

**DeAngelis, Michael, ed. *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television*. Pp. 328. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014. US \$31.99. ISBN: 9780814338988.**

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Published online: July 2016

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

Michael DeAngelis's edited collection *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television* (2014) is a timely contribution to film scholarship on the subject of bromance in its various media iterations. The term bromance, bringing together 'bro-' with 'romance', is an attempt to capture the idea of a male intimacy that simultaneously quashes any potential for sexual expression. As DeAngelis suggests, the very concept of bromance is suffused with paradox and contradiction: 'bromance involves something that must happen (the demonstration of intimacy itself) on the condition that other things do not happen (the avowal or expression of sexual desire between straight men)' (p.1).

It is a phenomenon that may be simultaneously homosocial, homoerotic and homophobic in aspect; at its heart lies a deep ambivalence about sexual equality and gay rights. Bromance is profoundly heteronormative in aspect, as well as potentially misogynistic. This collection of essays provide a sophisticated analysis of the anxieties prevalent in modern Western masculinity that bromantic screen relations give voice to and, through a range of methods, seek to defuse.

The term bromance, as a signifier of close emotional male bonds in a context of heterosexual friendship, did not reach common parlance until the mid-2000s, by which time it had entered popular vocabulary and culture through films such as *I Love You, Man* (John Hamburg, 2009) and *Superbad* (Greg Mottola, 2007), developing its own film genre and marketing rationale. The first section of essays in the collection takes a historical purview of American culture and manifestations of bromantic narrative elements prior to its recognition as a genre by Hollywood.

In the opening chapter, Jenna Weinman offers a comparative account of early sixties romantic comedies starring Rock Hudson, Doris Day and Tony Rudd and the millennial Bromance in 'Second Bananas and Gay Chicken: Bromancing the Rom-Com in the Fifties and Now'. The love triangles that typified the Hudson-Day relationships of films such as *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959) and *That Touch of Mink* (Delbert Mann, 1962) were

paralleled by immature male friendships that were threatened – and finally usurped – by heterosexual romance. Weinman compares such narratives to later films such as *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005) and *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, 2007), suggesting that both genres prioritize male-male bonds over those of romantic love, with little promise that such homosocial immaturity will be resolved by the social demands of marriage and fatherhood.

In ‘*Grumpy Old Men: “Bros before Hoes”*’ Hilary Radner interrogates the film series that provides a model of male-male bonds mediated by a female love interest as a way of undermining any suggestion of homosexual interest. This dynamic calls to mind Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s definition of male homosociality described in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985). Sedgwick talks of the triangulation of desire, in which men develop intense bonds with one another that are expressed indirectly through a female third party (p1). Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau’s pairing in the 1993 film *Grumpy Old Men* (Donald Petrie) referred to the 1960s buddy film *The Odd Couple* (Gene Saks, 1968), the title of which draws attention to a potentially extra-normative bond between the two men. In *Grumpy Old Men*, the characters Lemmon and Matthau play find themselves competing for the affections of the (younger) Ariel (Ann-Magret), which allows their close relationship to remain unscrutinised. The film appears to evince nostalgia for a previous era in which such male bonds were taken at face value and did not require the bromantic alibi that Ariel’s presence provides.

In ‘*Fears of a Millennial Masculinity: *Scream*’s Queer Killers*’ David Greven traces the trajectory of pre-bromance experiments in homosocial intimacy and their expression as psychopathology in the teen horror genre, looking at *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) as a case study. In common with the bromance, such horror films are characterised by immaturity and male bonds that are interrupted by the presence of a malignant female character. Both genres ‘promote intensely defensive responses to sexuality’ (pp. 80-81) but in the horror film only through the death of these ‘queer’ male protagonists can patriarchal order be restored.

The second section of the book focuses on the contemporary cinematic bromance, looking both at canonical Hollywood films that have come to be associated with the term, as well as key examples from world cinema.

Chapter four, ‘*I Love You, Hombre: Y tu mama tambien* as Border-Crossing Romance’, by Nick Davis, analyses a film that pre-empted the North American inception of the bromance and, in its privileging of a male homosocial narrative, forced the US industry to pay attention to the market for such work. Indeed, *Y tu mama tambien* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001) goes further than its US counterparts in following through with a homosexual encounter between the principal characters. That it is a relationship facilitated by a strong female protagonist that exists in the place of the marginal roles assigned to Hollywood women, further suggests a tension between the Mexican and US cultural industries that the film reflects.

Meheli Sen’s chapter, ‘*From Dostana to Bromance: Buddies in Hindi Commercial Cinema Reconsidered*’ takes as its study the *dostana* genre, looking at its development from the 1970s to the present day. Representation of the masculine code of friendship known as *dostana* has been transformed during this period of Hindi cinema. The intense bonds of love and loyalty and concomitant gestures of sacrifice characterising the ‘Bachlan film’ are

tempered by subsequent iterations of the buddy film in a more recent Indian cinema, increasingly informed by globalisation and the expression of individual desire.

