FALLING OUT OF THE CLOSET: KEVIN SMITH, QUEERNESS, AND INDEPENDENT FILM

by

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Title: FALLING OUT OF THE CLOSET: KEVIN SMITH, QUEERNESS, AND INDEPENDENT FILM

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My dissertation argues that the film comedies of Kevin Smith, through their willingness to depict and verbalize gender-bending, queer desire, and deviant sexual practices, exemplify the role independent "slacker" cinema played in the 1990s explosion of American queer media visibility. Couched in witty verbal comedy, Smith's films depict the tensions and dangers Generation-X males face as they negotiate the culturally enforced gap separating male homosociality (intense friendship, male bonding) from explicit male-male homoerotic desire in contemporary U.S. culture. The project takes Smith's career as a metonym for independent slacker cinema (which includes films by Smith, Richard Linklater, Jim Jarmusch, and Judd Apatow) and argues that Smith's films have been successful because they tap into and exploit both the 1990s boom in independent queer media production and the particular interests and needs of actual young white slackers, including how these young men navigate tensions related not only to gender and sexuality

but also to race and class (all of which are evident in their taste for mainstream superhero comics and the *Star Wars* films).

Chapter II argues that Smith's debut feature, *Clerks* (1994), exemplifies, through its plot and formal elements, the homosocial buddy relation that suppresses male-male homoerotic desire by channeling it into men's rivalries over women. The chapter exposes the misogyny inherent to the slacker's homosocial group and discusses his fear/fascination with masculine women such as domineering mothers, bossy girlfriends, and (in later Smith films) lesbians. Chapter III argues that *Mallrats* (1995) shares key narrative properties and subject matter with superhero comic books, thereby addressing the comic book fans who largely constitute Smith's fan base. Chapter IV offers a bisexual reading of Smith's third feature film, *Chasing Amy* (1997). Chapter V examines Smith's later films *Dogma* (1999), and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (2001), arguing that they function generically as queer road movies. Chapter VI analyzes Smith's public persona as an indie cinema icon who uses ironic, ambiguous modes of self-presentation to "have it both ways," maintaining an appeal for both homophobic *and* queer-friendly audiences, thereby demonstrating Smith's keen understanding of self-promotion and the economic structures of independent cinema.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: FALLING OUT OF THE CLOSET

"Indeed, much of what we call 'independent' film in this country has been queer, and the history of film production outside of the studio system has everything to do with the development of a queer cinema" (Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 186).

White masculinity has been in crisis for some time. Of course, any identity category that assumes a position of power and privilege over all others and attempts to maintain that position by rendering its centrality invisible and "natural" accepts a very daunting task indeed. Hence cinema and other popular forms of media have documented and metaphorized the various failures of white masculinity to live up to its own projected ideal of complete mastery over Wetern culture and its non-white-male subjects. In *Masked Men* Steven Cohen analyzes 1950s Hollywood cinema's representations of a white masculinity always already in crisis, concluding in his opening chapters that "the fifties' standard of normative masculinity was an incoherent portrait of the typical American male, not fully aligned to the social interests it authorized. [. . .] [Fifties cinema] calls into question whether masculinity can *ever* be assumed to be a coherent and singular, not to say authentic, condition in culture" (xi, 33). In the 2002 documentary

film *Tough Guise*, masculinity scholar Jackson Katz discusses the societal changes that have impacted and modified the "tough" form of classical Western masculinity since the 1960s, most notably the increased recognition of the rights and humanity of non-whites, women, and non-straights brought on by the Civil Rights, Women's, and Gay and Lesbian movements of the 1960s and 70s. Beset by traditionally subordinate groups clamoring for their rights and making steady legal and cultural headway in this area, the American white male finds himself increasingly "outed" as a privileged power-monger who sits (uncomfortably) at the top of a precarious and morally questionable socioeconomic pyramid. And, as Katz's analysis reveals, that privileged white male seems to have risen to his position via toughness, a willingness to violently dominate all comers who stand in his way. This classical form of tough and violent white masculinity is best exemplified by the onscreen cinematic image of actor John Wayne, and, in a form of cultural backlash against the gains of the various liberation movements in the 1970s, was revisited with a vengeance in the 1980s by conservative U.S. President and former film actor Ronald Reagan.

This mask or "tough guise" of classic masculinity is of course an idealized fiction, and while it still has a profound impact upon how most Western men *feel* they ought to live and behave, in fact it sits rather uncomfortably on most males in our culture. Katz acknowledges this fact in *Tough Guise* and, interestingly, points to the 1998 film *Good Will Hunting* as an example of a media representation of an alternate form of non-violent and positive masculinity. *Good Will Hunting* depicts a mathematically brilliant young man, Will Hunting (Matt Damon), who, with the help of a sensitive male therapist (Robin

Williams), confronts his childhood abuse and learns to start opening up to other people and to accept his great intellectual gifts (see Figure 1). Katz claims that protagonist Will Hunting's struggle to release his inner pain and learn to connect with others metaphorizes the plight of all men trapped behind the "tough guise" who must pretend not to be vulnerable or have feelings, revealing their emotions only through antisocial violence and rage.

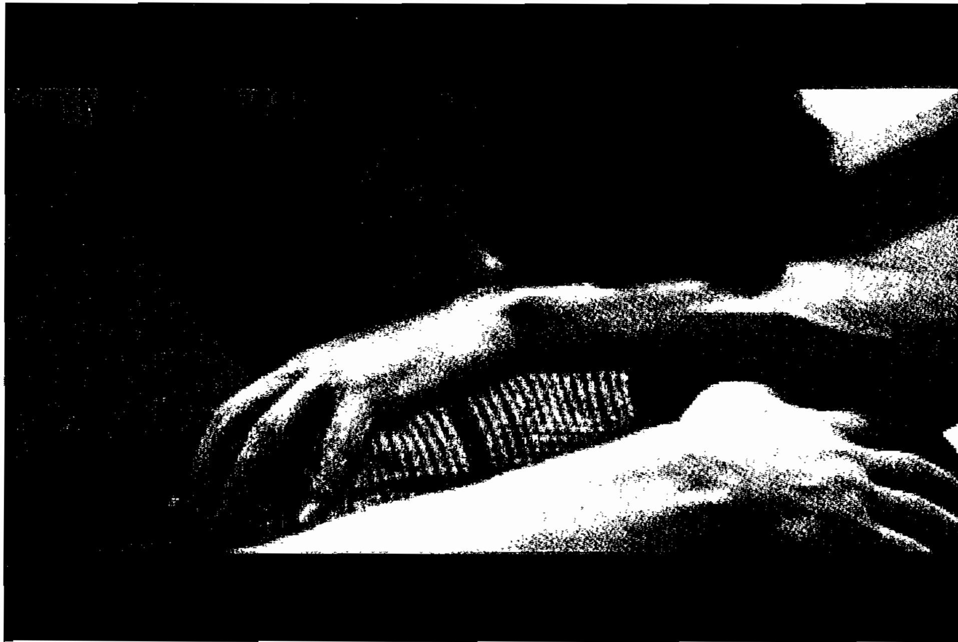

Figure 1: Will Hunting learns to open up emotionally to his male therapist.

Indeed, *Good Will Hunting* provides an exemplary depiction of a more sensitive and emotionally vulnerable form of contemporary masculinity, in part because it is the product of a group of Generation X males invested in exploring classic masculinity's failings and possible alternatives in the 1990s and the new millennium. The film was

written by and stars real-life buddy duo Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, and found theatrical distribution through independent distributor Miramax largely due to the efforts of a third buddy of Affleck's and Damon's, New Jersey independent writer/director Kevin Smith. Well-known for being generous toward his male friends, Smith lobbied Miramax CEO Harvey Weinstein to finance *Good Will Hunting* after numerous studios turned it down and initial distributor Castle Rock put the film's script in turnaround: "Within a day of getting the [*Hunting*] script from Smith, [Miramax's] Weinstein offered $1 million for it, with Damon and Affleck attached [as actors]" (Biskind 284, 286).

Of course, part of the reason for Smith's generosity in this matter was his affinity for the *Hunting* script itself, which is a slightly more dramatic and heterosexualized version of many of his own films' screenplays. Both *Good Will Hunting* and Smith's work feature male protagonists who are geeks: whiny, effeminate, yet intelligent and creative young men who are somewhat tragically (in *Good Will Hunting* or Smith's *Chasing Amy*) and/or comedically (in Smith's *Clerks*) trapped in a dead-end neighborhoods and jobs. The implication is always that, due to his substantial yet largely untapped intelligence and emotional sensitivity, this geek will one day escape his suburban, lower-class origins and go to college or some other place where his gifts will be recognized and cultivated. Will Hunting literally realizes this dream: at the end of *Good Will Hunting* he drives away from his Boston neighborhood to the West Coast, where college and a loving girlfriend (Minnie Driver) await him.

Smith's films, with the partial exception of *Chasing Amy*, tend to deny their protagonists this "happy" outcome, leaving their geek protagonists in a state of suspended

adolescence, forever joined to their slacker buddy sidekicks. For what Smith's offbeat *oeuvre* emphasizes, and what *Good Will Hunting*, in its bid for mainstream recognition, largely elides, is the extreme destabilization of the gender and sexual status of Gen X males who embrace these new, more emotionally vulnerable forms of masculinity. A site of particular danger in this regard is the male-male buddy relation at the heart of these (and so many other) films: once one buddy (the geek) starts accepting his emotional sensitivity and dispensing with the need to hide behind Katz's "tough guise," all manner of feelings can potentially emerge, including male-male homoerotic desire between these closely bonded buddy pairs. This sexual danger is amplified by the predilictions of the geek's clownish slacker sidekick, who, in his need to cling more desperately to the tough guise of classical Western masculinity, often presents himself as a hypersexualized ladies' man or, in the films of Smith, an outright sexual pervert who simply cannot get enough pornography and/or sexually explicit talk. Hence, the two buddies enable each other in a homoerotic if largely subconscious way. The geek refuses classical masculinity in favor of increased emotional sensitivity, thereby feminizing himself. The slacker sidekick clings to classic masculinity but *queers* this masculinity through his over-obsession with sex: his sexuality is excessive and spills over the boundaries of the heterosexual, into the "deviant" or queer. And *vis-a-vis* each other, the geek's femininity makes him a more "legitimate" target for the queer slacker's homoerotic desires: if he is queer, at least the slacker remains the more "male" of the two buddies and thus has an easier time deflecting and disavowing his queerness in the eyes of the public. He can (attempt to) mask his deep love for his geek buddy under the guise of "male bonding."

In its head-on depiction of the queering and feminizing of Generation-X masculinity, 1990s independent "slacker" cinema, of which Smith's work is a key exemplar, documents the tensions and dangers Generation-X males face as they negotiate the culturally enforced gap separating male homosociality (intense friendship, male bonding) from explicit male-male homoerotic desire in contemporary U.S. culture.

My project takes its title, "Falling out of the Closet," from the opening scene of Smith's debut film, *Clerks* (1994). The film is a low-budget, black-and-white comedy about two under-achieving clerk buddies who spend a day engaging in all kind of illicit and often sexually unusual hijinks while at work. The opening scene depicts geeky protagonist Dante literally falling out of a closet in which he has just spent the night. Not only is Dante's groggy slump halfway out the closet door emblematic of the strange, semi-conscious nature of the Generation X male's engagement with his own closetedness, Dante falls out of the closet in response to a phone call from his convenience store boss. Economic concerns draw him out. This serves as a metaphor for the trajectory of Kevin Smith's cinematic work, which trades on its half-closeted queerness to stay edgy, funny, and financially viable in the independent feature film marketplace of the 1990s and 2000s.

My dissertation analyzes the film comedies of Kevin Smith, arguing that their willingness to depict and verbalize gender-bending, queer desire, and deviant sexual practices is exemplary of the key role independent "slacker" cinema played in the general increase of American queer media visibility over the 1990s. Through witty verbal comedy, Smith's films depict the real tensions and dangers Generation-X male slackers

face as they attempt to negotiate the culturally enforced gap that separates male homosociality (intense friendship, male bonding) from explicit male-male homoerotic desire and homosexuality in contemporary U.S. culture. The project takes Smith's career as a metonym for independent slacker cinema (which includes films by Smith, Richard Linklater, Jim Jarmusch, and Judd Apatow) and argues that Smith's films have been successful because they tap into and exploit both the 1990s boom in independent queer media production and the particular interests and needs of actual young white slackers, including how these young men navigate tensions related not only to gender and sexuality but also to race and class (all of which are evident in their taste for mainstream superhero comics and the *Star Wars* films). The project analyzes Smith's savvy marketing of his own persona in this queer media *milieu* and exposes his keen understanding of the economic structures of independent cinema and, increasingly, mainstream media as well.

View Askew Productions Presents . . . Dante

The first few minutes of Kevin Smith's debut feature film, *Clerks* (1994), say a great deal about how this important independent filmmaker and his body of work negotiate male feminization and homoerotics in the 1990s.

The film opens with an animated pre-credits sequence that depicts a seated male baby tossing a ball from hand to hand as an older adult male clown enters from the left side of the frame and walks behind the baby to a privacy screen at the right of the frame to change clothes. Once he changes out of his clown garb, he emerges from behind the

screen in full drag, complete with a silly conical hat, garters, and a film clapper (see Figure 2).

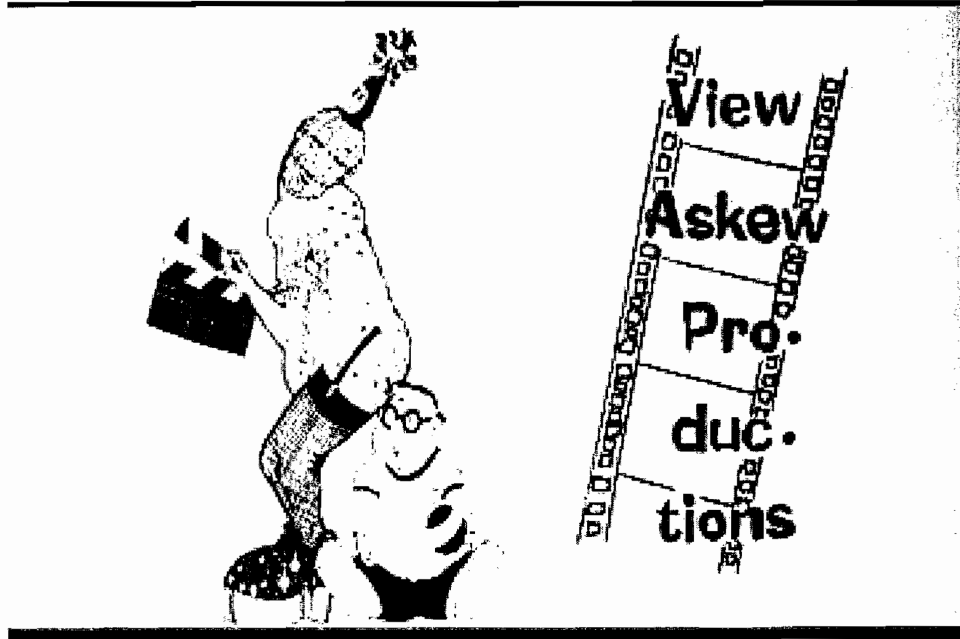

Figure 2: The View Askew transvestite clown and geeky little boy.

The baby boy tossing the ball back and forth represents the polymorphous perversity or inherent bisexuality of children, also standing in for the arrested development male or boy who refuses to grow up. Further, this young boy wears glasses, aligning him with our geek figure. The clown stands in for the geek's slackerish sidekick and reinforces the arrested-development motif, for clowns occupy a strange, liminal space between childhood and adulthood. Clowns are adults whose work requires them to paint their faces, act foolishly and engage in games and play in order to entertain children, which puts them in constant contact with kids and thereby casts potential

aspersions upon their motives and sexuality. This taboo aspect of what clowns represent *vis-á-vis* children is indicated in the downfall of fictional television character Pee-wee Herman, which was predicated on the public revelation of the (perverse) sexuality of Pee-wee creator Paul Reubens: "[O]nce Reubens queered the deal by being sexual in public, his market value as Pee-wee was nil [. . .]. After the arrest [of Reubens for masturbating in an adult theater], [. . .] kids + sex + Pee-wee equaled [. . .] a playground for homophobic fantasies" (Doty, *Making Things* 97). Like Paul Reubens, clowns are typically adults who (we can presume) have reached sexual maturity. Yet a fear-generating stigma—why does this adult love to spend so much time with children?—adheres to the clown performer's sexuality: he is easily suspected of erotically desiring young children, and sexuality plus children equals something forbidden and abhorrent in American culture, as Pee-Wee's case illustrates. And as we shall see, the View Askew clown plays upon that cultural fear of polymorphous child sexuality when he emerges from behind the privacy screen dressed in full drag.

As for the image and cultural role of the clown, John H. Towsen links the modern professional whiteface clown to the broader tradition of the fool, a figure who appears in many non-European cultures and plays a central role in medieval European carnivals. The fool or clown has proven to be a lasting cultural embodiment of unrestrained playfulness and reversal of social hierarchies, as evinced by his prevalence in the plays of Shakespeare (e.g., The Fool in *King Lear,* Feste in *Twelfth Night,* Falstaff in *Henry IV,* and many others) and in cinematic comedies dating from the silent era (e.g., Chaplin's Tramp). As Towsen writes:

> The fool's characteristic traits are very much those of 'natural' man. Lacking social graces and blissfully operating outside the laws of logic, he is often seen as a child or even an animal, but only rarely as a mature adult—his perceptions are too crudely structured, his use of language a parody of normal speech. Unimpressed with sacred ceremonies or the power of rulers, he is liable to be openly blasphemous and defiant; uninhibited in sexual matters, he often delights in obscene humor. (5)

This passage is a near-perfect description of Jay, who makes up for his buddy Silent Bob's verbal reticence by being overly talkative, crude, fascinated with scatological and sexual humor, and certainly quite childlike. Further, Jay speaks almost entirely in language appropriated from black hip-hop culture, which loosely fits Towsen's description of the fool as speaking in a "parody of normal speech" and reveals the cross-racial appropriation the Generation X slacker clown frequently engages in in order to ensure his hipness.

Towsen also distinguishes two separate types of fool that, as we shall see, offer insight into how Smith's films construct their central slacker / geek buddy pairs: "A formal distinction is [. . .] often made between 'natural' and 'artificial' fools. In the first category is the legitimate idiot, in the second an entertainer who plays the role of the fool" (Towsen 6). This division is helpful for delineating the two key (and interrelated) figures that appear with remarkable ubiquity in 1990s independent cinema, particularly in its slacker variant: the nerdy, creative geek and the disaffected, clownish slacker. In Towsen's terms, the 1990s geek is an artificial fool: he is, in actuality, intelligent,

creative, and driven to organize his slacker friends into groups that can help him fulfill his ambitious plans. He makes jokes, hangs out with slackers, and fantasizes about being as carefree and rebellious as his slacker counterpart(s), but is ultimately driven to create and succeed. Smith himself is such a geek, as are all his protagonists, including *Clerks*' Dante, *Chasing Amy*'s Holden, and Smith's own onscreen alter ego, Silent Bob. Never far from the creative, artificially foolish geek is his clownish slacker buddy, a natural fool who resists productivity and earnest emotional engagement for fear of appearing uncool in the ironic, post-modern period in which he lives. Cynical, snarky, and comedic in the extreme, the true slacker includes all of Smith's films' buddy sidekicks, such as Randal, Banky, and most famously, Silent Bob's "heterosexual life mate" Jay.

The use of a clown and a very young child, then, in View Askew's opening animated logo sequence plays upon the associations of clowns with arrested development, possible queer sexuality, and the liminality of sexualized children and clowns in general. For as Towsen notes, clowns, fools, and jesters occupy an "uncertain social position" (27) that is meant to both entertain and yet discomfort other people through direct confrontation of taboo subjects (27). Often fuctioning as a cultural "safety valve" for the release of repressed libidinous energy, clowns are nevertheless relegated to a subordinate position in hierarchical societies, dependent upon the leniency of more politically powerful figures in the culture for their sustenance and survival (15, 27). Furthermore, clowns, especially the whiteface clowns popular in our own period, often inspire fear and terror in the very children they are meant to entertain.[1]

Yet the clown in the View Askew animated sequence seems relatively benign, and the young boy with the ball takes little notice of him as he enters the scene and crosses to behind the privacy screen to change, emerging seconds later in his drag outfit. This is obviously some kind of dressing room, yet it is unclear whether the older clown's outfit and coy behavior—the sashaying walk and mischievous facial expression—after he emerges from behind the screen indicates that this is what he wears privately at home or if he is preparing for a public drag show or some other event. One clue to this may be that part of the older man's drag costume includes the film clapper, which links imagery of transvestitism, a form of gender deviance, to a key icon representing the practice of cinema production. The overall implication is that there is something very queer indeed about View Askew Productions, its personnel, and its cinematic output. [2]

Further, the privacy screen at the right of frame hides the space wherein the older man undergoes his transformation from clown to drag queen, and interestingly that space is conflated with the View Askew Productions logo once the screen disappears. Hence, "View Askew Pro. duc. tions" literally occupies a space where clowns become drag queens, suggesting that there is a gendered and sexualized dimension to clownishness and comedy that View Askew's displacement of the privacy screen symbolically exposes to us. In short, the disappearance of the protecting screen, which can be read here as a stripping away of the boundary between the normatively "proper" (or visible) and the deviantly "improper" (usually kept invisible), suggests that "View Askew Pro. duc. tions" will use its comedic perfomance(s) to render visible—and performatively flaunt—what is typically kept hidden out of a sense of propriety.

Following this animated introduction, the second half of *Clerks*' opening sequence depicts Dante, the film's geeky protagonist, falling out of his own closet in response to a ringing phone (see Figure 3). His dog is on the bed, while he sleeps in the closet – hence the dog is the alpha male, and Dante is feminized before we even see him onscreen. What's more, Dante's whiny-ness during the phone call marks him as femininely submissive, a trait that will stand out even more dramatically once his counterpart, the traditionally masculine yet sexually queer Randal, shows up later in the film.

As for the image of Dante falling out of the closet, queer literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has famously noted that "[t]he closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century" (*Epistemology* 71) and certainly Smith and his View Askew team are counting upon the prevalence of the closet as an emblem of homosexual existence in order for their visual joke to work. Interestingly, Dante falls out of the closet as a result of the phone ringing: an economic summons to come out and "perform" in his public role as an ostensibly straight clerk. The suggestion here is that for a feminized geek like Dante, even getting up to go to work in the morning involves a complex negotiation between in-ness and out-ness with respect to the closet he sleeps in.

This sequence is important not just because it begins and thus sets the tone for the rest of the film. It is also given special emphasis due to the sequence of its intertitles, i.e., "View Askew Productions Presents" followed by "Dante": View Askew is presenting us with Dante before it presents us *Clerks*, and I read Dante's arrival via the closet as being particularly significant in this light. Even if we dismiss or laugh off the drag queen

clown in the animated logo sequence, Smith and View Askew have made sure we won't miss the point here: that what View Askew is presenting is nothing less than the queering of the '90s slacker male, embodied here by Dante as he falls out of the closet.

Figure 3: Dante falls out of the closet.

True, Dante's fall is semi-conscious and constitutes a visual joke, and there is a sense in the scene that Dante is barely aware of his surroundings or what he's doing. However, this is the most common way male-male homoerotic behavior is depicted in Western narrative cinema: as a result of drunkenness, bizarre circumstances, accidents, and/or comic hijinks. Vito Russo notes that numerous male cinematic comedy duos have played upon this trope, including Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, and Martin and Lewis (*The Celluloid Closet* 73). "Temporary transvestite" comedies like Billy Wilder's

Some Like It Hot (1959) present practically the limit case of the "unconscious queer man" gag, since male cross-dressing and its attendant queerness catalyze these films' entire narrative. To take more contemporary examples, I think of the shirtless wrestling scene between Jesse and Chester in *Dude Where's My Car?* wherein the two stoner buddies play their homoerotic attraction to each other for laughs, or of the way Heath Ledger's character, Ennis Del Mar, is drawn into erotic relations—by the significantly named Jack Twist—in *Brokeback Mountain*: the two cowboys are drunk and trapped in isolated conditions, as if to suggest that their shared sexual love would never have happened if Del Mar were sober and in town. This suggests the role conscious repression plays in negotiating the closet, highlighting the fact that the closet is primarily an internal psychic space that defines the queer man even if or when he decides consciously to "come out." It is Dante's *un*conscious that leads him to fall out of the closet, in a habitual response to a ringing phone. Yet Dante remains consciously closeted, *unaware* of the possibility that he might have desires that are not heteronormative or gender identifications that are not typically masculine. In this sense he is exemplary of Smith's geeky slackers and of the Generation X queer male slacker writ large.

The Rise of Independent Slacker Cinema

According to Geoff King, the boom in American independent film production in the late 1980s and early 1990s came about due to "[t]he gradual establishment of an industrial infrastructure, particularly in distribution" (King 9), an infrastructure that was established and subsequently dominated by two key corporate players: the Sundance Film

Festival and the independent distributor Miramax Corporation. Hence, despite the important and influential early contributions of 1980s indie filmmakers like David Lynch, Jim Jarmusch, Hal Hartley, Spike Lee, and documentarian Michael Moore, many scholars and journalists agree that the 1990s indie boom really began in earnest in 1989 with Miramax's first major mainstream hit, Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape.* I will discuss the rise of Miramax and the significance of *sex, lies* at length in Chapter II, but for now suffice to say that I accept 1989 as the general starting point for independent cinema as I analyze it in this study.

Kevin Smith's career takes place within, and is in many ways emblematic of, the American independent cinema movement of the 1990s. As Geoff King and others have pointed out, the term "independent cinema" is always a dependent term that can only be understood *in relation* to the larger Hollywood studio system: "'Independence' is a relative rather than an absolute quality and can be defined as such at the industrial and other levels" (9). I agree with King's definition for two main reasons: (1) It identifies that there is always a relationship between the major studios and the independent sector, that each needs the other against which to define itself, and (2) It establishes criteria for independence that include both industrial factors—who produces, distributes, and exhibits the film—and also "other levels" such as aesthetics, formal properties, thematic content, and considerations of genre.

This latter distinction is key, for I agree with King that "[i]ndustrial factors are important, but do not provide the only grounds for definition of the particular varieties of filmmaking to which the label independent has most prominently been attached in recent

decades" (9). Such a multi-faceted definition of independence is important to my study of Kevin Smith, for while Smith's early career could hardly be more exemplary of economic / industrial independence—he made *Clerks* for $27,000 in personal funds with an unpaid skeleton crew in suburban New Jersey—King's definition allows me to consider Smith as an independent filmmaker throughout his subsequent rise to niche-market popularity, even after he began working with $10 million budgets and A-list actors. This is appropriate in this case since Smith's screenwriting style, fictional universe, and core team of collaborators do not change significantly from the time of *Clerks* (1994) through to the release of its sequel, *Clerks II*, in 2006. Hence there is no need to revoke Smith's independent status simply because his budgets, and dealings with mainstream production companies and practices, increase after the cult success of *Clerks*. His queer thematic concerns, extremely vulgar language, and many aspects of his low-budget style remain intact throughout the duration of his *oeuvre*. Further, Smith himself resolutely identifies as an independent filmmaker and has worked hard to maintain his indie credibility in the face of View Askew's escalating budgets and increased subcultural success.

Smith's career is thus indicative as one other possible definition of the term "independent": that of indie film itself as a genre. As King writes:

> 'Independent cinema' is itself a term that asserts a distinction from the Hollywood mainstream, [. . .] one that has sometimes, if loosely, implied the status of something like a genre [. . .] in its own right. If we ask what

> category *Clerks* and *Slacker* primarily belong to, [. . .] the answer might be 'low-budget, first-feature indie production' [. . .]. (195)

King's use of "might" in the last sentence is suggestive: his designation of 'low-budget, first-feature indie production' fits, yet these two key films also belong to the newly emerging 1990s genre of the slacker film / slacker comedy. Indeed, King's misgivings about low-budget indie-as-genre are reinforced by his next sentence: "Whether such a category merits the term 'genre' is open to question" (195). I agree that it is hard to establish a clear set of conventions that might distinguish the "indie film" as a *bone fide* genre, yet I ackowledge that in a market where independent and studio-produced fare is increasingly difficult to differentiate, the idea of indie-as-genre can be a useful concept, particularly when discussing a filmmaker like Smith.

In terms of more conventional genre classifications, American independent cinema of the 1990s is characterized by a wide variety of films and genres, including many works that defy or subvert easy generic classification. As King writes, producing films within recognizable genres has been central to marketing contemporary independent cinema:

> Genre functions as a marketing device, a way of selling a package for which the existence of an audience has already been demonstrated, [. . .] [thus] [w]orking within existing genre frameworks, even if complicating them, has always been an important way of making independent productions possible, because of the greater likelihood of securing an

> audience to ensure financial viability; or, at least, of convincing backers that this is likely. (191-2)

Indeed, the low-budget independent film sector has been a key location for the production of enduring low-budget genre fare since at least the late 1960s, when the horror genre in particular saw some of its most enduring masterworks, such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Last House on the Left* (1972), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), produced on incredibly low budgets outside the studio system. It makes sense that marginal and culturally "lower" genres like horror and comedy should be produced at the margins of the Hollywood system, both for economic reasons and also in terms of content: the graphic, grotesque, and often quite socially transgressive images and themes of horror and comedy would be difficult to find support for in a studio context. And while low-budget horror arguably had its boom period from 1968 to roughly 1983, the more recent late-80s and 1990s boom of independent features include a great number of works and filmmakers who primarily work in (often dark) comedy, including David Lynch, Jim Jarmusch, Richard Linklater, and, of course, Kevin Smith.

In part this tendency to produce traditionally "lower" genre fare like comedies occurs because independent distributors market their films based upon the perceived *differences* between independent and studio products. Since mainstream studios have the market cornered on socially serious dramas and big-budget spectacle films, edgy content and/or unusual stylistic approaches are aspects of independent productions that can be used to attract a certain kind of filmgoing audience that eschews more mainstream fare.

However, despite its need to maintain the appearance of difference *vis-á-vis* mainstream cinema, in the end, independent distributors, like their major studio counterparts, are in business to sell films and make money. Thus, like the major studios, independent producers and distributors attempt to figure out certain formulas or genres that will consistently draw audiences and make money, and this can over time lead to a few types of film dominating the indie sector and making it more difficult for more controversial, experimental, or otherwise atypical films to find audiences or distribution. So, for example, while the indie film movement played home to the highly influential group of films that became known as the New Queer Cinema, and while those films proved that there was at least a limited market for out queer cinema, Christina Lane points out that in terms of market share and public profile, the 1990s indie scene is dominated by two other main genres of film: "From development to reception, the male-oriented gangster or thriller genres [exemplified by the work of Quentin Tarantino], and the quirky 'loser' film [by the likes of Richard Linklater and Kevin Smith], have helped to condition major independent studios' ideas about what makes money and what makes film sense" (204). Lane concludes that this gender imbalance is due to structural sexism within the industry, and that independent female writer/directors (not to mention directors of color) have not fared nearly as well as their white male counterparts in the 1990s independent film marketplace. Obviously, as a leading, iconic filmmaker in the "quirky 'loser' film" genre, Smith and his team have benefited from this structural inequity and the industry's preference for 'loser' or slacker cinema.

Independent slacker cinema is a particularly Generation X phenomenon, in large part because "slacker" is a term that came into parlance around 1990, around the time that the greatest statistical number of Gen Xers were coming of age, and is the term most commonly used to broadly describe this generation by its Baby Boomer predecessors. Following William Strauss and Neil Howe, I define Generation X as that generation of persons born between 1961 and 1981, inclusive (Ritchie 16). Unlike the Boomers, who grew up defining themselves in terms of the Vietnam War, the Nixon White House, and the various social protest movements of the 1960s, Gen-Xers have grown up in a United States characterized by problems such as "crime, guns, drugs, or all three" and, thanks to the advent and widespread dissemination of cable television and personal computers during the late 1970s and 1980s, an increasingly digital media-saturated environment (Ritchie 18, Hanson 18-19). As Peter Hanson argues in *The Cinema of Generation X*, "Gen-X directors [. . .] seem more concerned with blending layers of fiction than with pursuing realism, and this tendency to employ ironic storytelling has everything to do with how Gen Xers have been bombarded with incessant information since their youth" (14). In fact, according to Hanson, not only did the Gex-X phenomenon of "latchkey kids" contribute to greater levels of exposure to television for Gen Xers, but the advent of cable TV and "infotainment" programming substantially changed the Xer's *relationship* to media: "The infotainment explosion is a crucial parallel to Gen Xers' television addiction, because in addition to being exposed to nonstop junk culture, Gen Xers were given countless opportunities to peer behind the curtain of said junk culture. These opportunities helped produce unprecedented media-related savviness" (Hanson 19).

Incredibly media savvy yet not nearly as politically idealistic as the Boomers, the Gen Xers were quickly labeled as apathetic by the preceding generation, and perhaps as an act of defiance, took up the name "slacker" as a form of resistant self-identification.

For one look at perhaps the defining cinematic text of slackerism, Richard Libnklater's *Slacker* (1991), reveals that Gen Xers may not in fact be as apathetic or politically disengaged as Boomers might think. As one of the many anonymous characters in Linklater's film puts it, "withdrawing in disgust is not the same thing as apathy," thus framing slackerism as a potentially conscious act of protest against the social and political world the Boomers created. And Bob Guccione Jr., editor and publisher of *Spin* magazine, argues that the labeling of Generation X as apathetic is both inaccurate and the result of Boomer propaganda:

> [T]he personification of Generation X [as shiftless and indifferent] was a deliberate propaganda campaign intended to make young people seem less desirable to employers, thus preserving jobs and career options for the Boomers, and slowing the next generation's succession to power. (qtd. in Ritchie ix)

But unfair mislabeling or no, the "slacker" moniker has certainly stuck to Generation X, and now the term describes a particular Gen-X (and now, additionally, Gen-Y) quality of resisting traditional nine-to-five career-oriented work in favor of a lower-key lifestyle that involves low-paying "McJobs" and/or unemployment, some degree of interest or obsession with popular culture, and frequently, pot smoking and other unofficial or illegal forms of entertainment. Slackerism could be seen as the delinquency of the 1990s,

inflected into a slightly older (twenty- to thirtysomething) arrested-development age bracket.

Yet slackers are almost always accompanied by geeks, and indeed geek culture, in the form of science fiction, computers, superhero comic books, video games, etc., is deeply imbricated with the grunge music and pot smoking culture of 1990s slackers. In fact, we can say that to some extent geeks are productive, conformist slackers or that slackers are cynical, nonconformist geeks. Certainly in the films of Kevin Smith the line between these two character types get a bit overlapped and blurry at times, yet key characteristics distinguish the geek, who may be a type that predates Generation X, from the Gen X slacker.

The main characteristic that differentiates the geek from his slacker counterpart is that geeks can "sell out" and become students, nine-to-five workers, filmmakers, and/or cultural taste-makers because they never resist the system in the first place. Geeks are good workers and social conformists who respond to social marginalization by working harder and becoming creative. As a prolific screenwriter and creator, Kevin Smith is himself such a geek, as are most of his film's protagonists—the slight exception being *Clerks*' Dante, who is a geek in all other particulars but who resists leaving his convenience store job in order to get out to college and develop his talents.

Extrafilmically, geeks play a key role, perhaps *the* key role in the *production* of the "rise of the slacker" phenomenon. For this is capitalism: if something "rises," it is because it makes money, and the key filmmakers of slacker cinema—Smith, Linklater, Jim Jarmusch, and more recently Judd Apatow—all appear to be highly productive and

market-savvy geeks who surround themselves and fill their cinematic narratives with groups of male slackers. In fact, there is often hero-worship or a wanna-be quality that adheres to the geek's perception of the slacker: for example, in *Clerks* Randal (the unapologetic slacker) tells Dante (the geeky underachiever) "you know I'm your hero" and Dante never contradicts him. In fact, Dante obviously admires Randal's devil-may-care quality even though it frequently gets him into trouble. William Miller (Patrick Fugit) is in the same position in Gen-X director Cameron Crowe's *Almost Famous* (2000): he is an underaged, geeky journalist who loves the band he is touring with, who wants to hang out with the musicians and be considered "cool" like them, but he worries too much about his domineering mom and his writing deadline, and therefore, as Lester Bangs (Phillip Seymour Hoffman) puts it, "is not cool." But by the end of the film he writes the article that resuscitates the band's flagging career.

In short, then, productive filmmaking geeks actively create slacker cinema.[3] Kevin Smith is an industrious geek who adores slackers like real-life buddies Bryan Johnson and Jason Mewes, and his fictional creations like Randal, Banky, and Jay, and all of his films center upon duos of one geek and one slacker. In fact, male geek/slacker buddy duos dominate Smith's *ouevre* and much of the most popular independent cinema writ large, including the work of Jarmusch, Linklater, Steven Soderbergh, and Quentin Tarantino. Thus Smith is not alone in his preoccupation with male-male bonding and love; much of the independent cinema of Generation X shares his concerns. And since to some extent independent cinema functions as an early barometer of pop-cultural trends, we should not be surprised to find that more recently, in 2007, geek- and slacker-centered

narratives have risen into the cinematic mainstream with the films of Judd Apatow (*Knocked Up* and *Superbad*), the recent comedies of Adam Sandler (*I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*) and Will Ferrell (*Blades of Glory*), and even network television programs such as "Reaper" (the pilot episode of which Smith directed).[4]

Queering Slacker Cinema

The specific genre that Kevin Smith operates in, independent slacker cinema, emerged in the indie *milieu* during a period—the early 1990s—when queer cinema was also experiencing a notable boom. Indeed, there was such an explosion of high-quality new queer films released from 1990-92 that Village Voice critic B. Ruby Rich dubbed this group of films the New Queer Cinema and stated that the NQC formed "the beginnings of a new queer historiography, capable of transforming this decade, if only the door stays open long enough" (22). And yet Rich, even in her moment of excitement over the burgeoning NQC phenomenon, noted that there was a strong potential for the post-NQC commodification of queer cinema, and also commented upon the seemingly unexamined sexist and racist biases of NQC exhibition and distribution practices: "[W]ill lesbians ever get the attention for their work that men get for theirs? Will queers of colour ever get equal time?" (22). These would prove to be prescient questions to ask in 1992, and Rich herself would offer a disappointed commentary on the dispersed, male-centered, and mainstream-commodified state of queer cinema in a follow-up article in 2000.

Meanwhile, slacker cinema, most accurately delineated as a specifically Generation X phenomenon (see above), was incepted during roughly the same period as the NQC, its two most significant inaugural films being Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991) and Smith's *Clerks* (1994). Hence, slacker cinema had to compete with queer cinema for its share of the (then booming but still relatively limited) independent film marketplace.[5] My project argues that filmmakers like Smith and distributors like Miramax were well aware of the cultural climate of their times, that they knew what would differentiate their product from the cinematic mainstream, what would titillate and sell. And in the 1990s, what sold best in the independent *milieu* was queer sexuality.

So, whereas the independent gangster film *a la* Tarantino and his many imitators uses tropes of hypermasculinity and excessive violence to expunge homosexual panic, the slacker film, with its focus on feminized white male geeks and queered white male slackers, is able to more subtly depict the anxieties of closeted queer Generation X men. Hence while slacker cinema is certainly homophobic, it is arguably less so (or more subtly so) than the hypermasculine independent gangster cinema, which is only able to imagine gay male sex as brutal, *Deliverance*-style rape, as in Taratino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and gay male sexual identity as freakish and bizarre, as in queer cop Paul Smecker (Willem Dafoe) in cult gangster favorite *The Boondock Saints* (1999).

Smith's films are ripe for queer readings because they so insistently maintain a homosocial *milieu* wherein male-male bonding and abiding love between men can flourish. Having been produced in the wake of the New Queer Cinema "boom" of 1990-2, with pervasive if frequently homophobic queer components, *Clerks* and the rest of

Smith's 1990s *oeuvre* are not as reluctant to open themselves to queer interpretation as are many Hollywood films, and become more explicitly queer the further along into Smith's career we get. Therefore my queerly inflected analysis of Smith's work will not depend upon seeking out what Alexander Doty calls the "silences and gaps" that open space for queerness in more mainstream texts (*Flaming Classics* 3). In fact, I will frequently be doing the opposite: looking for the places where the film's incessant foregrounding of sexual issues and ambiguously sexualized and / or gendered characters are complicated by potentially heterocentric or "normalizing" influences, both diegetic and structural. While it is my ostensible aim to explore how the progressive aspects of View Askew's queer politics are contained by their heterocentric elements and ellipses, it is these very heterosexual/heterocentrist elements that open the way to a reading of Smith's cinematic output that includes the greatest possible range of queer positionings: the acknowledgement of sexual identities and cultural positions that refuse to be delimited by the usual categories of (strictly) gay, lesbian, straight, and so forth. The depiction of such undefined, fluid (and hence queer) sexualities in the View Askew *oeuvre* perhaps reaches its zenith with Smith's 1997 bisexual romantic comedy *Chasing Amy*, yet I will argue that Smith's film's preoccupation with male-male love and the homoerotics of buddy duos continues right through to his 2006 sequel to *Clerks*. Indeed, *Clerks II*, concludes with a pathos-laden scene in which slacker Randal openly declares his love for geek pal Dante—with his usual telling disclaimer that he loves his buddy "in a totally heterosexual way"—thereby rendering completely explicit the driving force

behind Smith's work: fascination with homosocial love and its dangerous proximity to homosexual desire.

However, before discussing in greater theoretical depth the way in which homoerotic desire between male buddies is frequently diffused or displaced in Western narratives including the films of Smith, a word needs to be said about my use of the terms "queer" and "queerness." Following Doty, I see queerness as an inclusive term having a multivalence of possible meanings depending upon its specific context. In its broadest sense, it denotes "a wide range of positions within culture that are 'queer' or non-, anti-, or contra-straight" which, in addition to encompassing the positions of explicitly gay, lesbian, and other non-straight persons, "can be and [are] occupied in various ways by otherwise heterosexual and straight-identifying people" (*Making Things* 3, 4). In other words, as Doty constructs queerness and as I think the View Askew films exemplify, *everyone* is potentially capable of inhabiting queer space or responding queerly to cultural texts, and since "queer erotics are already part of culture's erotic center [. . .] as a necessary construct by which to define the heterosexual and the straight" (3), cultural products such as films cannot help but have queer erotics and thematics already embedded within them, no matter how explicitly or vehemently they might disavow this possibility. What interests me about Smith's work is the way it negotiates this slippery slope: Smith's *oeuvre* consists of films about male buddies who love each other more than they love any woman and who joke constantly about each other's (often deviant) sexuality, yet who constantly disavow or distort their homoerotics, typically through homophobic joking.

In the context of this project, I will be using queerness primarily to describe not-exclusively-straight males, especially Smith's feminized geeks and queer slackers, and as such my use of "queer" will align itself with Doty's description of *Psycho*'s Norman Bates from *Flaming Classics*: "not clearly identified as homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual, while also, in certain, usually gender, particulars, not fitting into current understandings of normative straightness" (157). As we shall see, this kind of ambiguous description suits Smith's male buddy duos quite accurately.

The Homosocial Continuum

According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a wedge or gap has been imposed upon the homosocial continuum for males in Western culture. As Sedgwick notes in *Epistemology of the Closet*, this gap or disjunct is constituative of the patriarchal order as it has manifested in our culture and gives rise to the rigid homosexual / heterosexual binarism that attempts to elide the actual fluidity of real people's sexual desires and identities and maintains instead an unequal binary with one term—heterosexual—in the place of privilege. On one level, then, these differences in power between the two members of Smith's buddy duos help maintain that rupture or gap: the ostensibly more masculine of the two buddies can (and does) use his buddy as a scapegoat for any queerness that accrues to the homosocial duo. This pattern is enacted by all of Smith's duos: two examples from *Clerks* include the aforementioned bait-and-switch routine that Randal pulls on Dante during their car ride to Julie Dwyer's funeral, and Jay's opening speech to Silent Bob, which I will analyze in Chapter II.

This disavowed male queer desire is most frequently channeled into rivalries over women, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes (expanding on the work of French literary critic / philosopher René Girard) in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Sedgwick argues that in any erotic rivalry between male characters, "the bond that links the two [male] rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: [. . .] the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent" (21). Sedgwick goes on to describe the male "traffic in women" has been a longstanding social structure that facilitates the disavowal of male same-sex desire and thus shores up the power of a patriarchy founded upon the homophobic abjection of its constituitive "other," the not-exclusively-heterosexual man. The crystallization of the category of the homosexual man and the attendant conflation of gender and sexual object choice that supports it can be viewed as discursive structures that reinforce the arbitrary border that separates the homosexual from the homosocial: if the "homosexual" now (since the 1950s) designates a specific type of person who can be easily identified through his displaying certain stereotypical gender traits, then (the thinking goes) the threat of same-sex desire between "heterosexual" men can be suppressed. This is not to say that there are not actual heterosexual men out there and actual homosexual men, but merely to point out that the division between these two is not so clean as the dominant ideology would have us believe, and that there are countless intermediate positions along the homosocial continuum for men that exist in practice but are suppressed or disguised in representation.

Radical Incoherence

Alexander Doty's approach to pop-cultural queerness aligns itself with what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would call the *universalizing view* of homosexuality, that is, the view which posits that gay-ness is not strictly limited to an easily identifiable minority of persons and that therefore any person is at least potentially homosexual. This universalizing account is what Freud refers to as the polymorphous perversity of un- (or under-) developed sexual subjects, and while Freud's work does not necessarily pathologize homosexuality or seek to "cure" or eradicate it as such, it does nevertheless posit same-sex object choice as being an intermediate stage on the way toward full sexual development, i.e., heterosexuality.[7] This universalizing (what some have called constructivist) account of same-sex object choice is contrasted with a *minoritizing view* which states that homosexuality is indeed an essential or inborn quality of certain identifiable and classifiable individuals (this has also been called the essentialist position). As Sedgwick argues in *The Epistemology of the Closet*, the often contradictory relationship between the universalizing and minoritizing accounts of homosexuality produces a radical incoherence in how homosexuality—or more broadly and accurately, the entire homosocial continuum—is perceived, medicalized, legislated, and discursively constructed in Western patriarchal culture.

Part of how this incoherence comes about is related to contradictions inherent to the homosexual/heterosexual binarism. Sedgwick claims, following Foucault, that the practice of classifying persons according to the homosexual/heterosexual binary emerged at the turn of the twentieth century and rapidly became the dominant "world-mapping"

structure by which present-day sexual, and to some extent gender, identities and existence are conceptualized. She argues that this binarism serves as a "[site] that [is] *peculiarly* densely charged with lasting potentials for powerful manipulation—through precisely the mechanisms of self-contradictory definition or, more succinctly, the double bind" (2, 10). As an illustration of this double bind Sedgwick describes a 1973 Maryland case in which an eighth-grade science teacher was moved to a nonteaching position once the Board of Education learned of his homosexuality. She continues:

> When Acanfora [the teacher] spoke to news media [. . .] about his situation, he was refused a new contract entirely. Acanfora sued. The federal district court that first heard his case [. . .] [held] that Acanfora's recourse to the media had brought undue attention to himself and his sexuality, to a degree that would be deleterious to the educational process. The Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals disagreed. [. . .] Although they overruled the lower court's rationale, however, the appellate court affirmed its decision not to allow Acanfora to return to teaching. Indeed, they denied his standing to bring the suit in the first place, on the grounds that he had failed to note on his original employment application that he had been, in college, an officer of a student homophile organization—a notation that would, as school officials admitted in court, have prevented his ever being hired. The rationale for keeping Acanfora out of his classroom was thus no longer that he had disclosed too much about his homosexuality, but [. . .] that he had not disclosed enough. (69)

As Sedgwick puts it, this example shows that "the space for simply existing as a gay person and a teacher is in fact bayonetted through and through, from both sides, by the vectors of a disclosure at once compulsory and forbidden" (70) and in a broader sense reveals the anxieties and contradictions that always inhere to attempts to keep the homosexual/heterosexual border intact. What is most disturbing about this example and the strange contradictory logics it exposes is the fact that real lives and real power relations are at stake: that particularly around homosexuality "contests for discursive power can be specified as competitions for the material or rhetorical leverage required to set the terms of, and to profit in some way from, the operations of such an incoherence of definition" (11).

Ultimately, Sedgwick deploys the figure of the closet as conceptual shorthand for the radical incoherence she charts, stating that "[the] closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century" (71). As the schoolteacher example illustrates, the issue is not so much whether a specific queer individual is "in" or "out" of the closet, for neither position guarantees that individual's rights or safety, but rather that the closet itself is the overarching figure through which homosexual or queer existence of any kind is rendered visible in our culture. It is this figure which gives rise to the phenomenon of the "open secret" whereby it is possible for other people to "see" someone's queerness or closetedness before the desiring subject himself does, his "in-ness" or "out-ness" notwithstanding; it is this phenomenon that renders Dante's semi-conscious fall out of the closet at the outset of *Clerks* meaningful and even funny (70). Dante's unconscious relationship to the closet (he was sleeping) serves as beacon to all of us watching him fall

out of it (we know what this means), and this image of a man who is closeted (or coming out?) without knowing it carries through to all of Smith's feminized geek protagonists.

