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Masculinity in the Contemporary Romantic Comedy: Gender as Genre by John Alberti, and: *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television* ed. by Michael DeAngelis (review)

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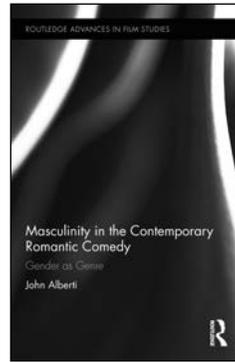
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Masculinity in the Contemporary Romantic Comedy: Gender as Genre.

By John Alberti. New York: Routledge, 2013.
124 pp.

Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television.

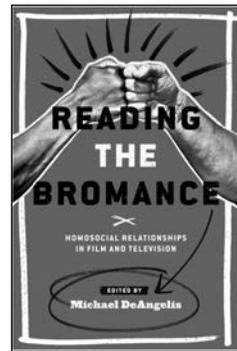
Edited by Michael DeAngelis. Detroit: Wayne
State University Press, 2014. 318 pp.



REVIEWED BY PETER C. KUNZE

Studying men *as men* has long been overlooked in academia. That is the rhetorical move, at least, made by many early scholars in masculinity studies, and it's not a completely disingenuous one. Whereas feminist scholars Nancy Walker, Regina Barreca, and Daryl Cumber Dance, among many others, led the way for understanding women's uses of humor as well as women and comedy, studies of masculinity and comedy have been fairly limited until recent work by scholars like Tania Modleski and Scott Balcerzak. John Alberti's monograph *Masculinity in Contemporary Romantic Comedy: Gender as Genre* and Michael DeAngelis's edited collection *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television* offer two more important contributions to this area of inquiry. Deeply invested in recent discourses around men and masculinity, both works offer productive inroads for further study into this important and underaddressed intersection of gender and humor studies.

Celebrity friendships between Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, Leonardo DiCaprio and Tobey Maguire, and Justin Timberlake and Jimmy Fallon have illustrated the strong male bonds commonly called "bromances." A portmanteau of "bro" or "brother" and "romance," the term "bromance" has been widely disseminated by the media over the last decade to describe (and perhaps police) male friendships in film and television narratives, as well as celebrities' social lives. Michael DeAngelis's edited collection offers the first book-length investigation into this phenomenon by examining what the representation of such friendships may imply for our society and culture.



The term “bromance” has found its most active deployment in discussions of comedies, particularly those directed and/or produced by Judd Apatow; but DeAngelis’s collection does not limit itself to Apatow productions. Jenna Weinman draws parallels between the bromance films and the 1960s sex comedies starring the likes of Rock Hudson and Cary Grant, while Hilary Radner focuses on *Grumpy Old Men* (Donald Petrie 1993) to discuss Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau’s long onscreen partnership as an earlier variation on the bromance. The book expands beyond the typical comedies into horror (*Scream*, Wes Craven 1996) as well as medical and urban crime dramas on television (*House* and *The Wire*, respectively). Furthermore, contributions by Nick Davis and Meheli Sen apply the concept to films outside of Hollywood cinema, providing important considerations of other national cinemas in our understanding of this seemingly pervasive plot convention, film cycle, or genre (depending on how one chooses to define it).

Certainly a broadening of the term “bromance” is welcome, but some authors appear to use “bromance” and “buddy film” interchangeably. I would argue this perception is a mistake; the term “bromance” in its very construction queers brotherhood, finding an erotic and emotional complexity that goes beyond normative male friendship. Bromance films are a specific cycle within the genre of buddy film, and their popularity seems linked with the increasing visibility of LGBT communities and culture in the mainstream as well as heated public debates over LGBT rights. *Superbad* (Greg Mottola 2007) and *I Love You, Man* (John Hamburg 2009) foreground the emotional ambiguity between heterosexual men, and the requisite chapters on these key films are among the most convincing in the book. Television shows like *Scrubs* (NBC 2001–2008; ABC 2009–2010) and *Entourage* (HBO 2004–2011) notably played this tension for laughs; curiously, neither is examined at length in this book, but the necessary theorizing for such analyses is very much present and useful for future research. Indeed, the strength of this collection may lie in the authors’ dissenting opinions on the key term under consideration and the thorough analyses of representations of male friendship in general.