The remaining contributions of the second section of the book turn their attention to representations of the bromance in Hollywood film. In 'From *Batman* to *I Love You, Man*: Queer Taste, Vulgarity and the Bromance as Sensibility and Film Genre' Ken Feil explores the use of 'gross-out' comedy in popular culture to disavow another vulgarity that looms in the threat of eroticisation of the male body. Looking at films such as *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (Dennis Dugan, 2007), *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (Adam McKay, 2004) and *I Love You, Man*, Feil traces how representations of 'masculine vulgarity' that both marginalise and objectify women and gay men work to strengthen homosocial intimacy (while negating its homosexual expression).

In 'Rad Bromance (or *I Love You, Man* but We Won't Be Humping on *Humpday*)' Peter Forster questions the fundamental dissonance evident in the term 'bro-mance' and its wider implications in analysis of two films, one Hollywood, one American independent. Two issues arise: first, the dangerous proximity of homosociality to homosexuality; second, the freedom allowed by homosocial bonds that threatens to be negated by the heterosexual dyad. Whilst the film narrative may encourage its protagonists to deviate from the demands of the heterosexual romance, the culmination of the plot insists upon its male protagonists giving up their treasured male friendships in favour of heteronormative pulls.

Michael DeAngelis in his chapter 'Queerness and Futurity in *Superbad*' interrogates the notion of 'queerness', not in relation to characters or matters of representation, but in terms of narrative time itself. *Superbad's* exploration of temporality brings into question the normalcy of time in so far as it supports heteronormative narrative structure. DeAngelis examines how theoretical concepts of 'futurity, straight time, and queer time can help illuminate the strategies' (p. 215) used to explore the homosocial connections employed in contemporary bromance, taking *Superbad* as his case study. Ultimately, the film's closing scenes do little to undermine the more meaningful scenes of intimacy between the two protagonists, Seth (Jonah Hill) and Evan (Michael Sera), at their sleepover prior to their departure for college. The ending, which matches the pair with two female love interests (with whom they were previously unsuccessful), instead 'intensifies the queer bond between the bromancers by rendering the *familiar* strange'. (p. 228) The film offers the pair no future together that can accommodate their intimacy so they are forced to renounce each other and part.

The final section of the collection explores depictions of bromance beyond the Hollywood comedy genre, looking at three analyses of bromantic relationships in US television drama.

In 'Becoming Bromosexual: Straight Men, Gay Men and Male Bonding on US TV' Ron Becker argues that greater visibility of the gay community in the 1990s was met with mounting anxiety in TV representations of male-male friendships, which led to a shift in bromantic discourse in the following decade. 'Mistaken identity' plots, in which male protagonists were taken as gay, articulated such anxieties and were popular in network TV shows including *Friends* and *Frasier*. Becker also examines more recent reality TV programming, including the knowingly named *Bromance*, which presents effeminacy as a greater threat to homosocial bonding than homosexuality itself.

Murray Pomerance's subject of investigation is the House and Wilson friendship in the US TV series *House* that flirts with homoerotic promise whilst never delivering: the

quintessence of bromance. In 'The Bromance stunt in *House*' Pomerance describes the 'stunt' of the titular character performing the cultural signifiers of homosexuality in order to befriend, and ultimately seduce Nora (Sasha Alexander), an attractive neighbour in Wilson's apartment block. The stunt depends on the 'target' recognising and reading the cues that he provides her with. As Wilson (Robert Sean Leonard) has already expressed a sexual interest in the same woman, House's (Hugh Laurie) performance becomes a show of heterosexual masculine competition, with each more invested in the other's failure than in romantic success with Nora herself. Wilson is only able to defeat House by staging a public proposal, which simultaneously destroys both their chances, while perversely confirming their commitment to each other. Moreover, the episode ends with the pair watching a hockey game together, while bickering about furniture and singing show tunes. Such simultaneous signifiers of the heteronormative and non-heteronormative, suggests Pomerance, leaves the relationship open to interpretation as the viewer prefers.

The final chapter of the book – "This ain't about your money, bro. Your boy gave you up": Bromance and Breakup in HBO's *The Wire* – looks at the dynamics of male friendship and intimacy that characterise the TV series. In a show that consistently marginalises women and female-centred stories, author Dominic Lennard argues how male friendships and homosocial intimacies are favoured, with homophobic rhetoric employed as a bonding strategy in a hyper-masculinised environment that denies its subjects the language in which to articulate their mutual attraction.

This edited collection provides a comprehensive critique of the cultural phenomenon of bromance. It charts the development of key bromantic tropes, such as the privileging of a male intimacy that must be disavowed in its sexual form and homosocial immaturity, across a variety of film genres, scrutinising developments in Hollywood and world cinema and analysing depictions of bromantic dynamics in US TV. Asking as many questions as it answers, the book throws open to debate the possible pleasures available through bromance with its potential, too often contained, for undermining heteronormative modes of representation.