To sum up, as Suzanna Danuta Walters writes in her 2001 book *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America*, gay life and identity in the 1990s "[have] now taken on the dubious distinction of public spectacle" (9-10). And while Walters concedes that this increase in gay visibility may be regarded as a positive step away from "the problems of invisibility, subliminal coding, double entendres and double lives" that have plagued queer existence throughout much of American history, she nevertheless expresses concern over the concomitant dangers this phenomenon creates: "I believe there are ways in which this new visibility creates new forms of homophobia (for example, the good, marriage-loving, sexless gay vs. the bad, liberationist, promiscuous gay) and lends itself to a false and dangerous substitution of cultural visibility for inclusive citizenship." In short, she concludes, "this moment provides us with a picture of a society readily embracing the *images* of gay life but still all too reluctant to embrace the *realities* of gay identities and practices" (9-10). The specific cultural tension that Walters here highlights—that American society as a whole is willing to embrace (and even, as I will argue, exploit) queer images while refusing to accept queer individuals and practices in real life—is replicated in the work and star text of Kevin Smith. While constantly exposing his viewers to a multitude of queer discourses, ranging from the overtly and usually comically homophobic (as in *Clerks*) to the surprisingly sympathetic and/or revealing (as in the *denoument* of *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* or his onstage reponses to audience questions in *An Evening With Kevin Smith*), Smith rides a very fine line

between openly embracing and subtly disavowing the queerness of the texts he produces: as he says of his films in *An Evening With Kevin Smith*, "I like to put a little gay content in there." This statement, which admits to the queer influence in his work while safely containing it within the parameters of the diminuitive phrase "a *little* gay content," effectively sums up the ambivalent stance toward queerness that pervades Smith's work and his identity as an indie-film *auteur*. As my dissertation will show, not only is Smith's coyness over queerness textually interesting, but in his line of work as an independent 1990s filmmaker, it is quite profitable as well.

Chapter Outlines

In Chapter II, "Gender Play," I perform close readings of *Clerks* (1994), Smith's debut feature, and argue that the film exemplifies, through its plot and formal elements, the homosocial buddy relation that suppresses male-male homoerotic desire by channeling it into men's rivalries over beloved women. The chapter contextualizes the feminized Generation-X slacker within his principal social sphere, the male homosocial duo or group, and shows how this frequently homoerotic yet homophobic buddy/group structure aligns *Clerks* generically with the buddy road film. However, *Clerks* goes further in its gender play than previous buddy comedies by refusing to align biologically male characters with masculinity or female characters with femininity: in *Clerks*, masculine females (Veronica and Caitlin) and queer males (Randal) compete with each other for the attention of the feminized male protagonist, Dante. Thus the film shifts its principal narrative erotic rivalries with respect to gender in such a way that same-sex

desire is depicted indirectly through its appearance in the register of gender but *not* sexuality. In delineating this triangular structure, the chapter exposes the misogyny inherent to the slacker's homosocial group and briefly discusses his fear/fascination with masculine women such as domineering mothers, bossy girlfriends, and (in later Smith films) lesbians. Since *Clerks* also marks Smith's industrial beginnings as an "indie" poster child, Chapter II gestures toward my concluding discussion (in Chapter VI) of Smith's star text and his role as a self-styled, industry promoted auteur.

Chapter III, "Fanboys and Caped Crusaders" focuses on *Mallrats* (1995), Smith's second feature film and the first one to explicitly incorporate Batman iconography, mapping it onto the figure of Silent Bob. This additional layer of signification enriches the discussion of the queer/feminized buddy pairs begun in Chapter two, as Batman and Robin have a long history of queer interpretations. However, and perhaps more importantly, through this deployment of comic book iconography *Mallrats* explicitly engages an audience that will be key in supporting Smith's ongoing film career: the white male comic book fan. Thus Chapter III analyzes the narrative properties of comic books and the politics of comic book culture, both of which play an important role in *Mallrats*'s narrative structure and diegesis. Chapter III also investigates the "teenpic" subgenre and its ideological implications *vis á-vis* teen culture, since Smith and distributor Universal Studios intended *Mallrats* as an *homage* to 1970s and 1980s teen sex comedies. The chapter argues that the film's intended dual address—to comic-book insiders and a broader teen sex comedy audience—was a central factor in causing *Mallrats*'s notorious

failure at the box-office, yet also reinforced a trend (begun with *Clerks*) of Smith's films finding their audiences and making profit in the home video market.

Kevin Smith's third feature film, *Chasing Amy* (1997), introduces the first two explicitly gay-identifying characters into Smith's "View Askewniverse": the mainstream-palatable femme lesbian Alyssa Jones and the flaming gay black man Hooper X. My Chapter IV, "Unspoken Bisexuality," argues that these characters' presence in *Amy* accomplishes two things: (1) It raises Smith's cultural capital and the marketability of *Chasing Amy* by exploiting images of queer persons, and (2) It distracts the viewer from the much more pervasive and fluid queerness of the film's white male protagonist, Holden McNeil. In fact, it is Holden's bisexual fantasizing—that is, bisexual desire that is connotatively depicted but never spoken or consummated—that drives the film's narrative. In this context, Chapter IV responds to B. Ruby Rich's 2000 article "Queer and Present Danger," which prominently references *Chasing Amy* and declares the death by mainstreaming of queer cinema. I argue (against Rich) that the queer cinema "moment" Rich defines was always already co-opted by the industrial and economic forces of the studio system and the desire for broader audiences for queer cinema. The chapter concludes by interrogating *Chasing Amy's* status as Smith's most "personal" film, which is supported at the level of the text by Smith-alter-ego Silent Bob's climactic pathos-laden speech, raising key issues about the function of stardom and the nature (and marketing potential) of Smith's *auteur*-ship in a queer cinema context.

Chapter V, "Racing Queerness on the Road" argues that *Dogma* (1999) and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (2001) function generically as queer road movies, bearing

many formal similarities to more "out" queer road films like *My Own Private Idaho* (1991, dir. Van Sant) and *The Living End* (1992, dir. Araki). In the process of bringing together the discourses and tropes of race, gender, (queer) sexuality and the road, *Dogma* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* finally make explicit what all previous View Askew films have only hinted at: the queer attraction between Jay and Silent Bob, the production company's most enduring and iconic male buddy duo. *Dogma* and *JSBSB* fully embrace the superheroic, comic-book version of reality deployed to a lesser degree in the earlier *Mallrats*, using it as a comedic fantasy *milieu* in which Jay and Bob, fuctioning as comedic superheroes, can finally find ways to safely express their queerness without ostensibly "queering the deal" of their longtime buddy relation. My discussion of both films highlights the racial dimension of the queer masculinity that Jay and Bob embody, looking at how the white slacker duo's encounters with black men on their cross-country journey both shore up and render parodic their attempts to appropriate the tropes (love of gangsta rap, hypermasculine posing) of a projected white fantasy of black manhood.

My sixth and final chapter, "'One Pleasantry Shy of a Cock in the Mouth!': Kevin Smith's Queer Star Text," analyzes Kevin Smith's star text, by which I mean the collection of filmic and extrafilmic discourses that constitute what is known of Smith as a cultural public figure, using the straight-to-DVD documentary of Smith's college Q & A tour, *An Evening With Kevin Smith* (2002), as a primary textual referent. As I argue, Smith deliberately "plays" with his own established star text when speaking or writing for public consumption, using jokes to address questions about queerness and always maintaining an ambiguity with respect to his own sexuality that is immensely interesting

when considered in light of queer readings of his key cinematic works. The subtitle of the *Evening With Kevin Smith* DVD, "Silent Bob Speaks"—also the title of an essay collection published by Smith—attests to the slipperiness that exists between the figures of "Kevin Smith" and "Silent Bob," an ambiguity that has played a central role in helping Smith achieve and maintain his multimedia popularity, allowing him to playfully "have it both ways" with respect to the avowal/disavowal of the queerness of his work.

Notes

1. Whiteface clowning is historically linked to blackface minstrelsy, and in his article on Elvis impersonators Eric Lott has even noted the racial significance of the ultimate "killer clown," Batman arch-nemesis the Joker. Lott argues that the ethnic ambiguity the Joker's whiteface performance generates "evokes a threatening racial subtext" for the character, and adds that the Joker as portrayed by Jack Nicholson in the 1989 *Batman* film plays up that threatening subtext by appropriating black cultural signifiers such as the "Prince soundtrack" and the "rap-rhyming" quality of his speech ("All the King's Men" 207). Indeed, the infantilized, playful, taboo-breaking behavior of clowns aligns them culturally with stereotypes of less restrained, more "animalistic" non-white races.

2. The View Askew produced film *Vulgar* (directed by Smith pal Bryan Johnson) renders explicit the homophobic rage of clowns, when a clown named Flappy (Brian O'Halloran) gets raped by a group of men and subsequently takes his murderous vengeance upon them. Other examples of killer clowns include Pennywise in (boomer geek) Stephen King's *It* (the film version of which features Tim Curry as Pennywise; Curry also plays murderous camp transvestite Dr. Frankenfurter in *TheRocky Horror Picture Show*), and real-life homophobic "killer clown" John Wayne Gacy.

3. See my unpublished work-in-progress, "Golden Geeks: Producing the Rise of the Slacker," coauthored with Kom Kunyosying.

4. As of the new millenium even women are beginning to be represented as slackers, albeit sparingly. Key examples of this trend include slacker / geek protagonists Enid and Rebecca in *Ghost World* (2001), Sarah Silverman's slacker-inspired comedic persona seen in *Sarah Silverman: Jesus is Magic* (2005) and *The Sarah Silverman Program* (2006-present), and most recently, the titular character in the immensely popular *Juno* (2007). It remains to be seen if this migration of geek / slacker characteristics onto female characters will stick.

5. *Clerks* and *Go Fish* were released in same year, marketed similarly, and bear many formal similarities to each other as well; see Chapter II.

CHAPTER II

GENDER PLAY AND QUEER EROTICS: *CLERKS* (1994)

I first saw Kevin Smith's *Clerks* in 1995 at the recommendation of an old college friend. I knew this friend[1] from my college years, 1989-1993, which I had the good fortune to spend in Los Angeles. Of course, Los Angeles is a hotbed of film exhibition, and by being there during this pivotal time I was able to see such independent cinema "hits" as Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) and Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991) when they first achieved limited national release. I particularly recall seeing *Slacker* at a local multiplex (!) in 1991 and being absolutely blown away by its disregard for typical Hollywood narrative form, and its ironically humorous look at mostly college-age "slackers" who reminded me of myself and my friends at the time. Like Linklater's disaffected dropouts and ne'er-do-wells, my social group were all misfits, people who wore black clothing, smoked cigarettes, and attended screenings of *Slacker* instead of attending the University's immensely popular football games. In *Slacker*, and later *Clerks*, my friends and I found a cinematic representation of life as we saw it, from the point of view of Generation X. Little did I know that on the opposite side of the country at about that same time, another Gen Xer, Kevin Smith, saw *Slacker* at the Angelika Theatre in New York, receiving the first catalyzing inspiration that would

lead him inexorably from that moment to eventually create *Clerks* and become a pivotal independent filmmaker of the 1990s and beyond.

I was just out of college by the time *Clerks* debuted at the Sundance Film Festival in 1994, but my college friend made sure I heard about it, repeatedly urging me to see this small black-and-white movie that he claimed was the funniest film he had ever seen. He laughed out loud as he tried to describe it for me: Dante Hicks (Brian O'Halloran) reports for work on his day off at his boss's behest, and spends the day getting into minor mischief with his buddy and fellow convenience store/video store clerk, Randal Graves (Jeff Anderson). Dante's attempts to get back together with an old girlfriend, Caitlin (Lisa Spoonauer), behind the back of his current girlfriend, Veronica (Marilyn Ghigliotti), are foiled when Randal informs Veronica of Dante's intended infidelities with Caitlin. As a result, Dante and Randal engage in a cathartic fight, and the day ends with both Veronica and Caitlin rejecting Dante, as drug dealers Jay and Silent Bob, who have lurked outside the store all day, provide snarky commentary on the outcome of Dante's various struggles.

But that is merely the *plot* of *Clerks*, and as a foundational independent film of the 1990s, it is at least as concerned with its self-conscious style and low-budget, almost documentary aesthetic as it is with developing its narrative. As Geoff King writes,

> The patterning of events in *Clerks* is motivated through verisimilitude, up to a point, the disparate structure of much of the material having its basis in the random selection of customers visiting the store. It is also a stylized

> pattern, however, designed to establish a particular aesthetic, an eccentric impression courted by many indie features. (82)

Indeed, what my friend could not convey verbally, and what I could not grasp until I rented a VHS copy and saw *Clerks* for myself, was the extent to which *Clerks* revels in its no-budget origins and its strong allegiance to the concerns of Generation X.[2] Described in the 1994 Sundance Film Festival Program as "the filmic equivalent of a garage band" (Hawk n.p.), *Clerks* takes its budgetary and aesthetic limitations and turns them into a kind of rallying cry for "keeping it real" Gen-X slackerism, featuring raw, sexually explicit dialogue and self-conscious formal elements such as its frequently ironic intertitles. Like *Slacker* or Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), which it also emulates, *Clerks* eschews standard Hollywood narrative construction in favor of an episodic structure consisting of a "loose accumulation of assorted comic scenes" and divided up by "chapter-type titles" (King 81). Taken together, *Clerks*' use of loosely connected vignettes or "micro-narrative fragments" to build its plot (King 85), its grungy black-and-white photography, and the raw and often esoteric subject matter discussed by its disaffected protagonists combine to strongly differentiate the film from its mainstream Hollywood counterparts. It is, quite simply, a film Hollywood could not and would not have produced at that time (if ever). True to its marginal, hip, and postmodern origins, *Clerks* defiantly declares: "If you're with us, if you get our pop-cultural references and dirty jokes, enjoy! And if you aren't, who cares?" In sum, *Clerks* is a lowbrow, low-budget Gen-X film comedy unabashedly aimed at white, male Gen-X slackers, and its

creator, New Jersey writer-director Kevin Smith, would emerge in its wake as one of the most significant and emblematic figures in 1990s independent cinema.

As I discussed in my Introduction, it is not possible to fully evaluate the circumstances and after-effects of *Clerks*'s production and Smith's subsequent film career without considering the industrial and cultural climate in which the film and its *auteur* emerged. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the rise of a new industrial infrastructure for independent film exhibition and distribution, spearheaded most notably by Robert Redford's Sundance Institute and Bob and Harvey Weinstien's fledgling distribution company, Miramax. These two entities were most directly responsible for the independent cinema boom that would change the face of U.S. film production, distribution, marketing and culture throughout the 1990s. In terms of content, I argue that the success of this movement through the 1990s and beyond is largely premised upon a smart engagement with queer (non-straight) sexuality. From *sex, lies*'s voyeuristically sexual slacker Graham (James Spader) to the explosion of the New Queer Cinema in the early and mid-1990s (including, by many accounts, Smith's own *Chasing Amy* in 1997) to the relative "mainstreaming" of queer sexuality in such late-1990s productions as *Boys Don't Cry* and *Being John Malkovich* (both 1999), queerness was and is a primary means by which the independent sector differentiates its product from the Hollywood mainstream, and throughout this rich decade we see countless examples of independent productions that represent and thematize queer sexuality in order to titillate, provoke, and (of course) make money at the box office and on video. Kevin Smith and his distributor, Miramax, were well aware of the cultural climate into which they were placing their

product, and as such Smith's debut film—and, as I will argue, his entire *oeuvre*—demonstrates a persistent (and often contradictory) engagement with queer sexuality, queer persons, and non-heterosexual desire and gendering. In short, Smith's films depict the real tensions and dangers Generation-X male slackers face as they attempt to negotiate the culturally enforced gap that separates male homosociality (intense friendship, male bonding) from explicit male-male homoerotic desire and homosexuality in contemporary U.S. culture.

Kevin Smith's debut film, *Clerks* (1994), exemplifies through its plot and formal elements Eve Sedgwick's triangular formulation of displacement of masculine queer desire through rivalries over "beloved" feminine characters. Sedgwick argues that in any erotic rivalry between male characters, "the bond that links the two [male] rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: [. . .] the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent" (21). Sedgwick thus argues that male "traffic in women" is a longstanding social structure that facilitates the disavowal of male same-sex desire, permitting straight-identifying men to displace their homoerotic tendencies into rivalries involving women.

However, whereas in the texts Sedgwick analyzes these masculine and feminine positions are occupied by biological men and women respectively, *Clerks* modifies the triangular model by refusing to align biologically male characters with masculinity or female characters with femininity: in *Clerks*, masculine females (Veronica and Caitlin) and queer males (Randal) compete with each other for the attention of the feminized male

protagonist, Dante. Thus the film shifts its principal narrative erotic rivalries with respect to gender in such a way that same-sex desire can be depicted indirectly through its appearance in the register of gender but *not* sexuality. This has to do with the strange reverse polarity of the geek-slacker duo: the geek is feminized but more conservatively heterosexual, the slacker is more masculine than his geek buddy but is also more sexually deviant or queer. Hence Dante may be feminized and the object of Randal's desire, but, as he himself insists at the climax of episode three of the made-for-television *Clerks* animated series, "Shut up, I'm not gay!"[3]

And while there is reason to be suspicious of Dante's claim to exclusive heterosexuality, in *Clerks* his potential queerness is depicted only through disruption of his *masculinity*, not necessarily his *sexuality*. Dante is feminized but not necessarily queered, at least not specifically in the realm of sexual identity or sexual object choice. Dante whines, prefers the submissive role in relationships, and frequently cedes the masculine sphere of direct action to his girlfriend Veronica, as we will see dramatically demonstrated by my close reading of Veronica's first appearance at the Quick Stop. However, despite his feminization, Dante does not appear to be all that sexually deviant: he dates women, declines to watch hermaphroditic porn with Randal, and reacts conservatively to Veronica's attitude toward fellatio in his first argument with her. Hence, we can safely say that Dante's deviance from heteronormative masculinity, such as it is, primarily occurs in the register of gender (he is a feminine male) but *not* sexuality (he has little interest in sexual deviancy).

Randal, on the other hand, is queered but not particularly feminized. He displays most of the traits of the masculine male: ostensible homophobia (hence his bait-and-switch games with Dante), emotional insensitivity, and preference for the dominant position in his relationships. However, his sexuality is very ambiguous and rather queer: he watches hermaphroditic porn, has no explicitly sexual relationships of any kind, and claims near the end of the film that "I don't know thing one about chicks." In truth, along with Willam Black and the duo of Jay and Silent Bob, Randal is an embodiment of the queer man-child or clown figure discussed in the Introduction, a character whose queer sexuality is stereotypically diffused or rendered illegible through its conflation with extreme symptoms of arrested sexual development. Yet he is also more streetwise and verbally "sharper" than Dante is, this because he is a rebellious slacker who eschews formal education and the complicity with the system it implies in favor of an intuitive street-wisdom that allows him to "keep it real." It also makes his queerness harder to see, because Randal comes from a class position (lower middle class) where sexual forwardness and brash talk are more acceptable yet where homosexual identities are typically referred to and responded to in only the most homophobic ways—often quite violently. In a constant state of defensive homophobia, Randal works tirelessly to deflect queerness away from himself and onto others, usually onto his geeky best buddy Dante.

Hence, the most overt non-straight sexuality depicted in *Clerks* is that of its secondary characters, particularly Willam the Idiot Manchild (his title is a giveaway) and the queer buddy duo of Jay and Silent Bob. As we shall see, these characters serve a crucial function in *Clerks*: like the explicitly homosexual characters that often appear in

1970s buddy films such as *Midnight Cowboy* and *Scarecrow*, Willam and Jay and Silent Bob serve to shore up the alleged non-queerness of the principle male characters, Dante and Randal, by being more queer than they are. As already noted, these secondary queer characters all conform (in varying degrees) to the man-child stereotype, and while this chapter will not focus on these characters or this stereotype in extensive detail, this is a motif that will resurface in my discussion of Smith's later films, particularly *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (see Chapter V).

What follows may at times feel like a litany of "outing" fictional male characters from *Clerks* as if to say: "Look how gay this film really is!" To some extent, that is true, for one prevailing misconception my project seeks to eradicate is that Kevin Smith's films are *not* queer, that they are perfectly straight male buddy comedies aimed solely at straight audiences. This is certainly the preferred meaning of *Clerks* that Miramax and to some extent Smith himself have supported over the years since its release. Yet, as we shall see, not only is the male buddy comedy genre a fairly queer genre to begin with, Smith's films in particular are pervasively queer-inflected, in a homophobically comedic way that invites disavowal but that nonetheless colors the work and leaves it open to queer interpretation.

In order to explicate how and to what ends *Clerks* plays with the gender and sexual politics of its main characters and their relationships, this chapter will be divided into four broad sections. The first of these discusses the film in its formal and generic contexts, examining how the film represents a continuation of the buddy road movie subgenre and looking in particular at how it alters and plays with the historically

established conventions of that cinematic form. The second section describes how the erotic rivalries depicted in *Clerks* queer the gender roles and/or sexuality of all four of its major characters: Dante, Randal, Veronica, and Caitlin. The third broad area of focus consists of close readings of key sequences from *Clerks* and is subdivided into four parts: "Masculine Women" (a focus on the gender play enacted by Veronica, Caitlin, and Dante), "Queer Male Sexuality" (which discusses the queerness of Jay, Silent Bob, and Randal) and two sections ("Syntax" and "Catharsis") dedicated to analyzing the relationship between Dante and Randal, the film's central dynamic duo. The fourth and last section looks at how *Clerks* was promoted and marketed by Miramax *vis-a-vis* its queerness, serving as a closing point for the chapter and an opening gesture toward Chapter VI's in-depth analysis of Kevin Smith as a self-styled, industry promoted cinematic *auteur*.

The Buddy Film: A Brief Queer History [4]

Clerks is a buddy film, specifically a buddy comedy.[5] No comprehensive critical study of the male buddy film yet exists, though individual articles by the likes of Steven Cohan, Robert Lang, Robin Wood, and Matthew Tinkcom analyze the subgenre from the perspective of gender and sexuality studies. Cohan is also co-editor (with Ina Rae Hark) of a collection of essays on the buddy road film, *The Road Movie Book*, which analyzes road movies from a variety of critical perspectives, though this collection is not specifically focused around the buddy comedy.

The connections between the buddy comedy subgenre and male homoerotics are longstanding. For example, in *The Celluloid Closet* Vito Russo notes that many of the earliest film comedy duos played upon the homoerotics between the two buddies for comedic effect, and he singles out Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy as a particularly "sweet" and "loving" buddy pair who had "the perfect sissy-buddy relationship throughout their long career" from 1926-1951 (73, 72). While Russo valorizes Laurel and Hardy for the "unconscious affection" in their relationship and faintly condemns other comedy duos like Abbott and Costello and Martin and Lewis for being occasionally "really cruel to each other," Russo's main point here is that male-male buddy teams, particularly ones like Laurel and Hardy that revel in "adolescent behavior," are nearly always fraught with the possibility of same-sex desire (73). Further, Russo's classification of Laurel and Hardy as consisting of a feminized sissy (Laurel) coupled with a more masculinized buddy (Hardy) correlates with the feminized geek (Dante) and queered slacker (Randal) pairs found in Smith's work, pointing to the fact that despite historically and culturally inflected shifts in nuance, the core structure—and homoerotics—of these buddy teams has remained relatively stable since the earliest days of film comedy.

The queerness of the comedic male buddy pair found heightened expression in the 1940s series of "Road to" films starring Bob Hope and Bing Crosby. As Steven Cohan has shown, the "Road to" films were produced during a period when dominant notions about male homosexuality were in flux. This instability was due in part to the prevalence of the wartime Army buddy relation, an institutionally sanctioned and culturally legible homosocial relationship structure that, according to Cohan, could very

easily queer the male homosociality underlying American masculinity (24). Further, due to the popularity of the gender-transgressive "fairy" stereotype, a figure whose popularity and visibility "reached its high point in the so-called pansy craze of vaudeville, nightclub, and live theater during the early thirties" with figures such as Gene (Jean) Malin, Bruz Fletcher, and Ray (Rae) Bourbon, forties film audiences were accustomed to seeing the "obviously queer sissy" on stage and screen (34). Unfortunately, with the enactment of the Hollywood Production Code in the mid-thirties, queer cinematic representation would undergo "a shift in register from a denotative encoding of queerness (the well-known fairy character) to a more complex, because more covert, one of connotation (sexual innuendo and camp)" (34); however, these attempts at repression could not erase the legibility of the fairy stereotype, a legibility that Bob Hope (along with contemporaries like Jack Benny) would draw upon to establish his popular comic persona.

In his discussion of the fairy stereotype in relation to Bob Hope's immensely popular comic persona, citing the work of historian George Chauncey in *Gay New York,* Cohan writes that "until the 1950s the contemporary heterosexual-homosexual binarism, which conflates gender and sexuality, was a middle-class ideology that did not dominate the entire culture. In the first half of the century, the fairy was primarily a gender position in working-class culture" that did not necessarily correlate to homosexual object choice (Cohan 42). This lack of consensus in the culture about what constituted gender/sexual deviance allowed the 1940s "Road To" films to deploy Hope's fairy-ness in such a way as to "[play] upon intimations of homoeroticism" between Hope and

Crosby and queer their buddy relation (25). Hence, Cohan insists that the 1940s "Road To" buddy films, progenitors of the later 1970s buddy cycle, can only be understood in their historical context, that is, "in terms of the gender slippages occurring during the forties, when, as institutionalized by the Army buddy relation, the homosociality underlying American masculinity could all too easily 'queer the deal'" (24).

Interestingly, and in line with what Eve Sedgwick has theorized about relations between men, the queerness of the Hope-Crosby duo also depends upon their rivalries over women—or really woman, since in nearly every "Road To" film the female object of desire is played by Dorothy Lamour. As Cohan observes, "[the] expectation that she will inevitably turn up on the scene gives these two 'friends of Dorothy' more license that usual for transgression" since her presence "legitimates their obvious pleasure—and physical intimacy—as a pair of buddies who have sworn off women in order to be together" (27). The "Road To" films thus fit neatly into the structure of the erotic triangle and "traffic in women" discussed in the Introduction, here rendered "knowingly and comically" overt by the Hope-Crosby team's explicitly stated "bonding [. . .] over their rejection of women" that impels the "Road To" narratives (25). For example, in *Road to Singapore* (1940), Ace (Hope) and Josh (Crosby), on the run from angry New Yorkers whom they have swindled, head to Singapore to escape the troubles that come from associating with women, and once there, initiate a new series of con-games masterminded by Josh in order to scam what they need to survive. Enter Mima (Lamour), who first tries to con the buddies in a scheme of her own, then falls in love with Josh and inevitably "sets up a good-natured rivalry between the two buddies that,

curiously enough, does not divide them or make them enemies but, on the contrary, intensifies their close relation" as they attempt to evade local authorities once again and escape Singapore without being killed or arrested (26). Hence the presence of Lamour's Mima acts as a catalyst for increased rivalry-as-bonding between the central male buddy pair, much as *Clerks* female characters Veronica and Caitlin serve a similar function for Dante and Randal, as we shall see.

At the end of his article on the "Road to" films, Cohan suggests that "after the 'Road to' series effectively ran its course with *Bali* in 1952, it would be much harder for movie buddies to queer the deal with either the innocence or audacity that Hope and Crosby [. . .] so outrageously put on display" (44). Indeed, after the last "Road to" film and the subsequent breakup of the Dean Martin-Jerry Lewis buddy team in 1956, the buddy film subgenre seems to have gone into remission for most of the late fifties and early sixties, perhaps as a result of decreased movie attendance in general and the increased popularity of romantic/sex comedies such as *Pillow Talk* (1959) during that period. Additionally, postwar paranoia about homosexuality and its presumed connections to American communism may have made the always-homoerotic buddy comedy a harder sell to American mainstream audiences, and as Robert Lang and Richard Dyer have noted, queer subtexts found rampant expression in the films *noir* of this period, which are notable for their "explosive" and homophobic "sexual paranoia" (Lang 33). This suggests a shift or oscillation in the representation of male-male homoerotic desire from the register of comedy (as in the "Road to" films) to that of excessive violence and moral depravity (the *noirs*).

Perhaps as a result of this temporary decline of the male buddy film during the late 1950s and early 1960s, by which time even the (homophobic) *noirs* had run their course, homoerotic buddy dynamics instead found their way into the mainstream heterosexual sex comedies of the period. As Dennis Bingham argues in his discussion of Rock Hudson-Doris Day films like *Pillow Talk*, the love between male buddies in these films usually "far outweighs either man's regard for [women]" and in fact "heralds a new emphasis in American film on male friendship that supersedes male-female relationships" (20). So despite the ostensible foregrounding of heterosexual courtship and romance in the Hudson-Day films, "[the] men's dealings with each other are the most convincing in these films, while the desperate denouements that get the heterosexual couple together by the final fade-out appear unmotivated and forced" (21). This latter statement could as easily apply to Kevin Smith's *Mallrats* (1995) as *Pillow Talk*, and it is in this sense that these early sixties sex comedies set the stage for the emphatic return of the central male buddy pair in the cinema of the late 1960s and beyond.

Another noteworthy mid-sixties entry in the buddy comedy tradition is Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple*, first a hit Broadway play debuting in 1965, then a 1968 film and subsequent network TV series. It features Felix Ungar, the neurotic neat-freak, and Oscar Madison, the fun-loving slob, as a dynamic buddy duo continually at odds with one another yet ultimately bonded together by friendship (and shared living quarters). The Broadway play featured Art Carney as Felix and Walter Matthau as Oscar, and the 1968 film retained Matthau as Oscar but featured Jack Lemmon as Felix. All versions of *The Odd Couple*—stage, screen, and televised—were extremely popular and hence the term

"odd couple" has entered common parlance as any mismatched duo with one geeky control freak and one clownish slob. In this sense it serves as an enduring template for many of the comedic buddy duos that follow it, including Dante (uptight control freak) and Randal (carefree clownish slob) of *Clerks*.

The male buddy film returned in a more serious register in the late sixties with the appearance of such films as *Easy Rider, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *Midnight Cowboy* (all 1969). Less comedic than their 1940s predecessors, these late-1960s buddy films make many significant revisions to the conventions of the subgenre, shifts that Cohan argues largely result from the influence of Jack Kerouac's immensely popular existential buddy road novel, *On The Road*: "Previously male buddy teams had taken to the road primarily in comedies [. . .]. Post-Kerouac buddy-road movies take the male couple more seriously, while simultaneously problematizing it" (*Road Movie Book* 8). As we shall see, much of that post-Kerouac seriousness and problematization centers upon the sexuality of and potential attraction between the two members of the male buddy duo.

In *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* Robin Wood analyzes the buddy film subgenre during the New Hollywood period, from the late sixties through the decade of the 1970s and into the 80s, correctly observing that "in all these films the emotional center, the emotional charge, is in the male/male relationship, which is patently what the films are *about*" (204). This assessment also applies to all the films of Kevin Smith but is perhaps especially obvious in the case of *Clerks*. The whole film is organized around the central relationship between Dante Hicks and Randal Graves. Further, as my discussion

of erotic triangles (shortly to follow) and subsequent close readings will show, the *way* in which *Clerks* depicts its central male relationship(s) aligns it in may respects with the 1970s buddy film tradition and opens it up to queer readings of the kind Wood applies to *Scarecrow* (1973) and *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (1974).

This strong correlation between the New Hollywood buddy films and the later Generation X buddy comedies of Kevin Smith should come as no surprise, given the immense influence New Hollywood director/*auteurs* such as Steven Spielberg and George Lucas exerted on the cinema of Generation X in general. As delineated in my Introduction, the Baby Boomer directors who shaped New Hollywood were largely white, male geeks who initiated the nerd-as-protagonist paradigm in mainstream cinema of the 1970s and 80s. Prior to the 1970s, nerdy, bookish men were rarely lead characters except in comedy (e.g., Woody Allen's protagonists), yet New Hollywood filmmakers made white male geeks and misfits the focus of their work. The New Hollywood films and their geeky—which is to say, thoughtful (even, as with Dreyfuss in *Jaws*, intellectual), feminized, and not traditionally masculine) protagonists, such as Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*, Richard Dreyfuss's characters in *Jaws* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and Ratso Rizzo in *Midnight Cowboy*, served as the cinematic precursors to the geeks and slackers of 1990s cinema. Their impact can be seen explicitly in the films of Kevin Smith: his films make frequent allusions to *Star Wars* and *Jaws*, and he names the chief mall security guard in *Mallrats* after sheriff Joe LaFours, Butch and Sundance's nemesis in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969). *Butch and Sundance* seems to be Smith's favorite buddy movie, perhaps because, as in his own films, it

preserves the homosocial buddy relation to the end: Butch and Sundance go out in a blaze of glory together, visually frozen in mid-stride together the instant before their deaths. The film's final shot is a freeze-frame of the two heroes as they rush to their certain demise, implying that although they are about to physically die, their homosocial bond will last forever, frozen in time and space along with their freeze-framed images. Smith emulates this final shot at the end of *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (2001).[6]

In addition to these specific influences and *homages*, Smith's films fit into the generic mold of the New Hollywood buddy film by adhering to virtually all of the subgenre's major conventions. Robin Wood delineates six major characteristics of the 1970s buddy film and describes how each supports his central contention that these films are in effect male-male love stories (203-4). These six conventions are: (1) The Journey, (2) The Marginalization Of Women, (3) The Absence of Home, (4) The Male Love Story, (5) The Presence of an Explicitly Homosexual Character, and, lastly, (6) Death. And while Smith's *Clerks* reworks some of these conventions and, in true Generation X ironic fashion, reunites the form with its 1940s origins in tongue-in-cheek comedy, Wood's template nevertheless offers an efficient inroad to grasping the major themes and conventions of *Clerks* and its successors. Indeed, while *Clerks* modifies or refigures two of these six conventions of the buddy subgenre—i.e., the road trip or journey and the presence of an explicitly homosexual character—it quite literally adheres to the other four principal conventions of the 1970s buddy film as Wood delineates them (203-4). I will now briefly discuss *Clerks* in relation all six of these conventions before moving on to describe the erotic triangles that structure the relations of the film's central characters.

First, the road trip or journey. The action of *Clerks* transpires almost exclusively in and around the Quick Stop Convenience Store/RST Video building, and unlike its 1970s predecessors, the film is not structured on an extended journey. Interestingly, however, the one time the two protagonists leave the store by car, to attend Julie Dwyer's wake at Dante's insistence, Randal initiates a conversation that ends with Dante admitting that he has tried to autofellate himself and Randal accusing him of being a pervert: a game of homophobic bait-and-switch during which Randal is able to disavow his own interest in deviant sexuality by deflecting it onto Dante. This is notable because in a shorthand fashion this sequence encapsulates all the homosocial thematics of the buddy road films that Wood describes, wherein one buddy is depicted as "unambiguously masculine" or at least more masculine than his counterpart (e.g., Thunderbolt, Randal) and the other is marked as feminine or queer in more overt ways (Lightfoot, Dante) (208). So while this journey does not constitute the impetus of the film's narrative as it might have in a 1970s buddy film, or as it would in Smith's own Askewniverse films post-*Chasing Amy*, it nevertheless serves a similar narrative *function*, that is, to queer one of the buddies while shoring up the other one's less ambiguous, implicitly heterosexual masculinity. Interestingly, however, in the case of *Clerks*, it is in fact the more feminized member of the buddy duo, Dante, who *seems* less queer than Randal. This motif, of making the more masculinized slacker more queer-seeming and –behaving than his feminized geek counterpart, is prevalent throughout Smith's cinematic work.

Second, the marginalization of women. Although *Clerks* features two significant female characters, Veronica and Caitlin, the film's diegesis transpires from Dante's point

of view and as such it is his relationship with Randal that is first and foremost the concern of the film. The two male buddies (particularly Dante) spend much of their time talking about these women, and the women in *Clerks* are certainly more narratively central (and at least in Veronica's case, more visible) than their 1970s counterparts. To his credit, Smith seems interested in female subjectivity and his films always feature prevalent female characters, especially in *Chasing Amy* and *Dogma* where the women function as central protagonists. However, even in those films the male buddy duos tend to dominate the narrative, and a simple comparison of male/female screen time in *Clerks* reveals that it is primarily *about* the relationship between Dante and Randal and, as with the "Road to" films or the New Hollywood buddy films, the female characters in *Clerks* are secondary—albeit crucial, as we will see—to the central homosocial buddy relation.[7]

Third, the absence of home. Although the pre-credits sequence of *Clerks* begins in the physical space of Dante's house, the action quickly moves to the Quick Stop Convenience store, in and around which most of the film's events take place. Like the road in many buddy films, the convenience store is a place away from home where transience and a kind of alienated ennui are the dominant motifs. The convenience store setting is an iconic one for Generation X, particularly in its slacker cinema strain, appearing in such visual texts as *Slacker* (1991), *Mr. Show with Bob and David* (1995-8), *Ghost World* (2001), and *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004) as key emblem of American consumerist culture overrun by late (global) capitalism. Indeed, Bob Hawk, the Independent Feature Film Market (IFFM) consultant who brought *Clerks* to the attention of film critics Peter Broderick and Amy Taubin in 1993, claims that

convenience stores are nothing less than "a metaphor for our society today"—a postmodern society rendered impersonal, commodified and inauthentic, a "ghost world" of strip-malls and badly managed convenience stores (*Snowball Effect*). In all these texts, the convenience store is depicted as an impersonal second home for slackers, a place where Gen Xers go to find low-pressure jobs and take refuge from the demands of a fast-paced and corrupt consumer culture that pushes them to "grow up" and succeed on terms they are not comfortable with.

Hence, by focusing on the site of the convenience store and the disaffected clerks who work there, *Clerks* follows, in a particularly Gen-X way, the buddy film imperative to demonstrate the impossibility of achieving anything like a home, which Wood argues must "be understood not merely as a physical location but as both a state of mind and an ideological construct, above all as ideological *security*" (203). In Western culture, the security that is associated with the concept of home is bound up in "monogomous heterosexual partnership and the conventional nuclear family," social constructs that marginalize and/or elide the existence of those who refuse to participate in the Oedipal drama of the nuclear family (Lang 332, 344). As Robert Lang argues, the road movie presents an ideal space for homosocially bonded characters who do not wish to grow up, get married, etc., precisely because the ever-puerile and marginalized buddies of this genre have "no place in the traditional family" and "must leave the spaces of home and family" if they are to find fulfillment. Indeed, Katie Mills supports this interpretation of the road (and the buddy pairs that travel it) as being anathematic to traditional family structures and thus fundamentally queer, writing that the "road story" of buddy films

"offers marginalized communities a ready narratological structure to represent rebellion and collective transformation," often in response to ideological crisis or oppression taking place in the wider culture (307).

Wood cites the Vietnam War and the Watergate crisis as being the major catalysts for the ideological crises being worked through in the 1970s buddy cycle, and as I have already suggested in my Introduction, *Clerks* and Smith's subsequent buddy films constitute responses to the concerns and anxieties of Generation X, including the queering of masculinity (embodied in nearly all his male characters) and the globalization of consumer culture (reflected in the physical sites of the convenience store and *Mallrats*'s shopping mall). Smith's early films (*Clerks* through *Chasing Amy*) may not include lengthy road trips but they are structured around the absence of an ideologically secure "home" of the kind Wood describes. Furthermore, as I shall discuss in Chapter V, Smith's two concluding films of the New Jersey cycle, *Dogma* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back,* adhere even more closely to the older buddy film formula by sending their male buddy protagonists out on the road.[8]

Fourth, the male love story. *Clerks* readily fits this conventional pattern: the entire film is structured around the central homosocial relationship between Dante and Randal. In fact, it is in this specific sense that *Clerks* stands as representative of Smith's entire cinematic career: his *oeuvre* is emphatically concerned with the bonds of love and intimacy that form between pairs (and sometimes groups) of pre-adult males. These male love stories, usually about ostensibly straight males on the level of plot and dialogue (*Chasing Amy* is a notable exception), express the underlying homoeroticism of their

central character's buddy bonds through *mise en scene,* editing, and subtle forms of visual and cinematic coding.

In that connection, we move to Wood's fourth convention, the presence of an explicitly homosexual character. *Clerks* does not technically feature an explicitly self-identifying homosexual character, but it *does* include characters who are definitely *more* queer than either of the central buddies, first among them being Willam the Idiot Manchild, a. k. a. "Snowball." It is significant that Willam (played by producer Scott Mosier) is first introduced into the narrative by his nickname, "Snowball," because he likes to engage in snowballing, a practice wherein a partner who fellates him then kisses him and spits his own ejaculate back into his mouth. The queer implications of this sexual practice are clear: Willam likes the taste of semen. This not only indicates his sexual interest in male ejaculate, but it is explicitly paired with a sexual practice involving women, hence acting as an indicator of bisexuality and/or a queer sexuality that transgresses, subverts, and/or just plain old ignores traditional gendered and sexual binaries. Willam is not only not-straight, he is truly, fluidly *queer*. Willam is also implicated in a number of other queerly interesting sequences in *Clerks*, a couple of which I will analyze in detail in this chapter. Hence, even though Willam is not presented in the diegesis of *Clerks* as being explicitly or avowedly gay, he nevertheless serves (in much queerer fashion) the same function that an openly homosexual character would: as a "disclaimer—our boys are not like *that"* (Wood 204). His presence allows us to see Dante and Randal as being at least *more* heterosexual than Willam. The queer duo of Jay and Silent Bob also serve this function, though, as my close readings will show,

the boundary separating Willam or Jay and Silent Bob from Dante and/or Randal is not as clear as it could be.

Wood's sixth and final buddy film convention is, simply, death. Wood observes that in all the major buddy films of the 1970s, one (or sometimes both, as in *Butch Cassidy* or the later *Thelma and Louise*) of its central buddies is either literally or symbolically killed (he cites Francis's catatonia at the end of *Scarecrow* as an instance of the latter). The reason for the prevalence of this motif is simple: "The male relationship must never be consummated (indeed, must not be *able* to be consummated), and death is the most effective impediment" (204). Having raised, however ambiguously, the specter of male homosexuality, the buddy films must purge the possibility of a queer consummation of the buddy relation by killing off one—and always the more effeminized and thus queerly marked—of the buddy characters, such as Jeff Bridges' aptly named Lightfoot in *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* or Dustin Hoffman's Ratso in *Midnight Cowboy*. In this light it is extremely significant that as scripted and originally shot and edited, *Clerks* (in the version now available on DVD as *Clerks: The First Cut*) concluded with the apparently random shooting death of Dante, the feminized member of the Dante/Randal duo. Smith was later persuaded to cut this ending from the film, those so advising him claiming that the tone of the ending was way too grim for a comedy.[9] However, the presence of this death scene in the original version of *Clerks*—it was even included as a bonus feature in the orginal 1995 DVD release of the film—is completely logical and would be conventionally expected if we read the film as a queer buddy movie

attempting to purge the possibility of a consummation between its main characters, Dante and Randal.

That *Clerks* so neatly fits into the six most prevalent conventions of the 1970s buddy film as identified by Wood is especially important given the author's comments near the end of his discussion of the New Hollywood period:

> [T]he ambiguity or evasiveness of the buddy movies [of the 1970s] can be read positively in the context of the collapse of confidence in normality [. . .]: the men are explicitly defined as heterosexual yet involved in what can only be called a "male love story." (213)

Wood further notes that "[i]t is striking that, just before the sudden outcrop of explicitly gay movies [such as *Making Love* in 1982], the buddy cycle virtually ends" (213), as if the subgenre itself acknowledged its true thematic underpinnings and conceded the spotlight to the new films that could deal with the same issues through direct denotation rather than indirect connotation. What is interesting to me in this context is the way in which strategies of queer representation in this subgenre shifted yet again with the turn of a new decade, the 1990s. For while it is crucial to note that the films Cohan and Wood discuss are Hollywood studio productions whereas *Clerks* is resolutely and emphatically a product of the independent filmmaking sector, I would suggest that this migration of the buddy film formula from the mainstream to the margins is itself significant, coming as it does on the heels of a similar shift away from comedy and into the hypermasculinized action/cop film genre during the 1980s.[10]

Erotic Triangles and Gender Play

Virtually every extant Kevin Smith film features at least one duo of male buddies—a feminized geek and a queered slacker—whose sexual desire for each other is constantly called into view and into question, typically for comedic purposes, but just as often as the central impetus of a more serious narrative arc (as in *Chasing Amy*). I call these buddy pairs "dynamic duos," a term which refers to the hierarchical power dynamics that exist between the two characters of each duo.

The twosomes falling under the dynamic duo rubric are hierarchical in nature and as such exhibit power dynamics between the two unequally positioned participants. One partner, our geek, is always presented as more submissive, feminized, and ambiguously gendered; the other, our clown or slacker, is more aggressive, masculinized, and less ambiguous in his gender traits though not sexual object choice. Hence the geek occupies the conventional space of "the woman" in the duo, the more masculine slacker the space of "the man." This hierarchization of the duo along gender lines correlates to traditional heterosexual relationship structures which "involve people defined as social unequals (or oppressor and oppressed, men and women)" (Dyer 33). By contrast, according to Richard Dyer in his article on stereotyping, "homosexual relationships involve two people who, in terms of sex caste, are equals" (33). However, this "sex caste" or gender equality between homosexual (and by extension, homosocial) men is rarely depicted in cinematic representations of same-sex couples precisely because the imperatives of contemporary heterocentrist culture demand some kind of inequality between the partners in order to make the relationship legible in the first place.[11] Thus Dyer observes that in

depictions of explicitly gay couples, "other forms of social inequality" such as "age [. . .] money and class" are often imposed in order to "[define] the nature of the gay relationship" (34).

Insofar as the buddy pairs in the View Askewniverse signify as homoerotically bonded, which they emphatically do, this social inequality between the two bonded buddies is evident in *Clerks*, wherein Dante comes off as more socially refined, educated, and therefore of slightly higher class status than the coarse and more traditionally masculine Randal. Nonetheless, in *Clerks*, since the homoerotics between the central male characters are not rendered as explicitly as in the more obvious gay couples Dyer describes, the social inequality needed to make the erotic/romantic relationship between the buddies visible is most fully reckoned in terms of their gendering: Dante is more feminine than Randal. As we shall see, however, neither partner is completely free from gender ambiguity or queer homosocial desire. The differences between the two buddies are differences of degree rather than kind.

This fluidity or lack of boundaries around masculine gendering and the sexual queerness it so frequently connotes is a result of a cultural disparity in how male sexuality and gender roles are conceived in the first place. As discussed in the Introduction, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a wedge or gap has been imposed upon the homosocial continuum for males in Western culture. This gap exists to separate abject or queer sexualities from the normative heterocentrist imperatives that privilege white male Christian heterosexuality and undergird patriarchal power in the West. To maintain these boundaries and this gap, certain powerful and radically incoherent

structures have been constructed, for example the homosexual/heterosexual binary as a way of "world mapping" and classifying whole persons according to their perceived sexual object choice—as if even that were stable or static for any given individual. Through the encompassing figure of the closet, a structure rife with contradictions that nevertheless functions as the "defining structure for gay oppression in this century" (*Epistemology* 71), these gaps and incoherences in the male homosocial continuum reify the power of a patriarchy founded upon the homophobic abjection of its constituitive "other," the queer or not-exclusively-heterosexual man.

Clerks emerges in an historical period when the rise of queer media visibility, and an increased public awareness of—if not sympathy with—the existence and rights of queer persons, is well underway. Along with increasing social and economic gains by women and people of color, the rise of queer cultural visibility further destabilizes white masculinity's hold upon the privileged position of centrality and symbolic normalcy within U.S. culture. Hence, white male media forms like independent slacker cinema and *Clerks* are increasingly compelled to police the borders between various sexual and gender choices for men, contributing to the maintenance of the incoherent gap in the homosocial continuum heretofore discussed. In light of this cultural situation, it is particularly interesting how the type of film I am analyzing, the independent buddy comedy exemplified by *Clerks*, delights in playing on and around the forbidden borderline between the rigidly hetero/homosexual and the liminal region described by the term queer. Of course, this is a form of play that simultaneously works to solve particular social dilemmas of this historical moment, in this case the fears, disavowals, and

abjection strategies of a white masculinity perpetually in crisis. Because the buddy film is the comedic subgenre that most insistently plays with and points to this rupture in the male homosocial continuum that Sedgwick describes, it depends heavily on the triangular structure of male homoerotic disavowal and the "traffic in women" that so often accompanies the maintenance of that rupture.

This triangular structure plays out somewhat differently in *Clerks,* where it is used to facilitate gender and object-choice slippages amongst the principal characters. For there are really two overlapping erotic triangles—the second of which is better described as a triangle with an extra leg, or a pyramid—that schematize the rivalries and homo/heterosocial bonds played out between the characters in the film. And since, in contrast to the classic erotic rivalries described by Sedgwick in *Between Men*, the principal male characters Dante and Randal do not overtly compete for any of the women Dante is involved with, the narratives of rivalry and desire in *Clerks* set themselves up along some rather startling cross-gender and intra-gender lines.

