOB'S BACHELOR PAD IN CRAZY, STUPID, LOVE

The aesthetic of the bachelor pads contained within these texts is linked to a specific moment in design history, one in which design, taste and intellectual culture explicitly prioritised the masculine: modernism. As Penny Sparke

notes, the rise of modernism in all areas of urban life meant the 'rule of a masculine cultural paradigm', which specifically rejected ornament, decoration and colour. The aesthetics of modernist architecture and interior design instead prioritised an almost exaggerated emphasis on the function of materials and objects (1995, p. 106-7). The deliberate and repeated exposure of bare, 'raw', industrial materials such as steel, glass, wood and brickwork within the design of the bachelor pad, as well as the colour palette of the space, characterised by browns, greys and silvers, suggests that these principles continue to be prioritised in masculine interior design. In line with the modernist commitment to Arts and Craft principles of truth in materials and in the purity of the object, the materials are stripped down, or left undecorated, in order to display their 'natural' properties (ibid., p. 107). This also leads to an aesthetic of 'hardness' surrounding the bachelor pad, particularly in contrast to the soft, cushioned, chintzy interiors of the feminine homes featured within the same texts, a design scheme which itself recalls the specific aesthetic ideals of nineteenth-century domestic standards, which 'prioritised comfort and display' (ibid., p. 2). Indeed, in *Friends With Benefits*, attention is drawn precisely to the discomfort of the bachelor pad space when Dylan arrives and attempts to flop down onto his bed, but the object does not give way beneath him.



FIGURE 5.12 – THE AESTHETICS OF FEMININE DOMESTICITY:
ANNE'S HOME IN THE BACHELOR



FIGURE 5.13 – FEMININE DOMESTICITY: JAMIE'S HOME IN
FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS

In contrast to many of the homes of men in the other categories, the bachelor's home is never cluttered or dirty. However, any labour involved in designing, creating or maintaining the space is erased entirely; as with the bachelor himself, the apartment just 'is'. This is never clearer than when Dylan first walks into his apartment, having just moved to New York. Although Dylan is represented as having just got off a plane from L.A., arriving with just three bags of possessions, his apartment is already furnished, cleaned and decorated. The sleekness of the bachelor pad and its modernist style is a motif of masculine domestic space carried through

virtually all of the films in this cycle that feature the playboy character. The design of the space represents its inhabitant as unburdened, unencumbered, his living space as uncluttered as his psyche. The trappings of domesticity, and thus, femininity, have no place here, as will be discussed later in this chapter. This representation is linked to the bachelor's emotional freedom, a point that gains clarity when the bachelor pads represented within these films are compared to the domestic interiors belonging to their female love interests. These spaces, like Jamie's (Mila Kunis) apartment in *Friends With Benefits* or Anne's (Renée Zellweger) home in *The Bachelor* (Gary Sinyor, 1999), offer a complete aesthetic contrast to the sleek design of the bachelor pad (Figs. 5.12-5.13). They are homely, cosy, 'busy' spaces, characterised by clashing chintzy patterns, soft furnishings like armchairs, chaise longues, blankets and cushions, and decorative, ornamental and/or sentimental objects such as vases, flowers and pictures. Lit in warm, soft lighting, these spaces are not just cluttered with objects, but also often with other people – friends (the first time we see Jamie's apartment, she is hosting a party), sisters (Anne shares her flat with sister Natalie [Marley Shelton]), and mothers (in one scene in *Friends With Benefits*, Jamie's mother [Patricia Clarkson] arrives and interrupts her and Dylan having sex). Women's leisure and domestic space is characterised by networks of sociality and care, an association that appears to be almost literally woven into the fabric of the space. As in the sitcom, disruption of the bachelor pad can occur when a woman enters the space. *How To Lose a Guy in 10 Days* contains a scene that mirrors the feminisation of sitcom apartments discussed in the previous chapter. As part of Andie's (Kate Hudson) masquerade to encourage Ben to

break up with her, she decorates his apartment with a pink bedspread, pink furry toilet seat cover and bathmat, cuddly toys, pink lacy ornaments, framed photographs of herself and wedding magazines (Figs. 5.14-5.15). The signifiers of feminisation are remarkably consistent with the makeovers that female characters gave to masculine domestic space in the sitcom, and they also, of course, represent a personalisation of the space, a visual demonstration of attachment that is, as argued above, usually absent from the bachelor pad.



FIGURE 5.14 – SIGNIFIERS OF FEMINISATION



FIGURE 5.15 – FEMINISATION OF SPACE IN *HOW TO LOSE A GUY IN 10 DAYS*

The bachelor pad, therefore, is designed and displayed on film not only as a space that will impress female companions (and the viewer) with a display of wealth and taste, but also as a space that represents the freedoms of single life. Indeed, as Pamela Robertson Wojcik notes, ‘the apartment enabled single life and has become inextricably linked with singles’ (2010, p. 26). This singleness was, she goes on to suggest, a ‘male prerogative’, thus the apartment itself as both a cultural and physical space holds strong links to single masculinity (ibid.). The opening of *The Bachelor* draws a specific link between the archetype of the bachelor and freedom, by comparing single (specifically, American) men to mustangs. The film opens with a

montage of shots of horses running free across the plains, accompanied by protagonist Jimmie's (Chris O'Donnell) voice-over which claims that 'in his heart, every man is a wild, untamed mustang', then continues to emphasise the 'complete freedom' of the 'open plain' (Fig. 5.16). As well as the rhythmic, relentless drumming of horses' hooves, this is accompanied by non-diegetic music: the song 'Don't Fence Me In'. This extended metaphor, while perhaps rather literal, nonetheless emphasises the degree to which single masculinity is equated with freedom, nature and 'wildness', and presented as requiring taming in order to domesticate. Obviously, there is ambivalence in this metaphor, as in many films featuring the playboy bachelor, where the state of freedom awarded by bachelorhood is presented as intrinsically natural, as something to be celebrated, but as a quality that will inevitably be curtailed by domestication and heterosexual coupling. In *The Bachelor*, the taming and domestication of the 'wild' male is represented by the repeated motif of the lasso, circling round the wedding bouquet as it is thrown at each of Jimmie's friends' weddings and around each man as he runs against a back projection of stampeding horses (Fig. 5.17). As will become clear later, this representation of bachelorhood as a time of freedom and excess is indirectly critiqued in many of the other films in this genre, some of which present single life as filled with loneliness, anxiety and insecurity; others which present it as immature, childish and regressive; and even films that suggest that a single life is linked to life-threatening illnesses and disease.



FIGURE 5.16 – 'EVERY MAN IS A MUSTANG' IN THE BACHELOR



FIGURE 5.17 – TAMED BY COUPLING IN THE BACHELOR

In line with the presentation of heterosexual, single masculinity as characterised by freedom through the presentation of the bachelor and his space as unburdened by attachment, the heterosexual closet, discussed previously in this thesis in relation to the sit-com, once again becomes a significant literal and metaphorical space. In *The Bachelor*, Jimmie keeps a tin of photographs of his ex-girlfriends hidden away in a wardrobe within his apartment (Fig. 5.18). He visits this space at crisis points during the narrative, such as after the moment where long-term girlfriend Anne catches the bouquet at a wedding, signalling his impending ensnarement into marriage. As Jimmie opens the cupboard and reaches for the hidden photographs, we hear the repeated aural motif of the drumming of horses' hooves. In the scenes described above, this sound represented the freedom of single masculinity. Its repetition at this point in the narrative, over the shots of Jimmie's closeted heterosexual past, means that it takes on an added urgency, becoming the sound of his freedom escaping him, of impending doom. Crucially, though, this scene indicates that it is not appropriate for a man to display his past and/or interior life openly within his living space, and all notion of attachment and past must be closeted, especially in relation to romantic life. Just as the sit-com bachelor hid his

pornography or sex tapes, then, heterosexuality and its representation is confined to a marginal, unseen place, removed from display.



FIGURE 5.18 - JIMMIE'S
CLOSETED
HETEROSEXUAL PAST

The bachelor pad aesthetic as a whole deliberately reveals little of the man's interior life to anyone who enters it, acting as a line of defence for the bachelor against feeling or personal revelation. This is a salient trait of the character type that is played with in *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, where Jacob's womanising is structured by rules about not answering questions from women, always asking them to open up, but never talking about himself. Again, the way in which the 'right girl' interacts with the protagonist through a breaking of these rules and patterns is a feature that marks her as distinctive. In *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, the moment of Jacob and Hannah's closeness is signalled as achieved when he asks her to ask him something personal about himself. This scene exposes the vulnerability behind the playboy bachelor façade, revealing a hidden desire to divulge – to 'talk', in the sense that other scholars, such as Jane Shattuc (1997) and Laura Grindstaff (2002) have used the word to describe a feminine confessional mode in contemporary media forms. As soon as Jacob has made this move into a confessional mode, we see the falsity of his original presentation as carefree, unfeeling, womaniser, seeing instead a man who is, by his own

admission, 'wildly unhappy'. We might remember here the insistence within the lifestyle makeover show that that male participants speak about their 'feelings', despite their sometime obvious discomfort and unfamiliarity with this role. It is interesting, therefore, that the playboy bachelor representation and its maintenance is dependent upon the withholding of individual feeling, personality and attachment. Residual formations of masculinity depend upon the denial of men as emotional beings, whereas emergent formations appear to be constructed through discourses that encourage the sharing of their interior life. This (still ongoing) shift in the gendering of emotion can be identified as one emergent characteristic of postfeminist formations of masculinity.

I would like to use this space to re-make some arguments about the gendered distinction between public and private space. As I suggested in my analysis of Barney's living space in the previous chapter, there are several elements in the design scheme of the bachelor pad that speak to a reassertion of discourses around masculinity and public space. The repetition within the romantic sex comedy of the urban apartment of the bachelor and its floor-to-ceiling windows creates a motif that visualises the breaking down of the barriers between public and private. A whole wall, and sometimes more, of the bachelor's apartment is opened up to the city, allowing the public into the private and making the private public. The floor-to-ceiling window can be read as a visual and physical rejection of the ideology of separate spheres.

