

## The Ted Series: This Bear is not that Bear

### — The Representation of Masculinity and Homosociality in the Contemporary Hollywood Bromantic Comedy

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#### Abstract

This article considers a new narrative mode that is associated with male/animal relationships, which is seen as a new trend for representing homosexuality and homosociality on screen. The paper focuses on Ted film series and discuss why it belongs to the genre of “bromantic comedy”. Secondly, it discusses the coherent narrative structure of this mode of films, that is, embedding bromance in a heterosexual relationship with the purpose of marriage. Thirdly, it analyzes how the films apply the personification of the male figure on animals, or “pseudo-male animals”, as a new attempt to represent the theme of homosexual, eroticized relationships on-screen, yet still following conventional generic approaches to doing so.

#### Keywords

bromantic comedy, masculinity, homosexuality, homosociality, Bear gay sub-culture.

#### 1. Introduction

This article will discuss a contemporary sub-genre of the Hollywood romantic comedy, the so-called “bromantic comedy”, which is considered a new trend for representing homosexuality and homosociality. This sub-genre stands in contrast to “bromance” films, yet is still representative of several cinematic components of the genre. The discussion begins from a simple, yet noteworthy observation: in this bromantic comedy sub-genre, as of the 2010s and onwards, a new narrative mode is presents that is associated with male/animal relationships, as shown in the series of *Ted* films. In a sense, these male and animal (or a character that is non-human) paired characters offer a scope for analyzing how bromance narratives rely on homosexuality to create their meanings. However, this human/non-human relationship does not significantly impact the construction of the bromance narrative. Despite the grotesque style it adopts, in terms of its style and content, it can arguably be viewed as a continuation of the Apatow film comedies. Prior to the emergence of the *Ted* series, the personification of animals in the bromantic comedy had been applied in *I Love You, Man* (John Hamburg, 2009), to a pet dog, in *Due Date* (Todd Phillips, 2010) to a dog masturbating, and in *The Hangover Part II* (Todd Phillips, 2011), to a monkey acting like a hooligan capable of smoking, masturbating, and even dealing drugs. The *Ted* films indicate an important stage in this mode of filmmaking; not only do the films continue the theme of representing a masculinity crisis and gender tension early on, allowing for a comparison between heterosexual marriage and the intimate friendships between men, perhaps more importantly, they provide full play to the depiction of male homosexual desire through the creation of “pseudo-male animal” characters. My primary focus in this paper will be on the films *Ted* (Seth MacFarlane, 2012) and *Ted 2* (Seth MacFarlane, 2015), as well as three related films represented in a “bromantic comedy” cycle: *Hitch* (Andy Tennant, 2005), *Due Date*, and *The Hangover Part II*. This paper has three purposes: first, it will summarize the core narrative elements and the significance of

male friendship in a crisis of masculinity, as perpetuated by this sub-genre. Second, it will discuss the coherent narrative structure of these films, that is, embedding bromance in a heterosexual relationship with the purpose of marriage. Third, it will analyze how the films apply the personification of the male figure on animals, or “pseudo-male animals”, as a new attempt to represent the theme of homosexual, eroticized relationships on-screen, yet still following conventional generic approaches to doing so.

## 2. The Bromantic Comedy: A Cliché of the Romantic Comedy, Filled with Jargon

The films discussed here belong to the broad concept known as “bromance” films, which is defined as “an emotionally intense bond” and intimacy “on the condition [of] the [dis]avowal or expression of sexual desire between straight males”[1]. Alongside its cinematic components, scholars have put forward various terms for this sub-genre of the bromance film, such as the generic category “bromance genre”. Joseph Aisenberg defines it as “bromantic comedy”, Jenna Weinman uses the term “brom-com”, and Peter Alilunas refers to “dude flicks”[2]. “Teen comedies” and “lad flicks”, which are, respectively, raised by David Greven, and David Hansen-Miller and Rosalind Gill, are two terms that consider immaturity in relation to masculinity[3]. It is difficult for scholars to agree on a common definition and terminology for generalizing this category, indicating the complexity of its style and content. Some, like Aisenberg, criticizes the films as “hung over from the R-rated films of the eighties”, and classify them as aimed at “the original audiences of Porky’s”[4]. Contrastingly, both Weinman and Gill’s articles consider the trend of the genre as rising, and declining current societal changes. The “boy-man”, along with increasing concerns about a “masculinity crisis”, which is viewed as “the propensity to frame male immaturity as pathological and hazardous”, an historical figuration and anxiety emerging within a specific time[5]. Hansen-Miller and Gill also point out that “lad flicks” can be considered a hybrid of “buddy movies”, “romantic comedies”, and “chick flicks”, which present a different traditional male figure in that the discussion of masculinity itself is the central aim of the film[6]. Similar to Hansen-Miller and Gill, other scholarly discussions on the bromantic comedy also adopt a twofold focus: i) the protagonist’s struggle to define “man”, and whether they are capable of meeting this standard of masculinity; ii) the entanglement and struggle of male homosocial friendship and traditional heterosexual marriage. For example, John Alberti elaborates on Celestino Deleyto’s thesis that the generic patterns, which concerns the relationship between the homosocial and homosexual on-screen, is a response to the social movement associated with social and sexual equality between men and women[7].