As Figure 4 shows, the first of *Clerks*'s erotic triangles maps out Dante's rivalry with the Asian Design Major Sang for the romantic affections of Caitlin Bree. This is a classic erotic triangle featuring two men in competition for one woman, but there are some interesting twists: for one, Sang never appears onscreen and we never hear his voice. He is an invisible character, a structuring absence. What's more, Sang is the ideal rival for Dante because from what little we do know about him he is similar/analogous to Dante in many key respects: Caitlin calls him "very traditional" with respect to gender roles, a conservatism we will see replicated in Dante concerning sexual practices later in

this chapter; he is ethnically marked as Asian, much as Dante's first name and dark features mark him as Italian-American; and, like Dante, he ultimately seems to be subordinate to Caitlin when it comes to determining the fate of their relationship. So ultimately, this is an erotic triangle where the masculine power and privilege belongs to the female object of desire: Caitlin may be the "object" when it comes to the sexual object choice of the two rivals, but it is she who wields the masculine power. Thus our first triangle reveals that some kind of divestment of masculine gendering, and its attendant privilege of action with respect to patriarchal power structures, from heterosexual object choice is taking place in *Clerks*. In sum, the Dante-Sang-Caitlin triangle upholds the rivalry over male-female sexual object choice but reverses the traditional gender positions of its participants: feminine men compete over a masculine woman.

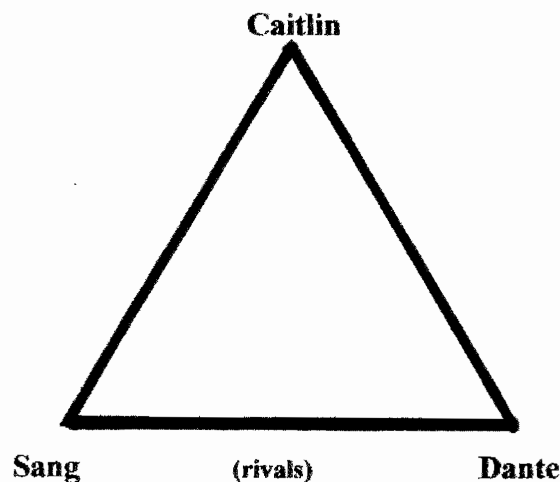

Figure 4: The Sang-Dante-Caitlin Erotic Triangle

The second triangle—or really pyramid—that we can use to map out the more central erotic rivalry that drives the narrative of *Clerks* delineates a three-way rivalry between Caitlin, Veronica, and Randal for the attentions of Dante (see Figure 5). This pyramid restores the more traditional gendering of its participants—as I will discuss in detail below, Caitlin, Veronica, and Randal are all gendered masculine—but queers these interrelations by (1) including two masculine females in the active, desiring (that is, desire-er rather than desire-ee) positions traditionally reserved for males, (2) exposing the potentially homoerotic nature of Randal's desire for Dante, and (3) queering the structure of the triangle itself by setting up a three-way rivalry along its base.

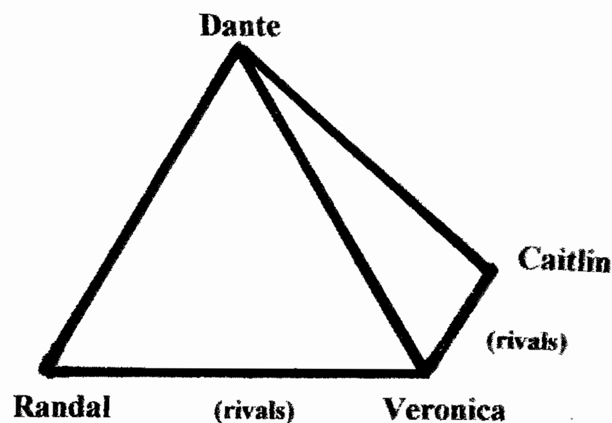

Figure 5: A Queer Erotic Pyramid

It is this unusual pyramid structure and the queer gender and object-choice crossings it schematizes that impels most of the key diegetic developments in *Clerks*.

In looking more closely at the film, I will refer to two versions of *Clerks*: the theatrical cut that was distributed by Miramax in 1994, and *The First Cut* which first became commercially available on the *Clerks Tenth Anniversary* DVD (2004, usually called *Clerks X*), accompanied by a making-of-*Clerks* documentary called *The Snowball Effect*.[12]

In order to serve as a kind of slice-of-film-history and to avoid digital remastering costs, *Clerks: The First Cut* as it appears on the *Clerks X* DVD is dubbed directly from the same Super VHS tape version of *Clerks* that first showed at the Independent Feature Film Market (IFFM) screening in New York in 1993. As Smith himself puts it in his video introduction to *The First Cut*, this is the "the tape that started it all," the very version that early supporters Amy Taubin, Peter Broderick, and John Pierson saw before the film even hit Sundance in 1994. This is also the cut that screened at Sundance 1994, minus the final scene involving the death of Dante. Once Miramax bought the film in 1994, they cleaned it up for national distribution: new music was added to the soundtrack, the entire soundtrack was remixed, and additional editing trims were made to bring *Clerks* from its original 105 minutes to the 92 minutes of the theatrical cut. While most of these trims are quite small, the most significant ones serve to tone down the queer / subversive content of *The First Cut*.

Masculine Women

Clerks depicts its key female characters, Veronica and Caitlin, as being gendered masculine. As is suggested by their positions at the base of the erotic pyramid described

above, the function of both Veronica and Caitlin in *Clerks* is to emphasize Dante's femininity, thus ultimately rendering him legible as an object of Randal's queer desire.

Veronica's first appearance in *Clerks* is significant because it sets her up right away as more masculine, take-charge, and powerful than Dante. All the shot numbers in the following analysis refer to the "Veronica Rescue" shot list found in the Appendix. Just prior to the beginning of this sequence, Dante looks on as a Quick Stop customer asks a second customer questions about his smoking habits and, in an attempt to convince him to quit smoking, shows him a picture of a cancer-ridden lung. The second man buys gum instead of cigarettes, and after he leaves Dante tries to get the anti-smoking activist to leave, or at least to "not bother the customers," to no avail. The man proceeds to verbally abuse Dante, blaming him for being a "source" for cigarettes in the area and equating his work as a clerk to Nazism. As Dante protests in vain, the agitator rallies a crowd of Quick Stop customers to turn against this "cancer merchant" and pelt him with unlit cigarettes, until Dante's girlfriend, Veronica, arrives to save him (see Figure 6).

Veronica's arrival and actions thereafter are formally structured to emulate a superhero comic book action sequence. Dante is literally framed (as if by a comic book panel) as a feminized victim that needs rescuing: just prior to and during Veronica's entrance, Dante is verbally attacked by a mob and is internally framed by the cigarette rack and shot at a distance, making him appear small and entrapped (shot 2—see Figure 6). As for Veronica, we first glimpse her as she enters the Quick Stop in shot 1, then she is withheld from our view for a few shots, as the angry mob's pelting of Dante with cigarettes continues. It is not until shot 6 that we realize what Veronica is doing, i.e.,

discharging a fire extinguisher in order to break up the mob, and it is not until shot 7 of this sequence that visual confirmation of her responsibility for this deed is obtained. These shots emulate a superhero's arrival at a crime-in-progress: the hero arrives, observes a misdeed taking place (shot 1), then there are five shots depicting Dante and the mob in a shot/reverse shot sequence, all of them apparently unaware of the arrival of the superheroine who is about to enter the fray. The cuts throughout these first six shots happen fairly rapidly; each shot lasts about 1-2 seconds. These short shots, conveying scant visual information about the scene, are somewhat reminiscent of comic book panels, and the withholding of Veronica's/the superhero's whereabouts once she has arrived but before she discharges the fire extinguisher is a common suspense-building device used when unveiling heroes or villains in comics and mainstream action films.

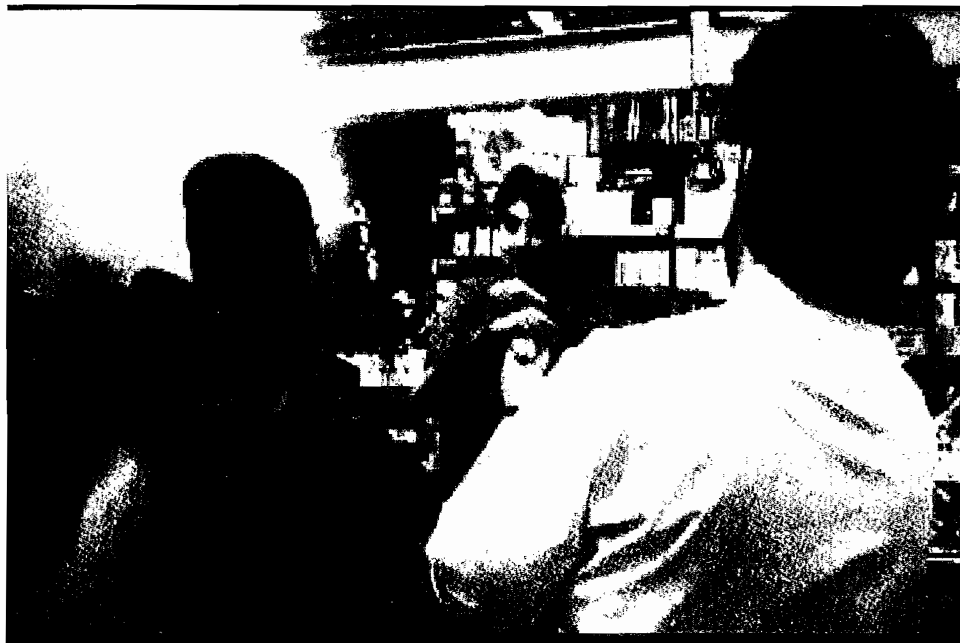

Figure 6: Dante, trapped behind the counter and assaulted by a cigarette-throwing mob.

Then shot 7 happens, and we are shown our mysterious, heroic interlocutor at last (see Figure 7). In this shot, the usually diminuitive Veronica stands atop a freezer case and is shot from a low angle; in fact, the camera starts by framing only her lower legs then tilts upward to take in Veronica's whole body, ending with a medium shot of Veronica from the waist up, still aiming the fire extinguisher nozzle. Not only does the low angle of the shot suggest Veronica's superheroic power as she towers over the now neutralized mob, but the motion of the camera tilt increases the effect, making Veronica appear taller still and "scoping" her outfit in a fashion typical of the initial revelation of costumed heroes. Between the spouting fire extinguisher nozzle and the low camera angle, this shot also visually phallicizes Veronica, a motif that is appropriate to her masculine role as rescuer of the passive, victimized Dante.

Further, on the level of sound design, the shot depicting Veronica's superheroic appearance is accompanied by a single dramatic electric-guitar chord, her superhero theme song if you will. This is especially notable because this guitar chord exists in *The First Cut* and is preserved into the theatrical release version of *Clerks*. By contrast, in *The First Cut* neither Jay and Silent Bob nor even Randal have theme music, a treatment apparently reserved only for active, masculine, heroic figures of Veronica's stripe. (Of course, the theatrical release version adds soundtrack music to Randal's and Jay and Bob's appearances—part of the film's marketing by Miramax.)

Figure 7: Dante is rescued just in time by super-heroine Veronica, a masculine woman who wields phallic power.

These gestures toward superhero comics form are not necessarily as important to *Clerks* as they will be to some of the later View Askewniverse films, especially *Dogma* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*. However, I mention them in this context to show (1) that the influence of superhero comics can already be seen in Smith's filmic work, and (2) that Veronica's positioning as the phallicized superhero figure is yet one more way that *Clerks* accentuates her female masculinity.

In contrast to Veronica's phallic power, Dante's feminized victim status is reemphasized in shot 13, where, in the wake of the cigarette-throwing crisis, he looks dejectedly at a single cigarette that he twirls slowly around between his fingers. Conventionally—and just moments earlier in the Jay and Silent Bob scene analyzed

below—a cigarette connotes sexual satisfaction, but here the cigarette symbolizes Dante's phallic failure and his need to be rescued by his more-masculine girlfriend.

Once Veronica steps down from the freezer and orders the rabble-rousing Chewlies Gum Representative out of the Quick Stop, her overt phallicization continues, at least in the film's original cut (*Clerks: The First Cut*). In shot 14 of *C:TFC,* Dante sits on the floor to one side of the counter and Veronica walks up to him from the right side of the frame, depicted from the waist down and holding the fire extinguisher in front of her crotch (see Figure 8). This visual pun on the size of her "package," and Dante's position relative to it—seated on the floor with the nozzle next to his head/face/mouth—says it all about the sexual power dynamics between these two characters: Veronica is the dominant, active masculine figure and Dante the submissive feminine one, positioned here to give her a blowjob. However, Veronica attempts to cover this power relation by playing (at least superficially) a more traditional gender role in relation to Dante, shoring up Dante's fragile ego by calling him "champ" (in *TFC* only) and "my man" (shot 21). However, the Theatrical Cut omits the fire-extinguisher-as-testicles portion of the sequence, thereby avoiding phallicizing Veronica, and moves more quickly to the shot of the sign (shot 15), to indicate a passage of time, and then on to the lengthy and revealing conversation between Dante and Veronica behind the Quick Stop counter in shot 16. This conversation bears looking at in detail.

Figure 8: Veronica's impressive "package," suggestive of male genitalia. This shot was omitted from *Clerks*'s theatrical release but was seen at Sundance 1994 and on the 2004 *Clerks X* DVD.

First off, the seating arrangement of the couple at the outset of the conversation (shot 16) bears noting: Veronica sits behind Dante, and he slouches down so that as he leans back against her his head is against her chest. I have often felt once the film cuts to this shot that I am witnessing a postcoital moment: the two of them sit together, one behind the other, Dante painting Veronica's nails. This action also feminizes Dante—nail-painting is a traditionally feminine activity—and perhaps recalls a similar sequence from Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita* (1960) wherein Humbert (James Mason) paints Lolita's (Sue Lyon's) toenails as they argue about her desire to associate with other boys: in this context nail-painting by a man is coded as sexually deviant. In *Clerks*, the passage of time implied by the shot of the "Please leave money on the counter" sign (shot 15) indicates that there could have been time for a sexual act to occur between Dante and

Veronica behind the counter. And while subsequent dialogue plays with yet ultimately negates this interpretation, the visual composition of the shot is nonetheless so suggestive of this possibility that the two characters are impelled to raise it explicitly themselves:

VERONICA: You think anybody can see us down here?

DANTE: Why, you wanna have sex or something?

VERONICA: Can we?

DANTE: Really?

VERONICA: I was kidding.

This exchange once again places Veronica in the more assertive role, which, given their relative positions, with Veronica seated *behind* Dante, would also be the symbolically (if not physically) insertive one had they actually had sex, with Dante in the more passive position. In short, the temptation to read this shot as post/pre-coital further suggests a reading where Veronica has taken/will take Dante from behind, further emphasizing their role reversal along gender lines. Further, Dante's incredulous response of "Really?" rather than simply saying "Yes" highlights his anxiety in the face of aggressive female sexuality and his lack of masculine sexual assertiveness and prowess.

Interestingly, though Veronica and Dante decide not to physically have sex, their verbal intercourse in this sequence centers completely on the subject of sex: they talk about how many partners each of them has slept with in the past. Not only is this a trope that Smith's films will return to again and again, but it also confirms my reading of this behind-the-counter scene as being sexually suggestive, if only in the verbally explicit and visually connotative registers.

Eventually the couple stands up and Veronica prepares to leave for class (shot 19). However, upon rising, the two discover that they are not alone in the store: Willam Black, the Idiot Manchild, stands in front of the counter, staring blankly into space. A conversation ensues between Veronica and Willam wherein three key facts, all having to do with names, are revealed (see Figure 9).

The first of these is that Veronica is known to some of her associates as Ronnie, the name Willam calls her at the outset of their talk. This masculinization of her given name firmly places Veronica in the category of the masculine woman or butch. As Judith Halberstam argues, this masculine woman "prowls the film set as an emblem of social upheaval and as a marker of sexual disorder. She [. . .] expresses aberrant desires, and is very often associated with clear markers of a distinctly phallic power" (186). We have already seen how Veronica is associated with phallic power, especially in her dealings with Dante; we shall soon see that, at least from Dante's perspective, she expresses aberrant sexual desires as well.

The second interesting point raised during this dialogue between Ronnie and Willam also concerns naming: Willam's last name is Black. Hence the character known and depicted as a queer "idiot manchild" also carries the surname Black, a conflation that refers to the concomitant sexualization and infantilization of non-whites in the white cultural imagination. In *Clerks*, Willam's penchant for unusual sex (snowballing), combined with his spaced-out manchild status, marks him as a symbolic substitute for a black character, positioning him as an object of sexual anxiety (and fantasy) for white men, in this case Dante. This racialized conflation will take on heightened significance in

my discussion of Jay and in the context of *Chasing Amy* and the View Askew films that follow it.

Figure 9: Willam Black, aka "Snowball," meets "Ronnie" and her "man," Dante.

Lastly, it is revealed (in shot 28) that Willam is nicknamed Snowball, a reference to his enjoyment of having his own semen spat back into his mouth while kissing. However, after Willam leaves, Veronica admits that she snowballed Willam at some point in the past, and in the ensuing argument a critical difference between Dante's and Veronica's ideas about sexuality is exposed: for Veronica, performing fellatio does not constitute having sex with a person, but for Dante it does. As Dante himself yells exasperatedly at Veronica in shot 30, "Why did you have to suck their dick, I mean, why couldn't you sleep with them like any other decent person?" Here Dante constructs

normative, missionary style sexual intercourse ("sleep[ing] with them") as being "decent" and thereby implies that Veronica's willingness to give blowjobs to her dates is indecent or deviant in some way. And indeed, the fact that Veronica has had oral sex with thirty-six guys implies that she is more sexually open than Dante, and her predilection for giving fellatio—an oral form of sexuality conventionally viewed as less developmentally mature than missionary style sex—queers her to an extent. Most importantly, and despite Veronica's reassurances, Dante sees this indecent / queer behavior of Veronica's as being a threat to his own position: "Every time I kiss you I'm going to taste thirty-six other guys." The depth of Dante's insecurity in the face of Veronica's sexual experience is revealed in the final shot of this sequence (shot 31), when he dashes out the door after her and shouts: "Hey, try not to suck any dick on the way through the parking lot!"—a hypermasculine attempt to contain her through a derisive command, which backfires when a male bystander starts walking after her and Dante is forced to admonish this incidental embodiment of his fears: "Hey, get back here!"

This sequence is also reflective of the liminal status of fellatio in U.S. culture in the early 1990s. Is fellatio a full-blown sex act (as for Dante), or just a casual activity that can occur on a first or second date (as for Veronica)? As Christopher Hitchens writes in a 2006 *Vanity Fair* article, "For a considerable time, the humble blowjob was considered something rather abject," a deed associated with prostitutes and gay men, hence "too queer" for a respectable person to either give or receive (Hitchens 52). But starting in the late 1960s, Hitchens notes, "there must have been a crossover in which a largely forbidden act of slightly gay character was imported into the heterosexual

mainstream" (Hitchens 53). Indeed, according to Hitchens, a fairly complete reversal in fellatio's fortunes occurred in the 1960s and by 1969 receiving a blowjob was considered much more "manly" and desirable than participating in missionary style sex, which by then was considered somewhat passé and conservative. This is precisely how the deed is framed in Dante and Veronica's argument in *Clerks*: for Dante, the blowjob counts as sex, and a deviant and suspicious form of sex to boot, whereas for Veronica, it does not even count as "real" sex but is much more casual. Though released three years before the Bill Clinton "Monicagate" scandal came to public light, *Clerks* anticipates the widely publicized debates over the meaning of fellatio that would arise in the midst of President Clinton's impeachment proceedings in 1997-8. In an attempt to clear his name of the charges of sexual misconduct with White House aide Monica Lewinsky, President Clinton would famously testify under oath that fellatio did *not* count as sexual relations in his case, largely on the grounds that he was a passive recipient of the act. However, more important than the Clinton hearings themselves is the fact that this form of sexuality was under much consideration and debate during this period, its exact status in the panoply of sexually intimate behaviors uncertain.[13]

In *Clerks* this one relatively short sequence exposes the extreme fragility of Dante's masculinity/security, giving the lie to the masculine bravado he displays early in their conversation (shot 16) with lines like "You can't get enough of me" and his misogynistic claims about the lack of women's sexual prowess in general. This fear of the sexuality of women is a theme that Smith's films will return to again and again.

The other interesting thing about this last exchange between Dante and Veronica before she exits the store is its exposure of the confusion and conflation that often results from discussions of gender and sexuality. Dante is threatened by Veronica's perceived sexual aberrations but not, apparently, her gender-transgressive masculinity. Conversely, Veronica does not care so much about Dante's sexual proclivities—she jokingly calls him a "pig" when he reveals how many women he has slept with but ultimately does not perseverate on the matter—but is seemingly quite invested in helping him to overcome his feminine passivity as emblematized by his refusal to quit his clerking job and go back to school. The two are at cross-purposes here, one preoccupied with issues of sexual behavior (Dante), the other with issues of gender role (Veronica). The fact that they both appear to be arguing about the same thing and that thing is sexuality clearly demonstrates the extent to which gender and sexuality are incoherently conflated in Western patriarchal culture.[14] As Eve Sedgwick notes, the conflation between gender and sexuality is one of the main mechanisms by which mainstream U.S. culture maintains its denial of / ignorance about matters of queer sexuality, for example, mistakenly assuming that effeminate behavior in men indicates homosexuality, and that therefore any non-effeminate man must be straight as opposed to bisexual or passing. In this sequence *Clerks* uses this same form of misunderstanding—does a willingness to give blowjobs constitute deviant or promiscuous sexuality in a woman?—to drive a rift between its two most straight-identifying characters.[15]

Randal wastes no time in using the argument between Dante and Veronica as a means to reassert his own verbally and physically intimate relationship with Dante. By

the time Veronica returns to the Quick Stop Convenience store a bit later in the film's narrative, Dante and Randal have talked over Dante's female troubles (see Syntax close reading below) and Dante has calmed down. Veronica brings him lasagna for lunch—the lasagna and the deed emphasizing her (decidedly unmasculine) Italian ethnicized traditionality—and the two of them make up.[16] However, at two points during their reconciliatory conversation, Randal can be heard in the background making slurping faux-fellatio noises. Ostensibly meant to "razz" Dante in front of his girlfriend, these audio interjections also foreshadow Randal's later attempt to break Veronica and Dante up by exposing the latter's plans *vis-a-vis* Caitlin to the former. They also help to end this heterosexual making-up sequence on a particularly queer note: the moment after Veronica leaves the store, Randal steps in close to Dante, occupying the space Veronica just vacated, and repeats the slurping noise one final time. A joke indeed, but also another case where, as with his bait-and-switch game during their car ride and many other instances, Randal finds a way to be close to Dante and make sexually suggestive vocalizations and/or conversation.

In contrast to Veronica, Caitlin is an offscreen presence until rather late in the film, and as a result we know little about her, except through Dante, up to that point. However, once she appears, a few very interesting facts emerge. For one, she has come to Leonardo (the New Jersey town in which *Clerks* is set) to escape a traditional wedding arrangement to the Asian Design Major, Sang, and to reunite with Dante. During the conversation in which she discusses her engagement to Sang with Dante, she emphatically states that she is not ready for marriage and that she intends to pursue a

career first. Although the viewer never learns what she is studying or what that career might be, it nevertheless stands that Caitlin is a self-proclaimed career woman and has no use for traditional wedding (read: gender) arrangements. This fact, combined with her known history of sexual assertiveness and promiscuity that torments and feminizes Dante throughout the film, makes clear that Caitlin is a take-charge sort who will no doubt be the dominant partner should she and the passive, femininely loyal Dante actually get back together.

Furthermore, once Caitlin accidentally has sex with the dead man in the darkened Quick Stop bathroom, she expresses extreme satisfaction at having the man (who she mistakenly presumes to be Dante) "just lie perfectly still and let me do everything": in fact, she says that "it has never been like that before" and reports that her legs are still shaking from the experience. Of course, this all gets turned into a misogynistic joke once she realizes that it wasn't Dante and that she mistakenly had intercourse with a dead stranger, a situation the misogynistic Randal finds quite hilarious, but Caitlin's initial reaction reinforces her status as an active, take-charge, and hence masculinized sexual actor. Further, even as this scenario takes its misogynistic turn, it remains a joke that cuts both ways, for according to Caitlin, sex is better with a dead guy than it is with the living, breathing Dante. Hence, by assuming the active sexual role in this sequence, Caitlin places Dante (or here, his dead—dead!—proxy) in the same feminized, passive position we saw him in earlier with respect to his relationship with Veronica. Both of these masculinized female characters reveal Kevin Smith's preoccupation with strong,

empowered women who threaten, disrupt, and/or usurp white male societal privilege, and figures like them reappear in all subsequent View Askew films.

Queer Male Sexuality

It is not only masculinized women who disrupt heterocentrist constructions of masculinity in *Clerks*, but also secondary male characters who appear more queer than our central buddy protagonists. Our main focus here will be on Jay and Silent Bob, whose interactions from the outset of *Clerks* mark them as queer, and who eventually draw Randal into a homophobic bait-and-switch game similar to the ones Randal frequently plays on Dante, thereby exposing the ways in which Randal himself is deeply implicated in the queerness that he attempts to deflect onto others.

Jay's opening monologue, which takes place seven and a half minutes into the film just after the "Jay And Silent Bob" intertitle, provides a super-condensed model of duo dynamics at work, demonstrating the strange slippages that accrue around the radically incoherent gap in the male homosocial continuum. Jay and Bob have just arrived at the outside wall of the Quick Stop, where they will lurk around all day selling drugs (see Figure 10). The camera work here, as it does through much of *Clerks*, evokes a feeling of documentary realism, with the slight camera wobble of handheld shooting. There are few cuts, most shots taken as long takes that increase the sense of documentary-like immediacy. Further heightening the sense of realism in the Jay and Silent Bob sequences is the naturalistic way Jay delivers his lines, very quickly and as if they are spewing forth from his subconscious:

JAY: I feel good today, Silent Bob. We're gonna make some money, then you know what we're going to do? We're gonna go to that party, we're gonna get some pussy, and I'm gonna fuck this bitch, gonna fuck this bitch. . . [yelling] I'll fuck anything that moves!

This first declaration is worth pausing over for a moment, as Jay's announcement that "I'll fuck anything that moves!" alerts us to the fact that Jay is at least potentially queer: his sexual object choice is not confined to any one sex (or even species), but is about a fluid as such a thing can get, excluding perhaps only inanimate objects that cannot move. Although Jay delivers the bulk of this monologue to Silent Bob, he shouts this last statement out toward the street with his arms raised defiantly: a coming-out gesture? Perhaps, but if so, it is of a particularly psychotic bent, for this phrase is also an exact quotation from David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986): disturbed kidnapper and rapist Frank (Dennis Hopper) shouts "I'll fuck anything that moves!" when preparing to depart for a harrowing car ride that ends in an explosion of homoerotic violence between himself and entrapped college kid Jeffery (Kyle MacLachlan). In the context of *Blue Velvet* it is not clear what Frank means by the verb "fuck" in this declaration: it is both sexual and violent, could as easily mean "kill" as "have sex with." And Jay's reappropriation of the line in *Clerks*, while not likely referring to actual violence or murder as with Frank, nevertheless carries a symbolically violent charge originating in Jay's defensive homophobia.

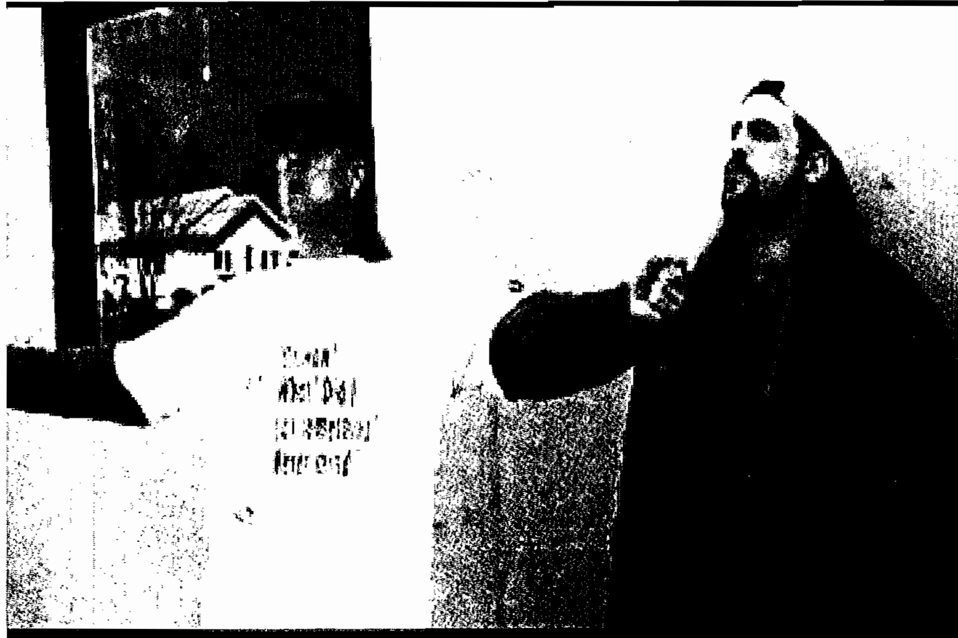

Figure 10: "I love women!" Jay declares, a comedically exaggerated gesture of hypermasculine posing with which he disavows his homoerotic impulses toward Silent Bob.

Furthermore, Jay's hypermasculine talk here emulates the imagined street talk of young African-American males. As Eric Lott argues, white masculinity depends upon proximity to / mimicry of black masculinity in order to constitute itself as masculinity: "the assumption of dominant [white] codes of masculinity in the United States is partly negotiated through an imaginary black interlocutor [. . .] [and depends] upon the momentary return [. . .] to a state of arrested adolescence" (246). Black manhood is thus imagined by whites to be an adolescent, immature form of manhood that all white males must pass through on their way to becoming full-fledged white adults. It is assumed that white adolescents, after they have "sown their oats" and acted in an immature fashion for a certain finite period, will then leave behind their "white Negro" phase and ascend to mature white adulthood. (The term "white Negro" is taken from Norman Mailer's

famous 1957 essay of the same name that describes the racial appropriation perpetrated by white "hipsters" of the 1930s and 40s.) Arrested development males like Jay, who seemingly refuse to progress into mature adulthood, are suspended in a constant (if imaginary and projected) relationship to black masculinity and its (imagined) signifiers. Jay's slang-laden speech and drug-dealing lifestyle is his way of ethnically marking himself as culturally black, hence rendering him cooler and more "hip" than the geeky, day-job holding clerks (Dante and Randal) he enjoys berating. Jay has "street cred" due to his economically disadvantaged and racially marked position in the social order, and his obsession with appropriating black culture, increasingly prevalent in each subsequent View Askew film, is emblematic of the racialized logic of slackerism writ large: slackers slack in order to repudiate white privilege and to mark themselves with a (performed and appropriated) "racial" identity.

Jay's speech continues:

> JAY: [. . .] [to unseen passersby in the street] Yo, what's up baby? What's up, sluts? Shit. [turns to Bob] Silent Bob, you're a rude motherfucker, you know that? But you're cute as hell. I'd like to go down on you, suck you, then line up three other guys and make like a circus seal. [mimics fellating multiple men] [stands up suddenly, cocking his fist back] [to Bob] Oooh, you fuckin' faggot! [yelling into street] I hate guys, I love women!

Perhaps this sequence needs little explanation, but three specific details particularly stand out. First, it is notable that Jay's enactment of a sexual fantasy in which he sucks off Silent Bob and three other guys is bookended by two instances of

hypermasculine posturing: his lascivious yelling of "What's up, sluts?" at (presumably) female passersby, and his post-fantasy shouted declaration that "I love women!"—the latter rendered comically ironic by the appearance of Willam the Idiot Manchild onscreen as Jay yells the word "women."

In fact, and this is my second point, this sudden appearance of Willam, who, recall, is "more homosexual" than Dante or Randal and thus serves as a proxy for an explicitly gay man in the narrative, is significant here because his status as a feminized or queered man combined with Jay's timely self-disclosure about what he will or will not fuck is certainly sexually suggestive. Even if Jay is serious about hating guys and loving women—a claim that contradicts his "I'll fuck anything that moves!" statement and is definitively disproven by the time we reach the fourth View Askew film, *Dogma*—Willam's sexual and gender status, rendered questionable by his love of snowballing (suggestive of deviant/queer object choice) and this verbal/visual joke (Jay yells "Women!" as Willam appears in the frame), certainly places within the realm of possibility the idea that Jay and Willam might "hook up" sexually.[17] We have previously discussed the significance of Willam's last name, Black, and here it takes on additional valence, for as a white Negro, Jay loves to hang out with and emulate black speech and behavior, and at the core of his cross-racial appropriation is sexual desire. His desire to be *like* a (here only symbolic) "Black" man is impossible to extricate from his desire to be *with* a black man—a figure whose racial identity has long been conflated with hyper-sexuality in the white imagination.

The third significant detail to be noted in this brief sequence is the shot of Silent Bob smoking a cigarette, quickly cut away to as Jay says "I'll suck you" to his verbally reticent buddy. Not only is this a funny visual pun—Silent Bob sucking on a cigarette as Jay emulates sucking him off—but it also invokes the classical Hollywood trope of cigarette smoking standing in for sexual desires and/or acts that cannot be depicted explicitly onscreen. In this sense, intentional or not, this shot is both funny, a traditionally prudish trope rendered ridiculous by the explicit content of Jay's monologue, but it also suggests that the feeling is mutual, i.e., that Silent Bob, despite his silence, might well be thinking the same thing. While *Clerks* does not answer this question explicitly—the last scene in which the duo appears features Jay dry-humping Silent Bob to illustrate a point but Bob, as usual, is non-responsive—the queerness of Jay and Silent Bob is an issue that will be developed, played with, and elaborated upon with increasing insistence over the course of all subsequent View Askewniverse films.

The film's central queer male character is Randal, who, throughout most of *Clerks*, interacts exclusively with other narratively central characters—Dante, Veronica, Caitlin—and with unnamed customers of the convenience and video stores. He is never seen onscreen with Willam, Olaf, or other recurring secondary characters except on the few occasions he has brief interactions with Jay and Silent Bob. Perhaps the most interesting of these is the sequence, an hour and twelve minutes into the film, where Jay tapes a sign in the shape of a comics dialogue bubble to the glass front door of the Quick Stop and then pounds on the door and flips Randal the finger. Randal comes out and, from where he stands behind the glass door, appears as a comic book figure, framed by

the doorframe and "saying" (via his dialogue bubble) "I eat cock!!!" Jay points and laughs, his practical joke a success (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Jay plays a visual joke on Randal, queering them both and evoking the formal structure of a comic book panel.

The queer implications of the visual image generated by Jay's joke reflect upon both Randal and Jay. As Sigmund Freud argues in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, jokes arise out of the unconscious thought-processes of the joke-maker and "make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way" (169, 101). In this case, Jay's homophobic joke is both lustful *and* hostile toward Randal and is an expression of his homoerotic lust for men that is blocked by societal taboos against non-straight sexuality.

The shot of Randal framed in the doorframe with his incriminating speech bubble constitutes the very last shot of the section of the film called "Paradigm." Of course, as

Geoff King points out, many of *Clerks*' vignette titles are meant to be taken ironically, indicating the film's "self-conscious" attempt to highlight its own "indie" status (82). However, King also acknowledges that many elements of *Clerks* are "heartfelt in some respects and not entirely ironic," and I wonder if we are meant to read the "Paradigm" intertitle and its subsequent content as ironic, heartfelt, or, most likely in a film like *Clerks* that delights in having it both ways, some combination of the two? To wit, does this last shot of the "Paradigm" vignette function as a paradigm for male queerness in the film, a queerness that is not avowed directly but is made explicit through practical jokes like this one and the one Randal plays on Dante during their car ride? It is notable that Randal, normally a very verbose character, does not speak in this shot and never responds to Jay in the aftermath of this joke. In fact, the very next shot (following the next intertitle) shows Randal sitting in the store, looking thoughtfully at the "I eat cock!!!" speech bubble sign: has Jay gotten through to Randal? As I have noted elsewhere, there is indeed a slippage in *Clerks* between Randal's presumed heterosexuality and his queer behavior, and nowhere is this incoherent disjuncture more clearly articulated than it is by Randal himself in the section that precedes "Paradigm," called, appropriately, "Perspicacity."

John Kenneth Muir's guide to the films of Kevin Smith, *An Askew View*, summarizes the "Perspicacity" section thus: "This word means 'clarity of understanding,' and it is here that Randal explains to Dante how title does not dictate behavior, *but actions do.* To prove his point, Randal spits water on a customer. Dante immediately gets the point" (206-7, emphasis added). Of course, Muir's account interprets Randal's

axiom that "title does not dictate behavior" in one register only, that of his and Dante's roles as clerks and his (very funny) spitting of water on a customer.[18] However, this concept that one's title or identity does not necessarily correlate to one's acts or behavior also applies to sexual identities and gender roles. In fact, coming from Randal, it is hard *not* to understand it in this way, and the film bears out the validity of this interpretation: for example, the most feminized male character, Dante, also commits the "ballsiest" move that Randal has ever been privy to by suggesting they play hockey on the roof of the Quick Stop. This not only reinforces the interdependence and role-reversal inherent to dynamic slacker-geek duos, it is also right in line with the fluid gender and sexuality play that dominates *Clerks*. Similarly, most of Veronica's deeds throughout the film, which mark her as masculine and more sexually open than Dante, run counter to her narrative positioning as the loyal, subservient, ethnicized girlfriend.

In terms of sexuality, it is Randal himself who most embodies this title/behavior disjuncture: although he is relatively unmarked with respect to both gender and sexual object choice, the imperatives of heterocentrist culture lead us to assume (in the absence of such markers) that he is ostensibly or by default heterosexual.[19] However, this title of "heterosexual male," which Randal is permitted to assume implicitly due to his privileged position as a white male in the heterocentrist patriarchal order, does not correlate with his behavior throughout *Clerks*. To cite three examples: (1) Randal never expresses any sexual desire for any specific persons of any gender, in a film that turns narratively on romantic entanglements, (2) he claims during his conversation with Veronica late in the film that "I don't know thing one about chicks," despite his apparently extensive

knowledge of matters sexual, and (3) he rents and watches a pornographic film featuring hermaphrodites, which he later claims to have rented in order to watch "together" with Dante.

These three behaviors taken together can only be described as queer. In fact, if we add to this profile Randal's keen interest in discussing subjects relating to sexual deviancy—male autofellatio (as performed by his cousin Walter), sex workers (the jizz-moppers), and hermaphrodites ("chicks with dicks!" he announces gleefully), to name a few—we might be tempted to see Randal as a kind of unconscious, vernacular queer theorist/practitioner. Of course, he is protected from direct connections to queer sexuality by his aforementioned male privilege and by his status (verified by behavior number one) as an asexual manchild.

In other words, for all his prurient talk, interest in queer sexuality, and belief that identities and actions are not contiguous—a very queer position indeed—Randal is rendered harmless by his ambiguous and seemingly asexual state of arrested development. The film avoids explicitly marking Randal as queer by denying him *any* expression of sexual object choice: even if we count his watching of the hermaphrodite video as such an expression, its subject matter ("chicks with dicks") leaves Randal's true sexual preferences opaque. *Clerks* is hedging its bets, playing it both ways, and in this sense it is a microcosm of Kevin Smith's independent filmmaking career writ large. As a geeky male slacker in the age of queer cinema, Smith has little choice but to engage with queer sexuality but to do so in a way that alienates neither queer-friendly nor homophobic audiences. And, as previously discussed, these simultaneously heartfelt *and* ironic

approaches to male queerness are also an accurate reflection of the fluctuating and precarious state of 1990s Gen-X male gendering and sexuality, themes that will recur even more strikingly in Smith's third film, *Chasing Amy*.

Dante and Randal 1: Syntax

Dante and Randal's onscreen interactions in *Clerks* articulate, in highly coded fashion that allows the film to "play it both ways," the sexual desire implicit in their close homosocial bond. This section will analyze events that take place in the "Syntax" vignette, identified (as are all the segments of the film) by a white-on-black intertitle bearing its name (shot numbers are from the Syntax shot list in the Appendix). The opening "Syntax" intertitle is accompanied by silence on the theatrical feature (*TF*) version though is accompanied by a single strum of a banjo on *Clerks: The First Cut* (*C: TFC*), which suggests the sinister strumming of the banjo from *Deliverance* and its pop-cultural association with compromised masculinity, male-on-male sexuality, and the conflation of queer sexuality and violence. Further, the OED defines "syntax" as "Orderly or systematic arrangement of parts or elements; constitution (of body); a connected order or system of things." but also lists an obsolete meaning for the word, "Physical connexion, junction," which is interesting in light of its reference to Dante and Randal's relationship here.

For the "Syntax" segment sets up all the dynamic relations between our central male buddy duo and the women who serve as outlets for their diverted homosexual desire. In essence, this vignette gives us the syntax with which to comprehend the

network of relationships that surrounds Dante and explains the clues we have already been given about his character earlier in the film. The sequence begins shortly after Randal arrives a half an hour late for work at RST Video and, after getting into a verbal conflict with one of his first customers of the day, walks next door to commiserate with best buddy Dante.

Shot 2 shows Dante in his usual position behind the Quick Stop counter, internally framed by the cigarette racks that hang overhead. True to form, Randal enters but rather than occupying space behind the counter, he leans against the front of it at the right side of the frame. Hence Randal is not trapped by the same boxed-in internal frame that Dante is, and Randal's relative freedom is emphasized by his action of picking up a snack from the counter without paying for it. Further, the story he tells Dante about tearing up a disagreeable customer's video membership, and Dante's labeling of that action as a "shocking abuse of authority," further highlight the differences between them: Randal is masculine, active, and free while Dante is feminine, passive, and trapped behind the counter on his supposed day off. Randal's position is emblematic of a past fantasy of "frontier" masculinity that is unfettered from social obligation, such as that of the classic "loner" heroes of westerns and detective film and fiction, which finds its late 20th century expression in Randal-like delinquents, rebels, and lower-middle-class slackers. Dante, on the other hand, represents the feminized "company man" of late capitalist culture, the social-conformist middle-class geek who does not wish to rock the boat or get into trouble with his boss, but who wants to whine and complain about his position constantly.

One of the most interesting and revealing images in this sequence occurs in shot 3: a small sign advertising Dave's fruit pies revolves atop its post for the three-second duration of the shot. The pies advertised are for two different flavors, apple and cherry, but their position on opposite sides of the same sign, and the location of this shot in the broader narrative arc, i.e., just before our principal duo, Dante and Randal, get into their first substantive discussion, is significant. I read the sign, which emphasizes the "Real Fruit Filling" of the pies it advertises, as an emblem for Dante and Randal, two differently flavored products with real fruit filling and inexorably bonded together, two sides of the same sign. Especially interesting in this regard is the deployment of the fruit pie sign later in the narrative, which only occurs in the *First Cut* version of the film: it reappears just before the stranger enters the Quick Stop and shoots Dante dead. The fruit pie sign thus placed is the key to understanding Smith's original ending: the fruit pie, Dante, must die.

The same homophobic anxiety that motivates the dominant duo member, here Randal, to bait and humiliate the more sensitive geek or "sad young man," Dante, throughout the film, reaches its apex (in the *FC* version) in this depiction of apparently random but narratively logical violence. The 'Sad Young Man' stereotype is delineated by Richard Dyer in an essay of the same name. It describes a popular stereotype used across a wide range of media to denote a male homosexual. The sad young man had its heyday in the 1950s and its best-known cinematic exemplars are James Dean and Sal Mineo. I think the character of Dante bears traces of the type, and hence, like Sal Mineo in *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955), he must be expunged from the narrative through death

in order to restore an ostensibly heterosexual closure for the film. In *Clerks*, the "motivation" for the shooting, ostensibly part of a robbery, is visually and formally "explained" by the reappearance of the fruit pie sign in the instant before the anonymous shooter enters the store. Of course, once *Clerks* was purchased by Miramax and Smith was convinced by John Pierson and others to abbreviate the ending, the second appearance of the fruit pie sign was eliminated along with the shooting itself since, as I argue, they are linked.[20]

Another sequence cut from the Theatrical Feature version of *Clerks* but preserved in the *FC* version takes place just after Randal comes into the store in shot 2: in fact, it *replaces* the fruit pie sign shot altogether. It is a sequence in which Randal, after delivering his "Especially because I rule" line, asks Dante if "the pelican is flying" and proceeds to climb a ladder and disconnect a security camera that sits above the store's beverage coolers. This camera is trained on the front counter; Dante and Randal discuss Randal's deed thus:

RANDAL: Is the pelican flying?

DANTE: Don't screw with it, it makes us look suspicious.

RANDAL: (shakes his head) I can't stand a voyeur. I'll be back.

Not only is Randal's negative proclamation about voyeurism funny in light of what a cinephile and pornophile he is, but one also wonders what kind of suspiciousness Dante is most worried about—especially since he does not make any serious effort to stop Randal from disconnecting the camera. Perhaps Dante himself enjoys having the camera unplugged as well, and Randal is not entirely unjustified in claiming later in the film that

"You know I'm your hero." In any case, it is clear that this has happened before and that Dante is not particularly concerned about this infraction—strange given how much fuss he raises over other violations of policy throughout the film.

So what in the *FC* version signaled Dante's impending murder becomes in the *TF* version the symbol of Dante and Randal's homosocial bond, standing in for the original (as scripted and shot) emblems of their possible queerness: the banjo strum in shot 1 and Randal's dismantling of the means of their surveillance by an external authority in the security camera sequence.

One other detail from this sequence is worthy of note: Randal asking Dante if he can borrow his car in shot 4. This is one of the few concrete indicators in the film that Randal may be of slightly lower economic status than Dante. Certainly his disregard for social conventions and contentedness in his clerking job *code* him as being of a lower class position than Dante, but his lack of car (in the face of Dante's converse privilege) shows explicitly that despite their current similarity in employment, Randal may come from a background of slightly less means than Dante. Typically, Smith's films position the feminized geek character (Dante) as being more educated, socially refined, and thus of higher class status than his queered slacker sidekick (Randal), creating an inequality between the two that helps render, alongside their contrasting gendered status, their homoerotic bond legible. This subtle class difference also emphasizes the slacker's disavowal of his own white privilege, for he embraces his socially and economically marginalized position, reveling in the social transgressions it permits him—which are also expressions of class-based rage at the hapless customers he abuses. Meanwhile the

more dutiful geek feels uneasy with his slacker-esque transgressions and feels more bound by white middle-class expectations, a positioning that feminizes him and places him more firmly within the grasp of the Oedipal narrative the slacker rejects.

Dante and Randal 2: Catharsis

The cathartic fight between Dante and Randal, which takes place in the "Catharsis" segment of the film (see shot list in the Appendix), can be read as a euphemism for sexual contact between these two characters. It takes place immediately after Randal tells Veronica about Dante's attempts to patch things up with Caitlin. Veronica breaks up with Dante and leaves, and then when Randal next appears in the store, Dante attacks him.

Like the play-fighting of would-be lovers, all of Dante and Randal's combat in "Catharsis" involves wrestling and attempts at strangulation: Randal is grabbed and dragged out of frame by the throat in shot 3, then shot 4 depicts Dante strangling a kneeling Randal in a tableau that looks suspiciously like Dante forcing Randal to fellate him (see Figure 12). Next, in shots 5 and 6, Dante tackles Randal and wrestles atop him behind the counter—the same location where Dante and Veronica had a suggestive and potentially postcoital scene early in the film. In the present circumstance, Randal escapes Dante's clutches by striking him ineffectually with a Pringles can, an object imbued with phallic and homoerotic connotations in the earlier sequence with the customer who gets his hand stuck in it. Here it is reinvoked in the context of Dante and Randal's relationship as they wrestle on the floor out of sight of any customers.

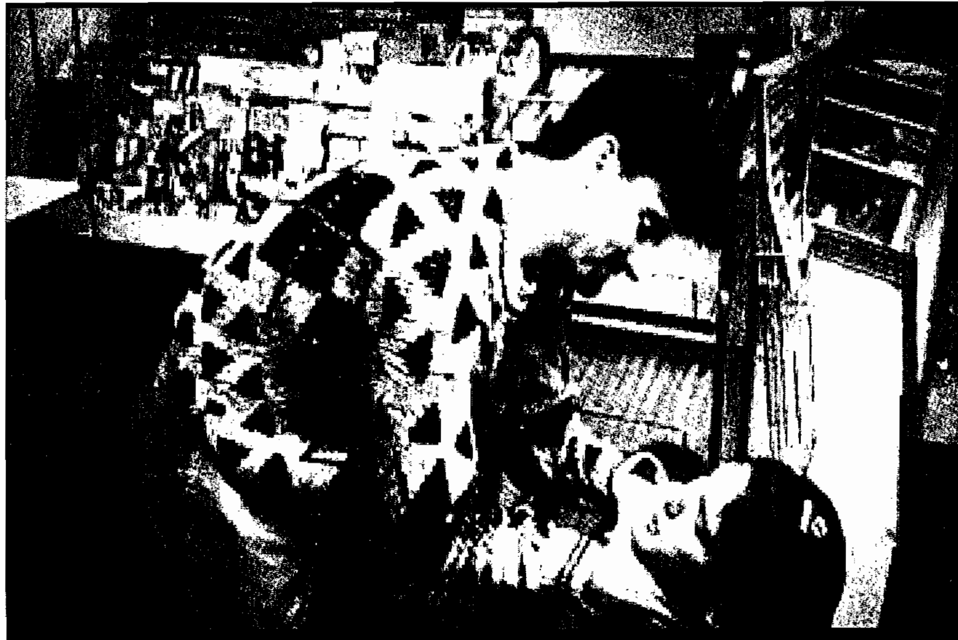

Figure 12: Choke-hold and/or fellatio?