The bachelor pad is designed to connect with the urban, public world, much like the masculine identity that the space is designed to embody. Again, this is written into the aesthetic and architectural priorities of its design and its connections to the modernist moment. As Sparke notes:

One of modernist architecture's key propositions was a total redefinition of the nature and significance of the interior of architectural structures, the domestic dwelling among them. They eradicated the idea of gendered spaces in the home and instead opened up the interior to become an extension of the exterior.
(1995, p. 108)

The open-plan architectural arrangement of the spaces within these films, then, references a specific moment in which an attempt was made to ungender the layout of domestic space itself. Such an arrangement also removes the barriers of privacy within the home itself, as highlighted, for example, in the way in which Dylan's bed in *Friends With Benefits* is shot with the camera located in the apartment's living area. As Wojcik suggests, 'the domestic urbanism of the apartment occupies an indeterminate space – neither fully public nor fully private – what might be called "public privacy"' (2010, p. 133). This categorisation of space is a repeated visual motif of the floor-to-ceiling window in cinematic bachelor pads. As noted in my discussion of Barney's apartment in *How I Met Your Mother*, this acts as a potential publicising of the space, turning the bachelor pad into a stage upon which the character can perform his (hetero)sexuality.

Crazy, Stupid, Love, in particular, plays with the motif of the floor-to-ceiling window as a literalisation of the breaking down of distinctions between public and private space. The first shot that we see of Jacob's home is a wide

exterior establishing shot of his house over his swimming pool, clearly displaying the architecture of the house, which has floor-to-ceiling windows on all three visible walls, allowing a semi-transparency to the space. The conceptualisation of the bachelor pad as a stage, discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, is invited by the design and composition of this shot. The audience can see right through the house, giving the effect of displaying Jacob's furniture – and the waiting Hannah – on a platform, visible to the world. This is further emphasised by the on-screen lighting: bright spotlights shining down onto the scene like stage lights (Fig. 5.11). The film continues its subtle visual metaphor of the bachelor pad as stage as Hannah encourages Jacob to act out the routines of his womanising: to show her his 'moves'. Until this point in the film, each sexual encounter that we have seen Jacob pursue has been cut off from the film audience's view beyond the action that takes place in the public bar. This is the first time that the audience have seen him interact with a woman outside that space, and what we are seeing is a complexly layered encounter. Jacob's relationship with Hannah has already been established as being 'different' to other women, and their feelings for each other more authentic. However, we also understand that he is trying to sleep with her, and thus there is a level of performance expected from the character. Further to this, Hannah explicitly asks if she can *see* the performance that Jacob usually puts on for the dates that he brings home – which is, to add another level of both performativity and self-referentiality to the text, a recreation of the famous 'lift' scene from *Dirty Dancing* (Emile Ardolino, 1987).

What we see in this scene, then, is Ryan Gosling's performance of Jacob's performance of a romantic manoeuvre performed in another film by another actor (Patrick Swayze), performed for Hannah, performed for the camera. The layering of meaning and the doubling of performance here is clearly displayed by the way in which it is staged and shot within his apartment. Once again, the camera returns to a view much like the establishing shot that opened the scene: a wide shot in which we see the action through the apartment's glass walls. As Jacob performs the manoeuvre, there are two further cuts to shots from outside the window, that move the audience progressively closer to the actors but retain the transparent barrier between public and private (see Figs. 5.19-5.21). The bachelor pad here 'provides a space or stage for display: the smooth performance of bachelorhood' (Wojcik 2010, p. 108-109). A final cut then takes us inside the house, timed to coincide with the moment at which Jacob lowers Hannah's body down his, and they must 'face' each other (Fig. 5.22). As well as the representation of Jacob's bachelor pad as a space in which womanising is (quite literally) *performed*, the *mise-en-scène* and editing here conveys a sense of the permeability of the barrier between the public and the private in male domestic space. It is particularly pertinent here that the switch of the audience's viewpoint from outside to inside occurs at the point at which true, authentic emotion is felt.



FIGURE 5.19 – THE APARTMENT AS STAGE



FIGURE 5.20 – PERFORMING SEDUCTION



FIGURE 5.21 – THE DIRTY DANCING LIFT



FIGURE 5.22 – THE CAMERA MOVES INSIDE

As if to signify this shift further, the couple then move almost immediately into the bedroom, their change of location highlighted through the dialogue.

The setting of the bedroom is the complete antithesis to the open-plan, glass-walled living areas of Jacob's apartment. It is a private, closed-off space, shot in such a way that there are no windows or doors visible to the audience. In contrast to the blue, grey, cold colour palette of the living room and its bright, white lighting, the bedroom has muted brown, beige earthy tones, and low-level orange lighting as well as an open fireplace (Fig. 5.23). It is in this space that the bachelor can truly reveal his inner self to his true love interest although, as noted above, in doing so, he ceases to be the playboy bachelor, and undergoes the transformation earmarked for him by the text into monogamous partner.



FIGURE 5.23 – THE CONTRASTING AESTHETICS OF THE BEDROOM IN CRAZY, STUPID, LOVE

The playboy bachelor is a standardised representational trope not only within the romantic sex comedy, but in Western culture more widely. It is, however, a formation that is always shown as in need of transformation. The playboy bachelor is an image of single masculinity that is culturally significant but always acknowledged as fantasy, 'a mythological construct', a fact emphasised by his impossibly polished aesthetics and unachievable showplace domesticity (Osgerby 2005, p. 110). Like Barney in *How I Met*

Your Mother, the playboy bachelor in these postfeminist romantic comedy films is presented as a residual element of gendered culture. Unlike Barney, however, whose imagining within the sitcom format dictates that the character must never change or learn, bachelors in the romantic sex comedy achieve transformation through narratives of heterosexual coupling, meeting the right girl and achieving redemption through authentic feeling.

I suggested at the start of this chapter that romantic sex comedy narratives tell the story of a man's quest to become 'choosable' as a heterosexual partner. In the case of the playboy bachelor, this story is partly about the protagonist becoming 'ready to be chosen'. Aesthetic elements of the makeover are de-prioritised, because these have mostly already been achieved, but a shift in subjectivity is privileged because it is this element that marks him as unsuitable and deficient. Through his discovery of the 'right girl', the bachelor is transformed into a figure ready for coupling, ready to adhere to the script of compulsory heterosexual monogamy that characterises postfeminist discourse.

THE MAN CHILD

Unlike the playboy bachelor, which, as the previous section of this chapter suggested, is a figure with a long representational history within Hollywood film and Western popular culture more generally, the man-child is a much more recent cultural construction of masculinity, one that has become an

emblematic figure within the romantic sex comedy. While the playboy bachelor character type speaks to traditional, hegemonic representations of single masculinity that are indirectly critiqued by his discovery of a more authentic lifestyle based on heterosexual monogamy, the man-child opens up a more obvious critique of these ideals of masculinity from the beginning of each film. The deficient and under-developed masculinity of the man-child and his centrality to this new breed of romantic comedy film seems to suggest a reaction to – and almost a backlash against – the bachelor figure, suggesting the urge to represent the revelation of a ‘truth’ of single life for men who don’t look like Matthew McConaughey.

The man-child is a recurring emergent figure within the romantic sex comedy, and I am using the term here to refer to a character cast in a state of ‘arrested development’, having achieved mature adulthood physically but not in terms of lifestyle, sexuality or emotional development. Key examples of this character type, which has also been labelled the ‘slacker’, include Andy in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, Ben (Seth Rogen) in *Knocked Up*, and Kirk (Jay Baruchel) in *She’s Out of My League*. In an article about transformations in the romantic comedy genre for *The New Yorker*, David Denby described the male ‘slacker’ as follows:

His beard is haphazard and unintentional, and he dresses in sweats, or in shorts and a T-shirt, or with his shirt hanging out like the tongue of a Labrador retriever. He’s about thirty, though he may be younger, and he spends a lot of time with friends who are like him, only more so—sweet-natured young men of foul mouth, odd hair, and wanker-mag reading habits. When he’s with them, punched beer cans and bongs of various sizes lie around like spent shells; alone, and walrus-heavy on his couch, he watches football, basketball, or baseball on television, or spends time memorializing his youth—

archiving old movies, games, and jokes. Like his ancestors in the sixties, he's anti-corporate, but he's not bohemian (his culture is pop). He's more like a sullen back-of-the-classroom guy, who breaks into brilliant tirades only when he feels like it. He may run a used-record store, or conduct sightseeing tours with a non-stop line of patter, or feed animals who then high-five him with their flippers, or teach in a school where he can be friends with all the kids, or design an Internet site that no one needs. Whatever he does, he hardly breaks a sweat, and sometimes he does nothing at all.

(2007, p. 1)



FIGURE 5.24 – *THE MANCHILD*
(ANDY) IN *THE 40-YEAR-OLD*
VIRGIN

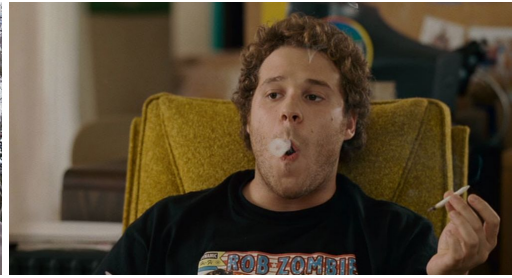


FIGURE 5.25 – *THE MANCHILD* (BEN)
IN *KNOCKED UP*

As Denby notes, the male 'self-dramatising underachiever' character is at the centre of 'the dominant romantic comedy trend of the past several years' (ibid.). The romantic sex comedy is sold most commonly upon images of this type: lazy, failing, overweight, immature figures of boyish masculinity. In contrast to the playboy bachelor figure, casting frequently works against the norms of conventional Hollywood masculine attractiveness. Bodies may be 'fat' (Seth Rogen) or 'weedy' (Jay Baruchel), short (Jason Bateman) or tall, gangly and 'soft' (Vince Vaughn, Jason Segel). Once again, the association of masculinity on film with 'hard bodies' is a useful reference point. As I suggested in the chapter on lifestyle television, the trained, disciplined, 'pathological' hard body is marked as residual in postfeminist culture, because it does not fit with the new domesticated, soft and emotional masculinities that are presented as desirable for heterosexual coupling

(Tasker 1997, p. 77). If the 'hard body' in cinema has been theorised as representing spectacular masculinity, the 'soft' bodies on display in the romantic sex comedy might be read as deliberately unspectacular bodies. The connotations of softness are also important here. Firstly, 'softness' implies an indiscipline in personal regime; the hard body of action cinema celebrates the achievement of muscles, even while it makes such a feat look effortless, whereas the soft body of the romantic sex comedy hero reflects his sedentary lifestyle. Secondly, in their repudiation of the conventionally masculine figure, these bodies invite comparison with the curviness of feminine forms, particularly the Rubenesque. *Vanity Fair* recently literalised this comparison between feminine curves and the stars of the romantic sex comedy in the composition for a covershoot entitled 'The Pretty Young Things'. In the April 2009 issue of the magazine, photographer Annie Leibovitz recreated her 'Ford's Foundation' portrait of costume designer Tom Ford with Hollywood actresses Scarlett Johansson and Keira Knightley posed nude (Fig. 5. 26). Instead of the original subjects, the parodic recreation features Paul Rudd in the Tom Ford role with Seth Rogen, Jason Segel and Jonah Hill wearing skin-tight nude bodysuits (Fig. 5.27).¹⁰³

¹⁰³ It is interesting to note that, within an exact recreation of a photo-shoot featuring nude women, nude male bodies were considered taboo, even though the images appeared in exactly the same publishing context.