The genre of films that include bromance films is rather broad, however, and there is a well-established cinematic history that draws the attention to homosocial interactions and its relation to heterosexual relationships. Therefore, I intend to analyze and summarize this trend by identifying the common features of these films, and comparing their similarities in detail. In fact, I disagree with Hansen-Miller and Gill; “lad flicks” may not be an accurate term to describe this new mode of films, one of the main reasons being that they focus primarily on white men. According to Hansen-Miller and Gill, lad flicks takes “a predominantly white, entirely heterosexual, and generally low middle class masculinity” as significant traits that are subsequently combined with various generic features for presenting the contemporary masculinity crisis in cinema[8]. Therefore, this type of classification completely excludes films such as *Hitch* and similar films associated with African-American narratives. At the same time, it also neglects and marginalizes the *Ted* films, because “Ted” is a bear, not a white man. However, it is worth noting that in *Ted 2*, when Ted’s lawyer, Samantha, defends Ted’s legal American citizenship in court, she cites Black slave history on several occasions. From this

perspective, I argue that *Hitch* and the *Ted* series are framed to resemble each other, and that the narrative framework they employ, and the male and female characteristics signified in them, indicate the continuity and unity of this sub-genre. They should not be restricted by their implicit concepts and categories, or terms such as “lad flicks”. In fact, the reason I prefer using the term “bromantic comedy” is that it is a mash-up of the words “bromance” and “comedy”. Bromance, as a broad category, “involves something that must happen (the demonstration of intimacy itself) on the condition that other things not happen (the avowal or expression of sexual desire between straight males)”[9]. Therefore, I regard *Hitch* as an early film of this sub-genre, with its own unique characteristics, and the *Ted* series as a later, more mature work, shows a small amount of narrative variation.

As the portrayal of male and female characters is mentioned, I will take this as the starting point of the discussion. I am aware that someone may disagree with me by arguing *Hitch* is not particularly related to the sub-genre of bromance, because of the two male protagonists’ strong and obvious heterosexual statements, that is, they desire relationships with women. However, considering the time during which *Hitch* was made, similar to other early works of this genre, I would argue that the homosocial interaction is secretly operating alongside masculine fallibility within the context of dating and marriage.

In *Hitch*, the fat man, Albert Brennaman, is cowardly by nature, but falls in love with popular actress, Allegra Cole. The man-child, juvenile and fallible in nature, is a significant focus in the film, as is the bromantic comedy genre itself. For example, when Albert sits down on some steps to eat his lunch, he drops hotdog sauce onto his pants. He quickly pours some Coca-Cola into a tissue to wipe the sauce and then splatters the Coca-Cola on the ground at where he sits down. His overweight body is not suitable for participation in male group sports, and his clumsy nature in daily life difficult to appreciate or accept by his same-sex peers. As a result, he turns to Hitch, a dating expert, to guide him in activities such as dining, holding hands, and kissing on three first dates. This “dissatisfaction with ‘perfectly codified conventions’ of masculine identity”[10] ironically contributes to creating two contrasting trends that represent masculinity in the bromantic comedy. In addition to the inappropriate and clumsy behavior, the weird costumes and excessive obsession with childish topics underline the male protagonist’s failure to “live up to contemporary standards of groomed, toned masculinity”, and being an adult[11]. In *Due Date*, Ethan’s femininity is highlighted in his self-expression, his soft, permed hair and long scarf, in contrast with Peter’s short, practical hairstyle and dressing style[12]. In *Ted*, John is holding on to his childhood teddy bear at the age of 35. He can still grow up to be a man, and even have a girlfriend, but Ted, a “bearskin man”, has become a stumble block to John’s love and marriage. His girlfriend, Lori, can eventually no longer tolerate this bear and demand that John choose between her (becoming a man) and the bear (continuing to be a boy) (see Figure 1). In this way, the bromantic comedy raises a potentially embarrassing question: “What do men really want?”[13]. John, forced to choose between his girlfriend and his bear, sees the film reflect his childishness and immaturity. Although many bromantic films are developed as traditional “battle of the sexes” narratives, *Ted* is more concerned with the confusion male characters have about their identity, and their inner struggle to show this conflict, rather than with the disputes between men and women, or women complaining about men[14]. In this sub-genre, every film has at least one socially disadvantaged boy who misunderstands or abuses social customs and, importantly, the process of growing up to be a man is often driven by women, and at the expense of male friendship.