Next Randal grabs a phallic-looking baguette loaf (shot 7) which he then hits Dante in the face with (shot 8), suggesting a reversal of the duo's dynamics from shot 4: now Randal is forcing his penis into Dante's face, whipping him across the face with it. Interestingly, the very next shot (shot 9) depicts the store's black cat sitting on the counter, presumably watching this encounter. This is a visual reminder of the animalistic aspects of the duo's behavior, and remember that the cat featured in the original Pringles can sequence, albeit only in audio form. In fact, the cat's placidity in the present sequence may indicate that the cat sees Randal as a more fitting mate for Dante than the doofus-y Pringles can customer from the earlier sequence, whose hijinks disturbed the cat.

Figure 13: Dante admits that "the FDS stings."

Most notably, the "Cartharsis" ends with the two combatants in two-shot, nursing their wounds and talking (see Figure 13). When Randal asks Dante "How's your eye?" in shot 13, Dante replies: "The swelling's not that bad. The FDS stings," indicating that he has been sprayed in the eye with Feminine Deodorizing Spray, a product intended for use on a woman's pubic area/genitals, thus literally placing Dante in the position of a "pussy." However, as their concern for one another indicates, this fight was not about actually harming the other person or ending the relationship, but constitutes a nonverbal expression of intense feeling between the two characters that ends in a sequence of shots of the two of them lying around and talking that could be read as postcoital. The outcome of this scene also squares with the cinematic tradition of male fighting-as-

intimate bonding found in such films as *Fight Club* (1999), the films of Quentin Tarantino, the shirtless, tattoo-identifying wrestling sequence in *Dude, Where's My Car?* (2000), and many others. It should also be noted that even heterosexual men and women who are attracted to each other frequently find ways to wrestle, physically tease, and / or "play-fight" each other in this same way and for the same reason.

The OED defines catharsis in three ways, any of which might apply here. The first is as "purgation of the excrements of the body; especially evacuation of the bowels." The second includes "purification of the emotions by vicarious experience, especially through [. . .] drama" And the third, originating in psychotherapy, refers to "the process of relieving an abnormal excitement by re-establishing the association of the emotion with the memory or idea of the event which was the first cause of it, and of eliminating it by abreaction."

The first definition is interesting due to its connection with the bowels and anality. The second, referring to vicarious experience and drama, suggests the dramatic or make-believe aspects of this encounter, i.e., that Dante initiates this encounter on the pretense that he is angry with Randal for ruining his relationship with Veronica when it is "really" about his desire to be close to Randal. In that sense, the entire "fight" sequence can be viewed as a kind of heterocentrist drama or show through which Dante and Randal vicariously experience physical intimacy with each other. Of course, the last definition is particularly interesting in that it explicitly supports my reading of this sequence, indicating that catharsis for Dante involves going to the root cause of his "abnormal

excitement" and associating his emotions about his sexuality and sexual relationships with the originary memory or event which precipitated them, in this case, his connection to Randal. And while the film's diegesis would have us believe that the cathartic fight is over issues of control over Veronica (and to a lesser extent, Caitlin), Sedgwick tells us that the more prevalent erotic and narrative charge is between these two men, and indeed it is significant that this catharsis occurs after all the women in the film have departed, not to be seen onscreen again.

Further, the OED notes that the original German term for this process, *abreagiren*, has different shades of meaning, from defense reaction to emotional catharsis, and I think the concept of the defense reaction is especially relevant here, as Dante is essentially staging a hypermasculinized display over the loss of Veronica that is no doubt meant to conceal/disavow/defend against his homoerotic desire for Randal. It is also worth noting that Randal provokes this conflict deliberately—the *First Cut* version of the film even shows him expressing doubts as to his motives for intervening with Veronica—and thus the defense reaction and the homoerotic desire it attempts to cover is at least equally, if not more so, Randal's. The "Catharsis" fight could even be read as the culmination of Randal's most daring and invasive game of homophobic bait-and-switch.

Finally, there is Randal's concluding line of this whole segment, delivered in shot 22: "If we're so fuckin' advanced, what are we doing working here?" This line suggests that the two of them are somehow underdeveloped—he calls their work at the convenience store "a monkey's job"—and thereby equates them with animals,

adolescents, and, in Judith Halberstam's formulation, people who live in what she calls queer time:

> [I] use the concept of queer time to make clear how respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality. [. . .] [I]n Western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation; and we [. . .] applaud the pursuit of long life (under any circumstances) and pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity. [. . .] [P]eople who live in rapid bursts (drug addicts, for example) are characterized as immature and even dangerous. (*In a Queer Time and Place* 4-5)

All of Kevin Smith's films center upon male characters caught up in "the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence" that Halberstam suggests operates in queer time, hence they appear "immature and even dangerous" to subjects who conform to the dictates of "normal," reproductive time. In *Clerks*, we see the clashing of these two temporalities most clearly in the behind-the-counter argument between Veronica and Dante: she thinks he "should be in school anyway" and wants him to quit the Quick Stop and get on with his life–in short, to mature, enter a respectable profession, and (presumably) marry her and live forever after in middle-class, reproductive time. Dante, on the other hand, wants to remain at his "monkey's job," consort with drug dealers (Jay and Bob), and prolong his adolescence with his clownish slacker buddy, Randal. These two temporalities and

the way they intersect are also characteristic of independent cinema writ large, which constantly rides a line between mainstream-palatable narrative techniques and aesthetics and the more radically queer practices of the cinematic avant-garde. Hence, American independent cinema of the 1990s, shot through with queer thematics and in a constant state of needing to differentiate its output from the conventions and production practices of the mainstream, occupies a sort of queer time and space with respect to Hollywood and mainstream popular culture.

Slackers and Dykes: *Clerks,* Queer Cinema, and Miramax in 1994

The rise of American independent film through the decade of the 1990s has a great deal to do with major industrial shifts that occurred in and around the Hollywood studio system at the time: as Geoff King writes in *American Independent Cinema*, "[t]he gradual establishment of an industrial infrastructure, particularly in distribution, was a key factor in the emergence of the type of indie scene that came to fruition in the 1980s and 1990s" (9). As the big Hollywood studios were taken over by multinational corporations in the 80s and 90s, thence becoming even more attentive to issues of the "bottom line" and less inclined to take risks on fringe films, smaller film distributors such as Miramax and New Line moved in and, with an eye for marketable independent work and innovative and aggressive promotion techniques, created and filled a niche in cinematic consumer culture.

The sudden expansion of the home video market via the advent of the now-ubiquitous DVD format also initially created a huge new market for the smaller

independent distributors (Wyatt 74-5). However, while the independent companies originally gained a foothold in the larger cinematic marketplace by responding to demands the larger studios could not meet, in time it became clear that even the lucrative home video market was being increasingly dominated by the Hollywood majors, due in part to the fact that "[t]heatrical successes drive the push at every additional market window so that 'A' titles are most likely to translate to video and cable successes" (Wyatt 75). Hence, as Justin Wyatt argues, the most successful and long-lasting independent distributors, such as New Line and especially Miramax, have lasted because they quickly realized the need to "consistently [develop] movies with the potential to cross over beyond the art house market" (76). Indeed, what I argue here is that by the time Miramax bought *Clerks* at the Sundance Festival in 1994, it had already so completely organized its business strategies around the imperative to cross over into mainstream markets that it was perfectly positioned to acquire "fringe" product like Smith's and market it successfully to a wide audience. I further argue that the Miramax Corporation of the early 90s—in fact, 1994 was a turning-point year in this respect—was particularly well versed at selling queerness to mainstream moviegoers, which it had done with enormous success in 1992 with Neil Jordan's transvestite drama *The Crying Game*.

The Miramax Corporation was founded in 1979 and from the start demonstrated many of the features that would eventually rocket the distributor to national success ten years later. Harvey Weinstein, the company's co-founder with his brother Bob, was a failed filmmaker and successful concert promoter who decided to put his ruthless, exploitative promotional tactics to good use in the independent film business.

Throughout the 80s, Miramax developed a system whereby they would cheaply acquire a fringe film, usually foreign in those days, and promote it in any way possible to gain a wide audience—usually by playing up the illicit sexuality that such foreign fare had a reputation for depicting. One example of this would be Miramax's marketing of *Pelle the Conqueror,* a "grim and gritty" Swedish-language film about a young boy attempting to escape his repressive father, set in the nineteenth century (Biskind 57). Despite the film's "bleak and uncompromising" content and lack of explicit sex scenes, Miramax's promotional ads for *Pelle the Conqueror* featured a still image of a "nearly topless peasant girl" who "appeared for a nanosecond" in the actual film, an attempt to capitalize on American audiences' assumptions about the explicit sexual content of foreign films (Biskind 57-8). In addition to exploitative (and sometimes downright misrepresentative) marketing and promotional practices such as the *Pelle* ads, the brothers Weinstein, particularly Harvey, also gained a reputation for meddling with the actual edits of the films they distributed, demanding cuts and overdubs and even hiring their own editors to make them (Biskind 62, 65, 87). While this practice, along with a tendency to short-change its clients financially, earned the Miramax Corp. a longstanding reputation as being hostile to artists, the company nevertheless successfully survived the 1980s by buying cheap and selling wide. This strategy finally paid off big in 1989 with Miramax's first major mainstream hit, Steven Soderbergh's debut feature, *sex, lies, and videotape.*

With the enormous success of *sex, lies*—the inclusion of the word "sex" in its title being a major selling point for Miramax as well as the moviegoing public—Miramax had tasted blood and was eager to duplicate its lucrative crossover into the cinematic

mainstream. And while it experienced some minor success with Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* in 1992, that film's excessive violence and primary appeal to a young, male audience prevented it from becoming the major hit Miramax was looking for. Instead, that repeat performance Miramax had thirsted for since 1989 would come from a seemingly unlikely source indeed, the British-produced IRA film, *The Crying Game.*

The Crying Game bore all the markings of a small, niche-market, art-house film: its plot about political violence and the IRA, its use of little-known actors (with the exception of Forest Whitaker), and of course its big "surprise," the fact that the female lead, Dil, is really a transvestite or transgendered male played by black drag queen Jaye Davidson. What Miramax did with it was to downplay the film's inflammatory politics and to develop a promotional campaign based upon the idea that Dil's maleness must be kept a secret at all costs. Hence the campaign was premised not so much on a suppression of the film's queerness but a refiguring of it: what could have been an incidental part of the film's diegesis now became *the secret* that everyone was (not) talking about and therefore the impetus for increasing numbers of moviegoers to see the film. By distributing the film to the multiplexes and pushing the "big secret" angle, the Weinsteins created a runaway word-of-mouth hit, eventually parlaying the film's box office success and art-house credibility into a fairly successful Oscar campaign.[21]

To be sure, Miramax's job was made easier by *The Crying Game*'s extremely homophobic stance toward its own material. The film's narrative structure encourages the ruse of the "surprise" since Dil's biological sex is kept secret from the protagonist,

Fergus, as well as the audience, until two-thirds of the way through the film. Further, when Dil's unexpected penis is revealed, it is a moment of shock, disgust and horror for Fergus, and while he is later reconciled with Dil, the construction of the reveal sequence all but begs for the kind of titillating and ultimately homophobic promotion that the Weinsteins concocted.[22]

The overwhelming success of the *Crying Game* campaign demonstrated once and for all to the Weinsteins that there was money to be made in certain forms of mainstream-friendly queer cinema. For while they had always thrived on controversy and the publicity it generates, *The Crying Game* showed that one of the most controversial and therefore lucrative topics that a film could engage with was gender and sexual transgression. Further, the years of 1991 and 1992 saw the explosion of a group of films dubbed the "New Queer Cinema" (see my Introduction), and while Miramax had no direct hand in distributing any of those films, by 1992 the Weinsteins were certainly aware of the cultural cache and potential profitability that queer cinema carried with it, especially—as the *Crying Game* example illustrates—if that queerness could be suppressed, elided, or framed in such a way as to meet the expectations of the largest possible (read: heterocentrist) audience segment.

So Miramax's penchant for controversy (so long as it can be turned to profitable ends), its recognition of the profitability of (properly framed) queer subject matter, and its status as the biggest of the indie distributors by 1994 all primed it to acquire and distribute Kevin Smith's *Clerks.* Indeed, the financial success of *The Crying Game* led

quickly to Miramax's acquisition by the Disney corporation in 1993, a deal that (supposedly) preserved the smaller company's autonomy with respect to film acquisitions while giving it a much greater pool of financial resources (Disney's) from which to draw. So with much of the risk factor removed, Miramax came to the 1994 Sundance Film Festival ready to buy and buy big. This was the same year that *Clerks* screened at Sundance.

As we have seen, the queerness of *Clerks,* while fairly obvious and often verbally explicit, is visually connotative rather than denotative, which means that the text opens itself easily to purely heterocentrist readings. Further, there is a streak of misogyny in the film that makes it particularly appealing to more traditional (homophobic) males of virtually any age group. This misogyny and lack of interest in women manifests in several key details in *Clerks*: first, that a whining, unmotivated "loser" like Dante is pursued by no less than two appealing women in the film; second, that the film's funniest characters, Randal and Jay, are openly misogynist; and third, that Caitlin Bree has sex with an anonymous dead guy as the film's ultimate joke. Besides its general male-centeredness, another feature that would have attracted Miramax to the picture was its built-in audience: the film is practically the definitive example (alongside *Slacker*, *Reservoir Dogs*, and, perhaps, *Reality Bites*) of Generation X cinema, reflecting as it does that Generation's interest in witty, raw, and pop-culturally savvy dialogue and low-budget films made by young, white, male *auteurs* working "outside the system" of mainstream Hollywood. In fact, it was the younger staff members at Miramax, particularly Mark Tusk, who brought *Clerks* to Harvey Weinstein's attention and

eventually convinced him to buy it. Finally and perhaps most importantly, Kevin Smith himself—his back story, his public persona, his concerns—made him very appealing to a company whose standard practice at the time was to bring new talent into the Miramax "family" and "by so doing [. .] control[led] their careers—at least in the beginning—and [kept] their salaries low" (Biskind 311). Smith, having maxed out his credit cards to make *Clerks* and with no firm distribution prospects beyond what might occur at Sundance, was primed to accept any offer that might come his way.

Once Miramax acquired *Clerks* at Sundance 1994, they marketed the film by very carefully negotiating the highly coded queerness of the text. It is worthy of note that another similar film was screened at Sundance that same year, Rose Troche's low-budget black-and-white lesbian romantic-comedy, *Go Fish*. Not only is *Go Fish* aesthetically and generically similar to *Clerks,* it was represented by the same producer's representative, the legendary John Pierson, and was sold to a distributor at that year's Sundance festival, a previously unheard-of practice that Pierson inaugurated. *Go Fish* was an early front runner in the bidding wars that Pierson encouraged between the various distributors at the 1994 festival, and by the end of the festival and its overwhelmingly successful three screenings, *Clerks* would be one of primary beneficiaries of this new approach.[23]

What I find so interesting about the connection between *Go Fish* and *Clerks* is how frequently historians and reviewers of this period discuss them together. It is as if, in the context of Sundance 1994, each film renders the other legible. Perhaps the most

obvious example of this is Pierson's own chapter on these films in his book *Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes*: he calls that chapter "The Odd Couple: Sundance 1994." Of course, what seems most odd to me is that Pierson considers these two films and their filmmakers an "odd couple" at all, for while Troche is a lesbian filmmaker and her film is explicitly about lesbians, it is actually a very conventional and sweetly rendered love story that unquestioningly accepts the consummation of a conventional monogamous relationship structure—albeit between two women—as its narrative *raison d'etre*. Comparatively, *Clerks* is actually a much more *queer* text than *Go Fish* in that it depicts and discusses all sorts of sexually nonconventional acts and does not ultimately privilege one relationship structure over another, unless it is the homosocial buddy relation: after all, both of Dante's heterosexual relationships fail, leaving him a bachelor at the end of the film, once again alone with Randal, in an ambiguous relationship.

However, as you might guess, the queerness of *Clerks* was not highlighted in the Miramax marketing campaign, and in fact, as with Pierson's chapter title, some pains were taken to differentiate *Clerks* from its out-lesbian counterpart. Smith's own avowed heterosexuality was a part of this. Another differentiating factor is *Clerks*'s cleverness in negotiating its own queerness, always suggesting and playing around the homoerotic possibilities of its characters and situations but never quite avowing them. This is the source of much of the film's humor but also makes *Clerks* much more easily marketable to the heterocentrist or homophobic segment of the filmgoing public. Indeed, the entire campaign to promote *Clerks* centered on playing up its light, comedic elements and framing it as a heterosexual Gen X film focused upon the socioeconomic difficulties of

its central characters. The trailer for *Clerks* almost makes the film look like a kind of revamped *Animal House* or *Porky's* for the 1990s, full of heterosexual hijinks and spunky characters who delight in committing youthful (and therefore temporary and forgivable) transgressions against the older generation's standards of good taste.[24] And while this description may well at least superficially suit Randal and Jay and Silent Bob, the trailer's exclusive focus on the light comedy aspects of the piece elides the more radical and progressive potential of its queer and gender-disruptive elements.

In this context it is worthwhile to once more discuss the film's original ending. As I mentioned earlier, by 1994 Harvey Weinstein had quite a reputation for cutting elements from films he did not think would sell well, and while the decision to cut the original violent ending from *Clerks* originated with Bob Hawk, Pierson, and others who were closer to the production than Weinstein, it is certain that the Miramax mogul agreed with it (Biskind 223). Why? Well, firstly, the Miramax advertising campaign shows that the company wanted to push the comedy aspects of *Clerks*, depicting the film as light entertainment for Gen X'ers, so the sudden seriousness of the ending would have been deeply incongruous with how the Miramax Corporation perceived the picture. Secondly, as I have suggested earlier, the original ending raises serious questions about *why* Dante needs to die, questions that might lead back to the film's structural queerness and queer-suggestive gender play. And while the removal of the ending could be read as a willingness to leave open some of the queerness of the text, to allow the effeminate and therefore sexually questionable Dante to live, as this chapter has shown, it is not really Dante who displays the most overt signs of queer sexual tendencies or non-heterosexual

object choice—it is Randal. So, by removing the dark ending and keeping the film light and comedic, the Miramax team actually opened the text to a much wider range of readings, one that of course includes the queer, but also embraces heteronormative and even homophobic and misogynistic ones. For while comedy permits a great deal of play and transgression, its very status as a lower genre and its strategies of narrative distanciation to achieve comic effects are the very things that allow a text like *Clerks* to deny the seriousness of the issues it raises and to subtly disavow the radicality of its own queerness.

Notes

1. Interestingly, that friend was Raf Ricci, brother to then-upcoming film star Christina Ricci (she had been in *Mermaids* and *The Addams Family* at the time I met Raf); however, for all the years I knew Raf I never met his famous (and incredibly busy) sister.

2. I am something of a typical Kevin Smith fan, having come to my first Smith film, *Clerks*, via home video at the word-of-mouth recommendation of another white, male Gen-X friend. I will discuss Smith's audience demographic in Chapter VI.

3. Dante is yelling, of course, at Randal, who even in an animated format plays homophobic bait-and-switch games with Dante—a tradition begun in *Clerks* that I will discuss in this chapter. But perhaps Dante doth protest too much: he is publicly outed as gay at the end of the animated episode in question.

4. This history of the buddy film is, due to space limitations, inadequately brief by design. A thoroughgoing queer geneaology of the buddy film would take a full book-length study.

5. To my knowledge the buddy film subgenre has been most prevalent in the comedy and action genres, though as my brief history shows, certain classic buddy films of the New Hollywood period, such as *Easy Rider*, *Midnight Cowboy*, and *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid*, all have a more melodramatic feel to them—part of generating sympathy for losers, geeks, and outsiders. The *bona fide* buddy comedies are exemplified by films such as the Hope and Crosby "Road To" films, the Dean Martin / Jerry Lewis comedies of the 1950s, the 1970s buddy films mentioned in my overview, the films of Cheech and Chong, and a great number of more recent offerings including the *Bill and Ted* films (1989, 1991), the *Wayne's World* films (1992, 1993), the *American Pie* trilogy (1999-2003), *Dude, Where's My Car?*(2000), *Road Trip* (2000), etc. The buddy action films include buddy cop and buddy action-comedy films such as the *Lethal Weapon* series (1987-98), *Midnight Run* (1988), *Tango & Cash* (1989), *Red Heat* (1988), etc.

6. Smith goes on to reference *Butch and Sundance* again in 2006 by playing "Raindrops Keep Fallin' On My Head" over a scene of male-male bonding between Dante and Randal in *Clerks II*, effectively queering a scenario that previously involved Butch Cassidy (Paul Newman) and Sundance's girlfriend Etta Place (Katherine Ross). I will discuss *Clerks II* in my forthcoming book Chapter VI.

7. This emphasis on the male characters is reinforced on the formal level in *Clerks* through the distribution of intertitles that introduce each segment of the film: the only three of *Clerks*' seventeen total intertitles that carry proper names are those of male characters, i.e., (1) Dante, (2) Randal, and (3) Jay and Silent Bob.

8. Sometimes called the fourth and fifth films of the New Jersey Trilogy, *Dogma* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* are no longer the last two films set in the View Askewniverse: *Clerks II* was released in July 2006.

9. Regarding the excision of the original "Dante's death" ending of *Clerks*, John Pierson claims that he was simply the person who "happened to say it first" but that many early viewers, including Larry Kardish of the Museum of Modern Art, responded negatively to the sequence (Muir 44). Smith himself acknowledges that the original ending was his "*Do The Right Thing* ending" and that it may not have matched the tone of the rest of *Clerks* (Muir 44). For while Spike Lee's 1989 film is ostensibly a comedy, throughout its running time it is focused upon racially-motivated conflicts arising between groups in an enclosed community. Thus the violent ending of *Do The Right Thing* is an earned conclusion, anticipated by the conflicts introduced in the plot. Smith's use of a violent ending for *Clerks*, on the other hand, is somewhat random and existential. His deployment of such an ending and his acknowledgment of its original source, *Do The Right Thing,* is interesting given the general elision of race in Smith's work and the overwhelming whiteness of the View Askewniverse: it reads as a kind of cross-racial appropriation similar to that practiced by Jay and Silent Bob (see Chapter V).

10. Even the more comedic of the 1980s buddy cop films, including interracial action comedies like *48 Hrs.* (1982), *Running Scared* (1986), and, later, *Rush Hour* (1998), are more action-oriented than the outright buddy comedies of earlier and later periods. See also note 5.

11. In *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, David Halperin discusses the historical inheritance of male-male Greek relationships and their relevance to this hierarchical model of gender relations.

12 *Clerks X* is a three-DVD set released by Miramax in 2004. It features two versions of *Clerks,* the 1994 theatrical release and, on its second disc, *Clerks: The First Cut*. Its third disc contains a feature length making-of documentary, *Snowball Effect*. In general, *Clerks X* is chock full of special features, including many video introductions depicting Kevin Smith talking about himself and his work, usually in dialogue with real-life buddy and *Clerks* producer Scott Mosier. I will discuss this DVD and its content in further detail in Chapter VI.

13. Will Ferrell's February 7, 1998 "Randy Graves" sketch on *SNL*'s Weekend Update brings together Clinton, blowjobs, and white male homosocial slackerism in a highly condensed way. Ferrell plays a college frat boy, Randy Graves, who comments that Clinton "went for a kick-ass hummer on the sly, and this *bitch*, Linda Tripp, totally cock-blocked him!" He goes on to defend "Slick Willie" for his desire for extramarital blowjobs and calls Hilary Clinton a "bitch" as well. Not only is the content of this sketch relevant to the "37" sequence in *Clerks*, Ferrell's character's name, Randy Graves, is identical to that of the *Clerks* protagonist played by Jeff Anderson.

14. Dante and Veronica's talk about what defines sexual boundaries (particularly around fellatio and Dante's phrase "sleep with them like any other decent person") aligns with Sedgwick's discussion of Axiom 1: *People are different from each other*, wherein she states that "even identical genital acts mean very different things to different people" (*Epistemology* 22, 25).

15. Caitlin's extreme sexual promiscuity queers her, as does her bond to out lesbian Alyssa Jones, hinted at in the *Clerks* weight trainer scene and concretized in *Amy* when Alyssa reveals that she had sex with the promiscuous Caitlin during her own sexually experimental high school years.

16. Also worthy of note here is the fact that Veronica moved back to Leonardo from Seton Hall University in South Orange, NJ, to be closer to Dante, telling Willam that she was "tired of missing him [Dante]." In some ways this behavior runs counter to her masculine, independent persona, instead suggesting a more conservative, more Italian set of values that might be characterized by the phrase "stand by your man." Yet we also see that Veronica has an investment in getting Dante to change his ways and go back to school, which might suggest that the masculine side of her wants to goad Dante out of his passivity.

17. This intersection of the character of Willam with suggestions of man-on-man desire and sexuality recurs, most notably in his encounter with Olaf Oleeson, the Russian metal singer who croons to Willam during the Pringles can sequence. As discussed herein, Willam is framed as working class, scruffy, strangely sexualized, and ultimately functions as a racially "Black" stand-in.

18. If Muir's book does not explicitly call attention to the queer connotations of Randal's axiom, it nevertheless raises an interesting and related point. Randal calls Jay a "junkie" and in his closing speech of the film also refers to himself and Dante (the clerks) as subhuman, i.e., monkeys. This frames all of the denizens of the Quick Stop—Dante, Randal, Jay, and Bob—as not adult, as refusing to live in middle-class "reproductive time" that assumes marriage and childbearing as a mark of social maturation and adulthood. These characters instead live in what Judith Halberstam calls queer time, a temporality that privileges intensity over longevity and does not pathologize behaviors (like drug using) that disregard the imperative to longevity and respectability (*In A Queer Time and Place* 4-5) As Muir notes, Randal's comment and his shared penchant for resisting respectability highlights the similarities between Dante and Randal and Jay and Bob. In their drug dealing, Jay and Bob *are* clerks. I will discuss Jay's drug dealing and the concept of queer time further in Chapter V.

19. In this context it is interesting to note that a very early working title for the film, when Smith was still writing the earliest first draft of the screenplay, was *Ostensibly* (as seen almost 26 minutes into *The Snowball Effect)*. And while this title was quickly discarded

for its "official" working title, *In Convenience*, the implications of the *Ostensibly* title *vis-a-vis* Randal's presumed heterosexuality and actual queerness are wonderfully funny and quite eye-opening.

20. Regarding *Clerks*' "twist" ending and its *homage* to / appropriation of Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* (1989), see note 9.

21. *The Crying Game* earned nominations in the Leading Actor, Supporting Actor, Director, Editing, and Best Picture categories, and won the Best Original Screenplay Oscar that year. For an amusing story about Harvey Weinstein's efforts to get Jaye Davidson nominated in the Best Supporting *Actress* category (thereby preserving the *The Crying Game*'s big secret), see Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures* pp. 147-8.

22. For further discussion of *The Crying Game*'s homophobia and marketing, see Lola Young, "Re-Viewing *The Crying Game*" and Judith Halberstam's discussion of the film in *In a Queer Time and Place* pp. 79-82.

23. For a thoroughgoing account of Pierson's central role in the rise of 1980s and 90s independent cinema, see his excellent book *Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes*.

24. While the comparison to *Porkys* here is my own, this is a parallel that would come back to haunt Smith during the production and promotion of his second feature, *Mallrats* (1995)—see Chapter III.

CHAPTER III

FANBOYS AND CAPED CRUSADERS: *MALLRATS* (1995)

Chapter II discussed how Kevin Smith's debut film, *Clerks,* put him on the map as an up-and-coming indie filmmaker and a key voice of Generation X cultural production. *Clerks* was a hit at Sundance 1994, became a cult classic after it hit the home video market on VHS in 1995, and made Smith and his onscreen alter-ego, Silent Bob, into cult media icons. *Clerks* was also a critical favorite: to cite one key example, Amy Taubin of the *Village Voice* declared that *Clerks* was "the standout film of the 1993 market" and called its "absence of style [referring to its amateurish acting and low production values] a virtue" (Miller 19). Yet, as Matthew Miller notes, while *Clerks* set up critics and audiences to view Smith as a "[John] Waters-esque subculture iconoclast," Smith's second feature, *Mallrats*, "clashed with the [. . .] preconceptions with which critics were primed to approach his work" (25-6). If *Clerks* was a critically lauded bid for indie-sector recognition, *Mallrats* moved away from that paradigm in two opposite and—at least initially—commercially disastrous directions.

Mallrats centers on the exploits of two buddies, T.S. Quint (Jeremy London) and his slacker sidekick Brodie Bruce (Jason Lee), as they hang out at a local mall over the course of one day after they both get dumped by their respective girlfriends. Brodie spends most of his time talking about comics, attempting to purchase comics, and getting

into fights with Shannon Hamilton (Ben Affleck), a local store manager who moves in on Brodie's ex-girlfreind René (Shannen Doherty). Meanwhile, T.S. tries to prevent his own ex-, Brandi Svenning (Claire Forlani), from appearing on her father's dating game show, which is broadcasting from a stage in the mall where our two protagonists are loitering. The two buddies' attempts to win back their girlfriends are interspersed with more broadly fantastical comedic episodes involving Jay and Silent Bob (Jason Mewes and Kevin Smith) who are constantly on the run from dreaded security guard La Fours (Sven Thorsen). The film climaxes with a showdown on the set of Mr. Svenning's "Truth or Date" game show, during which T.S. proposes marriage to—and is accepted by—Brandi in the show-within-a-show's *denouement*. In many ways, the film is structurally similar to *Clerks*, although for reasons I will discuss shortly *Mallrats* does "tack on" a romantic conclusion where both male buddies win back their female partners.

Hence, on the one hand, *Mallrats* was intended by Smith to be a more polished version of *Clerks*, a kind of "*Clerks* redux" as he put it in a 2004 interview. Certainly this is also how Universal Studios, who financed and distributed the picture, wanted it to turn out: they saw *Mallrats* as *Clerks* "cleaned up" for consumption by a wider audience, a "smart *Porky's*" that would appeal to Gen-Xers who liked *Clerks* as well as the average multiplex moviegoer who liked teen comedies. Universal's optimism about its ability to break Smith's Askewniverse into the mainstream held right up until *Mallrats*'s theatrical release, as both the filmmakers at View Askew and the studio personnel close to the film believed they had a big hit on their hands, the biggest R-rated comedy since *Animal House* (1979).

However, when it came to actually developing the marketing campaign for *Mallrats,* Universal and its affiliate Gramercy Pictures were at a loss for how to present Smith's sophomore effort to the movie-going public. In fact, as Smith himself relates it, Gramercy "came to us" and asked the filmmakers themselves how they would promote the film. Of course, Smith and company are artists, not promoters, and as we have seen, it was largely due to the efforts of seasoned indie-film business minds like Jon Pierson and Harvey Weinstein that Smith's first feature, *Clerks*, reached the audiences that it did. Thus, when asked how they would promote *Mallrats,* the View Askew team responded with a suggested campaign based on their perception that the primary fan base for the film would share one of Smith's great personal passions: superhero comic books and comic book fandom.

And that is exactly how *Mallrats* was promoted: its poster designed to replicate a comic book cover, its first wildly successful test screening at the 1995 San Francisco Comic-Con International, its opening title sequence depicting the main characters as comic-book superheroes (Muir 72). It was even accompanied by an 80+ page *Mallrats Companion* guidebook in comic book format. While this may now, in light of the recent domination of Hollywood by comic book-based properties such as the extremely lucrative *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* franchises, seem a prescient move on the part of View Askew and Universal, it was an idea far ahead of its time: *Mallrats* flopped on its opening weekend and was considered an unmitigated failure by the studio and by View Askew.[1] That the film would redeem itself by becoming a cult hit in the home video market is no surprise, for the film itself is wonderfully funny, smartly intertextual, and a

more than worthy follow-up to *Clerks*. Indeed, like its critically favored predecessor, *Mallrats* recently went to a Tenth-Anniversary Extended DVD Edition and is alternately referred to by Smith as a "gateway flick" and "the access film" to his other films, many newer (and often younger) viewers coming to his work via his accessible and funny second effort.

How did Smith, View Askew, and Universal work together to create such a contradictory product, that is, a film intended to reach a larger audience than *Clerks* yet specifically addressed and marketed to an even smaller one, comic book fans? How do the discourses of comic book fandom, centering on the figure of the so-called "fanboy" but also including explicit superhero iconography and references, inform how the film's producers and promoters made and marketed the film? And what does the film's simultaneous shift to embrace both comic book fandom and the demands of a wider teenpic/comedy film audience have to do with queerness? These questions will guide our inquiry into the rich and contradictory world of *Mallrats*.

From Miramax to Universal

Kevin Smith is fond of acknowledging his cinematic precursors, and none more so than Austin, Texas independent writer/director Richard Linklater. That Linklater's first wide-release feature film, *Slacker* (1991), served as the catalyst for Smith's entry into the film business is well known; however, as Smith confesses in Jon Pierson's memoir *Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes,* Linklater and his work were a model for Smith's intended career trajectory well into the production of *Mallrats*: "One would

almost think I sold my soul to the devil just to get Richard's life. First I want to make my small independent [*Clerks*] [. . .] then I want to make a comedy with Jim Jacks and Sean Daniel at Universal" (Pierson 182). Indeed, over time the two independent directors' sophomore films, *Dazed and Confused* (1993) and *Mallrats*, would come to occupy similar cultural spaces as enduring teen cult films that found their audiences in the home video market. However, as Smith himself is quick to point out, there are also significant differences between the two films, not least of which are their budgets—$27,000 for *Clerks* and $6.1 million for *Mallrats*—and Smith's perception of *Mallrats* as "bigger [than *Dazed and Confused*] in terms of scope and who I want this movie to get to. [. . .] I want this to be like every comedy I saw as a kid and was wowed by. John Landis when he was good, Ivan Reitman when he was really funny" (182). Smith's invocation of directors Landis (*Animal House, The Blues Brothers*) and Reitman (*Meatballs, Ghostbusters*), and his mention of Landis and 80's teenpic guru John Hughes (*Sixteen Candles, The Breakfast Club*) in *Mallrats*'s closing credits, demonstrate the extent to which Smith and his View Askew comrades really conceived of their second feature as a possible mainstream comedy hit in the making. In sum, Smith, thrilled to be following in indie icon Linklater's footsteps, nevertheless saw his own teaming with Gramercy Pictures and producers James Jacks and Sean Daniels as an opportunity to reach an even wider audience with an accessible teen comedy in the tradition of Hughes et. al.

In some ways this interest in paying tribute to—and hopefully capturing the box office success of—his 1970s and 80s predecessors fits in with Smith's status as a Generation Xer and the kinds of pop-cultural in-jokes already fairly abundant in *Clerks*.

For example, in that film, Dante and Randal talk at length about the original *Star Wars* trilogy (1977-83), a defining cultural event in the childhood of many Gen Xers. And any Gen Xer who grew up with *Star Wars* would have just entered his or her teenage years when John Hughes's epoch-defining *The Breakfast Club* came out in 1985.

However, the inclusion of explicit *superhero comic book* references is new to the View Askewniverse as of *Mallrats*, and claims to Smith's cultural prescience aside, this is arguably an odd choice for a film intending to reach a vastly larger audience than his black-and-white debut feature. For while *Clerks* never pretended to be anything other than a "wail of ennui" capturing something of the *zeitgeist* of Generation X, *Mallrats*, as both a bigger-budgeted studio film with mainstream aspirations and a follow-up to the resolutely independent *Clerks*, was in the difficult position of having to simultaneously address two very different (though at points overlapping) audiences: the mainstream comedy moviegoer and the *Clerks* fan. Interestingly, despite the tallness of this order and the film's initial box-office failure, I maintain that the film in fact *succeeds* at this feat of dual address—at least within the Gen-X demographic that constitutes its core audience—through two interrelated textual and intertextual strategies: first, an appeal to audience *nostalgia* for the 1970s and 80s films it pays tribute to and emulates, and second, an embracing of elaborate *fantasy* elements and sequences that are both consistent with the teen comedies just mentioned but also incorporate superhero comic book tropes and iconography, aspects that reach out to the core fans of Smith's previous and future work: comic book fans.

Genre/Content	1970s-80s teen comedies	Comics
Type of Appeal for Gen X/Comic Fans	Nostalgia	Fantasy
Intended Audience	teen film/gross-out comedy audience	*Clerks* fans (comics fans)
Textual Examples	heterosexual humor, happy ending, romance, ensemble cast, mall setting	Brodie as fanboy, Batman parodies, Stan Lee, intertextuality, View Askew "continuity"

Table 1: *Mallrats'* Dual Address

Genre, Gender, Queerness, and Race

Insofar as *Mallrats* can be read as "*Clerks* redux" we would expect it to follow the conventions of the buddy comedy, and to some extent this is so: the film's action centers on a male buddy pair, T.S. Quint (Jeremy London) and Brodie Bruce (Jason Lee), who, upon losing their girlfriends, venture to the local mall to hang out and commiserate.

Like *Clerks* and the other buddy comedies that precede it, then, *Mallrats* constructs a diegetic world from which women are largely excluded. For although at least one of the two *Mallrats* girlfriends, Rene (Shannen Doherty), is onscreen more than her *Clerks* counterparts, and though two of *Mallrats*'s female characters, Brandi (Claire Forlani) and Gwen (Joey Lauren Adams) even get one male-free scene together, nevertheless these women all play roles subordinate in the narrative to the two male protagonists and even the secondary male buddy duo, Jay and Silent Bob. Indeed, Brandi is hardly in the movie at all, appearing only in an introductory scene, her scene with Gwen, and in the final game show sequence. And the two more minor female characters, Gwen and Tricia (Renee Humphrey) have only two short scenes each and are primarily

depicted as objects of sexual interest or desire for the male characters. Thus in *Mallrats* as in many of the View Askewniverse films, women function as a kind of structuring absence: they are needed in order to guarantee the heterosexuality of our male heroes, and are present at the outset to catalyze the narrative, yet are shunted aside throughout most of the run time of the picture.

This marginalization of women in *Mallrats* can be understood in terms of genre, for the film is a male-centered buddy comedy that keeps its focus on its male duos (T.S. and Brodie, Jay and Silent Bob) even as it expands to include more secondary characters than did *Clerks*. Culturally speaking, however, this focus on (white) men instead of women is linked to anxieties over women and heterosexual pairing, both of which tend to spell doom for the ever-peurile homosocial antics that View Askew protagonists valorize. From the point of view of adolesecent male geeks and slackers who do not wish to grow up, women, who are linked to maturity, adulthood, and romantic commitment, are frightening indeed, and have little place in the world of comic book collecting and male bonding that *Mallrats*'s heroes (wish to) inhabit. Hence *Mallrats* maintains the masculinist leanings of the buddy comedy subgenre even as it expands to incorporate generic features of other comedic subgenres.[2]

Further, there are strong parallels between the central male buddy pairs in *Clerks* and *Mallrats*—see Table 2. T.S. is essentially an updated version of Dante: his primary focus is his girl trouble, in this case his separation from Brandi Svenning, and he is feminized through his pining for Brandi, his self-defeating attitude, and his discomfort with his buddy's more puerile and homosocial behaviors such as comic book collecting

and stage-trashing. Similarly, T.S.'s "sidekick" Brodie is cut from the same cloth as *Clerks*'s Randal, a snarky "bad boy" who evinces an interest in deviant sexuality—in Brodie's case, an obsession with "superhero sex organs" and a willingness to engage in at least one public sex act—and an overt indifference to relationships with women. The Brodie/Randal connection is further emphasized by the film's opening voice-over monologue, a story involving Brodie's cousin Walter—the same cousin Walter mentioned by Randal in *Clerks*, a fact which makes Brodie and Randal related by virtue of their shared cousin (Muir 80).

	Buddy #1 : Geek	**Buddy #2 : Slacker**
Characters	Dante (*Clerks*), T.S. (*Mallrats*), Silent Bob	Randal (*Clerks*), Brodie (*Mallrats*), Jay
Gender	feminized – whiny, passive, gets dumped and/or manipulated by masculinized women and is troubled by it	masculinized – snarky, rebellious, cares more about pop culture, video games, and/or comics than relationships
Sexuality	seemingly straight	queer – into deviant sexuality and is frequently asexulized *vis-a-vis* women
Role	romantic protagonist/superhero	comedic "sidekick"

Table 2: Buddy Pairs in *Clerks* and *Mallrats*

Brodie's Randal-ness reaches its peak during the "Truth or Date" game show, where he is placed in a very Randal-like relation to newly introduced character Gill Hicks, who is Dante's brother and is played by Brian O'Halloran, the same actor who played Dante in *Clerks*. Throughout the game show, under the auspices of "running interference" for T.S., Brodie homophobically baits Gill and, through an elaborate game of bait-and-switch, eventually accuses Gill of being a "textbook closet case self-loather

[who] can't be comfortable with his own sexuality" on live television. *Mallrats* visually emphasizes the Brodie-Gill relation in an interesting way when the game show ends. Throughout "Truth or Date," T.S. and Brodie are usually seen in two-shot, emphasizing Brodie's role as "Second Suitor" to T.S.'s "Suitor Number One": Brodie is literally situated as T.S.'s sidekick and is genuinely helping T.S. to achieve his aim *vis-a-vis* Brandi. However, once Brandi accepts T.S.'s marriage proposal and T.S. gets up to kiss her center stage, the film cuts to a two-shot of Brodie cheering and shaking Gill in a celebratory way—as if even in a heterosexually resolved romantic plot, Smith and company cannot resist leaving a *Clerks*-reminiscent male buddy pair visually intact.

Brodie's case differs from Randal's in that the former actually has an onscreen (ex-)girlfriend, Rene, and by the end of the film he seems to accept the importance of that relationship to some extent. However, as we shall see, Rene's primary function in the film, aside from feeding an apparently insatiable appetite for clothes shopping, is to serve as a conduit through which Brodie may play out his rivalry with the proprietor of Fashionable Male, testosterone-driven metrosexual Shannon Hamilton (Ben Affleck). And, tellingly, T.S. spends much more screen time in *Mallrats* fighting it out with Brandi's overprotective father, Jared Svenning (Michael Rooker), than he does talking with Brandi or actively trying to win her back. In these senses, *Mallrats* adheres to the buddy film formula of marginalizing female characters in order to foreground male friendships and rivalries.

That these rivalries all emanate *outward* from the central buddy duo, rather than manifesting *between* the two buddies, is a principal dynamic which differentiates

Mallrats from *Clerks* and to some extent de-queers the central buddy pair relative to their predecessors in the latter film (see Figures 14 and 15 below). For example, unlike Randal, Brodie does not seem to take delight in making his buddy the butt of homophobic joking, although he does question T.S.'s geek authenticity when T.S. perseverates on his relationship issues rather than engaging in talk about comic books. However, by the end of the film—again in contrast to the Randal-Dante dynamic—Brodie accepts the primacy of heterosexual romantic relationships, and his intervention in T.S.'s affairs at the film's climax—i.e., running interference against Suitor Number Three during the "Truth or Date" game show—is at T.S.'s request and ultimately helps T.S. to reunite with Brandi.

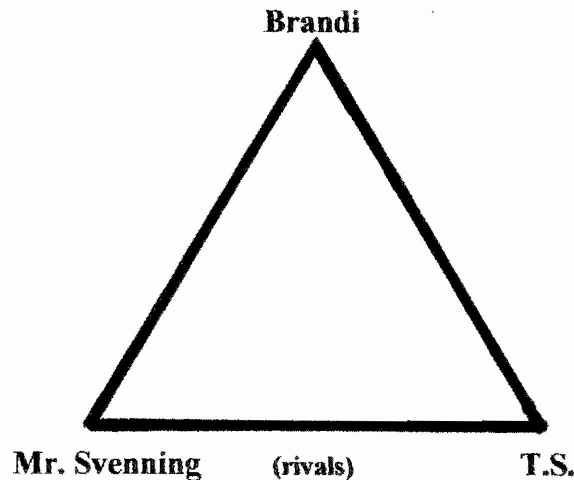

Figure 14: *Mallrats* Erotic Triangle #1

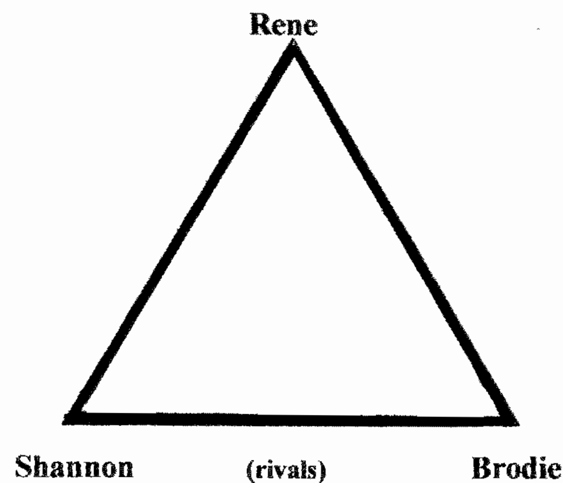

Figure 15: *Mallrats* Erotic Triangle #2

Generically, the slightly increased presence of women in *Mallrats* and the marked expansion of Jay and Bob's roles since *Clerks* are indicative of *Mallrats*'s slight shift away from the buddy duo formula and toward the teenpic or what William Paul calls the "animal comedy," a subgenre (akin to but not identical with the teenpic) that features ensemble casts, multiple plotlines, an emphasis on sex over love, and a tendency toward lower-stratum or "gross-out" humor.

According to Paul, animal comedy is a subgenre that emerged out of the late 1970s and dominated Hollywood box office into the early 1980s: its progenitors were the male-centered ensemble films *American Graffiti* (1973) and *MASH* (1970) and its definitive (and most successful) examples include *Animal House* (1978), *Porky's* (1982), *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), and *Bachelor Party* (1984) (91). Central features of the animal comedy subgenre include characters who are "defined chiefly in terms of their sexual desires" and who "are generally aligned to an institution" such as a school,

country club, summer camp, or in the case of *Mallrats*, a mall (110, 111). Like many teen films, these comedies focus on (mainly male) groups of characters rather than individuals and thus their narrative structure "reflects the focus on a social group by being episodic, contingent, always retaining the possibility of veering off with a character who might have previously seemed minor" (111). This last occurs frequently in *Mallrats*, as when Jay and Silent Bob engage in their stage-trashing escapades or when even more minor characters like Trish and Willam play key roles in abetting the final takeover of the "Truth or Date" game show and the exposure of Shannon Hamilton as a paedophile. Indeed, in animal comedy the combined efforts of the whole ensemble are deployed in resolving the "revenge motif" of one of the plot strands—in this case, the dual revenge of T.S. against Mr. Svenning and Brodie against Shannon—and the resolution of the revenge plot "marked by the triumph of the group of animals) signals the end of the plot for the entire film" (111), as it does in *Mallrats*.

The "animal" in animal comedy indicates the subgenre's interest less in specific age groups—though "kids on the borderline between adolescence and adulthood" frequently constitute animal comedy casts (172)—than in the liberating potential of unfettered sexual desire and out-of-control behavior, that is, animality. Indeed, as Paul writes, "[a]nimals are never far from these films—at least metaphorically, and occasionally literally" and this "insistent emphasis on animality" not only leads to increased carnality but also grants physical comedy "pride of place over verbal comedy" in animal comedies (86). Of course, in Kevin Smith's films, verbal comedy always holds pride of place and so physical comedy, where present, does not necessarily trump verbal

wit. This no doubt stems from Smith's strong self-identification as a writer above all else and has the effect of lending the View Askew films (including *Mallrats*) a certain ironic sophistication. In fact, Smith's verbally dense and highly stylized dialogue has provoked comparisons to the "fast-talking 1930s comedies, like *His Girl Friday*" as well as to the iambic pentameter of William Shakepeare, and no doubt helps lend credence to the criticism that his films are not particularly cinematic (Muir 38, 76-7).

Regardless of its trademark verbal wit, *Mallrats* is distinct from *Clerks* in demonstrating many of the central features of animal comedy, including increased physical humor (mostly involving Jay and Silent Bob but also including Brodie's being struck in the head with a girder and Gwen's downing of T.S. with a crotch shot) and, of course, the increased presence of animals: Brodie's opening voice-over describes his cousin's sexual exploits with a cat, Jay and Silent Bob open the film standing in front of a pet store with a prominent sign reading "Gerbils! Gerbils! Gerbils!" and they end the film in the company of an orangutan.