The weakest moments, for me, were when some of the authors ventured to criticize these films or their protagonists for their crudeness, almost implying that their crassness makes them unworthy of serious attention. While the misogyny and homophobia in bromance narrative remains nearly omnipresent, such films and television shows also provide a rich space

for exploring the discourses surrounding contemporary (largely white) heteromascularity. We can surely hold these films accountable for their regressive and, at times, offensive content, but let us not ignore what they reveal, for better or worse, about some recent strains of masculinity.

The title of John Alberti's new book, *Masculinity in the Contemporary Romantic Comedy: Gender as Genre*, strikes me as somewhat misleading. Readers will not find in this volume discussions of blockbuster "romcom" films they may expect based on this title, such as *What Women Want* (Nancy Meyers 2000), *Sweet Home Alabama* (Andy Tennant 2002), and *Wedding Crashers* (David Dobkin 2005). Even *Sex and the City* (the 1998–2004 HBO series and subsequent movies) receives minimal treatment. The book ends with a lengthy discussion of *Greenberg* (Noah Baumbach 2010), an odd move considering the film garnered mixed critical response and grossed less than \$7 million dollars. Alberti makes the most of this example, though its representation of "contemporary romantic comedy" is, at best, questionable. The book's title, of course, may be a late-in-the-game move by Alberti's editors and should not distract too much from the strength of this succinct, albeit idiosyncratic, book: its close readings. True to his roots as a professor of English, Alberti's approach to cinema is similar to a novel in that he reads plots closely, giving only occasional deference to formal elements. His attention to detail, however, makes his privileging of a handful of films over a broad survey nevertheless illuminating and rewarding.

Alberti's argument finds its roots in the popular media discourses around both masculinity and romantic comedy. As journalists Maureen Dowd and Hanna Rosin, among others, have claimed, masculinity may have reached a level of obsolescence, whereas a concurrent argument examines the exhausted even dying nature of the contemporary romantic comedy. Alberti links these discussions, problematic and (in his words) "incoherent" as they may be (7), to examine masculinity through the intersection of genre theory and gender theory. Indeed, for Alberti, masculinity *is* a genre that has several articulations. As time passes, and narratives change for various reasons, so do the effectiveness of narrative genres and genres of gender. Through case studies primarily of *Annie Hall* (Woody Allen 1977); *I Love You, Man*; *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow 2007), *Superbad*; *Dance Party USA* (Aaron Katz 2006); *Humpday* (Lynn Shelton 2009); and *Greenberg*, Alberti effectively demonstrates how anxieties and tensions within the genres of gender, specifically masculinity, influence and impact the effectiveness of genres like romantic comedy. At its finest moments, such as its discussion

of the bromance films, the book provides some of the most original thinking about the romantic comedy since Stanley Cavell's *The Pursuits of Happiness*.

Both books delight readers in their consideration of atypical or underappreciated examples, whether it is John Alberti's analysis of *Greenberg* or Ron Becker's discussion of the MTV reality series *Bromance* (2008–2009). There are some oversights, however, that leave room for important future work to follow. Media narratives starring men of color, for example, could offer productive interventions into how we understand masculinity, male friendship, and heterosexual romance on film. The commercially successful yet critically vexing films of Tyler Perry or the nearly completely critically ignored cycle of romantic comedies about black male friendship—*The Wood* (Rick Famuyiwa 1999), *The Brothers* (Gary Hardwick 2001), *The Best Man* (Malcolm D. Lee 1999)—offer excellent opportunities for considering whether or not bromance is raced as white and whether black masculinity faces the same challenges of obsolescence. Admittedly, as previously mentioned, Davis and Sen examine bromance beyond the United States, but considerations of men of color in the United States deserved more attention. Furthermore, one might consider how masculinity is constructed and performed in very popular romantic comedies for female stars like Cameron Diaz, Kate Hudson, Sanaa Lathan, Sarah Jessica Parker, and Reese Witherspoon. What work may spawn from these books is obviously unclear, but what seems apparent is that the books have offered useful strategies for examining these representations and furthering the important work of feminist and queer analyses of media.

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Reeling with Laughter: American Film Comedies—from Anarchy to Mockumentary.

By Michael V. Tueth. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2012. 228 pp.

REVIEWED BY JEFFREY MELTON

American film comedy has earned a wealth of deserved attention in recent years, and there is no doubt that the topic will continue to encourage interest among scholars and general

