Male Masculinity as the Celebration of Failure:
The Frat Pack, Women, and the Trauma of Victimization in the "Dude Flick"

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In a scene early in *The Break-Up* (2006, dir. Peyton Reed), during an argument about the deterioration of their relationship, Gary (Vince Vaughn) and Brooke (Jennifer Aniston) exchange a heated series of comments over Gary's lack of effort. In a moment of intense anger, Gary lashes out at Brooke, accusing her of constantly "nagging" him:

> Brooke: "You think that I nag you?"
> Gary: "That's all you do. All you do is nag me. The bathroom's a mess, your belt doesn't match. Hey, Gary you should probably go work out. Nothing I ever do is ever good enough. I just want to be left the hell alone."

A moment midway through *Old School* (2003, dir. Todd Phillips), also starring Vaughn, compliments this sequence. Bernard Campbell (Vaughn) hosts a birthday party for his young son around a backyard pool. Bernard's clothing makes the scene unusual: unlike all of his adult friends, who wore outfits typical for thirty-something males, Bernard sits calmly by the pool dressed in clown suit, complete with costume, wig, makeup, red nose, and oversized shoes—all the while smoking a cigarette and drinking from a bottle of beer. Though this startling image seems initially to merely conform to the film's overall project of presenting its protagonists (a group of dissatisfied adult men who start a fraternity) in a series of bizarre and ridiculous situations, it also graphically represents the conventional cinematic man (middle-class, heterosexual, white, early middle-aged) as both ridiculous and even slightly disturbed.

[Image 1: Vaughn in *Old School*]

This image of what would normally be considered highly conventional male masculinity as a humorless clown (indeed, Bernard makes none of the children laugh and instead seems unpredictable and even a little menacing) illustrates the film's tensions and anxieties regarding the appropriate place for men, and also demonstrate how contemporary cinematic discourses of male masculinity frequently become laden with images of resentment, bitterness, and a perceived victimization. The two sequences, though not from the same film, seem indicative of a growing thematic trend in contemporary American cinema. The resentment, anxiety, and perceived victimization these men feel stems from the apparent female evaluation that nothing they do is "ever good enough."

"Dude Flicks"

Increasingly visible since the late 1990s, what I will call "Dude Flicks"—such as these with Vaughn which feature desperate, anxious white men—are nearly always comedies, and construct their humor from the inadequacies and failures of white male masculinity. Susan Jeffords argues, "In the 1990s, externality and spectacle… give way to a presumably more internalized masculine dimension… More film time is devoted to explorations of their ethical dilemmas, emotional traumas, and psychological goals, and less to their skill with weapons, their athletic

abilities, or their gutsy showdowns of opponents" (Jeffords, "Can Masculinity be Terminated?" 245). While Jeffords focuses her analysis on transitional action films such as *Terminator 2* (1991, dir. James Cameron) that still feature "hard body" men, a generic shift seems to have occurred toward the end of the decade in which *comedy* becomes the genre through which the exploration of the "internalized masculine dimension" occurs. Adam Sandler may have pioneered this most recent "movement" with *Happy Gilmore* (1996), though such films have always existed in various forms. Sandler's brand of absurd, deliberately juvenile comedy might not have been the catalyst, but I would argue that it can be considered the contemporary precursor for the later successes of Vaughn, Ben Stiller, Jack Black, Will Ferrell, Owen Wilson, Luke Wilson, and Steve Carell—the group of actors often referred to as "The Frat Pack."[1]

[Image 2: Rogan and Rudd in *Knocked Up*]

Furthermore, the increasingly successful work of producer/director Judd Apatow—which frequently includes many of the "Frat Pack" actors, but also John C. Reilly, Paul Rudd, Michael Cera, Evan Goldberg, Jason Segal, Jonah Hill, and Seth Rogan—also exists as part of the burgeoning trend away from the "hard body" male masculinities of the 1980s, past the more "internalized" conflicts that Jeffords outlines, and into some new thematic territory. Among many others, *Dodgeball* (2004, dir. Rawson Marshall Thurber) with Vaughn, *Meet the Parents* (2000, dir. Jay Roach) with Stiller, *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (dir. Adam McKay) with Ferrell and Reilly, *Wedding Crashers* (2005, dir. David Dobkin) with Owen Wilson, *Old School* (2003, dir. Todd Phillips) with Luke Wilson, *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (2005, dir. Apatow) with Carell, Rudd, and Rogan, and *Superbad* (2007, dir. Greg Mottola) with Goldberg, Hill, Cera, and Segal all seem indicative of this trend toward "Dude Flicks."[2]

The men in these films typically adhere to a very particular set of conventions: they are white, heterosexual, single, and either disinterested in or suspicious of "serious" romantic relationships. The films present such relationships with women as potential sites of trauma to male masculinity. Furthermore, a homosocial community deliberately exclusive of women exists to which these men "escape" from the tensions of relationships with women. Finally, and most crucially, the men *do not* reject characteristics associated with femininity; in fact, they embrace them. The increasingly foregrounded, consistent cinematic presence of this particular image of male masculinity raises a series of questions: why is *this* type of image being given such a prominent narrative position? What is the significance of the ridicule surrounding such depictions? What deeper implications emerge from an analysis of the apparent resentment characterizing the men in these films—what are its root causes, to whom is it directed, and what are its narrative consequences? This "movement" certainly adheres to much of Jeffords' formulation—particularly the "internalization" of masculinity—but how it extends and alters it represents a site of needed analysis.