**Fig. 1** John choose between girlfriend and the bear

Women in these films stand in contrast to men, reflecting the stereotype of male “losers” and infantilized males who cannot achieve social adaptability. In *Hitch*, Allegra Cole is a female celebrity who owns an entire company, while Albert is only one of the company’s employees. In *Ted*, John’s job is associated with the lower classes of society; he is employed by a car renting company, and his salary is mediocre. In contrast, his girlfriend, Lori, is a white-collar woman whose salary is several times that of John’s. As a result, in the film, the female partners of these men act to a certain extent as “the mother of a boy”, forcing immature men to examine their current lifestyle and make changes. The consequences of this are manifested in two aspects: first, male chauvinism, which presents an androcentric logic that detracts from women, which serves as a unique approach for men to express their gender concerns. Second, men escape from women, and attempt to seek out emotional bonding between men as a substitute for the traditional heterosexual relationship[15]. Therefore, although the male and female protagonists are in a romantic relationship, or about to enter marriage status, the impression of the female role, as directed at the audience, is often primarily employed to interfere with the relationship between the male protagonist and his male friends. The female protagonist either sets the time urgency for the protagonist and his male friends’ return of the trip, or forces the man to choose between his girlfriend and a male friend, this choice signifying the root of male struggle.

### **3. The Struggle of Man: Heterosexual Marriage Versus Homosexual Bromance**

The stereotypes presented in male and female characters, and the function of the relationship between the homosocial and homosexual, have been discussed in detail. The next major goal is to distinguish the bromantic comedy from other male-centered comedies. I argue that the sentence, “You are my best friends, I love you” is the most frequently used string of dialogue in this sub-genre, and can therefore be considered a type of genre term in its own right, one that adjusts the conventions of the romantic comedy.

Alberti argues that, “In the Apatow’s bromance, conflicts over heterosexual bonding derive from what are seen as the more fundamental conflicts surrounding homosocial bonding”[16]. Hansen-Miller and Gill suggest that one of the distinguishing features of the lad movies is that they rely on the close relationship between male heterosexuality, and employ obvious homophobic humor. The connection between homosexuality and homophobia is neither accidental nor simple, but a structural feature of such films. The homophobic humor consistently denies and transfers the homosexual potential between characters, or between male spectators[17]. *Ted*, however, is a male companion who has accompanied the male protagonist since the latter was a child; most of the other films discussed in this paper

continue the narrative framework of “boy meets girl”, but replaces this convention with “boy meets boy”[18]. It is important to note that it is not uncommon for men to meet other men and become good friends. One of the main reasons I believe the bromantic comedy walks a fine line between gay discourse and male bonding is that the male friend of the male protagonist is presented as unique to him, and a male friendship is formed that is, to the protagonist, similar to being with his girlfriend/fiancée/wife. When a man has a good friendship with a group of male friends, or engage in homosexual intimacy within an acceptable heterosexual structure, it does not necessarily indicate that he is potentially homosexual. Yet when a man is overly dependent on or too close to one man, he is often viewed as on the edge of having a homosexual identity. For example, the actor, Zach Galifianakis, whether playing the role of Ethan in *Due Date* or Alan in *The Hangover* film series, a common feature of these two male characters is that they have almost no close male friends. Boyle and Berridge point out that the roles Galifianakis play is always that of a similar character, one who is “a socially-inept man-child who misunderstands or abuses social conventions in a somewhat desperate attempt to make male friends”[19]. Similarly, Peter, in *I Love You, Man*, has a need to find and make friends with a man in order to have a best man at his wedding, because he has spent most of his life around women, without any close male friends. As a result, the male character develops a strong attachment to men when he befriends them. The situation he needs taken care of, accompanied by his male companions, creates an undercurrent of conflict with his heterosexual male identity.