FIGURE 5.26 - 'FORD'S FOUNDATION' (LEIBOVITZ, 2006)



FIGURE 5.27 - 'THE PRETTY YOUNG THINGS' (LEIBOVITZ, 2009)

This shoot draws comparisons with the most prolific actors in the romantic sex comedy genre and the bodies of Hollywood 'starlets'. However, it does so in an obviously humorous way, as if to suggest that these bodies are so obviously *not* the sexually desirable images that the earlier portrait held. The bodysuits, of course, accentuate this, not permitting us what might be a sexually dominant or provocative gaze at naked male flesh, but also

suggesting that what lies underneath is so repulsive as to require covering up. There is a complexity of discourses around the male form as represented by these stars here. They are at once feminised, but also distanced from a gaze of sexual desire. These bodies stand in opposition to normative images of feminine sexual attractiveness, as well as those of the masculine. The soft body of the romantic sex comedy hero is also used to imply an inner softness of character: caring, kind-hearted, good. Finally, it is, of course, a representation of a bodily form of masculinity that is *achievable* by the average man. The vast swathes of press attention devoted to the physiques of these actors also suggests the novelty of such formations of masculinity as romantic comedy leads, highlighting their emergent status.

While the bodies of the stars associated with this character type are clearly of interest, publicity and promotional discourses around them also focus on their comic talent. Indeed, the image of a 'network' of comedic talent off-screen – coalescing around the figure of producer/director Judd Apatow – that reflects the male camaraderie and bonding displayed on-screen, is frequently invoked in the press. The *Vanity Fair* article alone, for example, describes its featured actors as a 'quartet', a 'tightly-knit ensemble', 'summa cum laude graduates of the Judd Apatow school of comedy', and describes their collective work as 'a brand of comedy that fosters a feeling of community' (Windolf 2009, p. 154). This focus on male bonding and the 'group' again seems to sit in antithesis to traditional Hollywood male heroes whose individualism and isolation was valued, especially in action and Western genres, but also in the romantic comedy too. Furthermore, it is also

a subject position that is frequently aligned with immaturity, indeed as the references to schools (and quite often, the image of the fraternity) suggest.

This section of the chapter is interested in the representation of what Denby calls 'male infantilism' and its centrality to the romantic sex comedy genre (2007, p. 1). The opening montage of *Knocked Up* is used to introduce the audience to and immerse them in the lifestyle of male infantilism. Over the Universal logo, an upbeat non-diegetic hip-hop song begins to play. The film opens with an establishing shot of a dilapidated single-level home, with furniture cluttering the drive (Fig. 5.28). A series of shots, cut to the beat of the music, then show a group of 20-something males in the backyard, playing *Gladiators*-style games, fire-boxing, smoking marijuana and leaping into their dirty, run-down swimming pool (Fig. 5.29). Throughout these shots the camera is frequently moving with the actors to capture the action (such as using a tilt for a jump into the swimming pool), suggesting that they cannot be contained by the cinematic frame. The poolside scenes are then intercut with shots showing the men riding a rollercoaster, a bright red ride set against a clear blue sky, a lens flare created by the morning sun (Fig. 5.30). Again, moving shots are used, both of the group on the rollercoaster and point-of-view shots that allow the audience access into the thrill of the ride. This is a short montage that economically establishes the carefree, fun excesses of the lifestyle of Ben and his friends, and tries to seduce the audience into desiring and enjoying the sense of child-like play it creates. Crucially, though, this montage does not work alone, but is juxtaposed with the structure, rigidity and obligation of Alison's (Katherine Heigl) life. From

a shot of the men on the rollercoaster, we cut to a composed, panning shot across a bedroom shelf to Alison's bed, where her alarm clock display tells us it is 7am (Fig. 5.31). The free-moving camera that captured the boys' leisure exploits is replaced by a more structured *mise-en-shot*, and the hip-hop track fades away, replaced by first the sound of the beeping alarm, and then the non-diegetic, instrumental opening to a soft indie piano tune. Alison sits up immediately and awakes brightly. Here, the sound and image work together to present a picture of pleasant conventionality, maturity and independence, in contrast to the irresponsibility of the homosocial male group.



FIGURE 5.28 – THE MANCHILD'S SHARED HOME IN *KNOCKED UP*

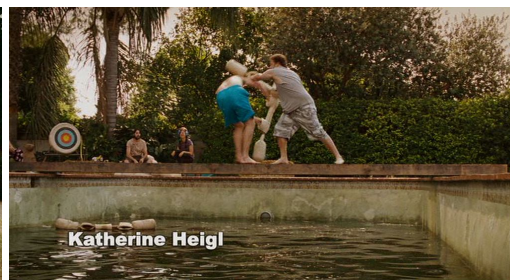


FIGURE 5.29 – THE MANCHILD AT PLAY



FIGURE 5.30 – ROLLERCOASTER

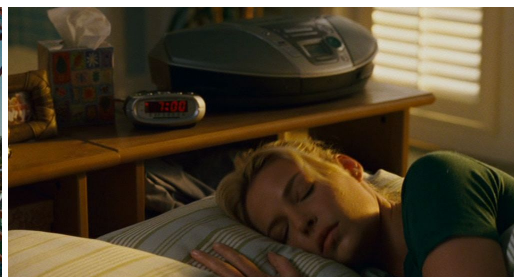


FIGURE 5.31 – ALISON'S MORNING

It is also significant that both protagonists in *Knocked Up* are introduced to the audience in their respective domestic settings. Alison awakes in a bright

room swathed in soft, cream drapes. It is both cosy and clean, and contrasts with Ben's rundown bungalow. Furthermore, although we see the men at their home, they remain outside it during the introductory scenes, suggesting once again that male spaces have a more permeable barrier between public and private space, and contributing to the text's characterisation of the group as 'free-range'. Alison's space is also private, whereas Ben's is a shared, group space. Indeed, at this point, Ben has not been differentiated from the rest of his companions as the text's protagonist.

As the juxtaposition in domestic spaces of *Knocked Up*'s opening montage suggests, the homes of man-child figures are rarely shown to conform to norms of showplace, familial or feminine domesticity, either in terms of aesthetics or upkeep. As a series of spaces, they are linked by a shared status of disorder. The homes of these single men are often best described as cluttered, messy, childish, or boyish. The man-child and his friends have often transformed homes so that they provide space created explicitly for masculine leisure. As in the *How I Met Your Mother* episode 'World's Greatest Couple', the film *I Love You, Man* contains a scene in which the viewer is invited on a tour of the space of the single male living alone. Sydney (Jason Segel) takes Peter (Paul Rudd) back to his house, which is painted a bright cornflower blue but visibly ramshackle. The outdoor space appears cluttered, suggesting a neglect of standards of upkeep even before we get inside (Fig. 5.32). The camera tracks in front of the pair as they walk through the yard. Sydney gestures to one of the items filling the outdoor space: 'That's a bumper car I got on eBay. I was in a bidding war with

carnivalkid32 so I had to go on the “Buy It Now” price, but I got it.’¹⁰⁴ The men and the camera approach the garage door, and arrive at what Sydney calls the ‘*piece de resistance*’. To build up anticipation for the reveal of the space, Sydney is shot facing the door/camera in a mid-shot, therefore obscuring our view of the ‘mancave’ as he announces ‘welcome to the Temple of Doom’ – as much to the camera and audience as it is to Peter (Fig. 5.33). The reference to Indiana Jones in the dialogue and the way in which the reveal is built up constructs the mancave as a fantasy space, but one that is both spectacular and juvenile.

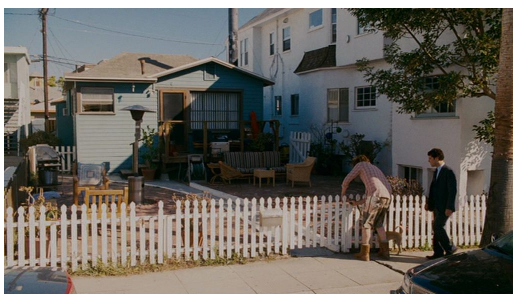


FIGURE 5.32 – THE EXTERIOR OF THE MANCAVE

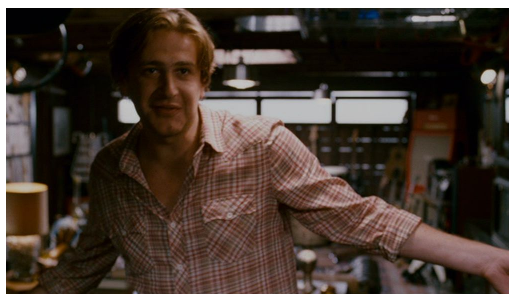


FIGURE 5.33 – ‘WELCOME TO THE TEMPLE OF DOOM’



FIGURE 5.34 – THE ‘COOL’ INTERIOR OF THE MANCAVE



FIGURE 5.35 – THE INTERIOR OF THE MANCAVE

¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, the text here sees it fitting to justify the motivations of Sydney’s opponent in the bidding war for the bumpercar through his eBay username. Unlike Sydney, a grown man who now has a (useless) bumper car rusting in his yard, “carnivalkid32” might, we assume, have had a legitimate use for it – his name establishes him as perhaps belonging to a carnival, and not being a grown up, either of which would, presumably, make him a more suitable owner for the item than Sydney. The film therefore very subtly comments upon the inappropriateness of Sydney’s acquisition of this item through the username given.

Subsequent shots of the mancave then serve not to pick out or isolate its features, of which there are many, but rather to display them all at once, so that the audience is overwhelmed in their attempt to absorb the 'coolness' of the space (Figs. 5.34-5.35). This strategy of *mise-en-scène* also emphasises the clutter within the space. Furnishings and decoration visible in these shots include: posters, CDs, records, a drumset, many guitars, amps, a desk, a beer fridge, a wall of tvs, photos of Sydney (particularly his childhood achievements), bongos. The extremely dense and detailed set design of this space characterises it as a space for leisure, creativity and the absorption of popular culture. Such a collection of possessions on display might remind us of Didier Maleuvre's work on 'collecting' as a masculine form of homemaking (1999, p. 115; see chapter 1 of this thesis for more discussion). As with Barney's apartment, the space is designed to exclude the feminine, as confirmed by the dialogue: 'Pete, this is the mancave. There's no women allowed in here.'