Finally, I want to situate the following within a context that acknowledges the gains made by the Civil Rights movement, feminism, queer culture, and the increasing cultural acceptance of "diversity." "Gender and racial equality often feel like a loss to white men," argues Michael Kimmel. "If 'they' gain, 'we' lose. Even if white American men have lost exceptionally little… men seem to also believe that their control is eroding, their grip on power loosening." Kimmel calls this a form of "wind chill" psychology, suggesting that "it doesn't really matter what the

actual temperature is; what matters is what it feels like" (Kimmel, *Manhood in America* 218). What it feels like to these men, as I hope to illustrate, is *victimization*. Jeffords, in her analysis of early 1990s action films, poses a question that remains extremely useful: "It is, most directly and insistently, the question of whether and how masculinity can be reproduced successfully in a post-Vietnam, post-Civil Rights, and post-women's movement era" (Jeffords, "Can Masculinity be Terminated?" 247). Indeed, this may be the overarching guiding question behind this examination: how do these films depict and define male masculinity in the context of these various "posts"?

While I do not want to suggest that any given text (including Vaughn's films) presents essential, inherent meanings, they do operate as an apparatus through which the changes in male masculinity—and its frequent partners patriarchy and heteronormativity—occur.[3] These films, then, seem to be ideal representatives of a much larger cinematic moment in which "dudes" have seized a very significant theatrical market share despite the simultaneous increase in cultural criticism of their hegemonic status.

"Always Judging"

[Image 3: Vaughn in *Old School*]

A scene at the beginning of *Old School* encapsulates such male fears of inadequacy and illustrates the apparent narrative need for escape. Bernard Campbell (Vaughn) stands in a line with three other men, all grooms at friend Frank's (Will Ferrell) wedding. Bernard, looking out at his wife and children in the crowd, whispers to the other men: "There's my wife. Always smiling, judging, look at the baby. You only get one vagina for the rest of your life." Thus, less than ten minutes into the film, men position women as the bearers of several simultaneous threats: first, they are "always judging" under an apparently superficial, illusory mask of "happiness." Second, they represent the power to limit male sexual freedom—embodied by the infant that visually represents the apparently inevitable result of the "one vagina" of marriage. Furthermore, the scene literally divides men from women, emphasizing the safe, supportive, and homosocial world of Frank's male friends in binary opposition to the judgmental world of women. Here, as throughout these films, irrational judgments against men represent women's predominant characteristic. These men, in their efforts to achieve successful manhood, must overcome what they perceive to be the unfair and irrational treatment they receive from women. Ultimately, what is "always being judged" is typically left unclear—a structure foregrounding the apparent traumatization of men. The solution, made clear by the conclusion of these films, is the containment of women, which prevents the judgment from halting men's journeys into "successful" manhood.

Working through a variety of mechanisms, this exclusion of what exactly is being judged serves three purposes: (1) it maintains the illusion of the dominance and superiority (as well as cultural necessity) of male masculinity; (2) it silences any potential queer interrogation that might disrupt hegemonic and heteronormative notions of gender inherency; (3) it prevents those persons who do not conform to the (changing) standards of hegemonic masculinity from confronting systems of inequality. Women, however, occupy a particularly salient position in these films as those who must be feared, excluded, and contained, thus recuperating masculinity as part of "manhood." This containment can take various forms. Sexual acquisition, diminishment,

outright exclusion, and gender suspicion may be a few of these mechanisms, but the goal is always the same: bolstering male "worth" in an environment of perceived failure.

Such notions invoke Judith Butler's concept of "regulatory norms," which borrows from Michel Foucault's "regulatory ideals." "'Sex' is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time," Butler argues. "It is not a simple or static fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms" (Butler 1-2).[4] In these films, such norms identify and enforce differences between masculinity and femininity and, more specifically, attach those terms to male and female bodies—even when obvious contradictions exist. The desperation in this attempt, however, merely reveals the performative and constructed nature of such a process and opens contradictory spaces in which to observe gender disruption. Nevertheless, the goal of this process (tenuous and unsuccessful as it may be) is to define "ideal" masculinity, link that definition to male bodies, and position women (regardless of their gendered characteristics) as subordinate to men.

This process adheres to what Arthur Brittan calls "masculinism," which he claims is "the ideology that justifies and naturalizes male domination. As such, it is the ideology of patriarchy. Masculinism takes it for granted that there is a fundamental difference between men and women, [and] it assumes that heterosexuality is normal… In general, masculinism gives primacy to the belief that gender is not negotiable" (Brittan 53). The result, though ostensibly "successful," actually reveals the ways in which such definitions of contemporary masculinity fail in their project of stabilizing gendered binary oppositions—most obviously through their very necessity to exist. After all, if gender were truly "not negotiable," there would not be any cultural negotiation. As Butler argues, "That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled" (Butler 2). Finally, then, much as with the "hard body" films of the 1980s, the constant need to demonstrate masculinity to prove manhood eventually seems only to prove its illusory status, and, in fact, to undo its original goal.[5]

The Dugout

In his analysis of teen comedies, David Greven notes "the domains of male friendship, color-coordinated and organized by coherent heterosexual desire (however problematic to male unity), buttresses the boys from all outside threat" (Greven 15). Indeed, these films, populated by groups of men bound first and foremost by friendship, present narratives bent on maintaining a division between men and women. The fear is that women may invade the "boys' club" at their center. I want to distinguish this from traditional notions that the exclusion hinges on femininity. *Male* femininity not only frequently receives support from the other men; it is appropriated from women as part of the exclusion process. Examples of such deliberate "feminization" litter these films. For example, in *Meet the Parents*, Gaylord (Stiller) works as a nurse; Chazz (Ferrell) performs as an ice skater in *Blades of Glory* (2007, dir. Josh Gordon and Will Speck); and Andy's (Carell) status as a virgin makes up the plot in *The 40 Year Old Virgin.* These examples reflect a deliberate move *away* from more conventional male masculinities in an effort to establish new ground for contemporary men, but the process does not occur in coalition with women or alongside other heteronormative and patriarchal disruptions. The "dugout" might best