Considering the above, it is not difficult to find that, as per the theme of “boy meets boy”, in most instances, men encountering men serves the purpose of fulfilling the needs of a female character. Whether planned or unexpected, the ultimate purpose of these encounters is to help the male protagonist, as soon as possible, to return to the female character, or to solve any problems existing between them, so as to smoothly enter the stage of marriage. According to McDonald’s discussion on David Shumway’s “boy meets girl” hypothesis, his genre of films must underscore the American capitalist ideology, which embodies the primary importance of heterosexual, white monogamous coupledness[20]. From this point of view, as Alberti puts forward, the alternative of having an intimate friendship with a male friend simply postpones the problem concerning the question of constructing a masculine identity[21]. However, neither having a gay friend or engaging in male bonding fundamentally undermines the construction of masculine identity itself in these dyadic relationships, as it eventually returns to the heterosexual marriage mode[22]. Regardless, there are two aspects of this bromance sub-genre that have caught my attention. On the one hand, as most scholars have noticed, dialogue such “I love you, dude” and “I love you too, Peter” in *Due Date*, and “I love you” and, “I love you, too” in *Ted* are frequently present in these films. On the other hand, in this mode of film, I have observed that the male protagonist and his best male friend often present a kind of erotic and intimate relationship in the process of learning how to get along with each other. For the former, some scholars believe a film’s expression of love between the male protagonists is accompanied by the announcement of homophobia and ridicule[23]. These characters often express their love for each other, while firmly and loudly denying the fact that they are gay. In response to this expression of sarcasm and denial, Hansen-Miller and Gill argue that this mocking of homophobia stems from the way the jokes appear to be less direct attacks on existing sexual minorities, and more self-deprecating jokes about the homosexual potential of straight men[24]. In addition to verbal presentation, I argue that physical presentation also reflects the same theme in this sub-genre. In *Hitch*, *Due Date*, and *Ted*, there are scenes lasting several minutes of two men fighting in ways that are similar to having sex. For example, in *Hitch*, Hitch has to use violence to calm Albert down, who has resigned from his job out of anger. Albert is like a rutting beast, and Hitch throws him down on the desk, and using all his strength, holds him down. In *Ted*, Ted and John have a dispute over Lori’s request

for Ted to leave. While fighting, John falls to the ground, and Ted takes the opportunity to pull John's pants down and whip his buttocks with a broken radio antenna. To some extent, when two muscular men are observed fighting, twisting their bodies together, no matter how much they attempt to deny their homosexuality, there is an illusion that their bodies display an honesty they are unable to admit to verbally (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).