This exclusion of the feminine characterises the home of the man-child, but is not always intentional. Many other spaces share the immature aesthetics and set-up of the space and are similarly marked as unsuitable as a home for cohabitation. Andy's apartment in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, for example, is designed to recall the aesthetics of an adolescent boy's bedroom, but enhanced and exaggerated throughout his entire domestic space. This is visible both in the furniture that Andy owns (including an electronic drum-kit and a gaming chair), and the way that his space is 'decorated' with action figures and posters of spaceships (Figs. 5.36-5.37). Andy's attachment to

these action figures – which are essentially toys – is emphasised by their penetration of the space. They appear arranged on shelving units in every room of Andy's apartment, even his bathroom. The condominium has the aesthetic of a space for play, leisure and escapism. Again, we can see here the topography and design of domestic space being used to mirror the protagonist's subjectivity and character.



FIGURE 5.36 – ANDY'S BEDROOM



FIGURE 5.37 – ANDY'S ACTION FIGURES DECORATE HIS HOME

The strategy of aligning man-child characters with teenage boys through their domestic space is reproduced even more emphatically in *Failure to Launch* (Tom Dey, 2006). 35-year-old Tripp (Matthew McCaughey) here literally inhabits the space of his teenaged self, still living in his bedroom at his parents' house. The set-up of the film moves from the traditional romantic-comedy setting of a date in a candlelit restaurant, to Tripp taking his date Melissa (Katheryn Winnick) back home, where their sexual intercourse is accidentally interrupted by Tripp's father (Terry Bradshaw). The film's narrative problem is introduced – how can Tripp's frustrated parents get him to leave the nest, especially when his living situation is repelling the women that might give him cause to move out in the first place?

Following the film's opening credits, there is a sequence that establishes the lack of responsibility in Tripp's life, a montage of the morning routine in his bedroom. Shots show Tripp waking, stepping across his bedroom floor littered with the remains of a half-eaten bag of tortilla chips, turning on his television and then entering his en-suite bathroom. While Tripp gurns into his bathroom mirror, the film cuts to a series of shots of his mother (Kathy Bates) making his bed, collecting his laundry and vacuuming. She then closes the door behind her onto a transformed, clean, ordered bedroom, a shot that is matched by the next frame in which Tripp emerges from his bathroom door. In this scene, attention is drawn to the way in which domestic labour is rendered invisible to Tripp. Various elements within the scene contribute to the representation of Tripp's life as untroubled and carefree; the television screen promises that the five-day weather forecast is 'sunny', and the lyrics of the non-diegetic music ask 'how does it feel when things are good?'.

However, as with the womanising sequences of *Wedding Crashers*, or the masculine leisure montage that opened *Knocked Up*, it is clear that this status quo will soon be disrupted. The narrative of *Failure to Launch*, as its title might suggest, centres around the attempts of Tripp's parents – with the help of professional expert Paula (Sarah Jessica Parker) – to encourage their son to leave the family home and develop a mature, independent adult life. As well as the parents' exasperation during the opening scene, there is a repeated motif throughout *Failure to Launch* that sees Tripp repeatedly attacked by wildlife. Over the course of the film, he is attacked by a

chipmunk, a dolphin and a chuckawalla, with the obvious underlying theme being that his continued single and 'teenaged' status is a violation of the natural order. Once Tripp has taken up his place in the heterosexual matrix, moved out of his parents house and formed a monogamous relationship with Paula, this is shown to be corrected: the final scene of the film sees a dolphin playing with him unaggressively, asking to be petted.

The 40-Year-Old Virgin also uses a change in its protagonist's domestic circumstances in order to suggest his maturation and achievement of adult masculinity. Indeed, even as the style and aesthetic of the space are established as 'youthful' during the opening scenes, the director uses Andy's actions and the spatial placement and framing of his body to work against this representation, creating a disjuncture that emphasises the problematic nature of Andy's lifestyle. As he slowly and methodically gets ready for work in the morning, the composition frequently leaves half of the frame empty. Shots such as that of Andy in front of his bathroom mirror next to a bare and unused sink suggest that there is a significant gap in his life, a subtext which is enhanced by his joyless demeanour in a space that is designed to be a space of play (Fig. 5.38). The narrative problem established here is two-fold: Andy is both immature and lonely, and the two problems are significantly intertwined, both represented through the cinematic presentation of Andy's domestic space.



FIGURE 5.38 – ANDY'S EMPTY SPACE



FIGURE 5.39 – ANDY PRESENTS TRISH WITH HIS APARTMENT

The unacceptability of Andy's home in a schema of normative domesticity is recognised within the diegesis by his friends. This is however, staged as a re-examination of the space through feminine eyes, only deemed necessary when love interest Trish (Catherine Keener) comes to visit. Andy's announcement that Trish is due to visit interrupts the leisure gaming of his friends, and causes them to embody a different subject position in relation to the space. Cal (Seth Rogen) suggests that, in order to prepare, they 'take everything that's embarrassing and take it all out so it doesn't look like you live in Neverland Ranch'.¹⁰⁵ That the men only worry about the appearance of the condo in relation to Trish, and not their own habitation of it, suggests that it is through feminine eyes that male immaturity is most keenly felt. Indeed, Andy is specifically asked by Cal to internalise a feminine gaze at himself and his living space: 'You've got to see this through the eyes of a woman,' he urges, 'What's she gonna think when she comes in here?'. This formulation of Andy's subjectivity gestures towards an interesting inversion

¹⁰⁵ The reference to Michael Jackson's infamous Neverland Ranch suggests a complex entanglement of postfeminist discourses that demonstrate that immaturity in men can be culturally demonised (as was the case with Michael Jackson, and Andy's attachment to his toys) as well as celebrated (as in the gaming chair that is hailed as cool by all of Andy's friends, or in a wider context, the growing spectacle of the bachelor party).

of the postfeminist condition of femininity in which 'the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime' (Gill 2007, p. 152).

The scene cuts to reveal the living room of Andy's condo stripped completely empty, with bare walls, no furniture and no personal effects (Fig. 5.39). The men make the space palatable by bringing it closer to the modernist, minimalist bachelor pad aesthetic. It is revealing, especially in relation to the debates around gendered design outlined above, that it is seen as more acceptable for Andy to present Trish with a completely empty apartment than it is to present her with a space that reveals 'too much' of himself. Andy, however, as with the bachelors in the examples described above, cannot keep his true self hidden for long in the face of true love.

During the conclusions of all of these films, the expression of authentic male emotion is valorised and rewarded. There exists within postfeminist constructions of masculinity, then, a tightly moderated system of behaviour in relation to emotional life. The postfeminist sensibility asks men to monitor what they put 'on display' to the world at the same time as it encourages them to be more emotionally expressive in the context of confessional talk. The demands placed upon the male protagonist within the romantic sex comedy reflect wider cultural ambivalence in relation to men and emotion. The postfeminist sensibility's emphasis on self-surveillance, with its added psychological focus and requirement to 'transform oneself and remodel one's interior life' can be seen within this genre to apply to men too (Gill 2007, p. 155). Thus while Gill sees women as postfeminism and neo-liberalism's ideal disciplinary subjects, these films suggest that it is

male subjectivity too that is increasingly viewed as a 'project to be evaluated, advised, disciplined and improved or brought "into recovery"' (ibid., p. 156). Andy's work towards his 'recovery' here ultimately involves the transformation of his domestic space, selling his action figures on eBay in order to fund an improvement in his career prospects by starting his own business.

Although the film ends with their marriage, the question of what the new home that Andy and Trish will make together will be like is left unaddressed. Despite its use as a site of negotiation, conflict and of gendered meaning and labour throughout the narrative, at the film's conclusion domesticity suddenly becomes an invisible element of coupling. This is a common manoeuvre within many films within this subgenre. The home of the 'final couple' – the 'final home' – is left as an unseen, unrealised fantasy space, perhaps because to deal with its representation would be to have to confront all of the previous issues and conflicts around domesticity that the formation of the couple is supposed to erase.

BROKEN MEN

The previously coupled or married man who has 'let himself go' is another recurring character type within the romantic sex comedy. The narratives of films featuring these characters as protagonists frequently begin with the dissolution of a monogamous couple – as is the case in *The Break-Up* (Peyton Reed, 2006), *Crazy, Stupid, Love, Forgetting Sarah Marshall* and *17 Again* (Burr Steers, 2009), for example. The set-up of these films represents the

man as being slobbish and lazy, having turned his attention away from self-care and consequently away from his partner and/or family. *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, for example, starts with a montage in which Peter (Jason Segel) is shown lounging around their shared apartment in sweatpants, eating cereal and watching the television report on the exploits of his famous TV-star girlfriend, Sarah Marshall (Kristen Bell) (Fig. 5.40). When Sarah returns, Peter has not yet finished getting dressed ready for her arrival, and so she must carry out her intended action – to break up with him – while he is in the nude (Fig. 5.41). Here the man's lack of attention to any form of domestic or personal labour in the absence of the feminine is exaggerated to the extent that the man appears naked: i.e. having made the least effort possible. This is further compounded by his contrast to Sarah's professional dress, and Peter's refusal to 'choose the outfit you break up with me in'. This also highlights a key point of Jane Gaines' analysis of the importance of costume in Hollywood film. Gaines suggests that costume in film can function to tell its own plot alongside the film's 'proper' narrative. She theorises that, despite fears over the potential of costume to overwhelm the plot, 'the real but unforeseen danger is not in too much costume, but in the total absence of it – the body naked' (Gaines 1990, p. 193). In the case of *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, Peter's rejection of clothing at this key narrative moment conveys a far stronger message than any carefully put together costume might be able to.



FIGURE 5.40 – PETER LOUNGES WAITING FOR HIS GIRLFRIEND



FIGURE 5.41 – FORGETTING SARAH MARSHALL'S NAKED BREAK UP



FIGURE 5.42 – CAL'S SPARTAN APARTMENT IN CRAZY, STUPID, LOVE



FIGURE 5.43 – NED'S POD RACER BED IN 17 AGAIN

One significant and repeated trope of the divorced or separated man is his removal from the family home and his temporary habitation of a transitional space. Once again, masculinity in the romantic sex comedy is mapped through topographies of domestic space. Men like Peter, Cal (*Crazy, Stupid, Love*) and Mike (Matthew Perry in *17 Again*) are shown to no longer live up to the standards required by the family home and thus must escape, or are forced out. Cal rents an apartment, which is small, bland and spartan, much like the character himself (Fig. 5.42). At the start of *17 Again*, Mike,

estranged from his family, is staying with his friend Ned (Thomas Lennon). Ned's home is characterised as a space not unlike those of the man-child described above, but perhaps even more fantastical. Ned sleeps in a *Star Wars* pod-racer bed and wears 'Spock' ears, and they munch on children's Cap'n Crunch cereal for breakfast (Fig. 5.43).