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

Yet the men's sexual desire for the excluded women presents a paradox resolved, again, by the safety of their homosocial community. Greven notes: "The drive to seek out and achieve heterosexual intercourse looms as [the men's] primary quest-objective. In fact, male friendship seems to be the dugout where the boys catch their breath during the game of heterosexual conquest" (Greven 16). Arguments can and have been made that more than just breath-catching is happening in those dugouts, but in this essay I will limit the discussion of the homosocial to its exclusionary function in the exaltation of male autonomy.[6] Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the insistence on heterosexual desire in films so otherwise concerned with ensuring the *absence* of women can be explained through sexual displacement: the men reassure themselves of their own heterosexuality in those moments when the narrative becomes homoerotic. For example, in *Pineapple Express* (2008, dir. David Gordon Green) Dale (Rogan) and Saul (James Franco) "break up" after an argument. Later, after Saul begins to cry about missing his friend, the narrative quickly cuts to Dale calling an ex-girlfriend, thus reestablishing his heterosexuality. The later reconciliation of the two men (which includes Dale, in his underwear, carrying an unconscious Saul out of a burning building in slow motion) can be seen in a completely safe (indeed, even humorous) context. Such narrative wrangling is common throughout the films, which seem to include women for just such reassurance. The guarantee, ultimately, is a space in which blatantly homoerotic play can occur without any real threat of homosexuality—which also acts as another form of female exclusion.

The apparent double-bind in which these men situate themselves (they sexually desire the same women they must exclude) creates the potential for the loss of male autonomy that might occur were these men to cede some authority to the women in the construction of equal relationships. The answer resides in the foregrounding of various forms of male "victimization" that can then only be overcome through the exclusion of the women on whom the narrative assigns blame. Tim Edwards suggests that "masculinity is at once everywhere yet nowhere, known and yet unknowable, had and yet un-*have*-able [*sic*]" (Edwards 1). Thus the containment through exclusion can be seen as part of a process to "have" masculinity.

[Image 4: Hill and Cera in Superbad]

The "dugout" described by Greven, though ubiquitous, takes different forms in these films. For example, *Anchorman* (2004, dir. Adam McKay) features the invasion of a 1970s newsroom resembling a fraternity by an ambitious female anchorwoman; *Wedding Crashers* presents two men who troll wedding receptions for sex while operating a divorce mediation business together; and *Knocked Up* (2007, dir. Apatow) foregrounds a house shared by a group of young men primarily interested in smoking marijuana and fantasizing about women. Generally, it seems imperative that these men maintain a males-only space in which to find sanctuary from the surrounding "judging" women. Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman suggest that "doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological. Once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the 'essentialness' of gender" (West and Zimmerman 137). Thus the very

presence of the spaces/groups in the films eventually justifies their existence, a pattern strengthening the sex divisions within the narratives—leading to Brittan's "non-negotiable" formulation of gender in which the masculinity attached to male bodies becomes "natural."

Yet I do not wish to imply the *total* exclusion of women from these narratives. The "safety" of the homosocial spaces exists precisely because it does not allow women inside—but they must narratively exist to make that safety viable. Here, my argument incorporates a portion, but not all, of Robert Walser's concept of "exscription," which he defines as the "total denial of gender anxieties through the articulation of fantastic worlds without women" (Walser 110). Vaughn's films do not create narrative worlds "without women," nor do they successfully achieve "total denial of gender anxieties," yet I still find the concept of "exscription" to be very useful in understanding how these narratives deliberately construct women in either extremely limited fashion or as large but ultimately narratively insignificant players—but, in either case, women do not seem to exist except to further men's journeys toward successful "manhood." I now wish to turn to *Dodgeball* for a more specific analysis of these elements.

Dodgeball

[Image 5: The clubhouse in *Dodgeball*]

Dodgeball exemplifies this type of contemporary narrative in its construction of male "victimization," a process identifiable (with variations) throughout "Dude Flicks." Peter La Fleur (Vaughn) owns and operates "Average Joe's," a neighborhood gym in direct competition with corporate competitor "GloboGym." When White Goodman (Ben Stiller), the owner of the corporate behemoth GloboGym, tries to buy out Average Joe's, Peter forms a competitive dodgeball team in the hopes of winning a national tournament to pay his back taxes and retain ownership. Initially, only men play for the team (Average Joe's has only male members), but eventually, when the men display little talent for the game, Peter allows bank lawyer Kate Veatch (Christine Taylor) to join the team. As the film progresses, Kate becomes an integral part of the team and second in skill only to Peter. Ultimately, the team beats GloboGym in the championship game and Peter maintains ownership of Average Joe's.