In fact, Jay and Silent Bob's concluding moment with the orangutan links *Mallrats* to the broader slapstick comedy tradition of which animal comedies are a relatively recent variant. During the film's closing "where are they now?" montage, where we learn what each of the principal characters does following the events of the film, Jay and Silent Bob are shown walking away from the camera down a long stretch of road in the company of an orangutan named Susanne (see Figure 16). They slowly walk into the distance as the end credits roll, eventually obscured by an iris-fade to black. This scene is an explicit *homage* to the closing shot of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*

(1936), wherein Chaplin's Tramp, in what would be his final screen appearance, sets off down a similar road with his partner-in-crime the Gamin (Paulette Goddard). This is a resonant intertextual moment that serves both to queer Jay and Bob, likening them to the heterosexually bonded Tramp-Gamin duo, and to self-reflexively place *Mallrats* in the physical comedy/slapstick tradition that Chaplin and his films represent. It also suggests a specific parallel between the films of Chaplin and Smith, both of which use the conventions of romantic love mainly for narrative purposes while consistently preserving the childlike and polymorphously sexual male clown figures (the Tramp, Jay and Bob) that occupy the true center of their films. Hence, while in *Mallrats* T.S. and Brodie reconcile with their respective girlfriends, thus ostensibly concluding the film's narrative, the *Modern Times*-esque ending signifies that Jay and Silent Bob's story, like that of Chaplin's Tramp, is never truly over, that these are figures who will remain marginalized and preserved in an endless pseudo-childhood from film to film to film. This connection between Jay and Silent Bob, arrested development, and the slapstick comedy tradition will recur in Smith's later films *Dogma* and especially *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*.

As a subgenre grounded in physical comedy, animal comedy revels in lower-stratum bodily humor, and hence there is prevalent carnality, nudity (and its correlate, voyeurism), and grotesquery in animal comedy. *Mallrats* incorporates all these features, from Brodie and Rene's public sex act on the elevator to a scene depicting Gwen's exposed breasts (complete with Silent Bob as voyeur) to the ultimate grotesque moment in the film (and arguably in Smith's entire *ouvre*), Brodie's stink-palming of Mr. Svenning. This last not only foreshadows the culmination of all of *Mallrats*'s plot

strands, acting as a precursor to the "elaborate prank [. . .] usually motivated by the revenge plot" that unites all the characters, but also exemplifies Paul's point that "derisive use of the grotesque is made for figures of authority and power" at the hands of the animal comedy's animalistic (and usually younger) protagonists (112, 111). If the trashing of Mr. Svenning's game show is the plot-ending prank of *Mallrats*, his stink-palming and subsequent illness is its grotesque and personally derisive counterpart.

Figure 16: Jay and Silent Bob with Suzanne the orangutan, in a shot that mimics the closing shot of Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936).

If, in animal comedy, it is "often the activity or location that provides the film's coherence rather than tightly structured plots or complexly defined characters" (Paul 89) then a few words should be said about the role of the shopping mall in *Mallrats*. Just as *Clerks* used one central location—the convenience store—to unify its somewhat non-

linear comedic vignettes and to emblematize the plight of the underemployed 1990s Gen-X slacker, *Mallrats*'s shopping mall, along with the school and the summer camp, stands as the central site of many 1980s teen films and Animal comedies that *Mallrats* hopes to emulate, most notably *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Valley Girl* (1983). In part this is because in the 1980s, malls were literal sites where teen culture flourished. Originally incepted as places where women could move about and shop "without the stigma or threat of the street" (Fiske 23), by the 1980s shopping malls had become a primary teen hangout space, both for shopping but also as a work space, a social space, indeed *the* primary space from which to approach teen culture. As Michael V. Montgomery writes, discussing *Valley Girl* and *Fast Times*, "there is clearly an effort [. . .] to comment upon the teenagers' comprehensive use of mall space in the 'mall montages' following the opening shots of both films. Both sequences suggest that the mall is the proper environment in which to study kids of the '80s" (96-7). *Mallrats* follows in this tradition by opening with a mall montage accompanied by Brodie telling a story in voiceover, formally establishing him as the film's expert mallrat who waxes philosophically about the status of mid-mall food stands and expresses extreme consternation over the possibility of child escalator accidents. Indeed, in this regard Brodie is an exemplary representative of Gen-X youths who grew up thinking of malls as social spaces: "[T]he Gen Xer [. . .] was of the first generation for whom the mall stood for freedom from parental control. He was in the first wave of mall rats" (Underhill 132).

This gendering of the Gen-X mallrat as male is significant. Formerly considered a space dominated by women shoppers, Generation X's rise into teendom in the 1980s

transformed the shopping mall into a key site for inter-gender teen socializing and male slackerism. Hence, since the 1980s, malls have been reconceptualized as a transitional space "in which the social identities of youth find articulation" (Bailey and Hay 218). Indeed, Steve Bailey and James Hay claim that the social space of the shopping mall "reflects a recognition that shopping—for meals in the food court, for films in the multiplex, for a 'lifestyle' and an identity in the larger space of the mall—is an absolutely critical task in human development" (227). Thus the shopping mall is a site for the socialization of youth, a space where teens (or in the case of *Mallrats*, twentysomethings) are trained to be good consumers and to develop into full-blown, consumerist adults. Indeed, according to Bailey and Hay, the shopping mall is nothing less than "the metaphorical location for the assumption of a mature lifestyle" in Western consumerist culture (227). Yet Brodie resists this maturation process by hanging around the mall without a specific "shopping agenda": he is a participant in mall youth culture but, with the exception of briefly visiting his comics store and at one point buying a cookie, he refuses to engage with the largely heterosexualized socialization and maturation processes associated with "the organising structure of shopping" (227). Brodie's disinterest in shopping activities that would help him mature into adulthood, such as accompanying Rene to the stores she wants to shop at, is a chronic failing of his that Rene explicitly cites as a contributing factor to their break-up.

So, while *Mallrats* uses troubled romantic relationships as the initial catalyst and final resolution of its narrative, the action is not so much *about* those relationships as it is about "two guys hanging out in a mall," wreaking havoc with the stage, getting into

fights with their male antagonists, and engaging in various forms of gross-out humor. This is similar in structure to many 1980s John Hughes films such as *Sixteen Candles* and *The Breakfast Club* as well as non-Hughes animal comedies like *Animal House* and *Porky's*: heterosexual romance is present but not typically the narrative focus. This may be due in part to the adolescence of these films' main characters, who struggle through the liminal period between childhood and adulthood, as yet unsure about their place in the adult heterosexual order. It may also have to do with the male-centeredness of the animal comedy subgenre. For even in an ostensibly female-centered film like *Sixteen Candles*, which stars Molly Ringwald as a sixteen year old girl seeking the attention of a popular boy she has a crush on, much of the film's screen time is given over to the over-the-top exploits of male geeks like Farmer Ted (Anthony Michael Hall) and exchange student Long Duk Dong (Gedde Watanabe). In short, gross-out and male-driven sexual antics trump romantic concerns every time.

William Paul notes the box-office dominance of male-centered, ensemble-based animal comedies in the early 1980s, and *Mallrats* producer Jim Jacks is aware of the subgenre as well, noting during *Mallrats*'s production that "nobody's done an R-rated youth comedy in awhile, [though] it used to be one of the staples of the business" (*View Askew's Look Back at Mallrats*). Yet not only is *Mallrats*'s status as an animal comedy (or R-rated youth comedy) a reference to the earlier films that its creators grew up with and that it consciously tries to emulate, it is also, in retrospect, a harbinger of changes in the teen comedy film genre in the years following its release. Citing the glut of highly profitable teen gross-out comedies that studios would produce in the wake of *There's*

Something About Mary (1998), John Kenneth Muir, author of *An Askew View: The Films of Kevin Smith*, calls *Mallrats* "a film that was really ahead of its time" and wonders if "*Mallrats*'s perceived critical failure might simply be a result of nothing more significant than timing" (75). Of course, Muir is a fan writing a book intended for fans and so is invested in valorizing *Mallrats* and emphasizing its importance. Nevertheless, his surmise rings true, especially in light of Smith's claim that the original screenplay for *Mallrats* included a scene in which Jay and Silent Bob, masturbating in a dressing room in the "Popular Girl" store, ejaculate into Gwen's hair without her knowing it—a nearly identical forerunner of the scenario which would later help propel *There's Something About Mary* to huge box-office success (*Mallrats* DVD commentary).

Interestingly, although *Mallrats* emulates a teen comedy in tone, setting, and many plot particulars, its characters are nevertheless explicitly *not* teenagers, but rather the same twentysomething types who inhabit the Quick Stop convenience store in *Clerks*. They literally inhabit the same fictional world and know the same characters that the *Clerks* protagonists do, and their language, knowledge of relationships and sex, and economic autonomy place them as aged-twenty-plus Gen Xers rather than high-school-aged teens. Hence the *Mallrats* cast consists of Gen X slackers *masquerading* as teens, inhabiting a teen film plot and setting while retaining their identities as *Clerks*-like characters aimed at Gen X audiences.

This juxtaposition of Gen-X characters with teenpic situations is itself postmodern, generating multiple layers of signification in the characters that render their placement in a teen setting comically ironic. Smith's Gen X geek/slacker characters,

even as they appear in *Mallrats*, have more in common with drunken 40-year-old Miles (Paul Giamatti) in Alexander Payne's *Sideways* (2004) than they do the actual teen protagonists of the 1980s John Hughes films. Like the older male characters in Payne's work—*Election* (1999), *About Schmidt* (2002), and *Sideways*—who undergo various forms of mid-life crisis in response to their *malaise* as privileged white men, Smith's slackers respond to the concerns of extended adolescence and the pressure to mature as twenty-somethings would, *not* as young adolescents experiencing dating and sexuality for the first time. For example, many of the characters in *Mallrats* speak of their past relationships and sexual exploits, and even refer to problems (such as Julie Dwyer's phobias about her weight) that they dealt with "back in school." This stands in stark contrast to the plight of "real" onscreen teen protagonists like Mark Ratner (Brian Backer) in *Fast Times At Ridgemont High* or Samantha Baker (Molly Ringwald) in *Sixteen Candles*, who are just entering puberty and have only the fuzziest ideas about dating and sexuality.

Of course, the most notable commonality across most of the teen films just mentioned, and Smith's own Generation X-targeted films, is the overwhelming whiteness of their casts. These films share a focus on white characters to the exclusion and/or marginalization of non-whites. As Richard Dyer notes, this exclusion of non-whites can make the specificity of whiteness as a racial category difficult to see, since whiteness tends to be an invisible category thought to stand in for humanity writ large, the "universal signifier for humanity" (28). Yet Dyer urges us to "see the specificity of whiteness, even when the text itself is not trying to show it to you, doesn't even know

that it is there to be shown" (13-14). Thus the overwhelming whiteness of the View Askewniverse presents a challenge to the critical viewer who wishes to see the specificity of that whiteness. One of the ways to approach the issue is to look at how the white, suburban buddy duo in *Mallrats* is raced and classed *vis-a-vis* each other. Brodie is suburban and white but not especially rich, living off his parents and collecting comic books using discretionary funds whose source is never revealed—he is a Gen Xer benefiting from white privilege and the tolerance of parents who let him live at home. T.S., on the other hand, signifies as financially better off than Brodie: he does not worry about the cost of a romantic trip to Disney World with Brandi, he provides $58.60 for Brodie and himself to pay for the services of Ivannah the Topless Psychic, and unlike Brodie, he has his own car. In this latter respect T.S. and Brodie are positioned similarly to Dante and Randal from *Clerks*—the former has a car, his slacker buddy doesn't.

Of course, in Western culture class status *is* raced, so where we see class differences, we can expect racial coding to be in effect as well. In this connection, the stagehands scene offers an encapsulated view of the function of white and non-white racial representation in *Mallrats* and the View Askewniverse. The scene takes place thirty-seven minutes into the film and depicts T.S.'s attempt to convince Mr. Svenning that he is meant to be with Brandi. As the scene begins, Svenning is on the "Truth or Date" stage, supervising the work of one of his workers, an ambiguously raced character played by View Askew regular Walter Flanagan. Svenning gets into a fight with this worker over the placement of a podium, and subsequently fires the worker on the spot. Meanwhile, T.S. storms onto the stage and confronts Svenning, following him backstage

after the firing of the first worker and looking on as Svenning instructs a second worker, who is black, to complete the task the first worker began. The whole scene is actually shot in one long take, two minutes in length, with a tracking camera that follows the characters as they move from onstage to backstage over the course of the scene.[4]

At the outset of the scene, Mr. Svenning yells at a stagehand (Flanagan) whose long, dark hair held back with a blue bandanna and dark facial hair mark him as ambiguously raced—he looks possibly Italian, Hispanic, or of mixed race, all of which are racial categories "often excluded, sometimes [. . .] assimilated into the category of whiteness" (Dyer 19). For example, in a telling moment during his rant at the first stagehand, Svenning asks the man "Do you speak English?" a moment after he has just heard him speak it. Of course, this snarky question can most directly be seen (and is intended by Mr. Svenning) as an insult to the stage worker's intelligence. Yet it also invokes a trope of ethnicity, implying that the stage worker may not have English as his first or native language. This is a trope of racially inflected difference imposed by the more white of the two characters (Svenning) to put the less securely white character (the stagehand) into his place.

Once T.S. enters the scene from the left of frame, he is visually paired with the ambiguously raced stagehand as they stand on either side of the irate Svenning (see Figure 17). Not only does the scene's blocking suggest a parallel between them, but T.S. and the stagehand both wear the same checkered flannel shirt and both happen to be dark-haired (Svenning is bald). These conspicuously similar flannel shirts are the most important visual motif of the scene, for T.S.'s is nearly identical to the shirts that *both* of

the other two stagehands wear—this first one and the one who is backstage yet to be seen—thus creating two separate yet similar visual rhymes as T.S. and each stagehand in turn stand to either side of Mr. Svenning. But the similarity between T.S.'s and the first stagehand's dark hair and features is significant too: Richard Dyer writes that characters of ambiguous race are frequently "treated as a 'buffer' between the white and the black" (19), and in this part of the scene both T.S. and the ambiguously raced stagehand act as such buffers, mediating between the most white character, Mr. Svenning, and the black stagehand we will meet shortly.

Figure 17: T.S. and the first stagehand flank Mr. Svenning, creating a visual parallel between them.

The visual similarity between the first stagehand and T.S. marks them both as less white than Mr. Svenning, whose German last name and bright, bald head mark him as the

whitest of the trio. According to Dyer, ambiguously white identities such as the first stagehand's "[incite] the notion that some whites are whiter than others, with the Anglo-Saxons, Germans, and Scandinavians usually providing the apex of whiteness" (Dyer 19), as Mr. Svenning here does.

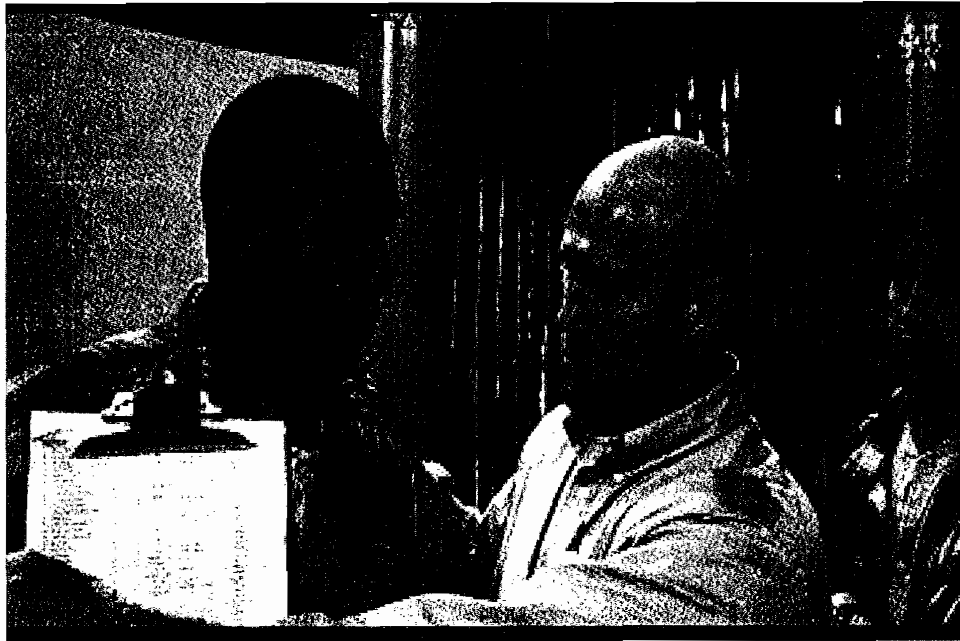

Figure 18: Another, stronger visual parallel between T.S. and a black stagehand.

This first part of the scene takes place in a medium shot, with T.S., Mr. Svenning, and the soon-to-be-fired first stagehand arrayed across the "Truth or Date" stage. Hence the ambiguously raced stagehand is permitted to be "out front" of the stage and in the public view, unlike his darker-skinned counterpart, who remains as yet unseen backstage. The camera follows T.S. and Mr. Svenning around the corner to the backstage area and settles into a still position when the pair reaches the black stagehand, at which point T.S.

and the black stagehand are depicted in *close-up* on either side of Mr. Svenning, strongly emphasizing the visual parallel between them (see Figure 18). This is a more visually intense shot than the scene's earlier three-shot, with its increased physical closeness between the three male characters and heightened sense of uniformity between T.S. and the black stagehand, despite the more pronounced skin-color difference between them.

This close-up shot visually depicts the closeness many adolescent white males feel they must have to black masculinity: as Eric Lott argues in his article on racial cross-dressing, white masculinity depends upon proximity to an imagined black masculinity in order to constitute itself as masculinity: "the assumption of dominant [white] codes of masculinity in the United States is partly negotiated through an imaginary black interlocutor [. . .] [and depends] upon the momentary return [. . .] to a state of arrested adolescence" (246). In short, black manhood is seen by whites as an immature form of maleness that all white adolescents must pass through on their way to becoming full-fledged white adults. Thus the shot of T.S. and the black stagehand not only schematizes this desired proximity for T.S., emphasizing his arrested adolescence, but it also suggests that our geek, T.S., is in fact more racialized than our slacker, Brodie: in the View Askewniverse, the geek is often coded as Italian American (Dante), Irish Catholic (Holden), or Asian (Sang), while his slacker sidekick is usually less ambiguously white (Randal, Brodie).[5] Hence even the fairly white-seeming T.S. is racialized through his visual proximity and similarity of costume to the questionably white and non-white flannel-wearing stagehands in this sequence, while Brodie's whiteness goes unquestioned throughout the film.

This subtle racial/class difference between T.S. and Brodie is heightened in the later "stink-palm" sequence involving the duo's final encounter with Mr. Svenning. T.S.'s possible Italianness is suggested at the outset of this scene, during an *homage* to Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* films (1972, 1974): Mr. Svenning grasps the sides of T.S.'s head, pulls him close, and tells him in a low voice that his daughter is too good for him, as a trumpet melody reminiscent of *The Godfather*'s main theme plays. This of course serves as a comedic, pop-cultural nod to a similar scene between Michael and Fredo Corleone in *The Godfather Part II* (1974), but it also racializes Mr. Svenning and T.S., rendering them (at least temporarily) Italian Americans—like Dante and Veronica from *Clerks*! By contrast, the slacker sidekick (here Brodie, but also Randal and Jay) is more emphatically white, also usually verging, in mannerism if not literal financial standing, on lower-class "white trash." Brodie, while eschewing many middle-class proprieties, is less obviously white-trashy than either Randal or Jay, and in fact during the stink-palm sequence is revealed to be Mr. Svenning's neighbor, a fact which puts him on a closer racial par with Mr. Svenning since they live in the same neighborhood. Yet, as in *Clerks*, Brodie's more secure whiteness *vis-a-vis* T.S. does not guarantee him equal financial status with his geekier buddy: he frequents the lower-class "dirt mall" flea market (he is known by name there) and he does not have any cash on hand when he and T.S. visit Miss Ivannah. And of course his status as Mr. Svenning's neighbor does him little good either: Svenning throws both buddies out of the mall together at the end of the stink-palm sequence.

In the View Askewniverse, then, economic stability and/or advantage of the kind Dante and T.S. enjoy *vis-a-vis* their slacker buddies is usually linked to a more pronounced work ethic (Dante evinces this) and a slightly more advanced emotional maturity: our geeks (Dante. T.S) are more conformist and mature than our slackers (Randal, Brodie) and they reap a slight economic benefit for it. For example, Brodie blows whatever money he does have on collecting comics and loitering at the mall, whereas T.S. saves his income for trips to Disney World with Brandi, attempting to achieve social maturity through literal investment in heterosexual mating activities leading to marriage.

And there is a racial dimension to this, for the geekier protagonist, be it *Mallrats*' T.S. or *Clerks*' Dante, is not only more mature and financially secure then his sidekick (Brodie, Randal), he is also less white. This is due to the sidekick's status as a nonconformist, clownish slacker as opposed to a more conformist, socially serious geek: the slacker, in order to have anything to rebel or slack "against," must be white by definition, for his slackerism is a resistance to white privilege that, according to Dyer, is founded upon a cultural stereotype of whites as inherently industrious and enterprising: "It is not spirituality or soul that is held to distinguish whites, but [. . .] get up and go, aspiration, awareness of the highest reaches of intellectual comprehension and aesthetic refinement" (23).[3] For the slacker to rebel against his whiteness, to attempt to mark himself as "not-privileged," he slacks. Our geek, meanwhile, is permitted to be more enterprising because he is already (if subtly) racially marked.

Queer Affection and Rivalry

The queerness of *Mallrats* manifests in the tenderness and affection evinced between its primary buddy pair, T.S. and Brodie, and in the rivalries over women played out by T.S./Mr. Svenning and Brodie/Shannon Hamilton.

The friendship between T.S. and Brodie has already been discussed in the context of their lack of internal rivalry and their willingness to support each other in achieving their heterosexual goals. This is quite a switch from *Clerks*, where Randal's relation to Dante almost entirely consists of making him the butt of homophobic jokes and counterproductively interfering in his heterosexual relationships. By comparison, Brodie and T.S.'s queerest moment, which happens very early in the film, is when T.S. tells Brodie how he was planning to propose to Brandi during their vacation and Brodie replies: "That's the most romantic thing I've ever heard." And T.S.'s response: "Too bad I'm not trying to marry you."

However, like *Clerks* and many of the 1980s films it also emulates, *Mallrats* channels most of its homoerotics through male rivalries over women, where intense conflicts and fight scenes between men stand in for homoerotic desire. As Eve Kososfsky Sedgwick argues, in any erotic rivalry between male characters, "the bond that links the two [male] rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved" and hence "the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent" (*Between Men* 21). Sedgwick thus argues that male "traffic in women" is a longstanding social structure that permits straight-identifying men to displace their homoerotic tendencies into rivalries

involving women as mediators. In the case of *Mallrats*, this deflecting of the film's queer sexual dynamics into more heterosexual-appearing configurations came about in large part due to restrictions imposed from the studio producers: as Smith puts it on the *Mallrats* DVD commentary, "the homoerotic subtext of the picture was trimmed way down for fear of the other. Some got in, but not as much as I would have liked."

Nevertheless, some got in, and I find that the most intense queer erotics emerge whenever Brodie and the femininely named Shannon are on screen together. This arises due to their positioning as rivals at the base of *Mallrats*' second erotic triangle and is abetted by the queerness of Shannon actor Ben Affleck's prior star text. While Affleck would later go on to become something of a mainstream "leading man" in films like *Phantoms, Armageddon* (both 1998), and *Pearl Harbor* (2001), at the time of *Mallrats*'s shooting he was best known as a teen actor and for playing the ridiculously hypermasculine villain, O'Bannion, in Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* (1993). Affleck's portrayal of the rageful O'Bannion is not only a career highlight, it emphasizes the link between intense homosociality and the threat of the ever-present homoerotic: O'Bannion is over-invested in male bonding activities, having flunked his senior year of High School, thereby staying on the football team for one extra year and, more importantly for O'Bannion, participating in freshman hazing rituals one more time. O'Bannion takes particularly intense delight in sadistically paddling freshman boys' asses in these rituals throughout the first half of *Dazed and Confused*, so much so that all his senior cohorts comment on his overzealousness and perversity. O'Bannion receives his comeuppance for this excessive homophobic/homoerotic violence when some freshmen

engineer a prank in which he gets soaked with off-white paint, a soaking which, read sexually, makes O'Bannion appear to have been doused with semen. In the wake of his dousing, O'Bannion calls the pranksters' friend a "freshman faggot" and accidentally breaks his beloved paddle in a fit of rage, both of which signify his impotence and his homophobically violent response to that impotence. Given this previous role as an infantilized, homophobic, and homosocially hyper-masculine villain, Affleck is well positioned to bring a certain perverse machismo to the Shannon character's rivalry with Brodie in *Mallrats*. The sequence in which Shannon accosts and beats up Brodie particularly illustrates the workings of this dynamic.

Brodie has recently had sex with Rene in the mall elevator and visits an unidentified fast food counter to acquire more soda for his dixie cup. To a sinister musical cue, Shannon enters frame from the left and, after Brodie makes a funny remark, grabs Brodie and yanks him out of frame to the left. This is a "rhyme" with the opening shot of Dante and Randal's "Catharsis" fight in *Clerks*, where Randal enters the Quick Stop and is yanked out of frame by Dante.

The next shot takes place in an empty maintenance corridor. The whole fight sequence takes place in this corridor and the angle from which it is shot—looking down the length of the hallway into darkness with the two characters in profile in the foreground—depicts a long, empty tunnel stretching away into darkness, emphasizing how alone the pair are and thus increasing Brodie's peril. Further, in its tunnel-ness the corridor connotes Shannon's sinister penchant for anal sex, which we hear about later in this sequence.

Shannon throws Brodie against the wall at left of frame and punches him in the stomach. Brodie sags against the wall and slowly slides down it over the course of shots 2 and 3 (see shot list in Appendix). Shannon removes his own jacket in shot 3 and in shot 4, with Brodie seated on the floor in front of him, head at Shannon's crotch level—suggesting, were this a literal sex scene, an oral preliminary to the pair's coitus—Shannon starts lecturing to Brodie about why he hates him.

This diatribe continues over the course of shots 4 and 5, and interestingly it centers on Brodie's status as a "mallrat kid" with "no shopping agenda." Shannon claims to despise "shiftless layabouts" and persons like Brodie who come to the mall and act as if they live there. Interestingly, Shannon's insistence upon the mall as a place for shopping (as opposed to loafing or anything else) feminizes him, for as John Fiske notes, men are not typically thought of as being shoppers: "Even the 'sensitive, intelligent' (i.e., nonjock) male [. . .] is incapable of understanding shopping" (20). Indeed, historically the shopping mall was conceived as a feminine space "where women can be public, empowered, and free, and can occupy roles other than those demanded by the nuclear family" (Fiske 20) and thus the (non-mallrat) male mall visitor is relegated to a secondary role: "Men in the mall are secondary figures. They come to wait" (Underhill 131). *Mallrats* bears out this stereotypical gendering of mall activities: Gwen and Rene are almost always depicted shopping in clothing stores and indeed Rene makes several costume changes throughout the film even though its events transpire over the course of one day.[6] Meanwhile, the film's male characters rarely shop, preferring instead to sit around, walk the mall, talk, fight, and generally do anything but spend money.

At the end of Shannon's anti-mallrat speech, Brodie makes a rude remark about "motivated salesmanship" and Shannon kicks Brodie where he sits. Brodie falls over in agony and now lies sideways on the concrete floor.

The next shot, shot 6, has always most intrigued me in this sequence: Brodie lies sideways on the floor and the camera shoots his face in close-up, lying horizontally in the bottom half of the frame. Shannon leans his head in from the top of frame and lays his face alongside—that is, on top of—Brodie's and near-whispers the next line into Brodie's ear: "Rene asked me to leave you alone, but she's fucking clueless." This has always felt like a very intimate moment to me and the two character's horizontal orientation plus the closeness of the shot denotes an intimacy between them (see Figure 19). This is where the erotics of this rivalry and its violence are laid bare. Shannon speaks softly, though threateningly, in Brodie's ear and their bodies are framed out of the shot. What are they doing? How close are their bodies?

Further, there is no music in this shot nor this sequence; the two encounter each other in relative silence. Kevin Smith has noted that the lack of music during this fight makes the scene feel "creepy" to him, almost too real and dangerous rather than funny (*Mallrats* DVD Commentary). I agree with his assessment but suggest that the "creepiness" Smith detects may have to do with the fact that a real intimacy and sexual tension is palpable between the two characters in this scene. The lack of music leaves their exact relation here ambiguous and hence wide open to queer interpretation. Of course, a goodly amount of sexual creepiness permeates *Mallrats*, including Shannon Hamilton's aforementioned anal fetish, fifteen-year-old Tricia Jones's sexual "research"

for her *Bore-gasm* book project, and the incestuous undertones of Mr. Svenning's overprotective relationship with his daughter.[7] But in the encounter between Brodie and Shannon, the creepiness takes on a particularly homoerotic-yet-violent edge.

Figure 19: Shannon and Brodie get intimate during a fight.

The next couple of shots, which conclude the fight sequence, really drive home the sexual dimension of the Shannon-Brodie rivalry and expose how it operates through women: as Brodie (post-coitally?) breathes heavily, Shannon soliloquizes to Brodie about his method of "picking up women on the rebound" and using their vulnerability and "open[ness] to suggestion" to manipulate them into letting him have anal sex with them. This penchant for anal sex queers Shannon, and his admission of it to Brodie is very interesting indeed. For one, he opens this speech by addressing Brodie by his last name,

Bruce. "Bruce" is a well-known euphemism for a gay man, and it is therefore notable that Shannon is the only character ever to address Brodie thus.[8] In short, he begins his speech about his own pursuit of a queer sexual practice, anal penetration, by indirectly calling Brodie a fag.

Secondly, once Shannon describes his strategy for obtaining anal sex from women on the rebound, which in this case indicates his intent to do so with Brodie's ex-girlfriend Rene, Brodie gets enraged and attacks Shannon (shot 8). Brodie's attack is to no avail: Shannon pushes Brodie back against the wall and punches him in the face. However, Shannon's speech and Brodie's anger here expose that the stakes of their rivalry are bound up in their desire to sexually possess Rene: just before the fight sequence, Brodie spies Shannon hanging out with Rene in the mall and subsequently confronts her about it in an elevator. Their argument culminates in the two of them having sex, and this act is ostensibly framed as a reassertion of Brodie's sexual mastery over her: "She attacked my libido and I felt obliged to defend myself" he tells T.S. afterward. However, this conflict more emphatically indicates a homosocial bond between the two male rivals, and indeed we know from Trish (Renee Humphrey) that Shannon mentioned his hatred of Brodie after sexual intercourse with her: once again their rivalry is couched in sexual (in this case post-coital) terms, and by playing out the physical component of their rivalry here in the private setting of an empty tunnel, the homoerotic nature of that rivalry is temporarily brought visually to the fore. Brodie then makes the sexual undercurrent of the fight verbally explicit a few shots later by asking Gwen, "Am I still glowing?"—

referring to an earlier exchange where she insisted that he was glowing after having sex with Rene in the elevator.

Intertextuality and Comic Book Culture

Mallrats is an incredibly intertextual film. In addition to the genre-mixing strategies discussed above, this intertextuality includes visual and verbal allusions to numerous New Hollywood "movie brat" films of the 1970s including *Jaws* (1975), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *The Godfather* (1972), and of course—Smith's favorite—George Lucas's *Star Wars* trilogy (1977-1983) (Muir 63, 68-9, 71). These references are not entirely new to Smith's *oeuvre*—for example, *Clerks* featured at least one lengthy discussion between Randal and Dante about the *Star Wars* films—yet the quantity and prevalence of *Mallrats*'s explicit intertextual nods are much greater than that of its cinematic predecessor. For example, in *Mallrats,* Silent Bob spends most of the film obsessed with perfecting the *Star Wars* "Jedi mind trick" of levitating objects with his mind. It is also significant that Silent Bob's single spoken line in *Mallrats*—in other cases a key piece of personal advice delivered to the film's protagonist, as in *Clerks* and *Chasing Amy*—is in this case a line copped directly from *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980): "Adventure? Excitement? A Jedi craves not these things." This direct appropriation of a *Star Wars* line by Silent Bob is unique among the Askewniverse films and is emblematic of the extent to which *Mallrats* plays with intertextuality.[9] Yet arguably none of these film references, abundant as they are, are as important—in terms

of *Mallrats*'s plot, intended audience, and promotional campaign—as the film's references to comic book superheroes and their fans.

The most obvious evidence of *Mallrats*' attempt to connect with comics-friendly audiences is the 1995 publication of the *Mallrats Companion,* a comic-bookish guide to the film for fans, including the complete screenplay of *Mallrats*. The text of the screenplay as it appears in the *Companion* is laced with the same comic-book cover images that run during the film's opening credits sequence, as well as photos of various scenes from the film rendered grainy and primary colored to resemble comic book panels, complete with speech balloons for the characters depicted. The *Companion* also includes other fan tidbits like behind-the-scenes photographs, the complete text of Rene's break-up note to Brodie, and an excerpt from Tricia Jones's book, *Bore-gasm*.[10] Perhaps most significantly, the *Companion* prepares the prospective *Mallrats* viewer to deal with the film's use of comic-book-like *continuity*: Smith's entire introduction to the 1995 *Companion* is about explaining the concept of "continuity" as it applies to the View Askewniverse (*Mallrats Companion* 3).

For beyond the mere existence of the *Mallrats Companion* itself, there are two broad levels upon which *Mallrats* engages with superhero comic book culture and the tastes of comic book readers: (1) Its move toward increased intertextuality and its insistence upon *continuity* with the View Askewniverse established in *Clerks*, and (2) Certain of its key diegetic elements such as Brodie's characterization as a comic book fanboy and its inclusion of prevalent Batman iconography.

Mallrats uses intertextuality and continuity to establish and train a "smart readership" for the View Askewniverse films that is akin to superhero comic book readership. As comics scholar Charles Hatfield writes, "comics solicit the reader's participation in a unique way; [. . .] [the] fractured surface of the comics page, with its patchwork of different images, shapes, and symbols, presents the reader with a surfeit of options" that can be initially bewildering to decode (xiii-xiv). Indeed, comics artist and theorist Scott McCloud has written a 215-page book on the subject of properly reading comics, *Understanding Comics* (1993), in which he notes that comics reading is a "learned ability" that requires the comic book reader to become a "conscious collaborator" in the meaning-generating process (63, 65). Of course, this is true of all textual decoding processes, yet, as McCloud suggests, with comics, even the proper order in which to read the panels on a comics page varies from text to text (or even from page to page within a single text), thus presenting a unique challenge to neophyte comics readers. Overcoming this challenge and learning to grasp, over time and with habitual practice, the formal conventions of the comics medium creates an elite taste culture around comics, a culture that can and does identify itself against those who do not understand or "get" how to read comics. For the initiated comics reader, this insider knowledge, combined with other fan activities like collecting comics, attending conventions, and knowing the back stories (or continuity) of the comics titles one reads, confers upon the comics fan a postmodern hipness, a membership into a small and geekily intelligent subculture. Of course, for superhero comics readers in particular, this

hipness also carries the stigma of arrested development and refusal to give up boyhood passions.

One key example should suffice to show how this process of training a skilled readership functions in *Mallrats* and the View Askewniverse. This example, which Smith himself discusses in the introduction to the *Mallrats Companion*, involves Brodie and T.S.'s first encounter with Willam Black, a character who first appeared in *Clerks* with the nickname "Snowball" and who was played in that film—as a spaced-out but friendly weirdo with a scruffy beard—by Scott Mosier. The role of Willam was recast for *Mallrats*, portrayed by the hulking, boyish-faced actor Ethan Suplee. The physical differences between Mosier's and Suplee's portrayals might seem enough to suggest that these are two different Willams who happen to share the same name, but Willam's first line to Brodie in *Mallrats*—"Do you work here now?"—is the same as Willam's first line to Veronica in *Clerks*! Hence, this one short line serves two interrelated functions: (1) It is an intertextual "shout-out" to *Clerks* and its fans, rewarding them for their insider knowledge of Smith's previous film, and (2) It firmly establishes that the two Willams are the same person.

While recasting roles in ongoing series or in sequels is not uncommon—to cite one relevant example, there is Robin Curtis's highly successful takeover (from Kirstie Alley) of the role of Vulcan starfleet officer Lt. Saavik in the third and fourth *Star Trek* films—in most cases the audience is expected to assume that the character is the same as before, and usually the re-cast is done in such a way as to encourage the elision of the casting change. In the case of Willam Black, however—in terms of physicality and

costume but also in the very disposition and behavior of the character—the transformation is far too extreme to be easily acceptable in the typical way. How, then, does screenwriter Smith explain Willam's sudden shift from the skinny, spaced-out, trenchcoat-wearing snowballer of *Clerks* to the hulking, angry, army-jacket-wearing version we meet in *Mallrats*? By the "Willam of Two Worlds Theory," by which Smith means that the two characters are indeed the same person but that some kind of bizarre anomoly like a "paradox shift" has occurred between the two incarnations of the character (Muir 66, *Mallrats 10th Anniversary Q & A*).[11]

This is a maneuver straight out of the *milieu* of superhero comic book narratives, in which a "continuity"—the official storyline of a given superhero character and his world—is established, then is frequently revised via recourse to all manner of diegetic twists, including time travel, intervention by supranatural beings, and the introduction of alternate realities and dimensions to regular continuity.

This analogy between the conventions of the superhero comic genre and the films of Smith's Askeniverse is almost surely deliberate on the part of the View Askew filmmakers. Smith and many of his cronies are comic book fans and collectors and, as we shall see, comic book references, tropes, and marketing strategies will increasingly come to permeate the View Askewniverse films from *Mallrats* forward.

In the specific case of *Mallrats* and its relationship to *Clerks,* Willam's presence establishes a sense of continuity between the two films even as the extremity of his recasting potentially threatens to disrupt it. I say "potentially" here because the way in which Willam is presented in *Mallrats*—with a knowing wink to the *Clerks*-savvy

viewer—indicates that, far from wishing to disrupt the smooth transition between the two films, the filmmakers actually mean to establish a comic-book-like continuity between them, albeit one that follows a very comic book- or science-fiction-influenced logic. Willam's recasting, though potentially confusing to the viewer who has seen *Clerks* and expects "straight" cinematic continuity, says through the character's clever first line, "Welcome to the View Askewniverse where such seemingly illogical things can happen without explicit explanation!" Such a move would make sense (or not matter much) to a viewer who is familiar with the ways in which superhero comic books do the very same thing as a matter of course.[12]

Interestingly, this strategy, whereby comic book logic and self-reflexive intertextuality are incorporated into the text in order to address a potentially very small segment of the overall intended audience for the film—remember that *Mallrats* was supposed to be the next *Animal House*!—is also a staple of the independent American film industry of the 1990s. As Geoff King notes in *American Independent Cinema*, many formal strategies such as "[s]elf-conscious allusion to the narrative format" and "ramblings [. . .] about splitting and parallel realities" are found in independent fare and mark it as different from the mainstream (85). Indeed, Richard Linklater's *Slacker*, Smith's inspiration for entering the independent filmmaking business in the first place, begins in exactly this way, with the film's director speculating about alternate realities that could have occurred had he done things differently at the bus station, and unfolds in a narratively meandering way that can alienate viewers who prefer the more linear, cause-and-effect narrative structures of the classical Hollywood variety.

Yet *Mallrats* takes this independent film premise of narrative experimentation and play (King 76) in a new direction by hybridizing it with narrative strategies borrowed from superhero comic books. For example, while *Slacker* introduces narrative weirdness to make a point about the constructed nature of cinema, *Mallrats* asks the viewer to make connections *between* this film and the previous one—it assumes a viewership that has *prior* knowledge of View Askewniverse events and characters. This is very much akin to the way in which superhero comic book titles cultivate comics-literate readers: "Since this [comic book] literacy is not held by all potential readers, telling a story in comics form automatically limits its potential audience to comic book readers, something of which members of this culture are keenly aware" (Pustz 123). In *Mallrats* Smith and his View Askew team fashioned a text which rewards the View-Askew-literate viewer and excludes those viewers who are not as literate, that is, who "missed out on the last issue." By so doing, Smith and View Askew productions foster the development of a View Askew-specific fan base who will tune in to each new installment, just like a diehard comic book fan would.

A key example of the demands and rewards inherent in the kind of comic book/independent film literacy *Mallrats* presumes is found in the film's first post-opening credits sequence. T.S. comes to Brandi's house to pick her up for their vacation together, only to find out that she has agreed to appear on her father's game show as a result of the death of the original scheduled contestant, Julie Dwyer. Now Julie Dwyer and her unusual death feature prominently in *Clerks*: Dante and Randal attend Julie's funeral in the middle of that film. Close reading of the two films and determination of

the exact evening of Julie Dwyer's death reveal that the events of *Clerks* actually take place the day *after* the events of *Mallrats*, a continuity point that is not explicitly discussed in either film.[13] This is the kind of "insider knowledge" that a "smart" or particularly dedicated viewer might eventually pick out—and it is the very kind of diegetic complexity that superhero comics titles also deliberately foster in order to retain readership: as Matthew Pustz notes of comic book titles with particularly complex continuities, "continuity-heavy comics have very loyal, highly knowledgable followings" (130). So Smith's claim that *Mallrats* would be a "*Clerks* redux" for consumption by a wider audience to some extent belies the complexity of its address, and the intended audience of that address. *Mallrats* wastes no time in establishing a diegetic *milieu*—the View Askewniverse continuity, to use comics parlance—premised on the events of *Clerks* and pitched to a independent film- and/or comics-literate constituency.

Mallrats continues its address to its "insider" fan base, *assumed to be at least somewhat comics literate*, on the level of its diegesis. The two primary ways it does this is (1) through its deployment of the figure of the comic book fanboy as one of the film's protagonists, and (2) direct appropriation of Batman iconography.

Brodie, one member of *Mallrats*'s central buddy pair, is an obsessive comic book collector and fan. He refers to his basement bedroom as a "vault" and indeed he has shelves full of bagged and boarded comics kept there. This marks him as a comic book "fanboy," an especially obsessive type of superhero comic book fan and collector who is often characterized as an "overt [speculator], buying comics as an investment," though Matthew Pustz notes that many comics readers "have recaptured the term *fanboy*, using it

to describe reading comics of any kind with a sense of fun and fascination, but the term remains controversial within comic book culture" (Pustz xii). Brodie clearly reads and loves the comics he collects, so might well fit into Pustz's second definition of the fanboy type: he has posters of many superheroes (including Spider-Man and The Punisher) prominently displayed on his bedroom walls and once he arrives at the mall he obsessively discusses comic book heroes with T.S., Jay, and anyone else who will listen. However, Brodie is also aware of the stigma attached to comic book collectors and publicly denies his love of comics at certain points during *Mallrats.* In part this denial arises from the stigma imposed from outside comic book culture by those who perceive comic book fandom as a sign of immaturity or arrested development. But there is also a negative stereotype of the fanboy-collector imposed from within superhero comic book readership.

The phenomenon of the fanboy-as-collector/speculator arose out of changes to the way comic books were distributed starting in the 1980s. Prior to the '80s, mainstream superhero comic books were found primarily in racks at supermarkets, drugstores, and newsstands. Bookstores typically did not carry comics, and specialty shops for comics were not yet widely extant either.[14] So while mainstream superhero titles as well as their alternative counterparts did evince a kind of proto-organized fandom throughout the 1960s and '70s, this was characterized by what Charles Hatfield calls "grassroots anarchy (the private and inchoate discourse of isolated fan conclaves)" whose existence depended upon "such institutions as used bookstores, small-circulation amateur 'zines (fanzines), amateur press alliances (APAs), conventions, mail-order businesses, and 'letterhacking'

(that is, writing letters for publication in comic books and corresponding with other such writers, or letterhacks)" (21). However, as Hatfield writes, "[by] the early eighties, the accelerating decline of newsstand sales led these [major comic book] publishers [Marvel and DC] to rely increasingly on the then newly emergent fan (that is, direct) market to stave off disaster" (21). The specialty comic book store quickly became *the* place for fans to buy comics, and this shift from an anarchic and inchoate comic book fandom to "a highly codified, in some sense disciplined and commodified practice [. . .] led, albeit gradually, to an overwhelming emphasis on organized fandom as the comic book's core audience—and on the costumed superhero as its core genre" (Hatfield 21). It is this focusing of the market and culture of comic book fandom that gave rise to the speculator/fanboy.

I find the fanboy type particularly interesting for the ways in which it parallels the independent film fan of the 1990s, particularly the type of collector/fan that emerged with the advent of the DVD format. I discussed the 1980s rise of the industrial infrastructure for independent film distribution in the previous chapter, and the broad similarities between comic book readers and independent film aficionados should be obvious enough: both belong to subcultures largely ignored by the cultural mainstream and in fact claim a sense of identity and/or belonging by (accurately or not) defining themselves against that mainstream. However, as Geoff King documents in *American Independent Cinema*, the introduction of the DVD format in the late 1990s, much like the rise of the comic book direct market and specialty shops a decade before, encouraged independent film *collecting* and, with its increased audio-visual quality and "potential to include extra

features, made it a format of choice for more film-literate viewers, more than averagely likely to be drawn to less mainstream fare" (24). And indeed, this parallel between comic book collecting/fandom and its analogue in the culture of independent film is particularly relevant to *Mallrats* and the View Askew films in general, for as View Askew producer Scott Mosier has asserted, "Our career [. . .] is at least 75% born out of home video" (*The Erection of an Epic: The Making of Mallrats*).

In light of his status as an obsessive comics fanboy, then, it is no surprise that Brodie's mall visit includes a stop at the comic book store, a key site for the expression of comic book fandom: "For comic book aficionados, comic shops are gold mines, places to find buried treasure, catch up with old friends, make new acquaintances with like-minded souls" (Pustz 6). Brodie does indeed meet some "like-minded souls"—the buddy pair of Steve-Dave and Fanboy (real-life Kevin Smith pals Bryan Johnson and Walter Flanagan)—in line at the comics shop, but ends up arguing with them and nearly fighting instead of making friends. The scene depicting their conflict, in which T.S. accuses Fanboy and Brodie of being "testosterone-seething He-man comic book fans," expresses the adolescent maleness of mainstream superhero comic book fandom, which Matthew Pustz estimates consists of "[a]bout 90 percent [. . .] adolescent males ranging in age from about twelve to twenty" (13). Indeed, the comic book shop is typically seen as a homosocial environment for young men, for as Pustz notes, "[f]emale visitors commonly become uncomfortable" in comics shops due to "the gazes of male patrons" and comics-related "posters that frequently objectify women and/or glorify violence" (8). Since comic book fandom, like independent film fandom, is an activity that by nature excludes

certain (usually defined as "mainstream") people in order to define its own constituency, it is perhaps not surprising that much of this exclusion in this case should occur along gender lines, especially since superhero comics—as opposed to "alternative" or more literary comics—are a hypermasculinized form to begin with, depicting primarily "men in tights" with superhuman powers.

However, superhero comic book fandom, while ostensibly providing a safe haven for the geeky adolescent male, is not necessarily understood or looked upon favorably by those who stand outside this particular subculture (or even by some self-hating elements *within* it). Brodie, who is very willing to discuss comics with those on the "inside" such as Jay, T.S., or even Steve-Dave and Fanboy, is aware of the adolescent/geeky stigma attached to comic book collecting and denies his hobby during the live broadcast of the "Truth or Date" game show: "Comics? What are you talking about, lady? I don't collect comics, comics are for kids!"

Brodie's public denial of his comic book fandom is especially funny in light of his earlier contention that T.S. is somehow lacking because he is more interested in girls than comic books. Brodie is aware of the outside perception that comic book collecting is juvenile, yet still values comic book collecting and sees those (like T.S.) who would depart the world of comics for the world of adult heterosexual coupling as highly suspect. This is in large part due to Brodie's status as a "True Believer," an authentic insider to comics fandom: by prioritizing comics and disavowing his interest in women he "keeps it real" within his subcultural context. Indeed, for someone *inside* the geek subculture of comics fandom, prioritizing the pursuit of women (and the transition into heterosexual

adulthood they represent) over comics is a move toward "selling out," embracing adult white privilege and turning away from the impractical yet somehow more authentic (that is, authentically geeky) pursuit of comics collecting. Hence, Brodie's fidelity to comics and resistance to romance, while a source of embarrassment to him in the wider world of mainstream culture, is his badge of realness, superior knowledge, and cultural power within his chosen subculture. On a homoerotic note, Brodie's attitude also suggests that he may harbor fears that if T.S. is more interested in girls than comics, he may abandon their homosocial bond in favor of a romantic/marital relationship with Brandi.