While the man's temporary expulsion from the family home results in his move to a temporary space, it is striking just how often such spaces are characterised by the fantastic. The use of a fantasy transitional space as a site for the reformation of failing masculinity can be seen in a variety of films, and manifests in numerous guises: holiday resorts in Hawaii (in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* and *Couple's Retreat* (Peter Billingsley, 2009), a ski resort (in *Hot Tub Time Machine* [Steve Pink, 2010]), or the frat-house that the men create on campus in *Old School* (Todd Phillips, 2003). Even the characters that do move to more mundane temporary accommodation are given fantasy spaces within which to transform. The bar in *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, with its low-lighting and lack of connection to the outside world acts as a space in which Cal can re-make himself, learn new skills and be taught new ways of relating to women. Mike in *17 Again* is given the chance to live in his 17-year-old body once more, and Dave (Jason Bateman) is made to inhabit the body, home and lifestyle of his bachelor friend Mitch (Ryan Reynolds) in *The Change-Up* (Figs. 5.44-5.45).



FIGURE 5.44 –
THE CHILDISH
SPACE OF
MITCH'S
BACHELOR PAD
IN THE CHANGE-
UP

FIGURE 5.45 –
DAVE'S FAMILY
HOME, A SITE OF
RESPONSIBILITIES



These films therefore remove the man from the spaces that represent the societal pressures of heterosexual monogamy, and move them into spaces of liminality. The liminal space is one in which identity can be reformed and remade. As Celeste Lacroix and Robert Westerfelhaus have argued in relation to *Queer Eye*, 'liminal status provides the ritual logic for the license to violate selected socio-cultural rules sometimes granted ritual participants undergoing a rite of passage' (2006, p. 14). It is in the liminal space or phase that 'transitory process' can occur (ibid.). Crucially, these spaces are shown to operate to different norms and values to mainstream American society. Hawaii can clearly be seen to function in this way in both *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* and *Couple's Retreat*. Hawaii is a mythical space in American culture in that it is both American, and yet not American; it is an island, geographically separated from the mainland and culturally separated from the mainstream. Its culture is characterised by a blending of Eastern and

Western influences alongside its indigenous rites, rituals and values. In *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, Hawaii is explicitly contrasted to the network television, showbiz news dominated setting of L.A., and is presented as a more authentic space, in which Peter can, for example, leap off a cliff into the sea, or help to kill and carry a hog for roasting. In both *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* and *Couple's Retreat*, there are scenes in which the characters have yoga lessons in Hawaii, reinforcing the sense of a connection to spirituality and the East. *Hot Tub Time Machine* takes place in another liminal US state, Alaska, and has a doubling of fantasy space in that the men are temporally as well as geographically dislocated when a malfunction in their hot tub sends them back in time to the 1970s.

Both *Hot Tub Time Machine* and *17 Again* offer their male protagonists a return to youth (Figs. 5.46-5.47). This is a significant move as it is once again aligning masculinity with childhood and the inability to grow up, suggesting the dominance of juvenile masculinity. However, it is also a testament to its transience, impermanence and impossibility, as we know that they will have to change back by the films' end. It is also significant that the return to youth allows a return to a space that is pre-postfeminism, suggesting that in order to remake themselves in the postfeminist paradigm the men must escape it to a time when gender roles were – the films seem to suggest – less complex. Significantly, another liminal space repeatedly used within this cycle is the parental or ancestral home, which again provides a space within which transformation can take place. The family home becomes a site where authentic feelings can be displayed and heterosexual relationships

cemented or worked through. In films such as *Friends With Benefits*, *The Proposal* (Anne Fletcher, 2009), and *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, the parental home of the male protagonist provides the setting for the initial realisation of romantic attachment. Both these types of romantic comedy 'moment' and the significance of the parental home as a setting are avenues of enquiry that would bear further investigation, perhaps as part of a wider project that continues this exploration into the importance of domestic spaces within the romantic comedy genre more widely. For my purposes here, this use of setting indicates once more the links between heterosexual coupling and the achievement of adult masculinity. The man returns to his childhood home to learn the final lesson that will transition him into adulthood. The ancestral home is also the model of familial, stable domesticity that the protagonists (both male and female) are being encouraged to emulate through their eventual union. The lessons that are learned either within the family home or from a literal return to youth involve shifts in subjectivity of the male protagonist, particularly in relation to coupling, that can then be taken back to contemporary everyday life.



FIGURE 5.46 – RETURNING TO
CHILDHOOD IN HOT TUB TIME
MACHINE



FIGURE 5.47 – MIKE CONFRONTS HIS
TEENAGE SELF IN 17 AGAIN

The liminality of spaces that are used as a site for the reformation and transformation of male identities also links to the fluidity of masculine space

more generally. As other parts of this chapter, and indeed this thesis, have argued, male domestic space is often characterised by the ease with which male leisure is accommodated within it. Homes are transformed into spaces resembling bars, as in *The Break-Up* where Gary (Vince Vaughn) installs a pool table into the dining room, and hosts a poker night complete with strippers; or in *Old School* where Mitch's (Luke Wilson) house is transformed into the ultimate frat house (Figs. 5.48-5.50). Many of the bars featured in these films, on the other hand, are striking in their homeliness and comfort, such as the communal space at Jimmie's workplace in *The Bachelor*, which has pool tables and a jukebox combined with comfy leather sofas, coffee tables and domestic lamps (Fig. 5.51). These spaces seem to suggest a rejection of the ideology of separate spheres, each space semi-public, and semi-private. They allow the men to live in the bar, and to play in the home. Furthermore, unlike the artificiality of the workplace, where men must strive, or the structure of the family home, where they must adhere to 'feminine' domestic norms, these semi-public spaces are presented as sites of authenticity, where men can 'be themselves'.



FIGURE 5.48 – THE HOME AS A SPACE FOR LEISURE: THE POOL TABLE IN THE BREAK-UP



FIGURE 5.49 – BREAKING THE PUBLIC/PRIVATE DIVIDE: THE HOME AS STRIP CLUB



FIGURE 5.50 – THE HOME AS FRAT HOUSE IN OLD SCHOOL



FIGURE 5.51 – THE PUBLIC SPACE OF JIMMIE'S WORK MATCHES THE AESTHETICS OF THE BACHELOR PAD

In *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, it is the bar that provides the liminal space for the transformation of Cal's masculinity. It is in this space that he, through the eyes of bachelor companion Jacob, first comes to understand his failings. During the scene in which the two meet, the audience is aligned with Jacob through a point-of-view shot that shows his appraisal of Cal: a slow track up his body taking in his sneakers, his beige slacks, and his loose jacket and tie. Once again, this mimics the camera action usually used to signify appraisal of the female in the makeover film. However, here the encoded meaning of the tilt is subverted both by the gender of the subject and by his unfashionable attire, in order to create humour. Cal, at this point, is unaware of the gaze upon him, and is ranting aloud about his wife 'cuckolding' him.

His speech, directed to no-one in particular, and his lack of awareness of the reaction of those around him reflects his lack of control. Jacob's whistle, from off-screen, corrects this, and marks the beginning of Cal's transformation: a journey into self-awareness and improvement. Jacob's intervention here, and his position as appraiser, places him in the position of lifestyle expert and fairy godmother.

During the conversation that follows, Cal is subjected to a harsh appraisal that can be seen to mirror the 'advice' given by experts in the 'before' stages of the makeover. Like the lifestyle expert of makeover television, Jacob explicitly frames his criticisms as helpful truths which, if recognised, will empower the subject and help him change his life for the better: 'Look, I know it sounds harsh, but it's true, and you need to hear the truth'. The aspects of Cal's appearance and identity that are criticised in Jacob's swift appraisal also reflect the expert discourses of makeover television:

You're sitting there with a SuperCuts hair cut, you're getting drunk on watered-down vodka cranberries like a 14-year-old girl. And you're wearing a 44 when you should be wearing a 42 regular.

Jacob identifies Cal's 'SuperCuts hair cut', a label which suggests the haircut is both cheap and unstylish. His critiques also put Cal into a position that is both immature and feminine, as he compares him to a '14-year-old girl'. Jacob here is shown not only to be able to identify that Cal is wearing the wrong size suit, but also to give the size that he is wearing *and* the size that he *should* be wearing, demonstrating a technical knowledge of fashion and tailoring usually attributed to the (queer) lifestyle expert. Crucially, of

course, Cal is shown to lack this knowledge, and has been wearing the wrong size clothes his entire adult life.

Jacob also, however, like the lifestyle expert, can see the potential for improvement in his subject. His offer of help in Cal's improvement explicitly frames masculinity as what is at stake: 'I'm gonna help you. I'm gonna help you rediscover your manhood'. Here, as in *Queer Eye*, a man can perform the makeover that women – such as Cal's wife and the partners of the 'Straight Guys' – have been unable to do. As in the narratives of transformation in *Queer Eye*, the heterosexuality of the subject is immediately reaffirmed after he enters into a contract of improvement with a male expert; Jacob plainly states the goal of their mission 'And when we're done, this wife of yours...she's gonna rue the day she ever decided to give up on you'. A relationship with a woman is explicitly what is at stake in this transformation.¹⁰⁶

The dynamic set up in the bar scene, between lifestyle expert and deficient makeover subject, is continued in a sequence in which Jacob takes Cal shopping. Their trip to the mall is arranged as soon as Cal consents to taking Jacob's advice, highlighting the importance of a new wardrobe (and conspicuous, guided consumption) as an essential element of Cal's transformation. Again, the scene opens by juxtaposing the two men. Cal is shown standing impotently on an escalator in sneakers and an

¹⁰⁶ This is not to say that the text does not also enjoy playing with the homosocial/homosexual terms of Jacob and Cal's relationship to create humour. This is most obvious in the locker-room scene in which Cal confronts, literally head on, Jacob's 'manhood'. The film positions the two actors so that Cal's head is the only barrier between the camera and Jacob's naked penis, and the dialogue draws attention to Cal's discomfort.

unfashionable pastel lemon striped polo shirt, muttering 'what am I doing?' repeatedly under his breath (Fig. 5. 52). His lack of agency is made clear here: the dialogue confirming that he has come against his own judgement and wishes, and his passive stance on the escalator showing him being moved towards his destination, rather than actively seeking it himself. In contrast, Jacob is leaning casually against a barrier, eating pizza (Fig. 5.53). The camera tracks in slowly towards him, and once again we hear the non-diegetic tribal music that accompanied his earlier introduction in the bar. Despite the casualness of the pizza slice, the framing and costume here continue the film's mythologisation of the bachelor. The slow-motion effect adds smoothness to the image, and the track suggests the effortlessness of his appearance. The stylishness of the character is undeniable, his expensive, designer sunglasses, and the crisp attention to detail on his suit, its contrast lapels and pocket trims conveying the promise of what he might offer to Cal during the scene. Again, we might consider Gaines' concept of the costume plot here, as Jacob's attire offers a promise of what Cal might become (Gaines 1990, p.180).