Dodgeball engages in a deeply regressive set of consistent discourses in its continual attempts to define masculinity as something inherent in and only appropriate for men. "Whatever the variations by race, class, age, ethnicity, or sexual orientation," Michael Kimmel argues, "being a man means 'not being like a woman.' This notion of anti-femininity lies at the heart of contemporary and historical conceptions of manhood, so that masculinity is defined more by what one is not rather than who one is" (Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia" 273). In keeping with this description, the Average Joe's team is made up of a variety of men—and, at least initially, no women: Dwight, a middle-aged black man (Chris Williams); Gordon, an older white man (Stephen Root); Justin, a younger white man (Justin Long); Owen, a spaced-out white man (Joel David Moore); and, most bizarrely, Steve, a white man who lives his life as a pirate (Alan Tudyk). Peter, as owner of the gym, is the ultimate "Average Joe" and, not surprisingly, the team leader. Yet, despite their foregrounded positions as team members, these men receive very little substantial narrative time to independently establish their masculinity. Instead, subplots involving their relationships with women dominate the film, and that structure ultimately reveals the film to be less about men competing with each other for ownership of the

gym (the film's overt plot) and more about them overcoming the threat embodied by women—all of which eventually allows for the standard narrative in which the journey to "successful" manhood must occur through an escape from victimization.

While *Dodgeball* overtly codes this victimization as the result of the loss of "manhood" that will occur through GloboGym's attempted takeover of Average Joe's, *women* actually present the real threat. As such, the film's primary narrative problem is not the acquisition of the money necessary to retain ownership of the gym, but rather the containment of the women whose increasing control over the lives of the men has been displaced into the potential loss of the gym, that "safe" space in which they find homosocial freedom. Gordon, a late-middle-aged man, slightly overweight, bespectacled, and coded as a "nerd" through his clothing, mannerisms, and interests (for example, he reads a magazine called *Obscure Sports Quarterly*), might represent the prototypical "Average Joe": he is not conventionally attractive, physically fit, or wealthy. Furthermore, Gordon is not particularly aggressive—and, in fact, initially remains quite passive even during the competitions.

The film makes an explicit connection between Gordon's passivity and his lack of "manhood" during a training session when the team's coach, Patches O'Houlihan (Rip Torn), throws the ball directly at Gordon's genitals and screams at him: "You gotta get angry!" All of these elements converge opposite the presentation of Gordon's wife, an Asian woman Gordon says he found "through one of those Internet mail-order things" and who seems openly to detest him. At each of the matches, his four small children from a previous marriage, whom Gordon showers with affection, surround her. Yet he tells his teammates that he hates when his wife "watches." Just as with Bernard in *Old School*, women are coded here as judges who continually look with derision on their failed men. Gordon, passive, ineffectual, and weak, begins the film in a state of castrated masculinity, most obviously evidenced by both the presence of his glaring wife and O'Houlihan's deliberate demarcation of his groin—that symbolic site of his loss of phallic authority. The solution, "getting angry," may ostensibly be a prescription for success on the dodgeball court, but he must defeat his wife for the restoration of his authority.

Initially, then, Gordon presents an image far removed from traditionally "strong" masculinity. Joan Mellen argues "the more a man possesses those qualities deemed feminine—such as intuition, tenderness, and affection for children—the less secure our films make him feel about his identity as a male" (Mellen 7). In fact, as *Dodgeball* progresses, it makes no effort to *recuperate* the presence of women; rather, it continually moves away from them in an effort to mark Gordon's "femininity" in more conventionally male terms. This process reaches its climax when he finally "gets angry," which occurs when the team needs him most—again linking the athletic competition to the need for the men to regain a sense of authority. After looking up in the stands and seeing his wife openly flirting with another man, Gordon enters a state of rage, dominating the remainder of the game and achieving victory for the team. Here, the earlier admonition to "get angry," combined with the deliberate identification of Gordon's phallic weakness, becomes literalized as he substitutes the males on the other team for the man in the stands in whom his wife has suddenly found interest. It is no real surprise, then, that at the conclusion of the scene, when she looks upon Gordon with newfound respect and admiration, she tells him that, "I always knew you could do it." Gordon's subsequent expression is not

forgiveness, acceptance, or even suspicion, but contempt. Rather, he immediately requests a divorce.

Thus, "proving" his dominance *on* the court also reestablishes it *off* the court in his marriage. The tournament simply narrates the conflict between the men and women and creates a mechanism through which the men can "find" their lost authority. The final shot in this sequence is of Gordon, standing with his two children, making an "L" shape on his forehead with his fingers—the sign for "loser"—at his wife, opposite him and isolated in the frame. This visual construction makes obvious the "winner" and the "loser": Gordon has unquestionably regained his patriarchal authority by eliminating hers. His *success*, it seems, depends upon her *failure*.

Thus, as it will be with the other women in the film, "it is… often the case that female characters often merely function as narrative foils for the male melodramas to unfold" (Bainbridge and Yates 306). Gordon overcomes the "trauma" of the threatening wife and relinquishes his status as a victim by reestablishing gendered boundaries and containing his wife's desires and behavior. The victory on the court becomes secondary and in fact works only to visualize this more important success. Furthermore, despite her small role, Gordon's wife's narrative ends in a truly marginalized position where she is entirely abandoned even from negative stereotypes. In their discussion of how men's appropriation of children from women when more traditional means (the workplace, athletic endeavors, etc.) no longer work recuperates cinematic masculinity, Amy Aronson and Kimmel, in a variation on "exscription," note that "writing men in can mean writing women out" (Aronson and Kimmel 46). Gordon's status as a victim—evidenced by a failed first marriage, his inability to impress his second "purchased" wife, and his failure to escape her "judging" gaze—is here, as she disappears from the film, "written out."[7]

The portrayal of Justin, the youngest member of the group, further expands the boundaries of "conventional" masculinity. Specifically, Justin wants to make his high school cheerleading team. He works out at Average Joe's in an effort to build his body to be more in line with the men already on the team and to impress Amber (Julie Gonzalo), one of the high-profile cheerleaders. During a tryout, Justin must hoist Martha Johnstone (Lori Beth Denberg), an obese woman, over his head during one of the cheers. Her subsequent fall onto him ensures his failure to make the team as well as to make him the object of ridicule for the observers. At the film's conclusion, when the cheerleading team happens to be in the same city as the final dodgeball tournament, Justin must step in for another injured cheerleader and help the squad to victory thereby earning him the love and admiration of Amber.