Brodie's *Mallrats* adventure culminates when he meets Stan Lee, creator of Spider-Man and founder of Marvel Comics, just prior to the film's climax. Lee's presence in the film is obviously another gesture toward the Marvel comic book fans who would recognize and love him, but it also calls up parallels between other classic films of the teenpic subgenre, particularly George Lucas's *American Graffiti* (1973): prior to *Mallrats*'s release, one Universal executive likened Brodie's discussion with Stan Lee to the Curt (Richard Dreyfuss) -Wolfman Jack conversation in Lucas's now-classic teen car film (*View Askew's Look Back at Mallrats*). The comparison is apt: despite Brodie's repeated attempts to turn the conversation to the subject of superhero genitalia, the Brodie-Stan Lee sequence is actually more serious and sentimental in tone than much of the rest of the film and deals with romantic relationships, leaving comic books behind, and the difficulties of growing up—much like the analagous sequence between Curt and the DJ in *American Graffiti*.[15]

The Dynamic Duo: Batman and Robin

DC Comics's Batman is one of the most popular superhero icons in the world today. As Will Brooker notes in his excellent *Batman Unmasked*: "From corporate merchandise to localised creativity, the adult consumer to the primary-school fan, [. . .] Batman got there"(4). Brooker argues that although "Batman and his meanings are still tethered to a multinational institution" (10-11), Warner Communications, the core components of the Batman signifier—his costume, Bat-symbol, and the basic outline of his origin story—are now so ubiquitously known that "Batman could 'die' in the comic book, or fold as a comic book—just as he now [in 1999] seems to have failed as a movie franchise—but [. . .] his legend could not be killed" (331). I agree with this assessment, and Batman's recent cinematic comeback in Christopher Nolan's immensely popular *Batman Begins,* the eighth highest-grossing film of 2005, is just one testament to the durability and cultural importance of the Batman icon and franchise (imdb.com).

It is no surprise, then, that a film as steeped in comic book culture as *Mallrats* would explicitly incorporate Batman iconography, mapping it onto the figure of Kevin Smith's character, Silent Bob. *Mallrats*'s parodic appropriation of this powerful iconography makes a rich addition to the "comic-bookness" of the film and also contributes to the queer erotics that underlie its ostensibly heterosexual teenpic narrative. To fully appreciate the meanings that the Batman *accoutrements* bring to *Mallrats*, we must first briefly discuss Batman's (queer) history.

Batman first appeared in *Detective Comics* in May 1939 and quickly became, alongside Superman, one of the two most popular comic book superheroes of all time.

The Batman character was loosely based upon the hard-boiled protagonists of pulp detective fiction and film, and in his earliest stories Batman showed little remorse over killing or maiming criminals and was not above using firearms, a feature that would soon change. Batman received his own solo comic book title in 1940, while continuing to star in *Detective Comics* as well.

The initial pulp-influenced portrayal of Batman started to soften in 1940 with the introduction of Robin, the Boy Wonder, intended as an identification figure for the comic's young (and presumably male) readers.[16] The subsequent foregrounding of Batman and Robin's relationship and the lightening of tone in Batman and Robin's stories over the 1940s and 50s led psychiatrist Fredric Wertham to warn of the danger of homosexual interpretations of Batman in *Seduction of the Innocent,* published in 1954. Batman scholar Will Brooker notes that Wertham's tract had the effect of promoting, rather than suppressing, queer readings of the Dynamic Duo, and he states that "the 'camp' phase of Batman did not [. . .] begin with the TV show of 1966 but in the comics from which the series was adapted," which began to soften and become gradually more campy "in the mid-1940s" after the addition of Robin (153, 150, 99). Thus, it is textually logical that the 1966 "Batman" television series, starring Adam West and Burt Ward as the dynamic duo, would draw upon the campy exploits of the comic-book Batman and Robin for its source material and thereby exponentially increase the circulation of the lighter (and queerer) image of the duo.

After the cancellation of the Adam West TV series in 1968, which was accompanied by a concomitant decrease in sales of Batman comics, *Batman* publisher

DC Comics decided to return Batman to his more detective-oriented roots, and through the 1970s into the 1980s, Batman slowly shed his do-gooder "caped crusader" image and took on a more menacing and dark persona and appearance in comics. This darker vision of Batman reached its apex in the mid- to late 1980s, when Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Tim Burton's immensely successful 1989 *Batman* film set a new popular standard for how the character would appear: dressed in black, charged with angst, and largely *sans* Robin. Of course, Batman could not shed his camp inflection completely: even Miller's homophobic *The Dark Knight Returns* reveals the erotic nature of the rivalry between Batman and his arch-nemesis The Joker, particularly in their final showdown (pp. 141-51), and Burton's film features a highly camped-up and comedically flamboyant Joker (Jack Nicholson). Indeed, as Brooker notes, Batman readers and critics "who stress the distinction between the 'dark' vision [of Batman] and the unfortunate distraction of the [1960s] TV show, may be forgetting or repressing the memories of telling their daddies to stop laughing at an Adam West who, at the time, seemed manly and heroic" (236). He thus emphasizes both the dual address of the Batman TV show—kids took it seriously as parents looked on and laughed at the knowing camp humor—and the historical and textual continuity between the camp and dark variants of the Batman character.[17]

As to the specifically queer interpretations of Batman and his youthful sidekick, Brooker and others have noted the strong parallel between superhero and gay lifestyles more generally: both often involve secret identities, double lives, unusual (and effeminate) costumes, and both have ties to the homosocial sport of male bodybuilding.

In addition to these general features, the 1940 addition of Robin the Boy Wonder to Batman's *milieu* specifically enhanced the openness of the Batman text to homosexual interpretations (Brooker 136, 137). As previously mentioned, the most famous emergence of a queer interpretation of the Batman-Robin relationship resulted from the publication and widespread popularity of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954, in which Wertham documents the Batman-related homosexual fantasies of many of his young male patients. As Brooker demonstrates, Wertham's text had the opposite of its intended effect, proliferating rather than suppressing the queer interpretation of the Dynamic Duo: "Wertham, in highlighting this [queer] interpretation, caused it to circulate not just in his own decade but in the popular discourse of the next forty-five years. At the end of the 1990s the joke that Batman and Robin are, or could be gay is something that 'everybody knows'" (161).[18] While Brooker's claim that 'everybody knows' the gay reading of Batman and Robin by the late 1990s must take into account the Joel Schumacher *Batman* films of 1995 and 1997, released after *Mallrats*, his book makes clear that the Dynamic Duo has generated queer readings of varying kinds ever since their inception. Indeed, for someone of Kevin Smith's generation, the franchise-rescuing success of the camp 1960s "Batman" television show and its subsequent syndication certainly have kept the queer Batman alive and in circulation even through his somewhat darker and camp-resistant incarnations of the 1980s.

Interestingly, as I have just suggested, *Mallrats* was produced at a time when the Batman signifier was most heavily influenced by the "Dark Knight" interpretation of the character, the serious vigilante of Frank Miller's graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*

(1986) and Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* film, rather than the campy "Caped Crusader" incarnation of pre-1980s *Batman* comics and especially the 1966-68 Adam West television series. Part of the project of the Dark Knight incarnation was an attempt to repudiate the homoerotics of Batman, and indeed stories involving the Dark Knight version of Batman since the 1980s typically exclude Robin, as in Burton's film, or somehow attempt to de-queer Batman's sidekick, as in Miller's immensely popular *The Dark Knight Returns*, wherein Robin is reconfigured as a young girl. Of course, as Christopher Sharrett has suggested, Miller's recasting of Robin as female "finally allows Batman to express his sexual feelings for Robin" and functions as "a subtle expression of [Batman's] gayness" that allows for the fulfillment of the Batman-Robin homoerotic fantasy (37-8). Miller denies this interpretation even though in the same interview he indirectly acknowledges Batman's queerness by admitting he conceptualized the *Dark Knight*'s Joker as a "homophobic nightmare" (Sharrett 36). Indeed, Miller's re-situating of Batman's queerness into his relationship with The Joker would set the tone for all the Dark Knight texts to immediately follow his.

In such seminal 1980s Batman texts as Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* (1988), and Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum* (1989), indicators of sexual queerness, gender play, and homoerotic desire are shifted from the Batman-Robin relationship onto the figure of Batman's nemesis, the psychopathic Joker. The ostensible aim of this shift was presumably to vilify queerness, conflating it with The Joker's extreme psychopathology (Miller's "homophobic nightmare"), and to leave Batman ostensibly desexualized: as Miller states in a 1991 interview, "Batman isn't gay.

His sexual urges are so drastically sublimated into crime-fighting that there's no *room* for any other emotional activity" (Sharrett 38). Yet by claiming that Batman is effectively asexual since he sublimates his sexuality into violence, Miller opens up a reading of Batman that suggests the character sublimates his libido as a defensive homophobic response to his own latent queerness. Interestingly, Miller states in the same interview that "I disagreed completely with everything [Alan Moore] did in [*The Killing Joke*]" and links his disagreement to Moore's treatment of the Joker: "Alan's view of the Joker was very humanistic" (Sharrett 36). I argue Miller disagrees with Moore's humanizing of the Joker precisely for the sympathetic (as opposed to homphobically violent) queer readings that that re-visoning of the super-villain engenders.

Thus the marginalization of Robin and emphasis on the queerness of The Joker merely serves to re-queer Batman in a different configuration, and the homoerotics between Batman and Joker are nowhere more overtly displayed than in these late-1980s "Dark Age" texts. For example, in Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns,* The Joker calls Batman "Darling" and their duel to the death is depicted in viscerally passionate (if overtly homophobic) terms (141-51). Moore's *Killing Joke* is indeed the most queer Batman text of all, because not only are the erotics of his relationship with the Joker foregrounded throughout the story, but Moore's Batman is not self-hating and in fact, he spends much of *The Killing Joke*'s narrative attempting to communicate with and "understand" his queerer other half (Moore 267-8). This is also The Joker's aim throughout *The Killing Joke*: to communicate to Batman the concept that *we are the same. What made you also made me.* Moore's is the first Batman text to make this

suggestion so boldly, and its "you made me, I made you" theme is carried forward into Tim Burton's hugely successful *Batman* film of 1989, wherein the Joker is reimagined as the killer of Bruce Wayne's parents and Batman is made responsible for The Joker's disfigurement and insanity: they literally create each other. And that film is the primary textual referent for Smith's deployment of Batman in *Mallrats*.[19]

Early in *Mallrats*, Brodie and T.S. seek out Jay and Silent Bob to enlist their assistance in somehow disrupting Mr. Svenning's game show, which is scheduled to broadcast live from a stage in the mall later in the day. Claiming that they were planning to trash the stage anyway, Jay and Bob accept this task and spend the rest of the film attempting to trash the stage (they fail), running away from feared mall security guard La Fours (named after Butch and Sundance's arch-nemesis Joe La Fours in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*), and ultimately helping Brodie to broadcast footage of Shannon having sex with an underage girl to the assembled game show audience. Hence the principal function of Jay and Silent Bob in *Mallrats* is to act as superheroes of a sort, fighting the forces of "evil," that is authority, in the form of Mr. Svenning and La Fours. Jay and Silent Bob's sequences gradually cross the line from the duo's usual ineffectual antics into a kind of comic book fantasy realm, where the two bumbling mallrat stoners—and especially Silent Bob—suddenly acquire superheroic abilities and gadgetry. This gradual shift occurs over three sequences.

The first stage-trashing plan that Jay and Bob formulate involves Bob attacking La Fours with a sock full of quarters while Jay knocks out a pin that holds the "Truth or Date" stage together. At this point, Bob wears no obvious Batman *accoutrements*,

though his black trenchcoat is somewhat reminiscent of Batman's cape. However, we know we are entering a comic-book realm in this sequence due to the Wile E. Coyote-inspired blueprints Jay and Bob look over at the outset of this episode. Bob gets his sock of quarters spinning and takes off toward La Fours, but a mischievous kid rolls a toy truck under Bob's feet at an inopportune moment and Bob rolls past La Fours, through a women's clothing store, and plants his head through a dressing-room door behind which Gwen is changing. She yells "Fuck!" and the sequence ends with Silent Bob looking up at Gwen as she looks on in disgusted surprise. This last shot of the sequence feminizes Bob, positioning him on his knees with a blue female undergarment wrapped around his neck. Further, the sequence as a whole, quite funny in itself, is in some ways merely a set-up for Jay and Silent Bob's second stage-trashing attempt, particularly since it establishes the Silent Bob-as-voyeur motif that will reach its zenith in the second sequence.

The second stage assault attempt, which Jay and Bob's cartoony blueprints significantly dub "Operation Dark Knight," involves Silent Bob swinging from a rope across the mall courtyard and snatching the pin that holds the stage together as he "flies" by overhead. For this sequence, Jay reminds Bob "Don't forget your helmet," which consists of a black helmet with pointed Batman-like ears on it. True, it is not an exact replica of Batman's cowl, which covers his head as well as half of his face, but Silent Bob does wear large goggles that obscure his eyes and the Batman connotations here are obvious. Further, once in position atop the elevator tower, Bob unfolds his "wings,"

which are bat-shaped and parodically emulate those used by Batman in Burton's 1989 *Batman* film.

Unfortunately for Silent Bob, this attempt at collapsing the stage fails also: he swings across the mall courtyard only to miss the critical pin by inches, then crashes his helmeted head through a wall into the "Popular Girl" dressing room where Gwen is (once again) changing (see Figure 20). Gwen's breasts are exposed to the viewer just before Bob's unexpected entrance, and her increased nudity combined with Bob's violent entrance through a solid wall make his unintentional voyeurism this time much funnier for the audience and much creepier for Gwen: she yells "You fucker!" at Bob and hits him on the head.

Figure 20: Silent Bob as Batman the voyeur.

What is most interesting to me about this scene is its conflation of the Batman/superhero figure with voyeurism/peeping tom-ism, for one of the difficulties inherent in positing superheroes like Batman and Superman is to explain why these superbeings do not use their powers for just such activities. I know that as a young boy the idea of being able to fly—encouraged by the George Reeves "Superman" program I saw then in syndication—was immensely exciting to me, and indeed, given their assumed audiences of young males, I see superhero comics as being a fertile ground for the encouragement of childhood power fantasies. In this connection it is noteworthy that the ability to fly is also one of Peter Pan's special talents, and in his stories flying is linked to never growing up, "thinking happy thoughts," and clinging to childhood social arrangements. A similar pattern is seen in Steven Spielberg's 1977 geek-meets-UFO odyssey *Close Encounters of the Third Kind,* wherein Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss) abandons his wife and family and flies away with childlike aliens in their womb-like mothership at the film's end. These fantasies of super-heroic (or extraterrestrial) powers conflated with children's sensibilities was indeed the focus of Wertham's concern about comics—that they might encourage young men to fantasize about homosexuality or other forms of deviance—and indeed I admit that if I had Batman's powers and resources, I would be most tempted to use them for personal gain or, as in Bob's plunge through the dressing room wall in *Mallrats*, as a means to sexually possess others. Thus, by incorporating superhero iconography and lore into an R-rated comedy film, Smith brings out the sexual dimension of superheroic fantasizing, both through Brodie's relentless obsession with superhero sexuality and the Silent Bob sequence just described.

Already marked as a voyeur by the end of his second superheroic sequence, Silent Bob (and Jay) is further queered in the third and final of his Batman-esque turns.[20] The stage-trashing business behind them, Jay and Silent Bob now rush to the rescue of T.S. and Brodie, who are being ejected from the mall by La Fours and his security team. Jay stuns La Fours with a baseball bat, then Bob downs a couple security guards with a "Vulcan nerve pinch" and next the two are leading Team La Fours on a chase around the exterior of the mall. Not only does Silent Bob suddenly possess superhuman speed, overtaking and passing the running Team La Fours with ease, but he next leads Jay into a blind alley and commences his most elaborate Batman *homage* yet. As Jay panics at the swift approach of Team La Fours, Silent Bob pulls a succession of strange objects out of his trenchcoat: a vibrating, finger-shaped butt-plug and a fully inflated blow-up doll. This is a comedic reference to the numerous gadgets that Batman secretes throughout his costume and simultaneously continues the gag of linking Silent Bob/Batman with deviant sexuality. The scene culminates with Bob pulling his jacket and shirt aside to reveal a very Batman-like utility belt and grappling gun. He shoots the grappling gun, grabs Jay, and the two of them are reeled up to safety just before Team La Fours rounds the corner into the alley. After Team La Fours departs the scene without seeing our duo, Jay, who is hanging aloft clinging atop Silent Bob, says: "Where do you get those wonderful toys?" and then kisses Bob on the cheek. This line is copped directly from Tim Burton's *Batman* film: the Joker (Jack Nicholson) wonders aloud "Where does he get those wonderful toys?" after Batman (Michael Keaton) rescues Vicki Vale (Kim Basinger) from the Joker's clutches at the end of the museum sequence—a sequence that Andy

Medhurst calls the liveliest and campiest sequence in an otherwise “dour” film (160-1). Hence, a line that is associated in *Batman* with the rivalry (channeled through Vale of course) between Batman and the camped-up, homoeroticized Joker is now remapped in *Mallrats* onto a rescue scene between the “Dork Knight” and his sidekick Jay. Thus this scene in *Mallrats* comedically recovers the lost homoeroticism and tenderness between Batman and Robin that the majority of the Batman texts of the 1980s sought to bury. Jay’s kissing of Silent Bob further highlights the homoerotics that exist between both Smith’s and DC Comics’s Dynamic Duos.

It is also worth noting that these Batman references in *Mallrats* are parodic, playing Batman for laughs by mapping his signifiers onto an overweight, stoner mallrat with a beard: for example, when Silent Bob reveals the Batman-esque utility belt girded around his midsection, the belt is shot in close-up and reveals his belly jiggling slightly, comedically emphasizing the differences between Silent Bob’s physique and that of the usual athletic, hypermasculinized portrayals of Batman. The film’s use of the double signifier of Bob-as-Batman reflects a post-modern sensibility, ironically appropriating imagery from one genre, superhero comics and films, and repurposing it in another, the Generation X buddy comedy inflected through the conventions of the 1980s teen film. Depicting Bob-as-Batman is also a queer move, for this comedic play with Batman’s visual *accoutrements* and behavior (such as rescuing his sidekick, a frequently occurring trope in Batman stories that involve Robin) invokes the campier “Caped Crusader” reading of Batman’s signifiers and re-queers Batman and Robin in cinema one year

before Joel Schumacher's *Batman Forever* (1995) would begin to do the same in a mainstream studio context.

From *Clerks* to *Mallrats* to *Chasing Amy*

Clerks was an unexpectedly overwhelming success that cost virtually no money to produce and, after its enthusiastic reception and acquisition by Miramax at Sundance 1994, launched Kevin Smith and his fledgling View Askew Productions into the independent-sector limelight. It also paved the way for Smith and company to work with Universal Pictures on *Mallrats* and to work within a budget—$6.1 million—that far exceeded their limited experience at the time and is frequently referred to by View Askew personnel as having been too much for them to handle. Ultimately the difficulties that attended *Mallrats*'s marketing and distribution may have stemmed from this disparity between View Askew's indie approach and the demands of Universal Studios, but on the level of the text it also relates to the misplaced belief that a film loaded with comic book in-jokes and centering on the exploits of a comic book fanboy could appeal to a wider teen audience. As executive producer Cotty Chubb puts it, "We made an R-rated movie for an audience that couldn't see it because it's R-rated. So the degree to which people over 17 were interested in this picture was limited to, you know, [laughs] emotionally stunted white boys who love comic books" (*The Erection of an Epic: The Making of Mallrats*).

Of course, Chubb's concern about audience inaccessibility applies primarily to *Mallrats*'s theatrical release; the film found great success on the home video market,

where younger viewers presumably have much easier access to R-rated films. And it is in the home video *milieu* that *Mallrats*'s dual address was most effective. Younger viewers found *Mallrats* to be an entertaining and accessible film, shot in color on a studio budget, laden with humorous sexuality and vulgarity, and featuring a healthy dose of comic book lore and culture—presumably a shared passion for many of the film's teenaged male fans. Yet at the same time, the film appealed to the same Gen Xers who enjoyed *Clerks*, due to its numerous New Hollywood references, John Hughes-esque visual style, and explicitly Generation X twenty-something actors and characters. In short, *Mallrats* appeals directly and simultaneously to two different audiences, Gen Xers writ large as well as younger teen comedy and comic book fans. View Askew would attempt this type of dual address again in 1997, across queer/straight cultural lines, with its romantic comedy *Chasing Amy*.

As for Chubb's "emotionally stunted white boys who love comic books," in *Mallrats* and particularly the character of Brodie Bruce, brilliantly and hilariously embodied by Jason Lee, View Askew gave the comic book fan community an incomparable cinematic gift.[21] As we have discussed, Smith and his studio bosses at Universal hoped this would be a gift that might also be accepted by a broader audience of non-comics fans, but Smith's own investment in comic book subculture—he famously sold his own extensive comic book collection to partially finance *Clerks*—may have blinded him to the limitations of *Mallrats*'s specific address to comic book fanboys and Gen-X slacker males. Perhaps predictably, the film did find its audience in the home video market and is now considered a "cult classic."

However, the initial box-office failure of *Mallrats* and the circumstances of its production undoubtedly influenced the View Askew team's approach to their next planned film, a romantic comedy called *Chasing Amy*. As Scott Mosier notes, *Amy* was originally planned–during the production of *Mallrats* but before its theatrical release—as a "PG-13 *Chasing Amy* comedy based on [. . .] the [1995] success of *Clueless*" (*Mallrats 10th Anniversary Q & A*). However, after *Mallrats* tanked theatrically, those plans, which were premised on the widespread success of *Mallrats*, were scrubbed and *Chasing Amy* was reconceived as a much smaller, independent production. This shift, along with a significant shift in genre—from the buddy film/teenpic/Animal comedy of *Clerks* and *Mallrats* to the melodramatic romantic comedy of *Chasing Amy*—would have a huge impact on the type of film *Chasing Amy* would eventually become.

Notes

1. Superhero films are the most consistent cinematic blockbusters of the new millenium. *Spider-Man* was the top-grossing film of 2002, and its sequel, *Spider-Man 2*, was the second-highest grossing film of 2004 (behind *Shrek 2*). The first *X-Men* film was the eighth-highest grossing film of 2000, while its sequel, *X2*, was the sixth-highest grossing film of 2003. Superheroes have also become immensely popular on television in recent years, with shows like the WB's *Smallville* (2001-present) and NBC's *Heroes* (2006-present) bringing superhero plots, themes, and characters to a much broader audience than ever before. As for the box-office and critical failure of *Mallrats*, Kevin Smith has frequently commented on this issue in public in tongue-in-cheek fashion, perhaps most famously when he suggested that *Chasing Amy* was his "apology" for *Mallrats* at the Independent Spirit Awards in 1996.

2. William Atherton, who played sleazeball villain characters in *Ghostbusters* (1984), *Real Genius* (1985), and *Die Hard* (1988), passed on the Mr. Svenning role before Michael Rooker was hired to play it (Muir 67). Furthermore, actor Sven Thorsen (La Fours) is a prevalent Arnold Schwartzenegger associate, playing roles in *Conan the Barbarian* (1982), *Predator* (1987), *The Running Man* (1987), *Red Heat* (1988), and *The Last Action Hero* (1993), as well as non-Schwartzenegger action films like *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), and *Lethal Weapon 3* (1992). Thus Smith links the hypermasculine 1980s buddy action film with the 1980s John Hughes teenpic/animal comedy through his casting choices in *Mallrats*.

3. Interestingly, and in line with Dyer's larger thesis that whiteness renders itself invisible in order to stand in for all of humanity, Captain Kirk (William Shatner) of the original "Star Trek" series (1966-1969) often cites this quality of "aspiration" and striving to be better than ourselves as a general (and redeeming) quality of all humans. This, plus the very name of Kirk's vessel, *Enterprise*, suggest that despite the program's multiracial crew, whiteness is nevertheless held up as the invisible standard for representing the positive qualities of the human species in general.

4. In *Mallrats* as in *Clerks*, Smith is fond of shooting long takes with minimal cutting, using well-rehearsed actors to act out scenes largely in master shot. This technique is also associated with independent film director Jim Jarmusch, whose early films *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984) and *Night On Earth* (1991) feature many scenes shot in long takes—in fact, the former film is famously shot *entirely* in this manner. Smith names Jarmusch as one of his inspirational figures in the end credits to *Clerks*, so his emulation of Jarmusch's style is not surprising. The use of long takes also plays to Smith's talents as a writer, showcasing the writing and delivery of the lines over skillful cutting or camera technique.

5. Of course, many screen geeks are potrayed as being Jewish, including Woody Allen's protagonists, Richard Dreyfuss in *Jaws*, *Close Encounters*, and *American Graffiti*, and

more recently, Judd Apatow and his repertory company of young Jewish comedians like Seth Rogen (*Knocked Up*) and Jonah Hill (*Superbad*). These Jewish geeks, like Smith's Italian American and Irish Catholic geek protagonists, are liminally raced and marginally white as in Dyer's formulation.

6. Shannen Doherty undergoes so many costume changes in *Mallrats* in part because her contract allowed her to keep all outfits she wore in the film.

7. The father-daughter incest motif is pervasive in U.S. cinema, as Kathleen Rowe Karlyn argues in " 'Too Close For Comfort': *American Beauty* and the Incest Motif" in *Cinema Journal* 44.1 (2004).

8. In addition to being Brodie's surname, Bruce is also the first name of Batman's alter ego, millionaire Bruce Wayne. Will Brooker discusses the homosexual connotations of the name "Bruce" in *Batman Unmasked*: "Batman's 'real' name, Bruce, had strong associations with gayness which date back to the 1940s and have apparently survived several decades" (132).

9. *Mallrats* is a film that revels in postmodern intertextuality and mediation: to cite another key example, during the film's climactic game show sequence Brandi and T.S.'s love is mediated by a game show, described as a "staple of 70's television," and Brodie's final smiting of Shannon Hamilton comes via his showing an illicit videotape on a bank of television screens that lines the game-show stage.

10. In another funny and revealing piece of View Askewniverse intertextuality, *Clerks*'s Randal is mentioned in an excerpt from Tricia Jones's male virility study *Bore-gasm*, included in *The Mallrats Companion*: "People have theorized for years that Randal was closeted, [. . .] [and] after our vid-store floor encounter, I'm forced to lend that talk some credence. [. . .] I feel the subject would much better off throwing away the shackles of gender role forced on him [. . .] and accepting his natural inclinations toward same-sex desire" (25). Tricia's book excerpt on Randal, which lays bare the homoerotics of Randal's relationship with Dante, concludes by noting that if Randal embraced his queerness, "[m]aybe then he'd quit calling girls 'Dante' as he climaxes" (25).

11. During the *Mallrats 10th Anniversary Q & A* session in 2005, Smith makes reference to both *Star Trek IV* and possible *Mallrats* sequels such as *Mallrats 2: Die Hard in a Mall* (*Mallrats 10th Anniversary Q & A*), revealing his awareness of the re-casting of roles as they play out in science fiction and action film-sequel contexts.

12. In terms of the View Askewniverse "continuity" this is actually reversed since *Mallrats* takes place the day *before* the events of *Clerks*, making Willam's *Mallrats* incarnation technically the first appearance of the character within the continuity timeline (Muir 66). It is also worthy of note that Suplee's portrayal of Willam highlights both the character's position as a queer manchild—Suplee has a boyish face and at one point

exclaims that his inability to see the sailboat is "not a phase!"—and hints at a connection between Willam and comic book superhero The Incredible Hulk: in the opening credits sequence, he is called "The Bulk" on his comic book cover. The Hulk can be seen as a queer figure due to his double identity and his alter-ego's first name, Bruce, a well-known euphemism for a gay man.

13. To the best of my knowledge, this fact was not made explicit by anyone at View Askew until it was mentioned by Kevin Smith in the *Mallrats* DVD commentary track released in July of 1999. It later appeared in print as a View Askewniverse timeline in the booklet accompanying the Criterion Collection DVD of *Chasing Amy* in 2000.

14. Charles Hatfield argues in *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* that the alternative comix movement of the 1960s, spearheaded by such writer-artists as R. Crumb, inadvertently laid the groundwork for a kind of proto-comic book direct market by selling its titles through the specialty "boutiques (or 'head shops') of the so-called hippie movement" (16).

15. In the 1970s, Richard Dreyfuss frequently played boomer geek characters who served as early prototypes for Smith's Gen-X geeks. See my Introduction and Chapter II for more on the connection between cinematic Boomer geeks and Gen-X geeks and their status in 1970s New Hollywood and 1990s Independent cinema.

16. Robin first appeared in *Detective Comics* #38 (1940).

17. Brooker also points out the well-known fact that the immense popularity of the 1966 "Batman" television series, which temporarily boosted sales of Batman comic books and elevated Batman to the position of a pop-cultural icon, may very well have saved the entire Batman franchise from "flagging [comic book] sales" and, perhaps, complete financial ruin: "Whatever the complaints of some comic fans, Batman would very probably never have survived beyond 1965 without the help of the ABC television series" (179).

18. Interestingly, this culturally pervasive knowledge of Batman and Robin's queerness was emphatically foregrounded in June 1995 when actor Chris O'Donnell appeared in costume as Robin as a "cover boy for [British gay lifestyle magazine] *Attitude*" in conjunction with the release of Joel Schumacher's *Batman Forever* (Brooker 164).

19. Will Brooker's *Batman Unmasked* (New York: Continuum, 2000) is an excellent resource for those interested in a fairly complete cultural history of Batman, including a whole chapter devoted to Wertham's attack on the morality of comics and queer readings of Batman and Robin.

20. Insofar as it goes against middle-class standards for acceptable behavior, voyeurism can be seen as inherently queer, an argument I make at length in "A Stalker's Odyssey:

Arrested Development, Gay Desire, and Queer Comedy in *Chuck&Buck*." *Jump Cut* 49, Spring 2007 (39 pps in ms). <http://www.ejumpcut.org/home.html>

21. *Mallrats* also launched Jason Lee's rather successful film and television career, for even reviews that disparaged *Mallrats*—of which there were many—would occasionally praise Lee's performance, calling his portrayal of Brodie a "bright spot" in the film (Stack C3). Arguably *Mallrats* also helped Ben Affleck to become a Hollywood megastar, though his star turn in *Chasing Amy* and Smith's involvement in finding distribution for *Good Will Hunting* (1997) played a more significant role than *Mallrats* did in this case.

CHAPTER IV

UNSPOKEN BISEXUALITY: *CHASING AMY* (1997)

Chasing Amy (1997) tells essentially the same story as *Clerks*, but in a melodramatic rather than comedic mode. This shift in sensibility allows Kevin Smith and his cohorts to explore the homoerotics and queer triangulations of his previous buddy films in more emotional depth, taking seriously the sexual hang-ups and repressed desires of his male buddy protagonists. This melodramatic focus on sexuality and love is further queered in *Chasing Amy* by the inclusion of explicitly gay / lesbian / bisexual characters, and especially the climactic bisexual "experiment" proposed by protagonist Holden (Ben Affleck). To be clear, Smith himself identifies as straight, as do the two members of *Amy*'s central male buddy pair, at least at the film's outset. Yet Smith and View Askew know that lesbianism and queer sexuality sell movies in the independent film marketplace of the late 1990s, and in *Chasing Amy* queer sex, specifically bisexual sex, is posited as a kind of cure-all for the sexual conservatism of the film's male geek protagonist.

If, as B. Ruby Rich argues, *Chasing Amy* is little more than an "imitation" of other, more legitimate lesbian-themed independent films of its period, authored by a straight man and deploying the figure of the mainstream-palatable femme lesbian in order to appeal to non-queer audiences, it nevertheless does so in the context in an extremely queer narrative ("Queer and Present" 24). *Chasing Amy* is obsessed with bisexuality. In

fact, a certain kind of "transitional bisexuality" drives the narrative of *Amy* to its unusual climax and is viewed by the film's protagonist, Holden, as a cathartic phase through which he must pass in order to reach sexual maturity in the queer sexual *milieu* the film depicts. *Chasing Amy* climaxes with Holden proposing three-way sex between himself, his lifelong buddy Banky (Jason Lee), and his lesbian / bisexual girlfriend, Alyssa (Joey Lauren Adams), in the hope that their queer sexual consummation will blast away the negativity and conflict that has accrued between all three parties: "This will keep us together," Holden claims after he outlines his unusual proposal. Through the character of Holden, *Chasing Amy* presents bisexuality as a kind of bridge or interstitial phase between fixed sexual identities: after rejecting Holden's proposal, Alyssa ends up going back to a lesbian relationship, and Banky's participation in the threesome is premised on the fact that it will allow him to take the "step" toward claiming a gay identity that "everyone else sees you should take" (according to Holden). Yet the film ends with the threesome unconsummated and with questions like Banky's queerness and Alyssa's commitment to exclusive lesbianism hanging in the air. In this way it can be seen as a bisexual narrative that uses a lack of final, monosexual coupling or closure to allow more fluid, bisexual readings of the film and its characters to stand. In this sense *Chasing Amy* is similar to much independent cinema of the post-NQC period, cinema that, as Maria Pramaggiore writes, insists on having its sex "both ways":

> If Hollywood, and the plethora of independent producers whose work dominates the contemporary film industry, need to "cheat" their representations of homosexualities for mass audience appeal—making

> them legible to those on both sides of the fence—it may be the case that the ambiguities, doubleness, and "both/and" of bisexual desire are encoded in contemporary films and may, in part, make bisexual reading practices possible and necessary. ("Straddling the Screen" 275)

This situation suggests that the very attempt to achieve crossover appeal, to engage with queerness via a mode of "both/and" dual address, is that which most queers or bisexualizes contemporary films like *Chasing Amy.*

Indeed, from a structural point of view we can consider *all* of Kevin Smith's work to be bisexual, in that all his View Askew films hinge upon the dynamics of erotic triangles: "Because the triangle offers the possibility for simultaneous desire and identification among its various positions, regardless of the gender of the figures occupying those positions, triangulation often highlights the both/and quality of bisexual desire" (Pramaggiore "Straddling" 277). Yet *Chasing Amy* offers the clearest lens through which to examine the bisexuality of Smith's cinema, since it is not only *structured* bisexually but is also *about* bisexuality in terms of its narrative and the desires of its principal characters.

In this context it is extremely interesting to note that the relatively low-budget ($250,000) *Chasing Amy* is well-known as Smith's most "personal" film, loosely based upon a real-life past relationship between Smith and *Amy* costar Joey Lauren Adams. Smith discusses this relationship and its connection to the film in the liner notes to the *Chasing Amy* Criterion Edition DVD, encouraging the viewer to see the film as "me [Smith] on a slab, laid out for the world to see" (n.p.). The personal nature of the film's

content is supported at the level of the text by Smith-alter-ego Silent Bob's climactic pathos-laden speech, an interjection into the narrative that raises key issues about the function of Smith's stardom and the economic and artistic nature of Smith's *auteur*-ship. While a full discussion of Smith-as-*auteur* will be deferred to Chapter VI, the concluding section of the present chapter will discuss that important speech's impact on how we read *Chasing Amy* and its comic book-creating protagonist, Holden McNeil.

Chasing Amy is also View Askew's most critically lauded film—it is the only Smith film available in a prestigious Criterion DVD edition—and has achieved a greater level of mainstream acceptance than any other View Askew picture. Thus, especially compared to the two previous View Askew films, *Clerks* and *Mallrats*, *Chasing Amy* carries a more "mature" status, both in terms of subgenre—romantic comedy is the most respected and accessible comedic subgenre—and in its marketing as a personal statement by an experienced and maturing writer/director. *Amy* also enhanced its "indie" credibility and marketability by foregrounding its queer (bi-)sexuality, rendering explicit—in carefully circumscribed ways—what *Clerks* only joked about and *Mallrats* more or less elided.

Significant in this context is *Chasing Amy*'s introduction of the first two overtly gay-identifying characters into Smith's "Askewniverse," i.e., the mainstream-palatable femme lesbian Alyssa Jones (Joey Lauren Adams) and the flaming gay black man Hooper X (Dwight Ewell). Of course, as I have just hinted, these characters are portrayed very carefully so as to make them palatable to a wide audience: Alyssa is a beautiful femme "lesbian" who falls in love with a man, and Hooper is an obvious queen

with a hyper-masculine public alter-ego who serves as a "magical Negro" selflessly dispensing wisdom to the white characters.[1] Both Alyssa and Hooper are ultimately relegated to secondary roles behind the film's central male buddy pair, Holden and Banky (Jason Lee), acting as lightning rods to draw queerness away from Holden in particular. In fact, the central argument of this chapter is that *Chasing Amy* uses fixed identity categories such as "lesbian" (Alyssa) and "experimental heterosexual male" (Holden) as smokescreens for a pervasive yet unspoken bisexuality.

In this chapter I first examine *Chasing Amy*'s privileged critical status, focusing particularly on its generic context. I explore how *Amy* both embraces and stubbornly resists the conventions of the romantic comedy, which ultimately places the film in the subgenre of the "nervous" romance or break-up film. Next I discuss *Chasing Amy*'s pervasive bisexuality, comparing its triangles of desire and some key scenes to the previous two View Askewniverse films. Lastly, I discuss B. Ruby Rich's 2000 article "Queer and Present Danger," which declares the death by mainstreaming of queer cinema and specifically names *Chasing Amy* as a contributor to that trend. Using *Chasing Amy* as a textual focus, I interrogate the validity of Rich's claim in its industrial and cultural moment.

Chasing Amy tells the story of comic book artist Holden McNeil (Ben Affleck), who writes a comic called *Bluntman and Chronic* with his artistic partner and lifelong buddy, Banky Edwards (Jason Lee). After meeting fellow comic artist and avowed lesbian Alyssa Jones (Joey Lauren Adams), Holden falls in love with her and confesses this to her one rainy night. Surprisingly, despite an initial few minutes of anger and

resistance, Alyssa swiftly forsakes her lesbian identity and circle of lesbian friends in order to be with Holden romantically. However, once a queerly jealous Banky uncovers the truth about Alyssa's sexual past—she had sex with men, and lots of them—Holden's intolerance and insecurities kick in and his romance with Alyssa deteriorates. The film climaxes with Holden proposing that the three of them—Holden, Banky, and Alyssa—have three-way sex so that he can regain his confidence and Banky can explore gay sex. Alyssa refuses the *menage á trois* and dumps Holden for good, and Holden and Banky drift apart after the incident as well.

Holden's first name immediately invokes *The Catcher in the Rye*'s Holden Caulfield, a cultural emblem (since the 1950s) of white teen male angst and slackerism. And indeed there are many parallels between J.D. Salinger's 1951 novel and Smith's 1997 film: *Catcher* and *Amy* share a New York City setting, a key secondary character named Banky (see *Catcher*'s Ed Banky, p. 55), and a self-defeating protagonist who is surrounded by strong women he cannot withstand—in Holden Caulfield's case, his domineering mother (72, 99-100) and tomboyish sister (206-7, 214), in Holden McNeil's case, his newfound love interest, Alyssa. Further, both Salinger's and Smith's Holdens appropriate black culture through proximity to black artists they admire—for Caulfield, piano player Ernie and "colored girl singer, Estelle Fletcher" (*Catcher* 104-5, 109-10, 149), and for McNeil, Hooper X—and behave in ways that can be read as whiny, somewhat sissified, and thus feminized (*Catcher* 115, 220, 249). This connection to Salinger's much-revered novel makes *Amy* seem more serious, literary, and high-cultural, akin to *Clerks*' Dante and his moniker's invocation of *The Divine Comedy* but unlike the

more lowbrow protagonists of *Mallrats*, Quint and Brodie, named instead after characters from Spielberg's *Jaws*.

Not only do these echoes of Salinger help qualify *Chasing Amy* as a more mature or serious work than Smith's previous two film comedies, many aspects of the *Amy* text itself were constructed in order to further this impression. View Askew Producer Scott Mosier comments that "a film like *Chasing Amy* says that Kevin Smith can write great scenes and create an environment for actors where they can produce good work. [. . .] *Chasing Amy* elevated us on all levels: as far as audiences, within the industry, and financially as well" (Muir 88). Mosier's comment is on the mark, for *Amy* not only won back *Clerks* fans who were disappointed by *Mallrats*'s perceived commercialism, it was also the most profitable View Askew film to date, making an estimated total domestic gross of just over $12 million on a $250,000 investment. And as Mosier suggests, much of this rise in status is attributable to Smith's excellent writing and the strong performances of his handpicked cast. Further, despite its fairly low budget relative to *Mallrats*, the *Chasing Amy* crew was newly sprinkled with industry professionals who brought an increased level of sophistication and skill to crafting the look and sound of the film. Most significant in this context is production designer Robert Holtzman, who previously held crew positions on *Philadelphia* (1993) and *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) and would go on to work as set decorator on *The Sixth Sense* (1999) as well as production designer on all future View Askew projects. Holtzman's contributions to *Chasing Amy*'s *mise-en-scene* represent a significant aesthetic jump up from the earlier View Askew films: his production design and the accompanying lighting are quite striking in many

sequences, including the yellow-orange blanket lying across Alyssa as she lies on Banky's orange-red couch, or the purple and green hues of the light behind Holden's SUV when he pulls over in the rain to deliver his confession of love to Alyssa. David Pirner's superb *Chasing Amy* score is also notable here, going beyond the grunge-influenced soundtrack of *Clerks* and the cartoonish orchestrations of *Mallrats* to create a sometimes whimsical (as in the opening credits theme), sometimes somber and dramatic (as in the rain sequence) musical palette for the film.

This process of maturation or "growing up" is also represented geographically in the film itself: this is the first film of the New Jersey cycle to feature a location outside the suburban tri-town area of New Jersey, specifically, New York City. Many of *Chasing Amy*'s key scenes take place in NYC, including the Manhattan Comicon that starts and ends the film, Holden and Banky's visit to the lesbian club "Meow Mix," and Holden's important discussion with Hooper X in the record store. *Amy* represents New York as an explicitly urban, cosmopolitan, and queer-friendly place: the film begins with a montage of NYC street scenes set to an aggressive hip-hop beat, including one image (the third shot of the montage) of a gay couple holding hands as they walk down the sidewalk.

Chasing Amy graphically and comically highlights this New York/New Jersey dichotomy in a key early sequence, Holden and Banky's visit to NYC lesbian bar Meow Mix. This sequence is structured as an elaborate joke on the central buddy duo, especially Holden, who does not yet know of Alyssa's lesbianism but finds out in a startling fashion during the "punch line" of the sequence. For, after singing a sultry song

that she dedicates to "that special someone out there," Alyssa beckons in Holden's general direction and walks offstage toward him. Unfortunately for Holden but to Banky's (and the viewer's) delight, Alyssa has been dedicating her song and pointing her finger at casual lesbian lover Kim, whom she now passionately embraces and kisses right in front of a shocked Holden. The diegetic music, a techno song that begins with the sound of a ringing alarm klaxon, heightens the impact of the joke. In certain ways, Judith Halberstam's comments on a similar set of sequences from Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1989) are illustrative here:

> In a series of scenes set in the gay bar, the Metro, where Dil performs, the viewer's gaze is sutured to [straight male protagonist] Fergus's. In the first few scenes, the bar seems to be populated by so-called normal people, men and women, dancing together. But in a scene at the Metro that follows Fergus's discovery of [transvestite] Dil's penis, the camera again scans the bar and finds the garish and striking faces of the drag queens who populate it. [. . .] [L]ike Fergus, we suddenly see the bar for what it is: a queer site. (*In a Queer Time & Place* 81-2)

The Crying Game uses a straight man's visits to a transvestite bar to spring a surprise on the protagonist and the audience—a shocking surprise that is in some ways merely fallout from the film's central shock, the original horrific revelation of Dil's penis. *Chasing Amy*, on the other hand, makes no such effort to keep Alyssa's sexual identity secret from the *audience*. For one, the theatrical trailer for *Amy* gives away the fact of Alyssa's lesbianism, a strategy that already sets Smith's film far apart from

Jordan's, which was marketed on the basis of the "secret" of Dil's gender. Further, I think the name of the club, Meow Mix, offers a linguistic clue to the viewer that it is a queer space: Hooper calls Alyssa a "kitten [with] a whip" in their first sequence together, links the lesbian to the kitten and of course a kitten needs her Meow Mix!

Last, for viewers who don't pick up on these somewhat extratextual and arguably subtle hints, there are ample clues in the Meow Mix sequence itself to let the viewer in on the joke before it is sprung on an unsuspecting Holden. To take just a few examples: (1) Hooper, an out gay man, works there as a bartender. (2) Hooper attempts to warn Holden that "there's something you should know" about Alyssa, a warning Holden foolishly ignores. And (3) Banky makes the ridiculously ignorant comment that "This is so fucking gay," to which Hooper replies, "You don't know the half of it." In short, while *The Crying Game* uses strategic visual secrecy to "[construct] a mainstream viewer for the film and [ignore] more knowing audiences" (80), *Chasing Amy* actually presumes a more knowing viewer, one who will tune in to the fact that Meow Mix is queer space and that Holden and Banky are buffoons for not realizing it. Their buffoonery and ignorance of queer space is linked to their provincial status as New Jerseyans—it is in part Alyssa's own New Jersey roots that seal the bond between her and Holden during this sequence—and New Jersey is the place the buddies will flee back to at the end of their wild evening in New York.

In this context it is interesting that Alyssa is a self-identified Jersey girl living in New York: with respect to the divide between the New Jersey suburbs and New York City, she has switched sides, she goes both ways. In fact, throughout *Chasing Amy*,

metropolitan New York is differentiated from suburban New Jersey through the former's explicit alignment with queerness: NYC is home to Meow Mix, Hooper X (who only ever appears in the city), and, of course, Alyssa herself. Conversely, New Jersey is the comfortable home place that Holden and Banky never left, the sanctuary for their longtime homosocial buddy relation.[2] Hence, by the geographical logic of the film, it takes a dose of New York queerness, in the form of bisexual Alyssa, to help Jersey buddies Holden and Banky to reach their "catharsis": the exposure of their mutual desire for one another.

Romantic Comedy: *Chasing Amy* and *Annie Hall*

While romance plots have been a central and enduring component of narrative cinema since its origins, the romantic comedy had its first major peak as a comedic subgenre in the 1930s, the era of the so-called "screwball" comedies. The screwball comedy, of which Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934) is typically cited as the inaugural example, centers on a heterosexual couple who are "made for each other" yet blocked in their attempts to unite by "whatever obstacles lay between them (for example, class difference, mistaken perceptions of each other's feelings, sheer obstinacy)" (Krutnik 58). The various delays leading to their inevitable union open up narrative space for the couple to engage in witty verbal play and one-upmanship that is largely responsible for the genres' "screwball" moniker. As Frank Krutnik puts it, the central romantic couple of the classical screwball comedies develop an "intimacy [. . .] through mutual play" that ultimately "[validates] love as a [. . .] magical force which would triumph eventually over

all manner of real or imagined obstructions" (61, 57, 58). The romantic comedy posits love as that which effaces all other differences—in the screwball comedies, usually class status or unequal power relations between the sexes.

The screwball film's popularity declined during the 1940s: the genre's romantic resolutions and general frivolity seemed out of place during the war and postwar years (Krutnik 58). Of course, the romantic comedy did not disappear, and it gained popularity again in the 1950s and early 1960s in the form of the less idealistic and more sexually charged "transitional" romantic comedy. Exemplified by such films as *It Started With A Kiss, Pillow Talk* (both 1959), *That Touch of Mink* (1961) and *Sex and the Single Girl* (1964), the transitional sex comedy is, according to Krutnik, marked by an increased emphasis on seduction over courtship, a clearer separation between sex and marriage, and a privileging of male rather than female point of view (59-60). The transitional romantic comedy's shift toward increased (male) sexuality and decreased romantic idealism reflected changes in American cultural mores since the 1930s and '40s, such as the "restoration of the gender relations that World War II had disturbed both in the home and the workplace, [. . .] anxiety about the mental stability of returning veterans[,]" as well as the general rise of "sexual self-consciousness" that occurred in the wake of the *Kinsey Reports* of 1948 and 1953 (Cohan xii).[3] This move away from the classical screwball formula within romantic comedy is also the result of related changes in cinematic industrial practices during the late 1950s and early 1960s, most significantly the "gradual erosion of the Production Code," the dissolution of which would alter the way films could depict relations between the sexes (Krutnik 59).

The transitional period gave way in the 1970s to what Krutnik calls the era of the "nervous" romantic comedy, which includes such films as *Starting Over* (1979) and Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Manhattan* (1979). According to Krutnik, the nervous romantic comedy "betrays an intense longing for the restitution of faith in the stability of the heterosexual couple as some kind of bulwark against the modern world" and is particularly suspicious of feminism, laying "much of the blame for the fragility of heterosexual relations in the late 1970s upon a 'feminist' sensibility" (63). The characteristics of the "nervous" romantic comedy subgenre become clear by contrasting the "nervous" romance *par excellence,* Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*, and its 1990s counterpart, Kevin Smith's *Chasing Amy.* I have long been fascinated with the structural, thematic, and ideological similarities between these two films, and I maintain that *Chasing Amy* represents an updated entry into the "nervous" romance subgenre as delineated by Krutnik. *Chasing Amy* not only adheres to the conventions of Krutnik's "nervous romance" but also represents a key entry, along with *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (2005), *The Break-Up* (2006), and *Knocked Up* (2007), into the more recent grotesque / ambivalent romantic comedy.