FIGURE 5.52 – CAL
BEFORE THE
MAKEOVER

FIGURE 5.53 – CRAZY,
STUPID, LOVE'S
MYTHOLOGISATION OF
THE BACHELOR



The scene that follows is a shopping montage, a convention usually aligned with feminine cinematic pleasure and genres such as the ‘chick flick’. In a visual and tonal style that establishes the scene as both ungendering *and* parody, *Crazy, Stupid, Love* follows many of the established conventions of the cinematic shopping montage: the repeated shots of items selected for purchase, changing room shots, close-ups of credit cards being handed over and receipts being signed, the carrier bags accumulating. The image is one of considered consumption, guided by the lifestyle expert and funded by credit. We are led into the montage with a tracking shot of Jacob’s shoes walking along the shop floor, which reminds us of the character’s introduction and displays, through the fetishisation of one fashion object, his position as expert in taste and personal aesthetics. As Jacob steps out of shot, Cal’s socked feet step in, his sneakers having been deemed so abject by Jacob that they can’t be allowed into the space of the shop and are instead cast off carelessly over the mall balcony (Fig. 5.54). This exposure of Cal’s feet reflects his vulnerability and out-of-placeness within the high-end shops

that Jacob takes him to, a feeling that is also conveyed through the following shot, which depicts the two men facing each other, in opposition, against a backlit wall of shoes (Fig. 5.55). Their clothing and body language enhance the contrast between their figures in this environment – one completely inconspicuous and at home, the other clearly uncomfortable and standing out.

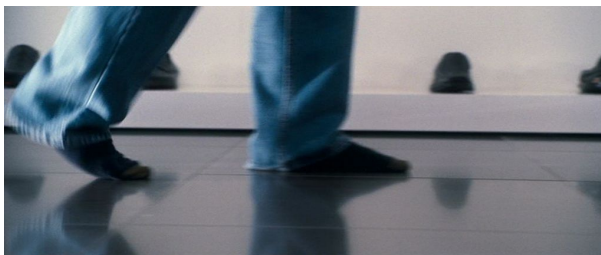


FIGURE 5.54 – CAL
STEPS INTO THE
STORE



FIGURE 5.55 – THE
CONTRAST BETWEEN
THE PLAYBOY
BACHELOR AND THE
FAILING MAN

As with the makeovers in *Queer Eye*, the consumption montage in *Crazy, Stupid, Love* does not just cover the purchase of new clothes, but also instruction on cosmetics and a restyling of Cal's hair. Jacob also casually espouses logics of consumption and fashion purchasing that could just as easily have come out of the mouth of a television lifestyle expert: 'You can rebuild your entire wardrobe with like 16 items'. The shots of shirts and ties laid out on the store countertops provides a visual reference to the dressing montage in *American Gigolo* (Paul Schrader, 1980), where the camera pans across Julian (Richard Gere) laying out his potential outfits for the day and matching the ties (see Figs. 5.56-5.59). The film therefore references a scene

that is explicitly about the construction of an image of desirable masculinity. Shots showing Cal being measured for a suit also cement this, the suit being, as I have suggested elsewhere in this thesis, the ultimate sartorial signifier of masculine desirability.



*FIGURE 5.56 – SHOPPING MONTAGE
IN CRAZY, STUPID, LOVE*



*FIGURE 5.57 – SHOPPING MONTAGE
IN CRAZY, STUPID, LOVE*



*FIGURE 5.58 – DRESSING MONTAGE
IN AMERICAN GIGOLO*



*FIGURE 5.59 – DRESSING MONTAGE
IN AMERICAN GIGOLO*

Where the scene differs from the shopping montage in the chick-flick or female-centred film, however, is in its humour. Throughout the montage, a series of jokes are made about Cal's unrefined aesthetics. The sequence is preceded by the following exchange:

Jacob: I'm asking you a question, you in a fraternity?
Cal: No!
Jacob: Are you Steve Jobs?
Cal: what?!
Jacob: Hold on a second, are you the billionaire owner of Apple Computers?
Cal: No

Jacob: Okay, well in that case you've got no right to wear New Balance sneakers ever.
(Jacob slaps Cal)

The humour here is both physical - the unexpected tossing away of Cal's sneakers and the slap - and verbal. Both types of humour carry over into the montage. This includes gags using the exaggerated sound effect of the Velcro opening on Cal's wallet and Jacob recoiling in horror; and insults that Jacob delivers at a rapid pace, telling Cal that the skin under his eyes is 'starting to look like Hugh Hefner's ball sack' and that he has a 'Mom butt'. Interestingly, the humour is never used to mock the activity that they are undertaking or to undermine the seriousness of the task at hand. Rather, we are laughing *with* Jacob, laughing *at* Cal. Rather than being cruel, however, Jacob's jokes are positioned as harmless and fun because they are delivered as part of the activity of teaching Cal not only the skills of personal care, grooming and curating aesthetics, but also to hold himself in higher esteem. This is summed up in Jacob's final mantra of the scene, where he tells Cal to 'be better than the Gap'. Thus the shopping montage is not just about the act of consumption, it is presented as a pedagogic process, teaching skilled logical consumption that supports a particular valuing of oneself. The way that the humour works within this shopping montage seems to continue the romantic sex comedy sub-genre's project of ungendering through humour, making a shopping montage palatable to male viewers by focusing on male stars and their comedic skills.

After the shopping montage, a scene in a hair salon cues the viewer in to the advancing reveal of Cal's 'after' self, but simultaneously suggests that the

makeover is not yet complete. He steps out of the changing room from behind red curtains, and a slow track in towards him and tribal, non-diegetic music mimic the ways in which Jacob has previously been constructed as desirable by the audio-visual language of the film. Cal's clumsy reaction to the beautician's admiration of his new exterior, however, confirms that he is not yet the 'after' image of the makeover. Here the text alludes to the next 'lesson' that Cal will receive from Jacob: instruction in how to talk to women. The suggestion that the transformation is still unfinished is confirmed in the following scene in which Cal, although looking much sharper in a petrol blue suit and dark, open-collared shirt, is instructed to watch Jacob's pick up techniques in order to learn how to approach women.

Like the television makeover show, however, the cinematic male makeover still retains a discourse of individualism within transformation. Crucially, Cal only achieves success in approaching Kate (Marissa Tomei) when he is 'himself'; his attempts to imitate Jacob's pick-up techniques only come across as aggressive and weird. It is only when he is honest with her that she becomes interested, and, significantly, his honesty extends to revealing his discomfort in his new attire. 'I have eighteen layers of clothes on', he complains, '...I'm just sweat under here, this is just sweat from here down. This sweater, this is "slim-cut". But it feels like a scuba suit'. Although the character is not allowed to reject the makeover entirely, he is allowed to adapt within the new form created for him by his attendant expert.

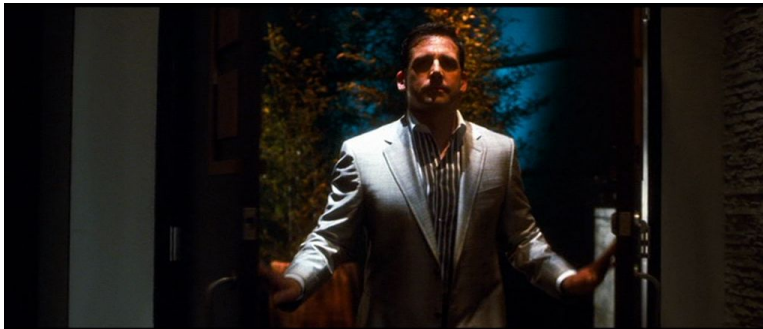


FIGURE 5.60 –
CAL AS THE
'AFTER' OF THE
MAKEOVER

It is only after Cal has *achieved* within his newly styled persona – marked by his successful seduction of Kate – that the audience is treated to the 'proper' reveal of his 'after' form. This plot sequencing emphasises the importance of internal as well as external transformation. The reveal scene deliberately creates parallels between Cal's new persona and the bachelor construction of his mentor. A slow motion shot shows Cal striding in through the double doors of the bar, the camera tilted slightly to look up at him and tracking with him as he moves through the bar, emphasising his new found agency and action (Fig. 5.60). The sequence then uses shots of Cal chatting up multiple women, stitching them all into one continuous tracking shot through the different areas of the bar. This is another example of a film using the manipulation of editing in order to represent the patterns of womanising. Unlike the two cases discussed earlier, however, which made the edits between different shots visible and patterned through aural and graphic matches, in this scene the editing process is simultaneously erased and highlighted. The actual jarring effect of the cut is entirely omitted, but the fact that multiple 'Cals' appear within the same shot foregrounds its artificiality. The dreamlike quality created by this intentional dislocation seems to reinforce the representation of the bar as a fantasy space for Cal.

Shots of Jacob sat at the bar watching serve to emphasise the transformation that he has wrought in Cal: they have literally switched places since his tutoring began. Cal's entrance also obviously and intentionally mimics the way in which Jacob was first introduced to the audience, and endows the character, through camera movement, with an agency previously only ascribed to the younger bachelor. Through the intervention of a lifestyle expert, Cal is coached into embodying a different – choosable – formation of masculinity. His makeover allows him access to the sexual excesses of the playboy bachelor. However, Cal exploits these freedoms only temporarily, quickly learning the obligate lesson of this formation of masculinity too, and recognising that his true desire is for long-term heterosexual commitment and security of the kind that he shared with his wife.