While, as with Gordon, the narrative constructs the potential loss of Average Joe's as the structural problem Justin must overcome to recuperate his masculinity, to find successful "manhood" he must defeat the actions and judgments of women. First, Martha's fall onto Justin during the tryouts thwarts his attempt to make the team. However, the film does not just place the blame for this failure onto the body of a woman; it exaggerates and emphasizes the size and awkwardness of that body and makes it *literally* fall on top of Justin. Following the work of Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, who argues that the bodies of "unruly" women can momentarily "unsettle" gender norms, there seems to be potential space in this scene for a reading of Martha's disruption of typical patriarchal norms through her presence at the cheerleading tryouts (Karlyn 19). Yet this reading is abruptly denied. Though the film gives Martha a name (unlike Gordon's

wife), it does not present any other details, revisit her in any subplot, or humanize her in any way. Naming Martha, I would argue, merely personalizes the target responsible for exposing Justin's "failure" of masculinity. Narratively, she exists solely to humiliate Justin by revealing his apparent weakness, and her exaggerated size merely acts as a visualization of the metaphor of women literally bearing down on the men of the film. Of course, this humiliation works both ways: Justin's humiliated state only works because of the outright contempt the film has for Martha, who disappears after this scene. Justin, like the other men in the film, must progress forward from this state of victimization to find "successful" manhood.

[Image 6: Justin and Martha in *Dodgeball*]

While Martha falls on top of Justin, Amber and the other cheerleaders make the decision not to permit Justin's inclusion on the squad. Once again, women are "always judging" the failed masculinity of the men who can seem to do no right; here, the film literalizes that judgment process. As the film progresses and spends extended time with the men in the "boy's club" training for the dodgeball tournament, the characteristics of Justin's failed masculinity become increasingly dismissed in favor of images of positive growth, such as athletic prowess, exaggerated confidence (especially toward women), and a tendency to identify and confront male rivals. This is particularly evident when cheerleader Derek (Trever O'Brien) cannot participate in the national competition, and Amber begs Justin to take his place. Here, the very woman who deemed him insufficiently masculine now requires his help. Thus, the "castration" of Justin through the literally crushing force of excessive woman-ness has been relocated onto the body of his rival, allowing Justin to step in as a hero and earn Amber's love and respect. In a reversal from Gordon's narrative conclusion, the "judging woman" is not contained through *exclusion* but *acquisition*: Justin not only erases the original judgment against him, but also "wins" Amber away from Derek, which seems more the purpose of Justin's interest in the cheerleading team in the first place.[8]

Ultimately, the subplots involving Gordon and Justin merely reinforce Peter's interaction with Kate, the film's primary narrative. If Peter cannot pay the back taxes, the bank (represented by Kate) will seize the gym and sell it to White. Here, then, it is Kate who establishes Peter's manhood, and her position of authority must be contained if Peter is to acquire the type of patriarchal dominance that will restore the "appropriate" narrative order. Indeed, the film introduces Peter by showing him asleep on a couch in a dirty home, surrounded by empty beer cans, followed by the Average Joe's members having to push his broken car to work. Furthermore, the film repeatedly cuts to a sign in the gym reading "Failure IS an option," and early in the narrative, he tells Kate his personal philosophy: "No goals, no disappointments." Much as with Gordon and Justin, the narrative displaces a woman's judgmental threat into the battle to save the gym where the homosocial exclusion of women can establish manhood. Peter's efforts involve the "acquisition" seen with Justin and a variation on the "diminishment" seen with Gordon.

Peter's attempts to "acquire" Kate begin in their first meeting. As she enters his office, he tries to verbally demonstrate his masculine superiority through sexualization and control: "What kind of law are you in, pretty eyes?" Her response, that she was in sexual harassment law before bank law, does not deter his attempts to "win" her and adds yet another layer to his victimized status

as even his attempts at flattery are judged. In this construct of Kate as arbiter, not only of Peter's finances but also his conduct, the narrative sets up a scenario in which she becomes the roadblock to Peter's success; in other words, the bank is really just a symbol of the castration threat posed by Kate that can accept the displaced fears and tensions regarding Peter's failure to mature into adulthood; indeed, no physical bank is ever seen, and no other bank representatives appear. Christine Holmlund, working from Karen Horney, argues, "Men oppress women because they dread them. They then try to excuse this societal oppression by making the woman the guilty party: 'The man strives to rid himself of this dread of women by objectifying it'" (Holmlund 36). *Dodgeball,* by thwarting Peter's attempts at acquisition through Kate's status as a former sexual harassment attorney, adheres to this formula. Along with Kate's position as bearer of "the law," she is also established as the judge of Peter's inappropriate sexual behavior. Thus, his "successful" masculinity depends upon containing her threatening status.

The attempts to seduce Kate, when seen through this lens of containment, take on a subtextual lack of sincerity. Kate's intervention into the "boy's club" threatened Peter's masculinity, and in this opening sequence he seems most concerned with recuperating that masculinity. Peter's real motivation echoes Mellen's observation that "Male sexuality, it is feared, might shrivel away to nothing were there a strong instead of a passive… female partner on screen" (Mellen 17). Despite Kate's hierarchical position as an authority figure, Peter's attempts at seduction work to chip away at her dominance and restore the "natural" heteronormative and patriarchal order in which men dominate women. In other words, if his subordinated position as the target of her financial examination places him in a conventionally feminized position, his attempted seduction can be seen less as a real romantic interest in her (indeed, Kate continually refuses his advances) and more about the narrative's avoidance of a genuine interrogation of traditional gender roles.