Thomas Schatz argues that *Annie Hall* (1977) disrupts classical Hollywood narrative conventions, specifically those of the romantic comedy, by assuming a "modernist" sensibility that includes ironic distance and self-reflexivity. Schatz characterizes *Annie Hall*'s formal structure as a classical courtship plot embedded within a non-chronological, stream-of-consciousness "narrative" that mimics the associative logic of a stand-up comedy routine (184). Schatz concludes that the Annie-Alvy

courtship story constitutes "a classical text imbedded within a primarily modernist one" (185) and that it is actually the "modernist" aspect of *Annie Hall*—i.e., the Allen/Alvy comedy routine—that "sustains its narrative integrity throughout" and "subvert[s] our reading of the courtship story as a traditional romantic narrative" (186, 185). Schatz further claims—and this may bear most directly on my reading of Kevin Smith's role in *Chasing Amy*—that by making Alvy a comedian and playwright and allowing the Alvy character to "[intrude] directly upon the Alv[y]-Annie story" at many points, Woody Allen the *auteur* "never *directly* intrudes upon the comedy routine or the narrated autobiography. Thus, Allen is able to play the film both ways" (186).

Smith does the same thing, playing a literally silent figure whose authorship of the *Chasing Amy* text is also depicted literally during the film's diegesis, yet who is still a *character,* which therefore allows Smith and the viewer to read the film on multiple (or, to use Barthes' term, plural) levels. Is *Chasing Amy* simply a fantasy invented by Kevin Smith? Yes, but his careful intervention in the guise of the Silent Bob character allows us to maintain a classical or non-reflexive reading of Holden and Alyssa's story even as Bob's "Chasing Amy" story deconstructs that reading before our very eyes. As with Allen and Alvy, the blurring of the line between Kevin Smith and Silent Bob allows Smith the writer/director to "play the film both ways" and ironically note its constructedness even as he (and his "serious" proxy Holden) earnestly insists that he "finally had something personal to say."

Just as *Annie Hall* frames its romantic love plot within a standup comedy structure narrated by Allen-as-Alvy Singer, *Chasing Amy* begins with a focus on its male

buddy pair, Holden and Banky, who are signing autographs for fans at a Manhattan comics convention. The two films also end the same way: Alvy tells us of his chance re-meeting with Annie in voice over, again emphasizing that this is *his* story, more interested in the impact of the meeting on Alvy than on what they discuss together, and *Chasing Amy* ends where it began, at the comics convention a year later, with nearly as much screen time dedicated to Holden's interaction with Banky (almost two minutes) as his re-meeting with Alyssa (just under three minutes). The importance of the Banky portion of this *denouement* is further highlighted by the very long (over thirty second) gaze Banky gives Holden before he leaves to meet Alyssa, and is reemphasized even *after* the Alyssa encounter by the closing credits theme music, Soul Asylum's "We 3," which encapsulates the film's events from Banky's perspective: "She's your girlfriend, seems she ain't too fond of me / I guess if that's the way it was meant to be / There we were, just we three / You, your girlfriend, and me." And while *Chasing Amy* ends with a tracking shot that slowly pulls back from Alyssa's autograph table, it is ultimately Holden's story: it is his maturing, his exit and the closing of the door behind him that ends the story of the film.

Much as Woody Allen contains the romance of Annie Hall within a larger stand-up comedy structure, thus reclaiming the film for comedian comedy, so Smith keeps his focus on the male buddy pair at the same time that he develops the Holden-Alyssa relationship. However, while Smith's previous and subsequent work reveals his preference for comedian or male-centered comedy as a genre, in the case of *Amy* I read the film's emphasis on the male buddy duo to be as much about privileging male

melodrama and suffering as it is about championing one form of comedy over another. In fact, Holden and Banky have nearly as many dramatic scenes together as Holden and Alyssa do (three versus four: Banky has the four-way road "dyke" exercise, the stoop talk, and the fingercuffs sequence, and Alyssa has the swings talk, the car sequence, the in-bed talk, and the hockey game break-up), and if we count the record store scene between Holden and Hooper as another homosocial scene invested in the male buddy pair, these equal out at four dramatic scenes each. (I don't count here other scenes played for comedy, such as Alyssa and Holden's first post-comicon meeting in the bar, their skee-ball date, or the various comic scenes involving Banky and Holden.) And as I will discuss later, the film may even depict more tenderness and intimacy between Holden and Banky than it does Holden and Alyssa.

Another characteristic that links Allen's and Smith's films to one another and also to the screwball tradition is their emphasis on witty speech and verbal play. As Kathleen Rowe Karlyn notes, "In the romantic comedy of the classical Hollywood period, playful and out-of-bounds speech becomes one means by which the female hero takes control of the narrative" (Karlyn 37). Indeed, both Annie Hall (the character) and Alyssa Jones do to some extent embody Karlyn's "unruly woman," who uses verbal wit to (at least temporarily) overturn patriarchal gender hierarchies: for example, Alyssa assertively initiates her friendship with Holden by showing up at his door and offering him a "story" about his own flight from the bar the previous evening. "Would you have any interest in a story like that?" she asks him playfully. That Holden actually does use this story as the basis for his "personal" comic book *Chasing Amy* by the end of the film demonstrates

Alyssa's power to verbally foretell and shape narrative events to come. *Chasing Amy*'s verbosity therefore makes it an ideal fit for the witty, "screwball" type of romantic comedy film, especially insofar as it allows Alyssa to participate on at least equal footing with the male characters in this register.

However, both *Annie Hall* and *Chasing Amy*, true to their "nervous" subgeneric status, tend to undermine that gender transgression by emphasizing the male point of view through pathos and melodrama. *Chasing Amy* in particular is laden with much more melodrama than a classical screwball comedy could withstand. Like the "nervous" romances Krutnik discusses, *Amy* is much more concerned with how the difficulties of negotiating romantic relationships impact the *male* protagonist than depicting love as a magical cure-all for both parties. For example, Holden's confession of love during the lengthy rainy car soliloquy is both the film's most melodramatic moment—rain pours outside, and Ben Affleck's performance of the pathos-heavy speech is full of vulnerable emotion—and it is all Holden's show: indeed, Alyssa seems struck mute for most of the sequence. That *Amy*'s privileging of the male point of view is most evident at the film's most melodramatic moment shows how Smith uses melodrama to elicit viewer sympathy for Holden at the expense of Alyssa's subjectivity. White masculinity is always front and center in View Askew films, even (or perhaps especially) when feminized by melodramatic *pathos* and destabilized by (bi-)sexual queerness.

Chasing Amy's disruption of white masculinity by means of queer sexuality is achieved via recourse to the grotesque. For although, as I have outlined, *Chasing Amy* shares many commonalities with the nervous romances of the 1970s and can rightfully be

considered a nervous romance, it is also the product of the 1990s and as such it differs in one key respect from its forbears: it integrates the elements of the grotesque and ambivalent. Film scholar Leger Grindon has recently commented upon the increased presence of ambivalent and grotesque elements in the romantic comedy post-1996:

> [B]y the late nineties the grotesque elements of animal comedy, the slapstick humor, focus on sex, gross physical jokes, and uninhibited vulgarity became integrated with romantic comedies. [Films like] *There's Something About Mary* [and *Chasing Amy*] found humor in masturbation, castration, voyeurism and perverse fetishes to name just a few subjects of fun. (6)

Indeed, a marked increase in verbal vulgarity and sexual explicitness separates *Chasing Amy* from its predecessors like *Annie Hall*, and its focus upon sex over love, upon the sexually grotesque over the romantically pure, makes *Chasing Amy* less reaffirming of romance, more ambivalent toward the ultimate union of the lovers, than earlier romantic comedies: even *Annie Hall*, which ends with Alvy and Annie apart, reaffirms the centrality of romance through its nostalgic tone and Alvy's concluding joke, which asserts that all of us crave true love even when it repeatedly fails. *Chasing Amy*'s ending is more ambivalent toward romance, focused more upon Holden's maturation and his subsequent (redeeming) recognition that he handled his relationship with Alyssa badly.

This increased ambivalence toward romance, Grindon suggests, is tied to post-1996 romantic comedies' focus upon failed or inadequate male sexuality: "[T]he power of sex to disturb, humiliate, distort, and infantilize becomes the subject of these [recent]

films. One is tempted to call them sex comedies rather than part of the romantic comedy genre, even though they incorporate the long standing conventions of romantic comedy" (6). I agree with Grindon that *Amy* and its imitators like *There's Something About Mary* hybridize the romantic comedy with the animal comedy, for this explains *Amy*'s incessant focus on Holden's feelings of sexual inadequacy and the changing face of the Holden-Banky buddy duo. I would add that it is not just any sex that infantilizes these films' male protagonists, functioning as a disruption/obstacle to love, but specifically *queer* sex, that is, in *Amy*, three-way "fingercuffing" and bisexuality, and in *Mary*, voyeurism and shoe fetishization. In *Chasing Amy* queer sex is opposed to the "grace of passion," at least in Holden's view (Grindon 7). Alyssa has no trouble reconciling her sexually adventurous past with her ongoing quest for a Platonically ideal life-partner, but from Holden's melodramatically rendered perspective, these two things—bisexuality and lasting love—remain largely antithetical.

Male Melodrama

View Askew's turn from buddy comedies to romantic comedy represents something of a maturational step up, dealing as it does with the more "adult" theme of heterosexual romance rather than the pre-Oedipal homosociality of the male buddy duo. While this is a Freudian, heterocentrist model of maturation that I do not necessarily see as positive, and that queer theory generally opposes, for Smith and *Chasing Amy* it led to much more widespread critical acceptance and acclaim. Given that *Amy* is also the first View Askew film to feature a lesbian / bisexual character and a black gay character, this

wider critical and public acceptance of the film may at first seem counterintuitive, but recall that the 1990s is the decade of queer cinema, and in 1997 *Chasing Amy* was cresting the queer cinema wave. Further, the fact that Alyssa turns out to be searching for her one true monogamous life-partner and Hooper X is marginalized as a "magic Negro" helps to contain these queer characters' queerness, making them palatable to white, heterocentric critics and audiences. And *Amy*'s generic status as a romantic comedy potentially opens the film's appeal even wider, perhaps attracting an audience segment (such as women) who might not have found much to connect with in *Clerks* or *Mallrats*.

As Kathleen Rowe Karlyn argues, the shift into romantic comedy is represented generically by the introduction of melodramatic elements to the genre's comedic structures. Calling melodrama "romantic comedy's shadow genre," Karlyn elaborates how post-classical romantic comedies play with the tension between the witty humor of romantic comedy and the pathos of melodrama in order to achieve their effects (114). In broad terms, this play consists of deploying melodramatic suffering, usually in the form of fights or misunderstandings between the lovers, to generate narrative desire for a happy resolution, then, by the end, oscillating toward the comedic side for a wittily humorous happy ending that finally brings the lovers together.

As Linda Williams argues, melodrama is best understood as an American cinematic mode rather than a specific genre, since its conventions—which center on the righteous suffering of its protagonists—can be found in nearly every genre of American film: "[The] basic vernacular of American moving pictures consists of a story that generates sympathy for a hero who is also a victim and that leads to a climax that permits

the audience, and usually other characters, to recognize that character's moral value" (58). *Chasing Amy*'s hero, Holden McNeil, is a victim of love whose suffering, which constitutes the central focus of the film's narrative, results in his "growing up" and learning an important moral lesson about relationships, albeit too late to win Alyssa back or change the doomed nature of their relationship.

This sense of doom and character helplessness is another hallmark of the melodramatic mode, which typically depicts a "[closed] world" where characters are trapped in a "cycle of non-fulfillment" that always brings the characters to their senses or to action too late to affect the outcome of narrative events (Elsaesser 79, 85). Indeed, the sense of "too little too late" that leads to melodramatic non-fulfillment and suffering perfectly characterizes Holden's story in *Chasing Amy*: once he realizes that action is required in order to save his relationship with Alyssa, Holden charges in, only to say and do all the wrong things, ultimately driving Alyssa further away instead of winning her back during the film's strange climactic sequence. This sense of characters being trapped by their circumstances and helpless to change them is also represented by melodrama's displacement of emotions—especially sexual desire and/or frustration—onto objects and *mise-en-scene,* as in the *Chasing Amy* confession scene in the rain that I will analyze shortly.

Yet, despite the centrality of the Holden-Alyssa love story to its narrative structure, *Chasing Amy* is primarily a *male* melodrama, much more concerned with Holden's (and to a lesser extent, Banky's) problems and pain than it is with Alyssa's. Alyssa's problems are not irrelevant. Indeed, as Pam Cook argues, "the problematisation

of female desire [in melodrama] means that her choice of the romantic hero as love object is usually masochistic, against her own best interests, and she suffers for her desire" (254). As we shall see, this is absolutely true of Alyssa, who gives up much more to be with Holden—her friends, her lesbian identity—than he does to be with her. And yet most of Alyssa's suffering occurs offscreen: we see her get ostracized by her lesbian friends and we also see her agony in the scene outside the hockey rink, but beyond that, the film is much more interested in Holden's tribulations and feelings than it is Alyssa's.

In sum, as Linda Williams argues, "[i]f emotional and moral registers are sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, if the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and action, then the operative mode is melodrama" (42). And *Chasing Amy*, despite its status as a comedy, incorporates melodramatic conventions extensively and finally gives melodrama the last word: in a *denouement* that dramatically stages Holden's essential innocence and moral goodness, the victim-hero shows up at the Comicon a year later having learned his lesson, and both Banky and Alyssa, overcome with the virtuousness of his prolonged suffering, forgive him for his earlier insensitive transgressions. In this way *Amy* follows the melodramatic convention of allowing suffering to "solve" or at least gloss over narrative and ideological problems, in this case, Holden's earlier intolerance of Alyssa's sexual past.

Indeed, melodramatic elements give *Chasing Amy* a very different tone than either of the two previous View Askew films: while there are many very funny moments and

Smith's usual pervasive frank dialogue, there are also many heavily dramatic scenes, such as (to name a few) the aforementioned rainy car soliloquy, Holden and Alyssa's fight outside the hockey rink, and Holden and Banky's argument over the latter's use of gay slurs in his own home. While melodrama is a cinematic mode historically associated with the women's film or weepie, and Karlyn has discussed its use in female-centered romantic comedies like *Moonstruck,* she also notes "the increased use of melodrama in recent romantic comedy to tell the stories of *men's* lives. [. . .] [T]he post-classical comedy, beginning in the 1960s, is both more skeptical about love and more sentimental about its victims. It also privileges the subjectivity of its male hero over that of the female" (192). This perfectly describes *Chasing Amy* (and *Annie Hall* as well), suggesting that its use of melodramatic tropes to favor the male perspective aligns it with much recent romantic comedy as well as male melodrama, for example Judd Apatow's male-centered rom-coms *The 40-Year Old Virgin* (2005) and *Knocked Up* (2007).

Chasing Amy privileges Holden's point of view throughout and is particularly invested in depicting his pain and suffering: "Smith's *modus operandi* is to make the audience closely identify with every scintilla of pain and yearning Holden feels. [. . .] Watch for Holden not in comforting medium shot, but in tight emotional close-ups" (Muir 100). This pushes the film into the realm of *male* melodrama, and unlike other post-classical romantic comedies like *Moonstruck*, which "[argue] finally for comedy [over melodrama]" (Karlyn 192), *Amy* ultimately resolves its tensions through male suffering and the catharsis of overcoming emotional immaturity. In short, it argues

finally for melodrama over comedy, a position exemplified by its ending, where Holden righteously suffers because he does not "get the girl"—or the guy, for that matter.

However, it does still generically adhere to many of the conventions of the romantic comedy, including its use of a musical montage sequence to represent the unrepresentable: romantic love. Interestingly, this montage occurs while Holden and Alyssa are ostensibly still "just friends" and only shortly before Holden confesses his love for Alyssa first to Banky, then to Alyssa herself: another privileging of his point of view as the film asks us to see their developing friendship in romantic terms, just as Holden does. The film pulls a similar trick at the conclusion of what I call Alyssa's bisexuality speech, during her first sexual night together with Holden: uplifting music swells as Holden (repeating Banky's words) jokingly suggests that all Alyssa needed was a "good, deep dicking" in order to give up her lesbianism. I will return to Alyssa's speech shortly, but for now I wish to note how the film uses music, the *melos* of melodrama, to lighten the mood here and emphasize the lovers' connection (Alyssa laughs and they playfully wrestle) even though Holden's comment is blatantly dismissive of Alyssa's lesbian-identifying past.

To fully grasp the impact of this dismissal-turned-joke, and to further elucidate the specific melodramatic structures that encourage the *Chasing Amy* viewer to align with Holden's perspective, we must examine the car scene involving Holden's confessional soliloquy. This analysis will show, based upon Alyssa's ultimate decision to embrace Holden as a lover at the end of this sequence, that Alyssa's bisexuality is a "bisexuality of the heart," an incidental consequence of her all-inclusive search for the "one right

person" that will monogamously fulfill her. Thus, it desexualizes her bisexuality and actually renders her more romantically conservative than Holden for the second half of the film. Shortly after this sequence, Holden's obsession with Alyssa's sexual past, and the fixation on possible future bisexual deeds it catalyzes in him, will take over the narrative of *Chasing Amy* completely.

In the opening shot of this sequence, which takes place just after Holden and Alyssa leave a diner where they have been talking together, we see Holden and Alyssa driving in Holden's car as rain pours on the windshield outside. The camera is positioned behind them in the back seat, focusing first on Alyssa in the passenger seat, then panning to Holden and back again to Alyssa as they converse. With the exception of *Amy*'s being shot in color and the different biological sex (but, significantly, *not* the gendering) of the participants, this is an exact replication of the car scene between Dante and Randal from *Clerks*, with Holden in Dante's role as the driver and Alyssa in Randal's position. In the scene from *Clerks* that this one mimics, Dante and Randal are on their way to Julie Dwyer's funeral. As we shall see, the *Clerks* trope of a car ride leading toward an event related to tragedy and death is a significant intra-textual clue to what will transpire once Holden stops the car in response to Alyssa's initial speech and gift.

The conversation in the opening part of this car-ride sequence centers upon a cheap painting Alyssa buys for Holden in the diner. As yet unaware of Holden's deeper romantic feelings for her, Alyssa claims that that painting has "captured the moment" and will serve Holden as "a constant reminder, not just of tonight, but of our introduction, the building of our friendship, everything." This statement motivates Holden to pull the car

over and finally confess to Alyssa the extent of his feelings for her. His soliloquy to her lasts fully three minutes, and while the camera, now alternately shooting the two of them in shot/reverse shot from the front seat, does show Alyssa's dumbstruck reactions for brief moments, the scene and speech belong to Holden. However, despite the privileging of Holden and his feelings that takes place during his speech, the film nevertheless encourages us to see Holden and Alyssa's romance as a bad idea, linked via its "rhyme" with the *Clerks* sequence to death/tragedy and marked by its own mise-en-scene and sound design as a relationship doomed to failure from its inception: rain pours outside throughout Holden's impassioned confession and distinct thunderclaps are heard at two key moments, most significantly when Holden first says "I love you" to Alyssa. Hence his profession of love is not accompanied by romantic catharsis or joy, only sinister tones that mark Holden and Alyssa as "star-crossed lovers" whose union will end in tragedy.

Once Holden concludes his heartfelt speech by telling Alyssa that he would never need a picture of birds bought at a diner to remind him of how much knowing her has meant to him, Alyssa, still speechless, gets out of the car and walks away in the rain. Holden lightens the mood a bit with the self-deprecating quip, "Was it something I said?" then follows her outside. Dramatic music that begins when Holden opens the car door immerses the viewer in the melodrama of Holden's situation; the handheld camera that follows him as he chases Alyssa down the rainy street further connects us to his troubled, emotionally raw subjectivity. What follows when Holden catches up to Alyssa is one of the most rich and complicated segments of the film—it begins when Alyssa angrily explains to Holden why it would be impossible for her to love him:

ALYSSA: Do you remember for one fucking second who I am?

HOLDEN: So? You know, people change.

ALYSSA: Oh, oh, it's that simple: you fall in love with me and want a romantic relationship—nothing changes for you, with the exception of feeling hunky-dory all the time! But what about me, Holden? It's not that simple! I just can't get into a relationship with you without throwing my whole world fucking world into upheaval!

HOLDEN: Listen, that's every relationship! There's always going to be a period of adjustment!

ALYSSA: (incredulous) *Period of adjustment?* (hits him in the chest) There's no period of adjustment, Holden, I am fucking gay! (hits him again) That's who I am! And you assume that I can turn all that around just because you have a fucking crush?

Alyssa's words here explain the stakes of the relationship for her and firmly ground her lesbianism in a social context: she never says she doesn't care for Holden but makes clear that her entire "world" and identity as a gay person would be destroyed if she became romantically involved with him. At the conclusion of her response, it seems as though she has chosen to retain that identity and reject Holden: she tells him to "go home" and then continues walking away from him into the rainy night. Holden watches her go for a few seconds (the camera stays on Holden—his viewpoint is still privileged) and then walks slowly back to his car, followed once again by the handheld camera.

Exactly thirty seconds after Alyssa tells Holden to go home, as he is re-opening his car door to do just that, Alyssa runs back into frame from the left and into Holden's arms, letting out a desperate, wordless cry as they embrace. Thus begins their short-lived romantic relationship. And despite the fact that Alyssa will later offer an explanation for her swift reversal here, her sudden capitulation in this scene has always bothered me a little, even though it "works" given the high melodrama and intense emotions of the moment, including the rain, the gravitas and pathos of Holden's speech, and the ferocity of her initial rejection. Furthermore, given that the textual evidence suggests that these two will not stay together, I do believe we are encouraged to see Alyssa's flight into Holden's arms as a big mistake on her part—a fact that helps me understand Alyssa in this moment as something other than "ludicrous: a piece of wish-fulfillment who functions primarily to aggrandize Holden's ego" (Guthmann D-3), as one *Amy* reviewer put it.

However, the film's hints at the ill-advised nature of this pairing aside, I still struggle with the moment of Alyssa's capitulation every time I watch *Chasing Amy*, and I think this has to do with the film's melodramatic emphasis on Holden's subjectivity and the tendency of post-classical romantic comedies to depict women as somehow "underdeveloped" and neurotic. As Kathleen Rowe Karlyn argues in her discussion of the nervous romance, "little irony surrounds the melodramatized male. If he suffers, we understand and sympathize, for he is not neurotic, merely sensitive. If she [the heroine] suffers, she is simply neurotic" (*The Unruly Woman* 197). And indeed, that is really the best explanation the film offers for Alyssa's quick reversal at the conclusion of this

pivotal sequence: that she is neurotic, a slave to the whims of her heart in spite of the clearly stated truths she just expressed in her rejection speech. As that insightful if unforgiving reviewer from the *San Francisco Chronicle* notes, Alyssa "is so drawn to Holden that she readily sacrifices her friends, community and sexual identity in a heartbeat. [. . .] In Smith's view, lesbians are gorgeous, confused and merely biding time before they meet the right guy" (Guthmann D-3).

Like all post-classical nervous romances, then, *Chasing Amy* offers up a seemingly independent and worldly/cosmopolitan woman only to collapse her resistance to heterosexual commitment just when the male-centered narrative wants to shore up the desirability and power of its male protagonist: "Each of these heroines resists her male suitor less out of her inherent independence or recognition of his need to change than out of something wounded or undeveloped in *her*—qualities which allow the hero to demonstrate his greater wisdom, charm, or sensitivity" (Karlyn 197). *Chasing Amy* re-articulates Holden's privileged place in its narrative by allowing Holden to charm Alyssa away from her lesbian community and strongly professed sexual identity, ostensibly because he loves her in a heterosexual way. However, as the next section will reveal, there is more at work in the film and in the various matrices of Holden's complex—and as I will argue, bisexual—desire.

New Triangulations

As my previous discussions of *Clerks* and *Mallrats* have shown, Kevin Smith's films are typically structured around one or more erotic triangles, each of which pits two

characters against each other in an erotic rivalry over a third character, usually the film's geek protagonist (Dante, T.S., Holden). The central erotic triangle in *Chasing Amy*, while structurally similar to the one at the heart of *Clerks*, carries added weight due to the melodramatic tone of the *Amy* and the more overt queerness of all three participants, emphasizing the heightened gender deviance and cross-gender desire that permeates this third View Askew film (see Figure 21).

To begin with, Alyssa's lesbianism masculinizes her, even though she is a femme lesbian. Alyssa may not be a flat-out butch—far from it—but she *is* a tomboy, and she spends much of the film palling around with Holden and engaging in very frank, masculine talk with Banky about her past lesbian sexual experiences.[4] Joey Lauren Adams, the actress who plays Alyssa, tends to play tomboyish women: for example, she plays Simone in *Dazed and Confused* (1993), who despite minimal screen time nevertheless concludes the film as the only woman in a car full of male buddies, and portrays a strong-willed, independent farm girl named Beth Ward in *A Cool, Dry Place* (1998). Neither do her masculine qualities go overlooked in Roger Ebert's review of *Amy*: "She [Adams] has the kind of deep voice and conspiratorial smile that make you think she could be a buddy as well as a lover" (2).[5] Like Veronica in *Clerks*, then, Alyssa is a tomboy/masculine woman whose presence in the film feminizes the men around her, particularly Holden. And in fact, although Holden develops conscious romantic feelings for Alyssa first, it is Alyssa who actually initiates their friendship by showing up at Holden's studio, and in the end it is Alyssa who actively desires a monogamous relationship with Holden, and not vice-versa.

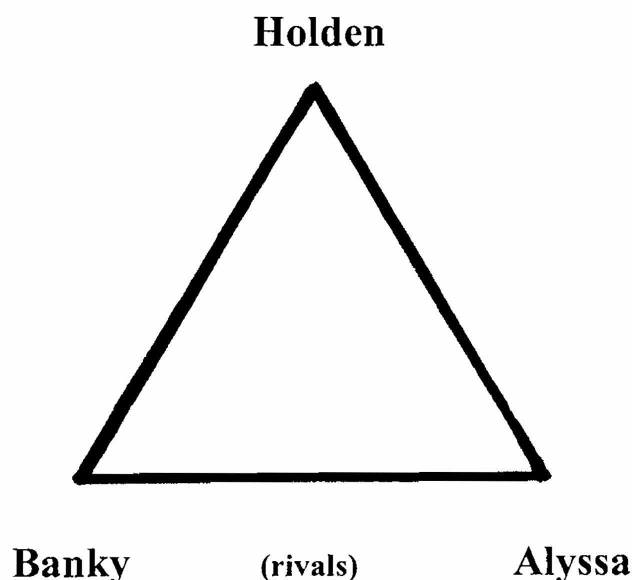

Figure 21: The Banky-Alyssa-Holden Erotic Triangle

Banky fulfills the role of buddy "sidekick" and homoerotic rival that Randal did in *Clerks* (visual clue: Banky wears a reversed baseball cap on his head, also Randal's trademark) and that Brodie did in *Mallrats* (extratextual clue: Jason Lee plays both Brodie and Banky). In *Amy*, the rivalry between the feminine-male sidekick and the masculine-female girlfriend, prevalent in *Clerks* and severely downplayed in *Mallrats*, is carried to new heights of intensity in *Amy* because the relation between the two male buddies is explicitly and denotatively sexualized: at *Chasing Amy*'s climax, the desire between Holden and Banky is spoken directly and the two even kiss.

But back for a moment to Alyssa's masculinity and its specific resonances with the character of Randal. I have already analyzed the *Chasing Amy* car scene in which

Holden-Alyssa are physically placed in the same positions as Dante-Randal from *Clerks*—that placement is anything but accidental. In fact, as Ebert's comment about Adams's/Alyssa's suitability as a "buddy" suggests, the parallels between Alyssa and Randal run deep: for example, in a scene shot for *Amy* but cut before its release, Alyssa and Holden discuss true love in a bar as they play darts (a shortened version of this sequence is actually in the final cut of the film). Interestingly, this dialogue was not originally written for *Amy* but rather for *Clerks*, where it was featured as "a discussion between Dante and Randal" (Muir 90). The fact that Smith was able to transpose a whole scene verbatim from the mouths of Dante and Randal over to Holden and Alyssa speaks volumes about Alyssa's masculinity—she can speak lines intended for Randal with no revision needed—as well as Randal's queerness (see Chapter II). Indeed, as in previous View Askew films, queerness is aligned with masculinity and sexual conservatism with femininity, regardless of the biological sex of the character in question. In *Chasing Amy*, tomboyish lesbian Alyssa is more sexual, queer, and masculine than histrionic geek Holden is.

Of course, as I have already suggested, Banky too has a great deal in common with Randal and other View Askew queer sidekick figures. Just to select one prevalent example, Banky's "Fingercuffs" investigation, in which he exposes Alyssa's (hetero-) sexual past to Holden in a professed effort to protect him, replicates Randal's interference in Dante's relationship with Veronica from *Clerks*. Banky also displays a penchant for porno magazines that would do the porn-obsessed Randal proud. However, what is most interesting about Banky is the unprecedented degree to which his sexual queerness is

explicitly linked to latent homosexuality, specifically his erotic desire for Holden. Numerous jokes are made throughout the film about Banky's gayness—see, for example, my analysis of Alyssa's introductory sequence in the next section—but it is just as often taken seriously, as when Hooper claims in the record store that "That boy [Banky] loves you [Holden] in a way he ain't ready to deal with," or most dramatically, during the film's remarkable climactic scene.

	Buddy #1: Geek	**Buddy #2: Slacker**
Role	romantic protagonist/superhero	comedic "sidekick"
Characters	Dante (*Clerks*), T.S. (*Mallrats*), Holden (*Chasing Amy*), Silent Bob	Randal (*Clerks*), Brodie (*Mallrats*), Banky (*Chasing Amy*), Jay
Gender	feminized – whiny, passive, gets dumped and/or manipulated by masculinized women and is troubled by it	masculinized – snarky, rebellious, cares more about pop culture, video games, and/or comics than relationships
Sexuality	seemingly straight	queer – into deviant sexuality and is frequently asexulized *vis-a-vis* women
Developmental Stage	aspires toward maturity but fails	puerile, infantilized

Table 3: Buddy Pairs in *Clerks, Mallrats,* and *Chasing Amy*

So, since Banky is more sexually queered than any previous View Askew sidekick, and since Alyssa's masculinity is thrown into such sharp focus by her status as a lesbian, what *Chasing Amy* really does in its early sequences is divide the sidekick function between a masculine-queer female and a sexually suspect male, at least until the revelation of Alyssa's past heterosexuality "queers the deal" for Holden and turns her into a problem rather than a buddy/lover for him. This sharing of the sidekick role

between Alyssa and Banky is exactly what makes their rivalry so heated and bitter: Alyssa is fairly dismissive of Banky from the get-go, and by mid-film Banky is downright insulting toward Alyssa, making her feel unwelcome in his home and calling her a "dyke" and a "bitch" when she isn't there. Of course, this misogyny on Banky's part aligns him with the stereotype of the woman-hating gay man, but it also highlights how far Alyssa's tomboyishness and "conspiratorial smile" (as Ebert puts it) go toward endearing her to Holden, displacing Banky as Holden's new best friend. In short, as I see it, Banky and Alyssa initially compete for the position of Holden's buddy/sidekick, and—in both cases—it is Holden who initiates a sexual/romantic dimension of the relationship with each of them. Given our previous discussion of the film's generic roots and its framing of a romantic comedy structure *within* a male-centered buddy comedy, this emphasis on the buddy relation across the lines of gender, sexuality, and romance is a logical pattern for *Chasing Amy* to follow, and bisexualizes the film and its narrative.

One might ask: Isn't Holden in competition with Alyssa's lesbian lover(s)—and to some extent, her very lesbian*ness*—at the outset of the film? And doesn't he play out a rivalry of sorts with his imagined version of Alyssa's past male sexual partners? While I must offer a mitigated "yes" to both of these questions, I maintain that the diegesis of *Chasing Amy* contains no *present* rival versus Holden for Alyssa's affections: she herself dismisses her lesbian lover at Meow Mix as a passing thing based on attraction but not love, and we know from her offhand comment that she "Got laid [last night]" during her skee-ball "pseudo-date" with Holden that casual sexual encounters may well constitute typical behavior for Alyssa, at least until she and Holden become sexually involved.

Hence there are no specific lesbian rivals Holden must best, and thus (so far) no erotic triangle with Alyssa at the top.

Unless we count her past encounter with Rick Derris. As the film shows, Alyssa's *menage á trois* with Derris and Cohee Lundin is *the* event in her past that Holden obsesses over and perceives as the central obstacle to his being with Alyssa. The importance of Rick Derris in Holden's mind is even wryly emphasized at the level of the text by the casting of Ernie O'Donnell–who played Derris in *Clerks*—as a bystander who overhears Alyssa's forced retelling of the three-way sex incident to Holden at the hockey rink. Yet O'Donnell's appearance in that scene does not constitute a diegetically specific reference to Derris—the character is called simply a "bystander"—and the intertextual joke it plays can easily be read as a kind of subconscious projection of Holden's fears and suspicions, which are very much the subject of the hockey rink sequence. Hence, all of Holden's struggles with the figure of Derris and what he represents *vis-á-vis* Alyssa's past are *internal* ones that are usually displayed, O'Donnell's appearance notwithstanding, via discussions Holden has with Banky, Hooper X, and even Jay and Silent Bob, rather than with Derris and Cohee themselves. In sum, Holden's suffering may be highly melodramatized and the primary focus of the film, and furthermore the cause of that suffering may be posited as other men Alyssa had sex with *in the past*, but I think the film encourages us to see those imagined rivals as just that: the products of Holden's overactive and over-jealous imagination. This is certainly how Hooper X, arguably the film's wisest character (as the narrative's "magical negro"), sees it, and he tells Holden so directly in the final scene they share in the record store.

The central Alyssa-Holden-Banky erotic triangle schematizes the channels of desire that flow throughout *Chasing Amy* and can be seen operating formally at key moments in the film's diegesis to queer certain characters and suggest specific intimate duos. To fully unpack the subtle meanings of one such formally laden sequence—the scene that follows Hooper X's violent speech at the Comicon panel, the scene where Hooper first introduces Alyssa Jones to Holden and Banky— we must first analyze View Askew's first "out" gay character, black comic book artist Hooper X.

Hooper X

As we discussed in Chapter II, secondary queer characters such as Willam the Idiot Manchild in *Clerks* serve to shore up the alleged non-queerness of the principle male characters, Dante and Randal, by being more obviously queer than they are. Similarly, in *Chasing Amy* effeminized and "out" gay man Hooper X (Dwight Ewell) helps Holden and Banky appear more straight by contrast with his out-ness. However, in *Amy* Hooper also serves a second and somewhat opposite function: to queer Banky. As we will see in the following sequence analysis, the film visually and verbally constructs Hooper as Banky's potential lover—a potential that will be realized two films later when the pair emerge as a romantic couple from a movie theater at the end of *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (2001).

Hooper X first appears in *Chasing Amy* onstage, giving a talk to white Comicon attendees about his comic book, *White Hating Coon.* His speech is laden with catch phrases from Malcolm X speeches and Black Power rhetoric, and at the culmination of

his speech, after Banky interrupts him from the audience with an overtly racist remark, Hooper pulls a pistol from his jacket and shoots Banky in the chest while yelling "Black rage!" (see Figure 22) The all-white audience flees the room, with the exception of Holden, the prostrate Banky, and one of the other Comicon panelists, Alyssa Jones.

Figure 22: Hooper X shoots Banky.

Hooper steps down from the podium and approaches Banky, kneeling down beside him and tapping him on the head to let him know that his performance is concluded. This shot is interesting in that it suggests a sexual connection between Hooper and Banky in two subtle yet condensed ways: not only has Banky already been shot by Hooper, acting as the recipient of Hooper's phallic discharge, but when Hooper first kneels down, his black gun enters frame right next to Banky's face, continuing the

gun-as-penis metaphor and suggesting (not for the first time) that Banky is the passive member of their duo who may well fellate Hooper's powerful symbolic phallus (see Figure 23). Further, and this is my second point, Hooper's tap on Banky's head echoes a similar scene that introduces Brodie (played, as Banky is, by Jason Lee) in *Mallrats*: he is asleep in bed and Rene taps him on the head to wake him up. This slippage between the Brodie and Banky characters is further emphasized in the next scene at the bar, when, during an argument Banky and Hooper have over the queerness of traditional comic book characters, Banky points at Hooper and says "You"—in the exact tone that Brodie uses to hail Rene at the end of *Mallrats*. Hence, these intertextual moments that hearken back to Jason Lee's performance as Brodie in *Mallrats* work to place Hooper in the role Rene previously occupied, i.e., as our sidekick's lover, and thus queer Brodie retroactively, especially since the highly queered Shannon Hamilton (Ben Affleck!) answers Brodie's first hailing of "You" in *Mallrats*.

These visual and intertextual connotations of the sexual connection between Hooper and Banky are reinforced at the verbal level as well: one of the first words out of Hooper's mouth as he kneels down and addresses Banky is "Bitch!"—a word Hooper will use throughout the film to address and refer to Banky, a word that positions Banky in the more passive role in their relationship, the bitch, and Hooper himself in the more masculine/active role as Banky's butch.

Figure 23: Hooper kneels down, placing his symbolic phallus in Banky's face and tapping him on the head, just as Rene tapped Brodie's head in *Mallrats*.

As if this weren't enough, the homoerotics between Banky and Hooper are further driven home by a portion of the conversation that ensues once Banky stands up:

> HOOPER: [. . .] I need to sell the image to sell the book. Would the audience still buy the whole 'Black Rage' angle if they found out the book was written by a. . . well, you know. . .
>
> BANKY: Faggot?
>
> HOOPER: When you say it it sounds so sexy. (grabs Banky's face and kisses him on the mouth)
>
> BANKY: (wipes his mouth) Hey, hey, hey! I'll play your victim but not your catcher!

Although this joke to some extent depends upon the thinness of the line dividing "victim" from "catcher," particularly in light of the visual cues that suggest the homoerotic energy between Banky and Hooper I've already described, the double irony here is that, as much of *Amy* suggests and as the *denouement* of *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* explicitly reveals, Banky will indeed end up playing Hooper's "catcher" or bitch in due time.

However, despite this kiss and as the film (and even Hooper himself) constructs it, Banky's latent homosexual desires are in fact primarily directed toward his longtime buddy Holden. Thus, in this scene as elsewhere, Hooper serves as a kind of proxy for Holden's denied/displaced/unspoken gayness: in the context of *Amy*'s plot, the kiss Hooper plants on Banky in this scene is a visual foretelling of the very similar kiss Holden and Banky will share in the film's climactic sequence.

Interestingly, this conversational snippet and kiss take place in a three-shot that includes (from left to right of frame) Hooper, Holden, and Banky. The shot depicts a threesome with Holden in the middle, a visual setup that anticipates the film's central erotic triangle between Alyssa-Holden-Banky. And indeed, no sooner is Alyssa introduced in the next shot—in an upward-tilting camera movement that echoes Veronica's first appearance in *Clerks*—than she rushes into this three-shot and chases Hooper out of the frame, effectively displacing him in the queer threesome this shot visually suggests (see Figure 24). Most interestingly, however, is the fact that Alyssa does not stop and literally occupy Hooper's place, but rather chases him completely out of frame, thus reconstituting the four characters into two separate two-shots, one with

Hooper and Alyssa (the New Yorkers and overt queers) and one with Holden and Banky (the New Jersey homosocial buddies). This reconfiguration visually schematizes Alyssa's ultimate role in what will follow: to help expose the homoerotic desire between Holden and Banky.

Figure 24: Alyssa chases Hooper out of a three-shot with Holden and Banky.

Not only does Hooper play a key role in visually representing the queer erotic triangles that impel *Chasing Amy*'s narrative, he also complexly embodies black masculinity, in many ways exemplifying its marginalized position within white superhero comic book culture.

In the comics panel scene we learn that Hooper has a dual personality of sorts: on the one hand, within comic book culture he performs a "black rage" style of

hypermasculinized blackness that is rooted in both the Black Power movement and the caricatures of the same proliferated by the Blaxploitation films and comics titles of the 1970s. For example, Hooper X's name and the rhetoric he deploys in his diatribe against white mass media are lifted directly from the identity and speeches of Malcolm X: Hooper says that "the chickens are coming home to roost, y'all," a famous phrase lifted from an answer Malcolm X gave in response to a question following his "God's Judgment of White America" speech made on December 4, 1963. Yet when Hooper pulls his gun and shoots Banky, funky Blaxploitation-style music is heard on the soundtrack, both to assure the *Chasing Amy* viewer that this is a hoax being played for laughs but also to indicate Hooper's positioning as a deliberate *homage* to blaxploitation-inspired superhero comics characters such as the protagonist of *Luke Cage: Hero For Hire* (1972-86), and to more recent real-life, militant comic book artists like Nabile P. Hage.

I make this comparison between Hooper and Hage based upon Jeffrey Brown's description of Hage in *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and their Fans*: "Perhaps the most visible, certainly the most controversial, of the Ania books is [. . .] *Zwanna: Son of Zulu* by artist John Ruiz and the outspoken writer Nabile P. Hage—who dresses up as Zwanna for comic book conventions and once, in full costume, was arrested for climbing the Georgia capitol building and tossing down copies of his comic book" (47). The parallels between Zwanna and Hooper's Maleekwa are obvious, and both Hage and Hooper display a tendency to perform outrageous stunts in order to promote their work.

The other side of Hooper's dual personality, the one the film insists we see as the "genuine" Hooper, is that of a fairly effeminate gay man. The gay Hooper, the "real" Hooper—who is called 'Hooper LaMont' in the liner notes to the *Chasing Amy* Criterion DVD—makes very clear in the sequence following his onstage performance that he is well aware of the contradictions inherent in his dual persona: as he puts it quite succinctly to Banky and Holden, "I need to sell the image to sell the book."

By exposing Hooper's hypermasculine "Black Rage" persona as merely a public performance he enacts in order to sell *White Hating Coon*, the film explicitly demonstrates the constructedness of all identities: if a swishy queen like Hooper can so effectively perform black hypermasculinity that he can keep himself in business as a comic book artist, then couldn't other identities in the film—most particularly, Holden's ostensible straightness—also be performances that mask contradictory realities underneath?

Intriguingly, Hooper's ability to negotiate a dual identity is a feat endemic not only to most gay lives, where various forms of passing and closetedness veritably constitute what it means to be queer in our culture, but (as I mentioned in Chapter III) it is also a defining feature of the superhero comics genre:

> Since the genre's inception with the launch of Superman in 1938 the main ingredient of the formula has been the dual identity of the hero. While the superhero body represents in vividly graphic detail the muscularity, the confidence, the power that personifies the ideal of phallic masculinity, the alter ego—the identity that must be kept a secret—depicts the softness, the

> powerlessness, the insecurity associated with the feminized man. (Brown 174)

This description, right down to its gender particulars, fits Hooper X/Hooper LaMont as perfectly as it does Superman/Clerk Kent.

In terms of gender, Hooper does have a stake in keeping his feminized gay side a secret from his readership, since he perceives that no one will "buy" the Black Rage angle if they find out that he is really a gay man. In part this is a response to the homophobia that pervades our culture and might be especially prevalent in a male-dominated industry like comic book production and consumption: as an overwhelmingly male homosocial environment, comics culture is a place where homophobic disavowals may be particularly pervasive and emphatic.

However, Hooper is also well aware of the difficulties that accrue to his position as a member of a particularly vilified minority: a black gay man. As he puts it, "[s]crew that 'all for one' shit. I gotta deal with being the minority in the minority of the minority, and nobody's supporting my ass. While the whole of society is fawning over girls-on-girls, here I sit—a reviled gay man. And to top that off, I'm a gay black man—notoriously the most swishy of the bunch." Hooper's claim points to the radical fear-generating potential inherent in identities that are not easily fixed, identities like his that involve "being the minority in the minority of the minority." This power to disrupt normalizing, socially constructed identity categories is what Robert F. Reid-Pharr refers to when he argues that "black gay men represent [. . .] the reality that there is no normal blackness, no normal masculinity to which the black subject [. . .] might refer" (103).

Since Hooper must live and work in a white male-dominated society and industry, and since he is also a member of a racial and gendered group—black men—that is particularly homophobic, he must carefully negotiate his various cultures' imperatives toward normalizing, fixed identities, and his solution is to split his personality in two along the public/private, passing/queer divide.

In fact, Hooper's two personas dramatically embody a central contradiction inherent in the historical construction of Black American masculinity: that black men are stereotypically expected to be *more* masculine than their white counterparts, to assume an "exaggerated style of toughness" to compensate for the historical "frustration, discrimination, and educational and employment inequities faced by Black males" (Brown 172, 171). Indeed, this dependence upon exaggerated toughness and hypermasculinity has led much of black male culture to be particularly homophobic, for feminized queerness is perceived as a near-impossible obstacle for black men struggling to assert their masculinity in the face of white oppression and racialized infantilization/feminization. Yet, as Jeffrey Brown points out, this "tough" and exaggerated Black masculinity, itself highly performative, frequently only calls attention to its constructed status as a "mask of masculinity," a mask that leads hypermasculine Black males to be "perceived as relatively *too* masculine" compared to their white counterparts (172). Indeed, although Hooper playfully dons a mask of Black Nationalistic *too* masculine-ness in order to sell his politically radical comic book, he bemoans his need to silence his gay identity in the process: "Look what I have to resort to for professional respect. What is it about gay men that terrifies the rest of the world?" In

short, by the multiple cultural logics he operates within as a minority within a minority, Hooper X cannot be a Black activist or a professional comic artist without completely hiding his gayness; his two minority identities are mutually exclusive.

In terms of the superhero genre, Hooper LaMont (the swishy gay man) can be said to have a super-heroic alter ego, Hooper X (the militant Black Power activist whose name invokes Malcolm X)—hence, Hooper X himself *is* a comic-book hero whose "secret identity" is that of a flaming gay man. In this manner, and once again, Smith casts queerness back upon the figure of the costumed superhero.

In fact, *Chasing Amy* again emphasizes the queerness of superheroes and their fans during the final "One Year Later" Comicon sequence. As Banky exchanges a series of hand signals with Holden, a comics fan played by Ethan Suplee rambles on excitedly to Banky about a comics club he founded with some friends. As it turns out, he tells Banky, the club eventually disbanded over a disagreement as to "who looked better in tights—Elektra or Robin" (296). This line hearkens back to *Mallrats* and Brodie's obsession with superhero genitalia, only now it is presented in a more bisexual register, since the two fanboys argue over the relative merits of (female) Electra's and (male) Robin's physiques. This queering of superheroes, which began with View Askew's camp appropriations of Batman in *Mallrats*, and continues more explicitly in this moment and in the figure of Hooper from *Amy*, will reach its apex in the fifth View Askew film, *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back.*

I have two final points to make about Hooper X and his superheroic double identity. The first is very simple but will show its structural importance in my next

section: Hooper, although he seems to be exclusively gay in terms of his sexual identity, is (in a more holistic sense) a *bi*-identity person.

Second, and this is related to my assertion that Hooper's total identity in the film is bi-faceted and structured like that of a superhero, I think one way that Hooper's super-heroism is expressed in *Chasing Amy* is through his generosity and wisdom as a person. True, we do not get to know Hooper as well as we do any of the other three main characters, yet what we do see of him is immensely likeable, sensible, and sensitive. What I'm getting at is that Hooper is seemingly *above* all the other characters in terms of his comfort with his own identity, his handle on his career, and his ability to see and hear others and offer them excellent advice and feedback.

Of course, these seemingly positive qualities align Hooper with the figure of the "magical negro," a stereotypically wise and self-sacrificing Black male character that is "very familiar to U.S. film audiences for decades and to readers of American Literature for centuries" (Colombe n.p.). In her article "White Hollywood's New Black Boogeyman," Audrey Colombe observes that the 1990s saw an upsurge of these magical Negro figures in mainstream cinema, in films such as *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), *The Green Mile* (1999), *The Family Man* (2000), *The Matrix* (1999), and Smith's *Dogma* (1999), to name a few. Perhaps most interestingly for our consideration of Hooper is Colombe's argument that "this recent incarnation [of the magical Black man] [. . .] has *supernatural* powers to please: killers cure the sick, and thieves turn out to be fairy godmothers. Their special abilities propel them into the intimate, even subconscious, lives of the White male characters" (n.p., emphasis added).

From this point of view, Hooper is less a character than a magical, supernatural place-holder who exists in order to assist and reinforce the narrative centrality of *Chasing Amy*'s white, male characters. His extraordinary powers—i.e., to maintain a positive attitude and a nuanced approach to sex and relationships in the face of his own social oppression—are ultimately placed in the service of a white man, Holden, who is unable to appreciate or enact the excellent advice Hooper gives.

The most condensed example of Hooper's wisdom / magical Negro-ness takes place in his record store discussion with Holden just after the latter has learned about Alyssa's sexual past.[6] After slipping quickly into and back out of his hypermasculine, anti-white persona in order to interact with a young fan, Hooper wisely tells Holden: "Do yourself a favor—just ask her [Alyssa] about her past, point blank. Get it out of the way, before it gets too big for y'all to move." Had Holden followed this mature advice, delivered two scenes *before* Silent Bob tells him essentially the same thing, he might have prevented the tragic end of his relationship with Alyssa. However, he doesn't, and furthermore, this scene is the last we see of Hooper in the film. Like the superheroic / marginalized magic Negro figure he is, Hooper swoops in, does what he can to save the white man's day, then moves on to other as-yet-untold—and unseen—adventures. As Colombe writes, "[t]he incredible growth of White wealth and world influence in the 90s coincided with a good deal of White male nervousness about the gains" and hence, "[i]t is [. . .] easier for White audiences to feel good about a [Black] figure that simply appears and then leaves the narrative without imposing any messy particulars concerning the real world" (n.p.). This deployment of Hooper as a magical Negro who dispenses wisdom to

Holden and then conveniently vanishes mitigates against the more progressive aspects of his portrayal as a complex and capable bi-identity individual.