Fig. 2 Hitch and Albert is Fight

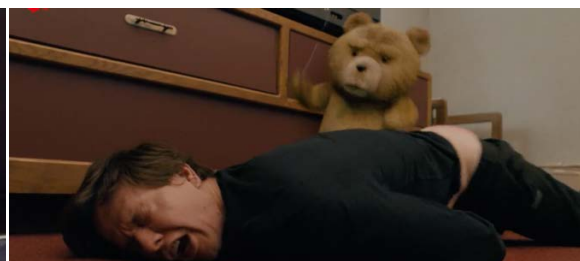


Fig. 3 Ted and John is Fight

#### 4. This Bear is not that Bear: Our Bodies, Our Space

I argue that Ted, as a “quasi-male” bear in the bromantic comedy, indicates a metonymy of the gay “bear” sub-culture. By associating with Boyle and Berridge’s observation of the two types of male protagonists in Apatow’s films, the dual male characters in this sub-genre often demonstrate two contradicting trends of masculinity. I argue that this paradigm is also applied in the *Ted* films, where John only dates one woman in each film. Even when he breaks up with her, he attempts to rekindle the relationship, rather than potentially dating another woman. Contrastingly, Ted – a teddy bear who is supposed to not have a sex drive – is surrounded by different women, prostitutes, and beautiful female strangers he meets in a park, and even has sex with his female cashier colleague in the warehouse of the grocery store. Considering McDonald’s conclusion and expectations of the neo-traditionalist romantic comedy, i.e. that recent works appear “forced to side either with the conservative narratives”, I argue that the bromantic comedy, like the *Ted* series, from the 2010s onwards renewed generic patterns by entangling their narratives with conservative narratives, and “more explicit gross-out” descriptions of sex[25]. It can be argued that this “bear-man”, i.e. Ted, appears in almost every film in this sub-genre. Albert in *Hitch* is obese and clumsy; Sydney and his chubby physique in *I Love You, Man*; Alan in *The Hangover* trilogy; overweight man-child Ethan in *Due Date*. All of these characters have certain characteristics applied to the stereotypes of bear masculinity in gay culture, e.g. hairiness, large body size, overweight, or obese. In fact, at the beginning of *Due Date*, Peter, who is lying in bed, describes Ethan in a drowsy voiceover as follows:

I just had the strangest dream.

It’s Friday. We’re at the hospital.

But it’s not a hospital, it’s a forest of sorts.

And I know that because right next to you there’s a bear.

A grizzly, cooling his feet in a stream. [26]



**Fig. 4** This bear is Ethan

In addition, when Peter smokes marijuana in a car with Ethan while driving on the highway, he turns to look at Ethan and sees a bear in the driver's seat (see Figure 4). For the characters of Ethan and Ted, I argue that a bear, as a specific figure, serves as a gendered strategy for denying feminism, and challenging – even reproducing – the norms of dominant masculinity. Peter Hennen points out that bear culture has been one of the most striking features of the queer culture landscape in the past 20 years[27]. During this period, many gay men attempted to resist the traditional connection between homosexuality and femininity, and found the hairy, masculine image of the “bear” attractive[28]. Bears with large beards, hirsute bodies, and stockiness physique tend to signal a more “natural” physical form of masculinity. However, from a “lad flicks” perspective, male characters with these body types are presented as having feminine traits, emphasizing the male masculinity in crisis. Although the latter runs counter to the former, it is not impossible to interpret this portrayal of the male figure according to the discourse of bear culture’s muscularity and masculinity. In fact, I would argue that after the emergence of the *Ted* films, by re-examining the narrative elements of this mode of film, the metaphor of “bear” can be viewed as a clever strategy for resisting the male crisis resulting from the feminist movement, in a bid to alienate the topic of homosexuality.

It is different from the exaggerated masculinity in “buddy movies”; this masculinity does not exist in response to any social movement. Its innate appearance can only allow it to exist objectively. Hennen reviews the relevant literature and puts forward that the rise of American bear culture in the early 1980s had been related to the dissatisfaction and resistance of the forerunners of the bear community with the “clone” trend and the “leathermen community” that prevailed in the 1970s[29]. They attacked “clones” for being too pretentious and “against nature”. On the other hand, they also felt that the leathermen, who often participated in sado/masochism practices, was too ruthless and lacked humanity. “With the Bears’ emphasis on camaraderie instead of competition”, they play teddy bears to emphasize their interest in hugging and cuddling[30]. So they began to put a teddy bear in their pocket, which symbolized nature and warmth, and gradually developed it into a sign of identity[31].

Accordingly, I would argue that the bromantic comedy has been secretly operating under the guise of the sub-genre of romantic comedy, or “bromance”, progressively signaling its homosexual representation for an extended period of time. As many scholars have observed, the genre includes a number of generic norms from a range of different films, which only share the common theme of the “bromance”. This pastiche and parody gave rise to a grotesque style that cannot be defined from a singular perspective. As I mentioned previously, the term “lad flicks”, proposed by Hansen-Miller and Gill, has ignored films like *Hitch* and the *Ted* series. Therefore, it seems too difficult to observe the cultural mapping of gay men as being implied in this mode of film, without looking at the continuity and unity of its

characterization and narrative content according to a timeline. In most cases, in terms of appearance, people tend to focus on the obese body and clumsiness of male characters, and connect it with fallibility, which is interpreted as an example of “failed men” and a masculinity crisis in the era of feminism.