Diminishment occurs only after it becomes clear that Peter cannot acquire her through sexual or romantic means. After attending one of the team's practices, Kate realizes the men are woefully inadequate and face potentially humiliating defeat in the dodgeball tournament. After her demonstration of athletic skill (acquired through her years playing softball), Peter accepts her on the team. While this narrative maneuver opens an interrogative space that questions inherent male athleticism, that same space also reveals that Kate's inclusion on the team actually *excludes* her from equal standing with the men because it allows Peter to demonstrate his superiority over her through bodily displays. Furthermore, it allows the narrative to question her sexuality, which directly counters her status as an authority figure and her refusal to be acquired by Peter.

Athleticism itself represents the first means of Kate's diminishment, which is somewhat ironic given her ostensible display of prowess. Yet the film immediately codes this display as *different* from the men by having Kate throw the ball underhand, thus engaging the discourse of the way "throwing like a girl" represents a marker of femininity that separates men from women. This allows the men on the team (who have displayed no real aptitude for the game) to prove their "superiority" over the very symbol of the threat against them. This exclusion-through-inclusion allows Peter to reverse Kate's judgments against him by de-emphasizing her masculine attributes and foregrounding her female body. Michael Messner argues "the institution of sport historically constructs hegemonic masculinity as *bodily superiority* [*sic*] over femininity and over nonathletic masculinities" (Messner 20). I would extend Messner's argument to suggest that, in *Dodgeball*, the inclusion of the athletic female body allows for the silencing of the male femininity that

could be classified as "nonathletic masculinity." Peter's masculinity, at risk in Kate's judgments of his finances and his behavior, finds recuperation through this bodily exclusion and containment.

The second means of diminishment by which the narrative contains Kate's threatening status is the suspicion regarding her sexuality. From the moment Kate joins the team, the other men voice their suspicions that she is a lesbian, most notably Patches, who continually connects this suspicion to her athletic skill. Messner notes "sports are something that *men* do. Women do not do sports. And when it turns out that some women *do* [*sic*] do sports, well, then they are not real women" (Messner 108). "Real women," this logic suggests, are not lesbians. With this questioning of her sexuality the narrative completes its exclusion and containment of Kate: when containment through sexual acquisition fails, the film pushes her into the impossible paradox of athleticism. Her participation in sports negates her status as a "real woman" even as it *emphasizes* her status as female, as well as calling her very sexuality into question. Only Peter refuses to participate in the skepticism regarding Kate's sexuality; in fact, he defends her heterosexuality to the other men whenever the subject is raised, a further indication of his efforts to "acquire" her. Yet, Kate does turn out to be a lesbian—at least momentarily. In the film's conclusion, after the Average Joe's team has defeated GloboGym, Kate's "girlfriend" Joyce (Scarlett Chorvat) comes down from the bleachers and gives Kate a long, passionate kiss in front of a baffled Peter. Yet, in a startling moment of male fantasy, Kate turns back to Peter, announces that she is "bisexual" and gives *him* a long passionate kiss as the film ends.

[Image 7: Kate and her "girlfriend" in *Dodgeball*]

Dodgeball, much like these films more generally, engages in a great deal of contradiction: Kate is ridiculed for being a "lesbian" even as she is prevented from being one; she is praised for her athletic skill as she is limited in its display; and her position of authority is finally made useless when the team's financial spoils erase the need for her audit. "The struggles of the female protagonist seem only to reinforce her passivity and secure her ultimate failure," argues Yvonne Tasker. "Disruptive narrative or representational elements exist, within such a critical view, as little more than precursors to their ultimate hegemonic incorporation" (Tasker 139). This "hegemonic incorporation" might be another way of describing the phenomenon that I have outlined in these types of films: "successful" manhood defines itself through a process of containing the threats women pose. Indeed, in the film's final scene, a television commercial for Average Joe's, Peter states what might be the ideological message of not just this film, but the entire movement: "You're perfect just the way you are. But if you want to make a few changes, Joe's is the place for you." It seems clear that the changes to which Peter refers have nothing to do with the *men* his message is intended for (they are "perfect," after all); as demonstrated with Kate, the changes involve learning how to contain judgmental women. "Joe's," then, might be more appropriately considered a *metaphorical* place where all the men in this film movement can find security.

In his examination of the development of the male psyche, Chris Blazina argues that the failure of men to achieve the goals of a culturally-sanctioned masculinity frequently leads to a fear of all those characteristics that reside on an opposite binary, gathered under the broad term "feminine." He notes further that these characteristics then become "confused or misassociated with the fear

of actual women" (Blazina 1). Thus, men engaged in a cycle of failed (indeed, impossible) attempts to achieve "successful" masculinity become inextricably tied to the potential threat women represent. He goes on to argue that the convergence of the fears of the feminine and of actual women lead to a sense of male security:

> By symbolically associating the fear of feminine characteristics with the fear of actual women, (e.g., mother, wife), men have made the deeper intrapsychic trepidations of masculine failure and potential paternal rejection more tangible, manageable, and avoidable. Men may assume that through distancing themselves from actual women or characteristics of women, they have effectively achieved the masculine ideal, throwing off a need for object relations and allowing the deeper intrapsychic conflicts to rest— temporarily. (Blazina 6)

This configuration matches the desired goal of the homosocial exclusion of women in these films: in the (ultimately successful) efforts to "distance themselves," these men believe they have confronted the judgmental forces embodied by the women who have apparently limited their success as men.