This focus on reforming failing mid-life masculinities within the romantic sex comedy highlights that both scrutiny and the need to perform work on one's self continues even after coupling. I suggested in the introduction to this thesis that the material conditions of gender relations in contemporary society had instigated a series of shifts in relation to coupling, which, when based upon 'choice', is always fragile. These texts and character formations suggest that such instabilities continue to affect heterosexual relations beyond the initial stages of coupling. Postfeminist and neo-liberal discourses promote constant vigilance and work on the self in order to maintain stability in this and other areas of modern life, especially in the face of 'empowered' postfeminist female partners. The solutions that these texts suggest to such problems are, as this analysis has shown, further

reiterations of aspects of the postfeminist sensibility and as such repeat motifs and concerns from the other media genres studied within this thesis. Once again though, the end result is a man who is transformed aesthetically, domesticated and emotionally in order to make him into an ideal postfeminist partner.

AGEING MASCULINITIES

As might be implicit in the discussion above, all of the texts discussed in this chapter display, to a greater or lesser extent, anxiety around the concept of single masculinity. I am interested, therefore, in this section in returning to the 'bachelor/spinster' dichotomy in relation to images of male ageing in the romantic comedy genre. A pre-occupation with the temporal and discourses of time-panic dominate postfeminist media texts, and, as Diane Negra suggests, this time crisis is, predominantly, feminized (Negra 2009, p. 48). Elsewhere in this thesis, I have argued that masculine culture is not perceived as being 'haunted' by images of ageing singledom in the same way that feminine culture is. However, as I suggested in my analysis of Ted's fear of being 'eaten by cats' in *How I Met Your Mother*, there are moves in these texts towards an ungendering of this archetype. In this section of the chapter, I will focus on images of ageing single masculinity, in order to discuss the potential for the ungendering of the 'spectre of female singlehood' (ibid., p. 50). I look at texts in which the bachelor himself threatens to become a haunted or haunting figure. I am also interested here

in the closely related 'hyped-up rhetorical/ideological formulation' of the 'biological clock' (ibid., p. 48). Although, by its very formulation, the concept of the biological clock is explicitly feminised, I want to examine here the ways in which both socially- and biologically-mapped concepts of time panic are beginning to seep into masculine postfeminist paradigms. From John's realisation in *Wedding Crashers* that 'we're not that young' as a coded statement that it is time to couple off and settle down, to the emergence of the idea of a male biological clock in what have been termed 'older bird' romantic comedies, there is an increasing emphasis in Hollywood cinema on the dangers of being male, ageing and single (Potter 2004, p. 16).

In *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*, the protagonist Connor undergoes a literal haunting by the ghost of his aged playboy uncle, Wayne (Michael Douglas).¹⁰⁷ In a narrative that plays with the plot of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843), on the eve of his brother's wedding, best man and playboy photographer Connor is visited by Wayne, who delivers the following ominous message: 'I'm here to warn you kid, don't waste your life like I did. You don't wanna end up like me'. Through the narrative device of visitations by the ghosts of Connor's failed relationships, the audience gains insight into the character's backstory. It is Connor's uncle Wayne who taught him his bachelor ways, but the character now acts as a warning to Connor that he must correct them. Fittingly, Connor's vehicle to the past is Wayne's bed, monogrammed with his uncle's initials and complete with leather headboard and animal print sheets, a shrine to sexual excess (Fig.

¹⁰⁷ A casting decision that plays with the extra-textual life of the star and the audience's knowledge of his high-profile marriage to a much younger woman (Catherine Zeta-Jones).

5.61). Again, domestic space here is presented as a battleground between masculine and feminine; Connor reminds his family that Uncle Wayne used the family's large stately home as something akin to the Playboy mansion – for 'mind-numbing, clothing-optional, week-long orgies' – and sees its use as a wedding venue as in conflict with its history. His outrage at this transformation (specifically, feminisation) of the space is displayed as he enters Wayne's old bedroom during the film's set-up and begins stripping back the white bows and voile trims and stuffing them into the fireplace (Fig. 5.62).



FIGURE 5.61 –
WAYNE'S BED
AS THE
VEHICLE TO
THE PAST IN
GHOSTS OF
GIRLFRIENDS
PAST

FIGURE 5.62 –
CONNOR
STRIPS THE
FEMININE
FROM WAYNE'S
BEDROOM



Many of the anxieties over single masculinity in *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past* are semantically linked to death and mourning. As Connor publicly eulogises the days when it was acceptable to be single, the flashbacks into his past present his current womanising as his way of mourning for the loss of his first love. This is a very common trend in the romantic sex comedy, acting as character

motivation for the protagonists in *Wedding Daze* (Michael Ian Black, 2006), *Just Go With It* (Dennis Dugan, 2011), and *17 Again*. It is a trope that affirms the 'magical' nature of heterosexual romance: destiny, monogamy and purity. However, it is in yet another scene of mourning that Connor is shown his potential fate if he continues his womanising ways. Again using imagery that taps into the idea of haunting, the 'Ghost of Girlfriends Future' (Olga Maliouk) takes Connor to visit his own funeral, where no-one mourns him but his own brother (who is also single and alone, thanks to Connor's destruction of his wedding, Fig. 5.63). The ghost of Uncle Wayne returns, and warns Connor that this is his future if he continues on the same path. Wayne then pushes Connor into his open grave, and the women that he has bedded pile dirt on top of him (Fig. 5.64). The bachelor is literally buried by the weight of his own womanizing, as the text tries to correct his abject single status.



FIGURE 5.63 –
CONNOR'S
FUNERAL IN
GHOSTS OF
GIRLFRIENDS
PAST

FIGURE 5.64 –
CONNOR'S EX-
LOVERS BURY
THE BACHELOR



Through these lessons, Connor is taught to care, and to finally express his repressed love for Jenny. Once again, the ability to feel and express authentic emotion is key to transformation into an acceptable, marriageable figure of postfeminist masculinity. The life of the ageing bachelor is presented as one of loneliness, despair and social extradition, and the formation of a monogamous heterosexual union is the bachelor's salvation. In *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*, we can clearly see the emergence of a cultural archetype of ageing bachelorhood that begins to move closer towards the equivalence of the maligned status of spinsterhood. As I suggested in the previous chapter, the ungendering of the figure of the sad 'singleton' produces not a figure of acceptable, chosen female singlehood, but rather an emergent formation of male spinsterhood. Within postfeminist culture, ageing and singleness is increasingly presented as abject in relation to both genders. Once again, the romantic sex comedy works to support a media sensibility in which options other than monogamous heterosexual coupling are closed down.

The literal haunting of the bachelor by a figure aligned to male spinsterhood in *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past* is one way in which the anxiety around male singledom is represented in the romantic comedy. The other manifestation of this increasing pathologisation and abjection of extended bachelorhood occurs in another sub-genre of the romantic comedy, what Cherry Potter, writing in *The Guardian* in 2004 dubbed the 'older bird' romance (p. 16). As Potter's labelling suggests (and in a reinforcement my own analysis of the gendered nature of the practice of generic labelling), much work on these

films has focused on the genre's feminine inflections and representations, in particular the centrality of female auteur Nancy Meyers and stars such as Diane Keaton and Meryl Streep.¹⁰⁸ What I am interested in here, however, is the way in which the texts' single male characters are subject to a 'diagnostic gaze' that seeks to correct disordered temporalities of gender, in a manner that has previously characterized postfeminist culture's treatment of abject single women (Negra 2009, p. 61).

As I explored earlier in this thesis, one of the key differentiators between male and female singledom to date has been a fixation on the biological and temporal specificities of female reproductive sexuality. One of the reasons that the spinster has been, and remains, such a potent and haunting cultural image of femininity is because of narratives of the 'biological clock' which see a specific end point to female sexual life and desirability linked to the onset of the menopause and their ability to reproduce. Men, on the other hand, so the flip side of this gendered cultural paradigm tells us, remain virile and fertile throughout their lives.

The introduction of Viagra, the drug to treat erectile dysfunction, is clearly important in this debate. Launched in 1998, its appearance is temporally linked to the corpus of this thesis, and is key to the contextual factors underlying the representations and shifts in the gender paradigm that I am interested in here. On the one hand, the drug makes the myth of lifelong male virility potentially possible, by promising to stop the effects of ageing reaching the penis. On the other hand, the very availability of such a drug

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Tally (2008); Jermyn (2011a; 2011b)

makes visible the condition that it seeks to cure, thus exposing the realities of masculine ageing. Its very existence proves and highlights that male sexuality is fallible, and suffers from the effects of physical ageing.

While Viagra's 'performance-enhancing effects' are a significant reference point within the films discussed here, there is another ominous physical indicator for male ageing that is even more present.¹⁰⁹ Within romantic comedy films that focus upon older characters, there is a recurrent theme of heart difficulties afflicting the male protagonist. I would like to argue here that the heart attack and its pre-indicators, such as high blood pressure, function within these stories as symbols of a male 'biological clock'. Much like the female biological clock, the device of the heart attack is used in 'older bird' romances in order to indicate that there is an appropriate timescale during which men should commit to heterosexual monogamy, and that to try to violate this timescale has dangerous, even life-threatening consequences. In *Something's Gotta Give* (Nancy Meyers, 2003), *Last Chance Harvey* (Joel Hopkins, 2008) and *It's Complicated* (Nancy Meyers, 2009), the male protagonists Harry (Jack Nicholson), Harvey (Dustin Hoffman) and Jake (Alec Baldwin) all suffer from heart attacks brought on, the films suggest, by the excesses of their single lifestyles: their pursuit of commitment-free sex and their inability to look after themselves, and their diets, properly in the absence of a wife.

¹⁰⁹ In *17 Again*, Mike works for pharmaceutical company selling Viagra; Harry (Jack Nicholson) in *Something's Gotta Give* (Nancy Meyers, 2003) takes Viagra in order to sustain his bachelor lifestyle.

Much like within the slacker/striver dichotomy of the romantic comedies that David Denby discusses, all of these men are contrasted with content, capable women, enjoying the freedom of flexible working in artistic occupations: the owner of a bakery in *It's Complicated*, a playwright in *Something's Gotta Give*. Meanwhile, the men are presented as trying to live out an extended youth, bringing the critiques against immature masculinity evidenced in the romantic sex comedy's man-child figures to an older demographic. Having divorced his wife Jane (Meryl Streep) 10 years ago, Jake (Alec Baldwin) in *It's Complicated*, now married to another, much younger, woman (Lake Bell). The couple's attendance at a fertility clinic as they struggle to conceive a child is presented as evidence that their relationship violates the natural order. Therefore, although the promise of male sexual potency is culturally mythologized as extending well into mature adulthood, the film suggests that this is problematic, as Jake cannot impregnate his wife, and, the dialogue that he exchanges with his ex-wife Jane reveals, does not really want to.