However, I would argue that the bromantic comedy may not reflect the pressure and crisis of masculinity in the context of feminism, but rather, responds to the rise of women with a disdainful attitude, just as the “buddy movies” of the 1970s represented a strong resistance to feminism and the women’s liberation movement. This strategy of juxtaposing the bear image related to the homosexual subculture with male feminization, and immature psychology and behavior, is similar to previous resistance to feminism. In the binary opposition between men and women, the image of the bear related to the homosexual subculture serves as the carrier of this contradiction, and the arbitrary “essence” of gender is concealed by its rich, homologous relationship with other dualities and gender characteristics. The “bears” like Ted are male in appearance, and symbolize masculinity, but their bodies are soft and feminine. However, as stated in the sub-heading, *this* bear is not *that* bear. In homosexual bear culture, Hennen argues that the bear body “act[s] to radically destabilize the reified hegemonic narrative linking femininity with male homosexuality”[32]. The bear masculinity againsts the feminine as well as “the twink”; the latter is appealing and popular in gay culture yet downplayed by bear community due to its “feminized, hairless, and gym-toned body” characteristics[33]. Entangled in these two arguments, the representation, as well as the interpretation of “the bear” appear to be rather complicated and ambivalent. However, I argue that the embodiment of “authentic” masculinity contributes an important argument. The desire to identify with homosexual bears is the pursuit of natural, uncivilized masculinity on the part of men today. The male characters in the films have the “bear body” and the desire for homosexuality, but they are not the real bear in a homosexual relationship. It is this ambiguous image that provides the potential for homosexuality in heterosexual relationships. Similar to the “bear body”, I would argue that the “jerking-off station” is a homosocial space that is provided in the bromantic comedy for sparking the idea of vulgarity. Initially, I derived this notion from Sydney’s “man cave” in *I Love You, Man*. I then realized that this space quite often appears as the house or apartment of the male protagonist’s best friend (when Ted moves out from John’s house and rents an apartment, the house becomes a “man cave” for John and himself). “The display of ‘masculine’ vulgarity in contemporary bromantic comedies unify the all-male group and serve as a bastion against full absorption into sexuality”[34]. Both Feil and Alberti, among others, observe that “male sexuality is the real mysterious Other for these characters, a source of inexplicable desire and humiliation” which the genre indicates a “preoccupation with phallic humour and the phallus itself”[35].



Fig. 5 Ted obsessed with its own penis



In *Ted*, as a bear, Ted never hides his penis obsession. He likes marijuana, which he smokes with a pipe (a phallic object); specifically, in *Ted 2*, he uses a marijuana device that looks like a penis (see Figure 5). In this sub-genre, humor about male genitals is restrained in early works, up until roughly 2010, when the scene of a dog learning to masturbate from Ethan in *Due Date*, and a monkey licking a monk's trousers appear on-screen in *The Hangover Part II*. The monkey in the same film can deal drugs, smoke, and masturbate, no different from a normal man. However, as the body of such male characters are placed within the body of animals/cartoons, they are allowed to expose their bodies and present homosexual desires without any restrictions on the presentation of homosexual behavior, as men do. Therefore, vulgar gimmicks about vomit and semen, obscene humor, and the swelling of a penis with erotic excitement can, metaphorically, be viewed as allowing for the bold representation of homosexual behavior.

In this part of the paper, on the basis of summarizing the narrative elements reflected in *Ted* that are reversed and repeated in the later works of this sub-genre, specific traits are twofold: first, the personification of the male figure via animals preserves a kind of opposition to homosexual relationships in earlier works. Second, through a humorous plot involving humans and animals, or more precisely, male and quasi-male figures, these films are able to boldly present two men in a close emotional and physical relationship comprising love and intimacy.

In conclusion, this article discusses a model of masculinity in recent bromantic film comedies, by analyzing *Ted*, *Ted 2*, and three other interrelated films. These films generally signify the entanglement of masculine identity and the homosocial interaction experienced by male characters. The emerging pattern of the homosocial, and desire and intimacy, only temporarily postpones the problem of construction masculinity. The dual male protagonists in the films, regardless of the fact that homosexuality has largely been rendered accepted or at least tolerable within society, find themselves confused about how to address the conflict and evolution of the "other types of relationships between people", between both the opposite-sex and the same-sex[36]. Corresponding to this point, the paper focuses on how films with "pseudo-male animals" serve as a new attempt to present the theme of homosexual eroticism in the genre of the bromantic comedy, and associates this with the "bear" in gay culture, yet underscores that a heterosexual structure is nonetheless rigorously maintained.

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