Male Wounds

Despite the evidence for successful containment in these films, spaces of disruption and contradiction nevertheless exist. Indeed, the incessant emphasis on "proving" male masculinity reveals the cracks in its façade. These fissures, as Greven argues, even frequently create *sympathy* for transgression (Greven 14). The very need for these narratives to focus so obsessively on containment can thus be seen as evidence for a dramatic cultural increase in the interrogation of patriarchy as a viable social solution. The continuous effort put into the homosocial exclusion of women offers potential for this type of "reverse" analysis, in which the need to perform the exclusion means the women in these films *really do represent a threat* just not the same threat as the men have constructed. Ultimately, that threat might be maturity: these men, unwilling to "grow up," see women as representative of a world in which "fun" can no longer be had whenever and however men want.

 [Image 8: Lance Armstrong in *Dodgeball*]

This notion of loss resonates with the victimization that the men in these films feel. The narratives might deal superficially with improbable and convoluted plotlines (dodgeball tournaments, for example), but their real subject matter remains the psychic wounds men experience from the actions and even the presence of women. The consistent phallic obsession in these films literalizes this motif most graphically. For example, *Dodgeball* offers Lance Armstrong in its conclusion, playing himself, to give Peter a "pep talk." Armstrong, a cancer survivor, had one of his testicles removed which makes this motivational speech about much more than the overt symbolization of Armstrong's athletic success; it is also about his literal state of castration. This is further reflected in the film's tagline: "Grab Life by the Ball." The wound to the male body becomes represented in the primary biological difference between men and women: the penis.

Apatow's films further foreground such imagery: Seth, in *Superbad*, obsessively draws pictures of penises; an extended sequence in *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (2007, dir. Jake Kasdan) features a roomful of naked men; Sarah (Kristen Bell), in another prototypical "judgment" moment, breaks up with Peter (Segel) while he is completely nude in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008, dir. Nicholas Stoller). In fact, Apatow has stated that "America fears the penis," and that "I'm gonna get a penis in every movie I do from now on" (WENN). This desire to reestablish the penis, when seen alongside the failed masculinity of the men populating Apatow's films, seems much less about "helping" America get beyond its unfamiliarity with cinematic male bodies than it seems about reasserting the phallic dominance of the men in perhaps the last way possible.

This construction links the films back to the "hard body" era, suggesting that the goal of patriarchal reassertion remains the same. In his analysis of the *Rambo* films, William Warner argues that the action film's appeal "depends upon subjecting hero and audience to a certain masochistic scenario—the pleasure of intensely felt pain, and crippling incapacity, as it is written into the action, and onto the body of the hero" (Warner 673). The men in "Dude Flicks" may not engage in the same sort of "action" as Warner examines, but the results remain the same: audiences watch as these men overcome the "crippling incapacity" of surviving in a culture which no longer seems to appreciate or approve of their status as "men."[9] These narratives repeatedly construct scenarios in which men initially cannot "prove" themselves, yet eventually find ways to redefine failure as "success." However, even in these conclusions these men retain elements of anxiety—as if the vulnerability lurks around every corner.

Yet these films do not blame such vulnerability on a vague or neutral force; rather, they assign it quite forcefully to women. This reveals a complicated disassociation and projection process occurring in these films, in which *women* take the blame for the negative aspects of the same feminine traits that are accepted in the men. "The fear of stereotyped feminine characteristics may at times be symbolically linked with the fear of real women," writes Chris Blazina, who goes on to suggest that men who fail to "live up" to the impossible standards of masculinity may displace the resulting anxiety onto the bodies of women (Blazina 56). The result, as these films make continually clear, is a need to connect the containment of those women to the potential for a successful "manhood." In other words, as Silverman notes, "conventional masculinity can best be understood as the denial of castration" (Silverman 46). Ultimately, that denial happens most efficiently and successfully when employed against the women who threaten to make it most visible, and it is often literalized with the presence of the penis alongside the judging women.

"Successful" manhood in these films, then, is much less about achieving a quest, denying femininity, overcoming obstacles, or becoming a hero than it is about finding escape routes and places where white male masculinity can recuperate and celebrate its insecurities and failures without incessant female judgment and evaluation. This adherence to narrative conclusions in which the men find "success" suggests that, underneath the overt plotlines detailing men's "crises" of where and how to fit within a culture that no longer accepts them, the standard cinematic fantasy still exists in which men regain lost power and authority. Arthur Brittan argues that "what has changed is not male power as such, but its form, its presentation, its packaging. In other words, while it is apparent that styles of masculinity may alter in relatively short time spans, the substance of male power does not" (Brittan 52). The incessant

victimization, the anxiety toward outside threats, and the "never good enough" responses to judgmental women in these films might represent the "packaging" of contemporary male masculinity—but the "successful" narrative conclusions merely point out the familiar and predictable patriarchal goals.

The historical consistency and predictability of the restoration of patriarchy thus finally and firmly situates the meaning of "successful" manhood in these films with the long, ongoing effort of filmic male masculinity to regain cultural ground perceived to be lost. This latest iteration—comedic men foregrounding their apparent status as unfairly judged victims of irrational, angry, female evaluators—does not even necessarily represent a completely new image of male masculinity. Certainly such themes appear throughout film history, particularly in the films of the 1970s featuring isolated, vulnerable, and "wounded" male protagonists. Nevertheless, while these earlier films offered somewhat grim, "realistic" approaches to failed and "wounded" men, the "Dude Flicks" narrate primarily through exaggerated, often absurd humor. Andrew Ross argues, "Men… must constantly update and modernize their profile if male dominance… is to be maintained" (Ross 171). While the humor might be an example of "updating the profile," the goal remains the same: justifying the restoration of highly traditional patriarchal authority.