In *Something's Gotta Give*, Harry's bachelor exploits are presented as infamous. Eventual love interest Erica (Diane Keaton) and her sister Zoe (Frances McDormand) remember an article in *New York* magazine that referred to him as 'The Escape Artist'.¹¹⁰ This is a reputation that Zoe, a lecturer in Women's Studies at Columbia, takes affront to:

¹¹⁰ Given the context of the work already done in this chapter, the name 'Erica' cannot help but bring to mind the protagonist of *An Unmarried Woman*. Whether this intertextual reference was deliberate or not, it is undeniable that the star persona of Diane Keaton is linked to the time period of the films that Brunsdon discusses, with her breakthrough performance in *Annie Hall* (Woody Allen, 1977) still remaining the defining performance of

[You've] never married, which, as we know, if you were a woman would be a curse, you'd be an old maid, a spinster, blah blah blah. So instead of pitying you, they write articles about you. Celebrate you never marrying. You're elusive, and ungettable – a real catch. There's my gorgeous sister here. Look at her. She is so accomplished. The most successful female playwright since who? Lillian Hellman? She's over 50, divorced and she sits in night after night because the available guys her age want somebody that looks like Marion. So the whole over-50 dating scene is geared towards men, leaving women out. And as a result, the women become more and more productive. And therefore, more and more interesting. Which, in turn, makes them even less desirable because, as we all know, men, especially older men, are threatened and deathly afraid of productive and interesting women. It's just so clear. Single older women as a demographic are about as fucked a group as ever can exist.

The film explicitly comments upon the imbalance that exists within the bachelor/spinster dichotomy: a cultural paradigm that it simultaneously invokes and seeks to undermine. Zoe's rant is designed to 'ring true', echoing the sentiments of feminist scholars such as Diane Negra about the now-familiar trope of the presentation of single womanhood as 'a particularly temporal failure and a drifting off-course from the normative stages of the female life-cycle', with no corresponding abjection perceived in older men in the same position (Negra 2009, p. 61). Zoe's critique presents this gendered paradigm as outdated - much like these men and their attitudes to women. However, rather than rejecting these discourses of temporal appropriateness and the 'mythology of marital superiority' (DePaulo 2006, p. 29) completely, *Something's Gotta Give* instead chooses to make its male protagonist subject to them as well.

her career. In both of these examples, and in Jill Clayburgh's performance in *Bridesmaids* as discussed earlier, films that deal with the renegotiation of gender identities and relationships seem to be working to link these representations to those of what Brunson labeled the 'subjects for the seventies'.

The past-ness of male dominance is a theme common to all of the films in this cycle, from the need for Mel Gibson's advertising company to chase female consumers in *What Women Want* to the electronics store in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* where the men work in low-paid, low-status service jobs managed by a sexually aggressive older woman (Jane Lynch). These films explicitly invoke the ungendering of previously binarised cultural paradigms as something that is currently in process. For example, in *Definitely, Maybe* (Adam Brooks, 2008), ten-year-old Maya (Abigail Breslin) asks her father Will Hayes (Ryan Reynolds) what the 'boy word for slut' is. He replies that, although there isn't one yet, 'I'm sure they're working on it'. Here the inevitable (as it is presented by the postfeminist discourses of Hollywood romantic-comedy) march towards gender equality means that, rather than abandoning sexually derogatory and misogynistic terminology, male equivalents will emerge. Frequently, the older men in the romantic comedy are involved in occupations that are explicitly framed as 'too young' for them, making them seem even more outmoded and residual. Harry, for example, runs the hip-hop music label 'Drive By Records' (*Something's Gotta Give*). Harvey, once a successful composer, now works on advert jingles and complains that television work is 'just sound design, it's not music anymore' (*Last Chance Harvey*). His older, traditional talents have been made redundant by 'computers and the digital', much like the residual form of hegemonic masculinity that many of these older male characters espouse.

Of course, it is not just in their occupations that these characters are presented as being relics of a past patriarchal system, but also within their

relationships with women. Harry's behaviour is presented as a violation of the natural order. It is as he is attempting to engage in sexual activity with Erica's daughter Marin (Amanda Peet) that his first heart attack occurs, causing her to interrupt her orgasmic moans in order to shout 'Mom' and reach for Erica's (age-appropriate) maternal competencies. Furthermore, as the doctor at the hospital examines Harry, he asks him whether he has taken Viagra. Harry denies needing the drug. However, as the doctor explains the serious contraindications between Viagra and the drip that he has just inserted into Harry's arm, extreme close-up shots of the drip, Harry's face and the needle entering his skin are used in order to show the patient's rising panic. The suggestion that he has in fact taken Viagra, and lied about it, is compounded when he rips out the drip and tries to leap free from the bed. Harry is forced to expose himself and his collusion in the myth of male sexual potency. Similarly, in *It's Complicated*, the medicine that Jake is taking (for blood pressure) reduces his ability to produce sperm, which counteracts his attempts to conceive with his wife. Male ageing sexuality in these films is not an image of potency, but one of failure, both in sexual/reproductive terms, and of the man to take up his correct place in the social order. This is particularly affirmed through the way in which Harry is shown to use Viagra to prepare for sex with Marin, but his erection springs up of its own accord as he enters a sexual relationship with her mother Erica. In his acquisition of an age-appropriate partner, Harry can forego medical intervention into sexual intercourse, and make love without the need for Viagra or birth control. Both of these factors are explicitly

commented upon in the dialogue of the sex scene, the text condoning the 'natural' appropriateness of the union.

A heart attack also interrupts Jake in *It's Complicated* as he is about to indulge in extra-martial sex with his ex-wife, and a heart palpitation prevents Harvey in *Last Chance Harvey* from attending his arranged date with Kate (Emma Thompson). In all three cases, heart problems serve as a wake-up call to the protagonist, indicating that his lifestyle has jeopardised his future health and happiness. It is the catalyst that provokes each protagonist to change his ways and to take up his position in an age-appropriate, monogamous heterosexual romance. The heart attack in these films presents an interesting emergent configuration of a male biological clock. The films, while willing, it seems, to tackle the issue of male sexual fallibility by introducing the subject of impotence and/or infertility in coded ways, use the heart attack as their primary method of communicating the unsustainability of single life for these men. It is also significant that Viagra was originally studied for use in the treatment of high blood pressure and angina. Thus, in a way, the heart attack is the perfect configuration of the male biological clock – a short-hand for the link between male ageing and sexual fallibility as well as its obvious connections to lifestyle factors that reflect a lack of 'care' over one's own body.

CONCLUSIONS, ENDINGS, AND BACKLASH

The formations of masculinity expressed within the romantic sex comedy and reiterated not just across the genre but throughout postfeminist popular culture more widely suggest an increasing concern with and anxiety over single masculinities. The repetition of these tropes highlights an intensified focus on gender and temporal propriety previously seen as being a primarily feminised discourse. While these films seek to make their male protagonists 'coupleable', however, there are still clear tensions in relation to the desirability of the end point of heterosexual domesticity.

Most of the films discussed within this chapter have traditional 'happy endings' with the (re)union of the final couple. However, as suggested above, despite a focus on the arrangements of domestic space throughout the narratives, the 'final home' of these relationships is never visualised. Many films do end with actual (*Wedding Crashers*, *The 40 Year-Old-Virgin*) or substitute (*She's Outta My League*) marriage ceremonies, suggesting that this is still an important generic icon of the romantic comedy and ritual of heterosexual coupling more generally. However, the endings of films such as *The Break-Up*, *Crazy, Stupid, Love* and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* are inconclusive, if generally optimistic, about the future of their final couples. Despite the genre's insistence upon coupling, it also projects ambivalence towards it, providing space to mourn what is lost in its protagonists and their youthful excesses. This is extremely visible in a related (and sometimes overlapping) cycle of comedy films that deal with the trauma of

coupling and its impacts upon homosocial relationships: films such as *Old School*, *The Hangover* (Todd Phillips, 2009) and, more recently, *Bridesmaids* (Paul Feig, 2011). *I Love You, Man*, for example, ends with a mock marriage ceremony between Sydney and Peter, as they profess their love for each other (Fig. 5.65). At the very point that the ‘proper’, heterosexual ceremony between Peter and Zooey (Rashida Jones) begins, the camera cranes out and away, and the credits roll (Fig. 5.66). In this scene, though the necessary heterosexual union takes place, it is deliberately and forcefully overshadowed in favour of a celebration of masculine homosociality. As Andrew Britton suggests of Katharine Hepburn/Spencer Tracey films, we might think of the ‘pleasurability’ of the romantic sex comedy as being ‘in direct proportion to the presence of a significant tension between an overall narrative movement towards conservative reassurance and a substantial enactment of real ideological problems and disharmonies’ (2003, p. 177). Attempts by the films’ conclusions to celebrate the heterosexual couple are pleasurable, but, perhaps intentionally, do not fully erase the gendered problems and tensions that arise during the narrative.



FIGURE 5.65 – PETER AND SYDNEY'S
“MARRIAGE” IN *I LOVE YOU, MAN*

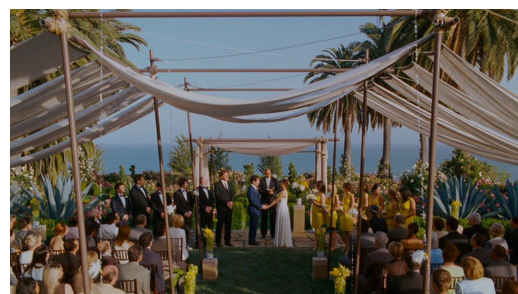


FIGURE 5.66 – THE CAMERA MOVES
AWAY FROM THE WEDDING IN *I
LOVE YOU, MAN*

The romantic sex comedy cycle and its visibility in postfeminist media culture suggests once again an intensifying cultural anxiety over the place of men and masculinity. The genre provides another, repeated, iteration of the necessity of masculine transformation in order for men to become acceptable partners for postfeminist women. The representation of encounters between masculinity and areas previously gendered as feminine such as shopping, homemaking and emotion-work form a key theme of this genre, echoing the emergent discourses of postfeminist masculinity that I identified in lifestyle television and the homebuilding sitcom. Finally, the prominence of formations of masculinity coalescing around life-stages, particularly those of single men who have not yet achieved 'proper' adulthood is a distinctive feature of this cycle, and one that is repeated across the different film and television genres discussed within this thesis. All of these elements, and their reiterations across many different postfeminist media forms, suggest an increasing normalisation of the inclusion of men as postfeminist subjects. The emergent subject positions that men are encouraged to work towards and perform are, of course, different to those prescribed to women, but equally work to a typically postfeminist script of temporal propriety, compulsory heterosexuality, showplace domesticity, and the ability to make the 'correct' life choices.

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