Conclusion

When seen in the larger context of the goal of restoring patriarchy, the "packaging" of successful male masculinity in these films can take various routes into potentially transgressive and progressive moments without ever really altering its most important objective. Ross suggests that "the reason why patriarchy remains so powerful is due less to its entrenched traditions than to its versatile capacity to shape-change and morph the contours of masculinity to fit with shifts in the social climate; in this it [bears]… a hunger to seize the present and dictate the future" (Ross 172). While it has not been the project of this essay to examine and understand the "social climate" in which these films have been released, their content can nonetheless be seen as exemplifying the "shape-changing" that Ross describes. The vulnerable, victimized male masculinity in these narratives represents less of an "accurate" portrayal of contemporary men than the latest constructed amalgamation designed to elicit cultural support in an era when white male authority finds itself unable to maintain uninterrogated dominance.

[Image 9: Rogan and Franco in *Pineapple Express*]

Ultimately, what characterizes "successful" manhood in these films might be their capacity to avoid the discussion almost entirely. The narratives spend the vast majority of their time establishing their primary male characters as "victims" through their failures, weaknesses, vulnerabilities, inabilities, and incapacities. Confusion, resentment, anger, and anxiety perhaps best define them. Yet, in the end, after having contained the threats posed by women, these men still emerge victorious: loved, appreciated, respected, in control of themselves and their surroundings, and trusted by the other characters. But this apparent maturity occurs *according to their terms*. They dictate the rules, the methods, and the parameters. In effect, they rig the game. I want to conclude by suggesting that these endings, rather than illustrating the "success" these men find, merely *reinforce* their weakness and vulnerability. Thus the endings feel like desperate attempts to visualize the fantasy of white male security in narratives otherwise

obsessively filled with images of instability and disappointment. Perhaps the "Dude Flicks" stand, ultimately, as portraits of the latest cinematic version of "successful" manhood: the celebration of failure.

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Notes

[1] "The Slacker Pack" is the name coined by *Entertainment Weekly* for this group of actors who frequently appear together. The term was later altered in a *USA Today* profile of Vaughn and Owen Wilson. The name refers to both Frank Sinatra's "Rat Pack" of the 1950s and to the film *Old School*, with its fraternity storyline. See: Wloszczyna, Susan. "Wilson and Vaughn: Leaders of the 'Frat Pack'." *USA Today*. 15 June 2004. 1 March 2008 <http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2004-06-15-frat-pack_x.htm>.

[2] Tim Havens makes a similar argument in his essay on "Guy-Coms," which he calls the domestic situation comedy on television at the end of the 1990s. While his argument centers on negotiating the difficulties of family life, I do think his core thesis that this type of presentation "help make juvenile [male] masculinity hegemonic in U.S. culture" is extremely applicable here as well.

[3] Kenneth MacKinnon makes an extremely nuanced argument for this in: *Representing Men: Maleness and Masculinity in the Media*. New York: Arnold, 2003. 37.

[4] Foucault's ideas are also particularly useful here, particularly his identification of discourse as something that is actually *increased* during times of suppression: "Rather than a massive censorship, beginning with the verbal proprieties imposed by the Age of Reason, what was involved was a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse" (34). Similarly, Vaughn's films, much as they might try to exclude discussion of the illusions of hegemonic masculinity, actually contribute to its very illumination. See: Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Random House, 1978. 34.

[5] Judith Halberstam notes as much: "The action adventure hero should embody an extreme version of normative masculinity, but instead we find that excessive masculinity turns into a parody or exposure of the norm. Because masculinity tends to manifest as natural gender itself, the action flick, with its emphases on prosthetic extension, actually undermines the heterosexuality of the hero even as it extends his masculinity." While Vaughn does not play action heroes (in fact, quite the opposite), this description still applies in that it very usefully unpacks the notion of "excess." Halberstam, Judith. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998. 4.

[6] For an excellent reading of the queer potential of Vaughn's films, see: Wyatt, Justin. "Identity, Queerness, and Homosocial Bonding: The Case of Swingers." *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture*. Ed. Peter Lehman. New York: Routledge, 2001. 51-65.

[7] Gordon's wife's position as an Asian woman is also crucial to this scene. While not the focus of this essay, I will briefly argue here that the victimization that Gordon feels must be seen through the lens of his whiteness, and that the "judging" that she performs must also be interpreted from her cultural position. This narrative subplot, far from being "humorous," is actually quite sad and disturbing: the white man "purchasing" an Asian woman only to interpret her unhappiness as a castration threat, which quickly turns to his banishment of her from his family. Thus the "victimization" of white masculinity includes the "threat" of racial "others" as well as women.

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[8] Of course, Justin's narrative success must occur within the hierarchy of the film's masculinity: in the final tournament, Amber loudly exclaims her love for Justin at a key moment, which disrupts him long enough to be eliminated from the game—which allows Peter to conclude the game as the sole hero, demonstrating his own hierarchical status within the film. This moment could certainly also be read as yet another example of the victimization of the men in the film at the hands (or voices) of the women.

[9] For a much more in detailed examination of this lack of "appreciation" see: Faludi, Susan. *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*. New York: W. Morrow and Co., 1999.

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