This doesn't mean that Hooper doesn't have his troubles or isn't aware of his difficult position as a gay black man. As his "Screw that 'all for one' shit" speech reveals, Hooper feels relatively isolated from support networks within the black *or* the gay community, trapped, perhaps, by the very dual identity structure that makes him a living: straight-identifying blacks revile him for his queerness, and queer persons may well object to his public, hypermasculine, "passing" persona. Even Roger Ebert, who agrees with me that Hooper is a "wonderful character," notes that he is "a gay black man whose militant anger is partly a put-on and partly real pain, masked in irony." Yet Ebert may be giving the text too much credit here, for how does the viewer know Hooper's pain is "real"? The film shows the viewer only the ironic mask, and doesn't tell us enough about Hooper to speculate about the real depth of his feelings or struggles.

Yet perhaps in this sense Hooper stands as a metonym for the entire film and much of Smith's cinematic output: View Askew films depict the difficulties of queer white male geeks and slackers as they negotiate their fluid identities in a world not yet fully able to comprehend or accept them. Thus, like his white counterparts, trapped between multiple "fixed" identity categories yet making the best of it, using camp strategies and identity play as a form of militant (and financially sustainable) expression, Hooper X serves as a cross-racial model of bisexual queerness and identity-fluidity for Holden and the viewer that is not diminished by Holden's melodramatic inability to follow his example and advice.

Unspoken Bisexuality

Romantic comedies seek to resolve ideological crises through melodrama and the catharsis of consummated romance. At first glance, we might suspect that *Chasing Amy* wants to resolve the crisis of queer sexuality: after all, the thing that keeps Holden and Alyssa apart, at least initially, is her ostensible lesbianism. Yet Holden is undeterred by this: "Holden has 'zero' problem with Alyssa's homosexual experience" and repeatedly apologizes to Alyssa for what he perceives to be Banky's insensitivity to lesbian issues (Muir 101).[7] Of course, lesbianism / female bisexuality is a visual staple of straight male porn and erotic fantasy, and in this sense it is culturally acceptable to a straight-identifying, white male subject.[8] Especially as framed by straight heterosexual porn, lesbian sexuality is usually seen as a prelude to straight sex, perhaps more indicative of female promiscuity or sexual fluidity rather than as a marker of committed lesbianism. And indeed Holden ultimately sees Alyssa this way, asking her to join him and Banky for a three-way at the end of the film, a deed Alyssa herself equates with his treating her as his "whore." Strangely, it is Alyssa's past sexual openness that most disturbs Holden, yet is the very thing he banks on when he makes his ultimate proposal.

So, while Alyssa's lesbianism provides an initial obstacle to the consummation of her and Holden's love and is thus what we generically expect from a romantic comedy—which usually depicts romance happening with "the one least likely" as Alyssa puts it—this obstacle is dissolved once Alyssa runs into Holden's arms in the rain, and the second half of *Chasing Amy* is much more interested in Alyssa's heterosexual past and Holden's

inability to deal with it: "[Alyssa] becomes emotionally and sexually involved with Holden, only to be castigated by him when he learns she was not a 'real' lesbian" (Pramaggiore 256).

However, and this is my main point, it is quite significant that Holden falls in love with—or continues to fall in love with, since, to be fair, he does not realize Alyssa is a lesbian the first time he meets her—someone he knows has no interest in men. Not only does this potentially spare Holden from actually having to consummate a sexual relationship with Alyssa, under the guise of the romantic trope that one often falls for "the one least likely" Holden is able to establish an intimate relationship with an avowed lesbian, which indicates that on some level Holden is interested in exploring his own queerness: his love for Alyssa queers him. In fact, over the course of the film, Holden's relationship with Alyssa functions as the primary catalyst for the overt queering of his relationship with Banky, and ultimately for Holden's literal staging of a bisexual fantasy: the *menage á trois* he proposes to Alyssa and Banky at the film's climax. Hence, the ideological crisis the film (unsuccessfully) attempts to resolve is the problem of Holden's felt but unspoken bisexuality.

It is Banky himself who comes closest to putting words to Holden's interest in bisexual experience, when during one of their most heated arguments he yells: "Why do you bother wasting time with her [Alyssa]? Because you're Holden fucking McNeil—most persistent traveler on the road that's *not* the path of least resistance! Everything's gotta be a fucking challenge for you, and this little relationship with that bitch is a prime example of your fucking condition." Banky's jealous misogyny aside, I find his

characterization of Holden as possessed by a "condition" that makes him the "most persistent traveler on the road that's *not* the path of least resistance" quite suggestive of bisexuality—after all, in matters of desire the path of least resistance would be to embrace a single fixed sexual identity category, such as "gay" or "straight." Bisexuality in this context connotes an openness to anything, and as Banky points out, Holden has a history of questioning the status quo and taking challenging, experimental roads—just as Alyssa has. Like Hooper's dualistic black gay masculinity, Holden's refusal to find a strictly heterosexual love interest places him outside simple binary identity categories, in a liminal position fraught with contradictions and potentially plagued by social marginalization. As Maria Pramaggiore argues, Holden "isn't permitted to call into question the distinctions between friends and lovers in his own sexual and erotic journey. He must choose from the available monosexual options in order to mature" (257). Even Banky boils Holden's situation down to an untenable binary at the end of his "persistent traveler" diatribe, telling Holden that it may eventually come down to a choice between "her or me"—rather than the bisexual solution Holden eventually (unsuccessfully) proposes.

Holden's interest in bisexuality is also signaled by a couple of key visual and verbally described images from the film. The most significant of these is the literal image of a swing-set that appears in a New Jersey riverfront park. This park and specifically the swing-set serves as a crucial location in the development of Holden's relationship with Alyssa and the bisexual fantasizing it inspires (see Figure 25). The first frank conversation the two of them have after Alyssa's lesbianism is revealed takes place

on these swings, and like the ball tossed back and forth by the kid in the pre-*Clerks* View Askew animation (see my Introduction), I take these swings as emblematic of sexual fluidity, as in the popular concepts of "swinging both ways" (bisexuality) and/or simply "swinging" (non-monogamy). Further, this initial conversation about Alyssa's lesbianism culminates with Alyssa demonstrating the act of vaginal fisting—a practice, however, that is most often associated with *gay male* sexual practice in the form of anal fisting.[9] Hence, Alyssa's fisting demonstration not only masculinizes Alyssa within the context of her own queer sexual practices, but also can be read as a piece of information crucial to Holden's evolving bisexual fantasy from this point forward—he is shown how fisting works and is assured that while it does hurt, it hurts "in a good way." He is taken aback by the concept—out of horror? Or fascination/desire masked as shock?—and, significantly, needs extra time to pry himself out of the swing in the wake of Alyssa's visual demonstration.

The second (and I suppose most obvious) indicator of Holden's bisexuality is his obsession with Alyssa's nickname "Fingercuffs" and the sexual practice it refers to: two men penetrating one woman, one orally, one from behind. Such a practice allows the two male participants to physically have sex with a woman while clearly facing each other, literally positioning the woman as the conduit or channel that mitigates male-male desire.[10] To my mind, this one bisexual image, discussed incessantly throughout the second half of *Chasing Amy*, is the single most important symbol of Holden's fears (he cannot get over the fact that Alyssa has "fingercuffed" in the past) and desires

("fingercuffing" is essentially what he proposes to Alyssa and Banky at the end of the film)—both the fear and the desire centering on the idea of bisexual *menage á trois*.

Figure 25: The swings, a key site for Holden and Alyssa's relationship, suggestive of "swinging" bisexuality.

Further, despite much of Holden's misleading rhetoric to the contrary, it is *Alyssa*, not Holden, who actually wants the two of them to be a "normal"—i.e., monogamous and heterosexual—couple:

> The real "secret" of Alyssa's bisexuality is its absence. Her sexuality rests upon a very traditional foundation in the Platonic notion of the humans as originally hermaphroditic: Alyssa seeks the one individual, man or woman, who is her opposite, her "other half." Smith's film thus creates a space for bisexuality only to foreclose it. The film's focus on Alyssa—its

> chasing of "Amy"—eclipses Holden's exploration and rejection of his bisexuality. (Pramaggiore 257)

I don't necessarily agree with Pramaggiore's assessment that the film "forecloses" Alyssa's bisexuality—I think it actually forecloses her lesbianism. Pramaggiore seems to assume here that monogamy and bisexuality are mutually exclusive, which they aren't. If anything, Alyssa's serial monogamy is at odds with certain aspects of her supposed "experimentalism," i.e., engaging in sex with multiple partners at once. As Pramaggiore herself puts it, "Alyssa isn't a 'nymphomaniac' or 'erotic glutton' at all, but, instead, a choosy lover in search of Platonic completion" (257). But even the monogamous/experimental binary does not constitute an outright opposition since sexual experimentation is widely accepted as a developmental phase that many young people go through on their way to a fixed sexual identity. Hence, if anything it is Alyssa's lesbianism that is minimized, contradicted, foreclosed by this film: her *exclusive* lesbianism never really exists except at her insistence and through the negative reactions of her lesbian friends to its supposed disappearance—they ostracize her specifically for her non-lesbianism, her bisexuality.

Ultimately, however, it is difficult to put a precise label on what Alyssa is: she identifies as lesbian, acts bisexual in the film's diegesis, and her most revealing speech (analyzed below) exposes her as something between a bisexual and a serial monogamist. The difficulty in pinpointing Alyssa's sexual identity is due in large part to the fact that many details of her past are left murky. When, for example, did she become an exclusive lesbian or start identifying as such? She may well have had bisexual encounters or a

period of bisexual transition between her earlier heterosexual days and her current lesbianism. Hooper's faux-shocked reaction to the "Fingercuffs" revelation and his comment to Holden in the record store that "Kind of gal Alyssa is, you don't think she's been in the middle of an *all-girl* group-grope?" hints at her openness to unconventional sexual practices, and her sexual relationship with Holden in the diegesis of *Amy* confirms the non-exclusive nature of her lesbianism. Hence, the only proper word for her *behavior*, if not her self-identity, is *bisexual.*

The speech Alyssa delivers midway through the film in Holden's bed is the strongest evidence we have that Alyssa is bisexual, particularly this passage:

> ALYSSA: I'm not with you [Holden] because of what family, society, life tried to instill in me from day one. The way the world is—how seldom you meet that one person who gets you—it's so rare. My parents didn't really have it. There was no example set for me in the world of male/female relationships. And to cut oneself off from finding that person—to immediately half your options by eliminating the possibility of finding that one person within your own gender. . . that just seemed stupid.

Maybe in some sense Pramaggiore is right and Alyssa really is—she certainly verbally self-identifies as—a lesbian who has merely slept with some guys here and there.[11] Yet her self-description in this speech is anything but lesbian-essentialist: she does not claim some "authentic" lesbian identity that emerged from the closet at some point after years of heterosexist repression. Rather, Alyssa expresses a fluidity of desire, a quest to find that one right person *regardless* of gender, that suggests not lesbianism but *bisexuality*—

a point that is contextually driven home by her delivery of this speech to Holden as they lie (heterosexually) in bed together. In sum, Alyssa's in-bed speech is a perfect description of bisexuality, and yet, true to the slipperiness of *Amy*'s queerness throughout, it ends with a musical celebration of her and Holden's heterosexual bond that seems to override her earlier claims to exclusive lesbianism.

So Alyssa's bisexuality, such as it is, is described (in the speech above) and acted upon (when she falls for Holden) but goes explicitly unspoken *as* bisexuality. However, I argue that Holden is aware of its existence and implications and is scared of them because of the latent bisexuality he feels in himself: as Pramaggiore argues, "[t]he fact that she [Alyssa] had sex with two men at the same time in high school forces him [Holden] to question his own view of sexuality and, more particularly, monosexuality, the strict division of sexual orientation into gay or straight" (257). Thus, when Holden breaks up with Alyssa outside the hockey rink because he wants them to be a "normal couple," he is really doing what Silent Bob tells him *he* mistakenly did: projecting his fears about his own (slippery) desires and sexual object choice onto Alyssa, then pushing her away. Unable to express his bisexual desire openly or productively, he instead does emotional violence to its external representative, first judging Alyssa, casting her aside in the parking lot scene, then trying to manipulate her into being "his whore" in the final sequence despite her repeated warnings not to continue. Just as *Clerks* ends in an explosion of displaced violence—the fight between Randal and Dante—so too does *Amy,* this time figured as the violence of Holden's manipulative proposal, which not only denigrates Alyssa but forcibly "outs" Banky at a time not of his own choosing.

So, in sum, throughout *Chasing Amy*, Holden's interest in bisexuality surfaces, drives the plot to its unusual climax, yet is never named. Similarly, Alyssa continues to be described as a lesbian even after the film reveals that she has engaged in behaviors that would suggest that she, too, is bisexual. In fact, as Pramaggiore points out, it is ultimately the fluidity and queerness of Alyssa's desire that makes her desirable to, and even more importantly an identificatory figure for, Holden: "Holden devises a plan that will satisfy him—he suggests a three-way sexual encounter among Banky, Alyssa, and himself—a move that reflects his desire to be more like Alyssa, to act on his identification with her and her 'experimentation' rather than only acting on his sexual desire for her" (256). I find it significant that just before Holden invites Alyssa over to his and Banky's place to make his three-way proposal, he returns to the riverfront park and those swings, and is seen sitting on a swing, looking again at the yearbook page where Alyssa is depicted over the nickname "Fingercuffs." The sense of this scene is that Holden is putting the finishing touches on his plan, thinking it over one last time before taking the plunge and making his radical proposal. Hence for Holden, the proposal he is about to make is explicitly linked to "swinging both ways," Alyssa, her bisexuality, and specifically the practice of "fingercuffing" that I discussed in detail earlier.

Yet his proposal (see Figure 26) is rejected. Banky, while initially agreeing to it with little hesitation, utters the phrase "Thank Christ!" after Alyssa says no, and his intonation and emphasis make me believe that he means it: he is relieved that the *menage á trois* won't happen, because he is still not ready to confront the queer desire in himself in so direct a way. Alyssa, in possibly her best speech of the film, outlines for Holden

why she doesn't want to engage in such queer sexual activities anymore, finally slapping Holden and castigating him for thinking she would be his "whore" and go along with his fantasy. She exits, telling Banky, "He's yours again." Yet Banky gets up and leaves without a word, and that is where the scene ends: the violence and self-centeredness of Holden's proposal have alienated both Alyssa and Banky, and the homoerotic desire between the two Jersey buddies that has just been exposed in the form of their kiss and Holden's offhand admission that "in a way, I'm attracted to you" is left unacted-upon.

Figure 26: Holden's three-way proposal schematized via a three-shot.

Instead the film jumps us ahead "One Year Later," to Holden's appearance at the next Manhattan Comicon. Here he briefly touches base with Banky via a "dialogue" consisting of hand signals, and ultimately ends up at Alyssa's comics-signing table,

presenting her with a copy of his self-produced limited-run comic, *Chasing Amy*. This is all meant to signal that Holden has grown up, learned his lesson from his experiences with Alyssa and Banky, and is the better person for it, as the uplifting soundtrack music and general feeling of forgiveness in both Holden's encounters denote. Yet the film tells us nothing at this point about Holden's presumably evolving sexuality, and in fact implies through its silence that he may well be pretty much back where he started: a straight-identifying man who silently harbors unacted-upon queer desires and identifications. We just don't know for sure. But it is in this context that I wish to suggest two possible interpretations of the film's title, *Chasing Amy*:

On one level, and this is Silent Bob's version of the story, *Chasing Amy* suggests that Amy, the woman, is "the one that got away," a woman that could have satisfied the male protagonist in an enduring way—Holden tells Jay and Silent Bob that "I look at this girl, I see kids. I see grandkids"—and might have led him into a whole new realm of adult heterosexual monogamy. But the protagonist's fears and insecurities lead him to sabotage the relationship, refusing to enter that more adult world of commitment and possible progeny.

The second way I read the film's title is in the sense I suggested in my reading of the first Hooper/Alyssa introduction scene: that it is Amy who does the chasing, appearing in the male protagonist's life primarily to catalyze (by acting as an identification figure) his recognition of own latent queer desires.

So which one is it? Is our lead buddy afraid of growing up and accepting the mantle of adult, heteronormative, procreative sexuality? Or is he afraid of the

bisexual/queer/homoerotic desire that the Amy figure chases out into the open? I think both. In fact, I think these dual meanings embedded in *Chasing Amy*'s title are emblematic of Smith's entire cinematic corpus and constitute a key element of my current project: to expose the fear of women, particularly masculine women presented as domineering mothers and scary dykes, that impels the queered 1990's male slacker toward *refusing* to make any decisions whatsoever, to instead remain in a homosocial yet strangely desexualized world of male buddies characterized by an ironically comical arrested development. Chased into the open, forced to see the queer and abject linings of his own straight-passing subjectivity, our slacker protagonist ultimately retreats—albeit in a comedic if melodramatized way—before the horrifying possibility of his own unspeakable bisexuality.

The Comics Industry as Metonym for the Independent Cinema

Through its rendering of comic book creators from different racial, sexual, and gendered backgrounds, *Chasing Amy* offers depictions of the comic book industry as a metonym for the independent cinema business at the time of *Amy*'s production. I will make this case by looking again at the opening sequence of Hooper and Alyssa's panel, and then will analyze the scene near the end of *Chasing Amy* in which Jay and Silent Bob appear.

The panel that Hooper abruptly concludes by shooting a gun and scaring away the audience is called "Words Up: Minority Voices" and thus is an appropriate place for minority-group artists like Alyssa (a woman) and Hooper (a black man) to be heard. Of

course, applying the term "minority" to women is inherently (quantitatively) problematic, and the very existence of a "minority voices" panel implies that there is a majority against which its constituents are defined, and that majority is of course made up of white males. Hooper, Alyssa, and Holden discuss this matter explicitly in their post-panel trialogue, Alyssa putting a particularly fine point on it when she tells Holden to "[l]ose the dick or change the skin tone and we can get to know each other on panel after panel." Indeed, this same discussion reveals that Holden and Banky's puerile comic *Bluntman and Chronic*—explicitly modeled after the "real-life" View Askew characters Jay and Silent Bob—outsells Hooper and Alyssa's comics put together. This marginalization of female, black, and queer voices in the comics business is, of course, prevalent in 1990s independent cinema as well, and many textual clues in *Chasing Amy* suggest that the film is well aware of this connection.

The inequities suffered by non-white-male comics artists/filmmakers is dramatically displayed in the opening credits sequence of *Chasing Amy*. This sequence shows still images of comic book pages and covers, as well as press clippings tracing the careers of Alyssa, Hooper, and, most prevalently, Holden and Banky. In one such clipping, a writeup about the duo's first comic book release, a title called *37* that constitutes a barely veiled reference to *Clerks*, is seen alongside blurbs about Hooper and Alyssa's work, but thereafter the images and articles displayed focus almost exclusively on the two white creators' successful *Bluntman and Chronic* title. This parallels Smith's own cinematic career: after the wild success of his first independent release, *Clerks*, he has been able to continue making films starring his own buddy duo, Jay and Silent Bob.

Similarly, and in another striking parallel to the career of Smith, Holden's misgivings throughout *Amy* about the dangers of "selling out" and permitting the production of a televised *Bluntman and Chronic* cartoon echo Smith's own struggles to achieve mainstream recognition, both in the failed experiment of *Mallrats* (see previous chapter) and in his own negotiations with ABC over production of a *Clerks* animated series. What Alyssa and Hooper are careful to point out to Holden (and thus the viewer) is that he occupies a place of economic and artistic privilege: in the comics industry as in independent cinema, only white males are ever given a chance to succeed and "sell out" in the first place. This angst in the face of disproportionate social privilege is typical of the white male Romantic hero dating from the 19th century, characterizes later figures such as *Catcher in the Rye*'s Holden Caulfield, and finds renewed emphasis in the post-1970s era of the media-producing geek (e.g., George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola) and the 1990s Generation X slacker.

It is in the context of white male privilege that specific mention must be made of Guinevere Turner, co-writer and star of the 1994 independent lesbian feature film *Go Fish*. *Go Fish* was released the same year as *Clerks*, was represented by the same legendary John Pierson who repped *Clerks* (and associate produced *Chasing Amy*), and in fact bears a great many formal similarities to View Askew's debut feature. Yet unlike Smith and his View Askew team, *Go Fish* director/co-writer Rose Troche, a Latina lesbian, has struggled to continue working in the independent film business: after seeing her sophomore film, *Bedrooms and Hallways* (1999), get buried by its distributors and the next one, *The Safety of Objects* (2002), get critically panned for its supposed

"didacticism," she has now retreated into directing the occasional television episode (Lane 203). Meanwhile, Troche's *Go Fish* collaborator Gwen Turner, a personal friend of Smith's since their meeting at Sundance 1994, has acted in many independent features including making cameo appearances in *Chasing Amy* and *Dogma* (1999). Turner's ability to keep working may owe something to her whiteness, her good looks, and the fact that she aspires to be an actor, not a writer/director like the marginalized Troche.

For as Christina Lane shows in her article "Just Another Girl Outside the Neo-Indie," independent female writer/directors have not fared nearly as well as their white male counterparts. Lane concludes that this imbalance is due to structural sexism within the industry: "From development to reception, the male-oriented gangster or thriller genres [exemplified by the work of Quentin Tarantino], and the quirky 'loser' film [by the likes of Richard Linklater and Kevin Smith], have helped to condition major independent studios' ideas about what makes money and what makes film sense" (204). Obviously, as a leading, iconic filmmaker in the "quirky 'loser' film" genre, Smith and his team have (perhaps unwittingly) benefited from this structural inequity.

However, in one sense, Smith's inclusion of Turner in *Amy* and *Dogma* acts as a visual reminder of the independent cinema's misogyny, and I like to think that, although Smith is well-known for casting his friends, his placement of Turner in so many of his texts can also be read as a subtle political statement of sorts, as if to say, "look, this business doesn't typically support female filmmakers like Turner, but remember, here she is." Perhaps I give the View Askew team too much credit in this, though, for another way to read Smith's inclusion of friends and lesser-known independent actors in his films

is as a strategy to maintain some kind of independent credibility in the face of his continued niche-market success. In this sense, his casting of Turner, a beautiful femme lesbian and indie film star, in *Amy* can be read as an attempt to cash in on lesbian chic.

For indeed, *Chasing Amy* itself replicates the gendered inequities that certain moments I've just described seem to want to counter or at least expose. Early in this chapter I discussed how *Amy* frames its romantic comedy elements within a larger comedian-comedy/male melodramatic structure. Nowhere is this male-centered orientation made clearer than in the scene late in the film where Jay and Silent Bob meet Holden in a diner to pick up their likeness-rights money. The core of this sequence consists of Silent Bob's "Chasing Amy" story, wherein he describes a past relationship that is an obvious mirror image of Holden's own present troubles with Alyssa. The telling of this story by Silent Bob has multiple effects. The first is to reassert Smith (who plays Silent Bob) as the *auteur* of *Chasing Amy*: the fact that these events supposedly happened to Silent Bob *in the past* aligns with the fact that the very story Holden is caught up in has already been written and orchestrated by Smith. Bob's speech also foregrounds the "personal" nature of this particular View Askew film, since the past relationship Bob describes is a reference to Smith's real-life romantic relationship with *Amy* costar Joey Lauren Adams: hence the line between Bob and Smith is made very blurry indeed in this sequence. This blurring of the distinction between the figures of Kevin Smith and Silent Bob is a subject I will address at length in my fifth chapter.

However, not only does this sequence highlight Smith's authorship and control of the *Chasing Amy* cinematic text, it also diegetically establishes Silent Bob as the

originator of the title and concept for Holden's cathartic independent comic book, *Chasing Amy*. Alyssa provides the content for the *Chasing Amy* story throughout the events of the film, and now Silent Bob literally gives Holden the title and structure he needs to form that content into a narrative comic book. By depicting Holden paying Jay and Silent Bob for their *Bluntman and Chronic* likeness rights and then copping his comic book idea from Bob's pathos-laden story, this sequence reveals that Holden's "art is merely a vehicle for the recirculation of cultural artifacts [he finds] around [him]. [. . .] His creativity was a sham" (Pramaggiore 258-9). So even as this sequence reminds us of Smith's authorship of the text, it also undermines the very concept of such authorship, showing it to be a "sham" dependent upon the input of the people the so-called "author" meets and interacts with in his daily life.

This leads us back to the 2000 article by B. Ruby Rich I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, which states that filmmakers like Smith and particularly films like *Chasing Amy* constitute an invasion by straight-identifying directors into the territory of queer cinema: "If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then *Chasing Amy* (1996) was probably the most sincere product of its season. Not only did Kevin Smith manage a career comeback, but his film managed to draw all the attention in a year when numerous lesbian independent features languished for lack of publicity and audience" (24). Despite Rich's mistaken assertion that *Amy* was released in 1996 (a "misprint?" as *Clerks*' Dante might ask), her point about the changing face of what constitutes queer cinema is a poignant one. As opposed to the films of the New Queer Cinema "moment" of 1991-2, which were all produced by queer-identifying filmmakers, queer cinema in 1997 is

indeed a difficult thing to define: noting that "[i]dentity politics doesn't meld well with market considerations," Rich's article asks "what's a queer film? The films and their receptions over the past few years have rearranged all [. . .] definitions" (24).

Yet, despite the gendered, racial, and sexual politics that support this privileging of white, straight, male filmmakers above all others, there is also a way in which this dissemination of queer filmmaking into other hands can be seen as liberating, productive of a multivalence of new queer cinematic voices. Of course I abhor the structural inequities that allow Smith to succeed while Rose Troche and others struggle and frequently fail, yet I also think that queerness as I define it wants to move past the limitations of identity politics and allow liminal or harder-to-define filmmakers like Smith to explore queer issues from different vantage points. For while Smith himself is ostensibly straight-identifying, films like *Chasing Amy*, "imitation" or no, certainly constitute a form of queer cinema, perhaps most emphatically insofar as its white male protagonists are exemplars of the "post-closet" queer straight man. This figure is described by Ron Becker as benefiting from the increased presence of out gay characters like Hooper, whose outness provides security-by-contrast for the queer straight male: "[T]he banal ubiquity of [. . .] openly gay guys supports the illusion of a post-closet world where all men who are gay are out, and any man who isn't out is obviously (and securely) straight—otherwise they'd be out" (Becker n.p.). Of course, as we have seen, this inductively logical smokescreen for the queerness of characters like Holden and Banky ultimately fails, especially when their queer desires rise so strongly to the narrative surface of films like *Chasing Amy*. Indeed, *Amy* takes great delight in showing

its audience how queer Holden and Banky really are, even if neither of them know it yet, in this way performing the same maneuver on both buddies as Holden does on Banky when he outs him in the film's penultimate scene.

Thus while *Amy*'s subtle deconstruction of white male *auteur*-ship seems to acknowledge that its "queer representation is not based upon any necessary connection to the real in terms of writers, actors, directors, etc." (Pramaggiore 264), in depicting the plight of queer straight men like Holden and Banky it simultaneously serves as an example of "straight queer cinema" and perhaps subtly outs its creators as being invested in forms of white masculinity that are not so straight as they seem. In short, by poking fun at Holden's sexual conservatism and exposing both his and Banky's homoerotic love for each other, *Chasing Amy* reveals that the post-closet world is an illusion and that queerness does not have to be out to be queer. Hence I don't think we can specifically blame Smith or View Askew for doing what they do, even if—or perhaps especially *since*—their work in some ways exposes structural misogyny that limits what voices and views may be heard in independent cinema.

Maria Pramaggiore argues that *Chasing Amy*'s representation of bisexuality, particularly its presentation of a bisexual woman, is emblematic of the tensions inherent to the queer/Independent cinema binary. Arguing that the figure of the bisexual is threatening due to its supposed lack of discrimination—bisexuals swing both ways, refusing gender distinctions in the formation and expression of sexual desire and identification—Pramaggiore concludes:

> The various bisexual dynamics in these films [*Chasing Amy* and Lisa Cholodenko's *High Art* (1998)] enact fears associated with the breakdown of New Queer Cinema distinctions: fears that representations of queerness will not be the province of 'real' queers, and that queer cinema will evolve as merely one more niche market. (264)

I acknowledge the validity of these fears and am immensely sympathetic to those who end up marginalized as a result of the independent film industry's money making, niche-marketing practices. But just as I would have liked to see Holden find a way to embrace his queer desires, to "speak" or fulfill his bisexuality at least for a short while, I see the "bisexualizing" of queer cinema as opening up an opportunity. For if queer cinema is to be "about" anything, I feel it should focus on breaking down the binary structures that support existing patriarchal power and sexist modes of representation, be they centered on sexual identities, gender distinctions, or binarized claims to "real" queerness or queer authorship. In sum, a queer cinema that includes queer 'imitative' works like *Chasing Amy* and thus corrodes the distinctions that allow our culture to hierarchize and discriminate can only enhance the ability of persons and media productions to recognize, speak, depict, and experience ourselves and each other as we truly and fluidly are, on or off the cinematic screen.

Notes

1. For a thoroughgoing discussion of the magical Negro figure and his deployment in recent mainstream cinema, see Audrey Colombe's "White Hollywood's New Black Boogeyman" in *Jump Cut* No. 45, Fall 2002, found online at: <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc45.2002/colombe/>

2. A similar but even more dramatic deployment of the New Jersey/New York dichotomy will be played out in Smith's 2004 non-Askewniverse film *Jersey Girl*, where New York will be the place of fast-paced business, financial success, and cocaine use, and New Jersey the locus of family, fatherhood, and authentic, clean living. I will discuss this film in my work-in-progress, *Falling Out of the Closet: Kevin Smith and Post-Closet Independent Cinema.*

3. Perhaps no single book better documents this period and its effects on/in cinema than Steven Cohan's *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties.*

4. The *Jaws-homage* scene where Alyssa and Banky share their "permanent" scars masculinizes Alyssa by having her brag about cunnilingus-related wounds, not to mention that the original scene this one pays *homage* to depicts the male homosocial environment of sailors together at sea.

5. Also notable along this line is that the character Adams plays in *Mallrats*, while not overtly masculinized, is named for out lesbian actress and Smith pal Gwen Turner, who herself literally appears in a cameo role in the Meow Mix sequence in *Chasing Amy*. As for JLA's voice, many viewers find it to be too little-girlish and breathy to be read as "masculine." And perhaps this aspect of her voice somewhat infantilizes her, which for me enhances the "tomboy" aspect of her persona, making her the tiniest bit sexually indeterminate. So while I acknowledge the legitimacy of this view, I find I generally agree with Ebert, hearing a depth of pitch in Adams' voice that mitigates against or combines with its breathiness to connote tomboyishness rather than traditional femininity.

6. Interestingly, Hooper X actor Dwight Ewell suggested the addition of this scene to *Amy*, convincing Smith of its necessity by arguing that, in the initial draft of the script, "Hooper seemed to be used as comic relief, only one-dimensional. All of the other characters talked frankly about their sexual encounters except for him" (Muir 93). According to Ewell, after he brought this to Smith's attention, "Kevin understood immediately and [. . .] came back with that scene in the record store and I loved it" (Muir 93).

7. And while some of Holden's embarrassment is warranted—Banky does make the claim at one point that lesbianism is nothing more than "bullshit posturing"—he is just as often off the mark about Banky, accusing him of homophobia when in fact Banky is more

so healthily curious. I am thinking particularly of the scene where Alyssa and Banky discuss their cunnilingus-related injuries, a scene where, despite Holden's protestations, Alyssa seems perfectly comfortable discussing her sexual practices with Banky and where the two of them laugh over a shared interest in a particular sexual deed.

8. Female bisexuality is perhaps especially enticing to geeky slackers like Randal and Banky who enjoy sexual voyeurism and porn. See, for example, Banky's incessant staring at Alyssa and Kim during the Meow Mix scene, similar scenarios of geeky guys obsessed with lesbian sex in *American Pie 2*, or Gareth's fascination with lesbian sisters in Series One Episode 4 of BBC's "The Office."

9. I am deeply indebted to Caetlin Benson-Allott for pointing out the gay male signification of this act during a conversation of March 9, 2007.

10. I am again grateful to Caetlin Benson-Allott for highlighting just *how* queer this sexual configuration is.

11. This position, that of a lesbian who occasionally sleeps with men but does not identify as bisexual, is best outlined in a sequence from *Go Fish,* wherein lesbian Daria (Anastasia Sharp) defends her decision to sleep with a man to a gathered "mock court" of angry, accusatory fellow lesbians: "If you're talking about me calling myself a lesbian, that's what I am! [. . .] [H]e's a friend of mine, what's the big fucking deal? Women are my life. I love women. [. . .] I don't [consider myself bisexual]. I'm a lesbian who had sex with a man" (*Go Fish* Ch. 9, "Sex With Men"). I have always wished that Alyssa would say something to this effect when she is attacked by her own lesbian cohort group in *Chasing Amy*—but alas, she remains silent.

CHAPTER V

RACING QUEERNESS ON THE ROAD:

DOGMA (1999) AND *JAY AND SILENT BOB STRIKE BACK* (2001)

Dogma (1999) and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (2001) function generically as queer road movies, bearing many formal similarities to more "out" queer road films like *My Own Private Idaho* (1991, dir. Van Sant) and *The Living End* (1992, dir. Araki). In the process of bringing together the discourses/tropes of race, gender, (queer) sexuality and the road, *Dogma* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* finally make explicit what all previous View Askew films have only hinted at: the queer attraction between Jay and Silent Bob (Jason Mewes and Kevin Smith), the production company's most enduring and iconic male buddy duo. This intensification of the stakes of Jay and Bob's closetedness/outness *vis-á-vis* each other, while handled humorously in both films, is accompanied by a concomitant increase in the element of *fantasy*, specifically comic-book influenced *super-heroic fantasy*, that dominates the View Askewniverse for the duration of these two films. So while, for example, *Mallrats* includes isolated segments of superheroic fantasy—Jay and Bob's Batman-flavored attempts to destroy the mall stage etc.—integrated into what is essentially a John-Hughes-esque teen comedy, *Dogma* and *JSBSB* fully embrace that superheroic, comic-book version of reality, using it, as we shall see, as a comedic fantasy *milieu* in which Jay and Bob, functioning as comedic

superheroes, can finally find ways to safely express their queerness without ostensibly "queering the deal" of their longtime buddy relation.

This increased level of fantasy and homoerotics also interconnects with issues of race: *Dogma* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* depict Jay and Silent Bob interacting with more nonwhite characters than in previous View Askew outings, and the duo's highly charged relation to black masculinity is particularly foregrounded in these two road films. For in the View Askewniverse as in U.S. culture writ large, homophobia is raced and classed, with homophobic straightness generally coded as white and queerness typically projected/reflected onto less white or nonwhite characters such as Willam Black (*Clerks*) and Hooper X (*Chasing Amy*). It is Jay in particular who struggles to maintain his semblance of straightness in *Dogma* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, for his lower-class behavior—signaled by his vulgar speech, obsession with money, and hypermasculine posturing—singles him out for extended comedic anxiety around his own "outing" in *Dogma*. Indeed, in this film as throughout his View Askew career the character of Jay appropriates racialized (hyper-)masculinity in order to cover his queerness. And while Silent Bob may appear to be more sensitive and in touch with his feminine side, he is also Jay's "heterosexual life mate" and ostensible bodyguard, hence his silence and deferral to Jay in most matters read as a kind of hypermasculine toughness meant to cover his less traditionally masculine qualities.

Hence these two films—and perhaps the entire View Askew *oeuvre* to this point—are all about queer disavowal, defensive homophobia played for comedy. This explains why the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) went after

Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back after its release, yet as we will see, these films to some extent presume a knowing audience who will be "in on the joke" of Jay and Bob's longstanding homoerotic relationship and desires. Longtime View Askew fans know *JSBSB's* disavowals to be funny, in large part due to the homoerotics that have pervaded all View Askew films to this point, and perhaps especially since Jay is "outed" by Rufus (Chris Rock) in *Dogma.* Dedicated fans of View Askew films, the target audience for the in-joke-laden *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back,* would have seen *Dogma* and known of this "outing," hence Jay's disavowals in *JSBSB* are rendered doubly ridiculous and funny to the insider viewer.

So Jay and Bob's queerness will come out, but little will change between them as a result. No, ever constant, ever puerile, Jay and Silent Bob will conclude *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, intended to be their final film appearance, frozen in a freeze-frame shot (see Figure 27). And they are not standing alone, nor in their fairly white suburb of Leonardo, New Jersey, but rather onstage in urban Los Angeles with their black role models, Morris Day and Jerome Benton (see Figure 28) of 1980s funk/rock group The Time, a group most famous for their musical appearances in Prince's 1984 film *Purple Rain*. The Time rocketed into national fame due to the *Purple Rain* phenomenon, scoring hit singles with "Jungle Love" and "The Bird." The Time frontmen Day and Benton gave particularly comedic performances in the *Purple Rain* film as a buddy duo who was as funny offstage as they were funky onstage.

Figure 27: Jay and Silent Bob in freeze-frame at the end of *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, an *homage* to the final shot of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969).

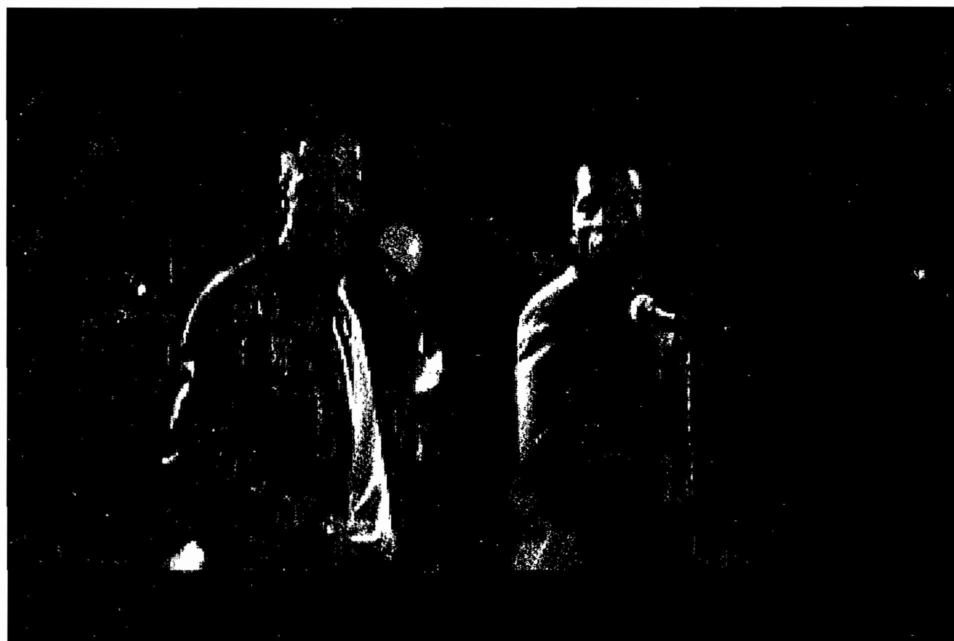

Figure 28: Morris Day and Jerome Benton onstage with The Time in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back.*

Thus, Jay and Bob's concluding freeze-frame shot in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* is not only an *homage* to that *ur*-text of post-classical buddy films, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) (see Figure 29), but in its depiction of white male buddies immortalized in a freeze-frame and surrounded by a band of mostly black associates, it serves as the launching point and ending point for the themes of this chapter.[1]

Figure 29: The closing freeze-frame shot of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.*

To briefly summarize, *Dogma* tells the story of two angels, Bartleby (Ben Affleck) and Loki (Matt Damon), who have been forever banished to earth yet find a loophole within Catholic dogma that will allow them to regain entrance to Heaven against the wishes of God. If they successfully enact their plan, all of existence will be

unmade. So God dispatches several of her minions—an angel called Metatron (Alan Rickman), a muse called Serendipity (Salma Hayek), and a thirteenth Apostle, Rufus (Chris Rock)—to assist the so-called Last Scion, Bethany (Linda Fiorentino) to prevent the two renegade angels from passing through the doorway of a church in Red Bank, New Jersey. Also joining in the mayhem are two "prophets," Jay and Silent Bob (Jason Mewes and Kevin Smith) and a vengeful demon named Azrael (Jason Lee). The action of the film largely consists of the two angels racing Bethany and company to the New Jersey church, and ends with a violent bloodbath as one of the angels, Bartleby, vents his centuries-long frustrations upon a bunch of Catholics gathered at the church for a ceremony. However, God (Alanis Morissette), who throughout the film has been trapped in a coma in corporeal form, is released by Silent Bob, brings all the churchgoers back to life, and prevents the angels from entering the church. Existence is saved, the heavenly beings return to heaven, and Jay, Bob, and Bethany are left on the church steps in the film's last shot..

Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back follows a similar road-movie pattern as *Dogma*, but this time, only Jay and Silent Bob's reputations are at stake. Early in the film, the stoner duo learn that a movie based upon their comic-book likenesses, Bluntman and Chronic, is being made by Miramax and that, as a result, internet bloggers are saying insulting things about "Jay and Silent Bob" on a movie-buff website. This upsets the "real-life" slacker duo and they vow to travel from New Jersey to Hollywood to prevent the *Bluntman and Chronic* movie from being made. On the way to California, Jay and Bob accept a ride from a group of four female diamond thieves who set the slackers up as

"patsies" to take the fall for one of their crimes: Jay and Bob steal an orangutan from a chemical testing facility while the thieves rob a diamond exchange next door. Thus Jay and Bob spend most of the film running from a Federal Wildlife Marshal, Willenholly (Will Ferrell), in the company of a stolen orangutan, all the while attempting to reach Hollywood. Once they reach L.A., many wacky hijinks ensue, and the film culminates with one of the thieves, Justice (Shannon Elizabeth), turning in herself and her associates to the police, thereby exonerating Jay and Bob. Jay and Bob fail to prevent the *Bluntman and Chronic* movie from being made, but make enough money from the successful film to pay for airplane tickets around the country, and they travel around and physically beat up all the bloggers who made fun of them on the internet. *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* ends with the premiere of *Bluntman and Chronic* and an after-party wherein the duo's lifelong heroes, Morris Day and The Time, perform "Jungle Love" and ask the two stoners to join them onstage.

Buddy Comedies and Road Movies

While each of the first three Kevin Smith films qualifies as a male buddy film, none of them functions as that most enduring of comedic subgenres, the buddy road movie. Although both *Clerks* and *Chasing Amy* feature pivotal sequences that involve one of their central buddy duos interacting in a car, none of the first three View Askew films takes its New Jersey-based characters any further than a local funeral, a suburban shopping mall and dirt market, or nearby New York City. Both *Dogma* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, by contrast, fully embrace the conventions of the buddy road

movie: *Dogma* traces *two* different buddy pairs as they race from points in the American midwest (Wisconsin and Illinois) to a church in New Jersey, while *Jay and Silent Bob* follows its titular heroes from their hometown of Leonardo, New Jersey, to that most ubiquitous and overdetermined of road-movie destinations, Hollywood, California. This chapter explores the implications of these films's placement in this specific subgenre, arguing that both of these films more or less fit Robert Lang's description of the "new queer road movie" (335, 342-6).

Historically, *Dogma* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* were produced and released at a time (post-*Chasing Amy*) when the so-called "mainstreaming" of queerness was well underway in the independent and, to a lesser extent, studio sectors. The key example of this trend took place in 1999, the year of *Dogma*'s release, when Hilary Swank won a Best Actress Oscar for her portrayal of real-life transgendered teen Brandon Teena in Kimberly Peirce's independently produced *Boys Don't Cry*. This Oscar win by Swank has been widely acknowledged as a turning point in the fortunes of independent queer cinema, a moment where A-list actors and the major Hollywood studios realized that to "play queer" could not only be profitable but could win Oscars as well (which is in itself profitable). No doubt this film and Swank's resultant Oscar win laid the groundwork for future queer portrayals by straight, mainstream stars like, for example, Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

Further, 1999 marks a turning point in the careers of Kevin Smith and his View Askew Productions team. After returning to their humble economic roots in 1997, making the critically acclaimed *Chasing Amy* for the ultra-low sum of $250,000, View

Askew would now, on *Dogma*, work with a $10 million budget, almost double that of the next-most expensive View Askew film to date, *Mallrats* ($6 million). Hence *Dogma*, which had been gestating in Smith's imagination since before 1994, would be more epic in scope and more special-effects laden than any previous View Askew film (Muir 112, 115). Further, on the basis of its increased budget and the cache of *Chasing Amy*'s widespread critical acclaim, it would attract respected indie and studio veterans like Robert Yeoman (Director of Photography on all of Wes Anderson's films and *The Squid and the Whale*), Howard Shore (composer for *Big*, most of David Cronenberg's films, and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy), and special effects wizard Vincent Guastini (*Requiem for a Dream, Hannibal*) to key creative positions, and A-list actors such as Alan Rickman, Salma Hayek, and comedian Chris Rock.[2] These factors represent a major overhaul to how View Askew would make movies from this point forward; the days of four crewpeople shooting at night in cheaply obtained locations, which was how the entirety of *Clerks* and much of *Amy* was shot, were now gone, and View Askew would make *Dogma* and all its subsequent films in a way that is much more akin to the typical procedures of a major studio production. Smith and company had now entered the cinematic "big league," and would celebrate this rise in economic power by making a comic-book fantasy road movie featuring demons, angels, God, a poop monster, and, of course, an increased dose of highly visible queerness.

Superhero Comics, Queerness, and the Road

Before discussing *Dogma* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* themselves, we must first take a look at another View Askew-produced queer buddy road "movie" that takes the form of a comic book: *Chasing Dogma*, the Smith-penned comic-book prequel to *Dogma*. Illustrated by Duncan Fegredo, the lasciviously over-the-top book provides an explanation for how Jay and Silent Bob make their way from Leonardo, New Jersey, to McHenry, Illinois between the events of *Chasing Amy* and *Dogma*. Along the way, the iconic slacker duo get involved in various sex-, porn-, drug-, and heavy metal-related escapades, most of which are incredibly far-fetched and fantastical even when compared to some of the zaniest moments from the first three View Askew films, or at least *Clerks* and *Chasing Amy*. For example, while *Clerks* ends with a woman inadvertently fucking a dead man in a darkened bathroom, and *Amy* depicts a "lesbian" who falls for a guy, none of these compare to the outrageousness of Jay and Bob working on the set of a porn film or sheltering a fugitive orangutan while on the run from a federal wildlife marshal. Only *Mallrats*, with its comic-book-fantasy sequences involving Jay and Silent Bob, approaches this level of outright departure from reality. And further, as we shall see in a moment, the very motive behind the duo's travels in *Chasing Dogma* is so silly as to be legible only as fantasy. Hence a shift has been made: we are no longer in a slightly verbally heightened (due to Smith's prose) version of a more or less believable slacker *milieu*, as in *Clerks* and *Chasing Amy*. No, with *Chasing Dogma*, we are now inhabiting a version of the View Askewniverse that much more closely resembles the fantastical, superhero-inspired fancies of *Mallrats*. Indeed, as if to signal this connection explicitly,

the opening scene of *Chasing Dogma* takes place in the apartment of Trish the Dish, a View Askew character featured only in *Mallrats* up to this point.

Thus, the *Chasing Dogma* comic book is noteworthy for how it readies its audience to accept the narrative innovations, the expanded sense of fantasy, and, finally, the queerly sexual openness of *Dogma*. For, as I have indicated, *Chasing Dogma* not only reemphasizes the View Askew films's already strong connection to comic book culture, iconography, and narrative conventions; it ratchets these resonances up a couple of notches in order to prepare the reader for the fantastical, comic-book-epic proportions of *Dogma*.[3]

The main strategy by which *Chasing Dogma* achieves its goal of carrying the View Askew fan from *Chasing Amy* to *Dogma* is through its use of continuity, a property of ongoing, serialized narratives (such as periodical comic books) whereby the official storyline of a given set of characters and their world evolves and changes over time. According to the continuity principle, each new installment of a serialized text contributes new information to the cumulative and ongoing *continuity* (or "back story") of a series and its diegetic world.

Yet *Chasing Dogma* also introduces an element that will eventually, upon the release of *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* in 2001, create a rupture in the View Askewniverse continuity: Suzanne the orangutan. First seen during the closing credits of *Mallrats*, Suzanne joins Jay and Silent Bob on the road during the third issue of the *Chasing Dogma* comic book—an episode that is more or less "imported word-for-word into *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*" (Miller 86). Indeed, the orangutan and wildlife

marshal subplot was recycled for use in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* once Smith, post-*Dogma*, decided to temporarily abandon plans for *Clerks 2* to make a Jay and Silent Bob movie instead. Hence the dedicated View Askew reader/viewer is confronted with a contradiction: did Jay and Bob's adventure with Suzanne happen *before* the events of *Dogma* (as per *Chasing Dogma*) or *after* those events in the subsequent film, *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*? Matthew Miller notes that, to his surprise, View Askew fans did not react negatively to this recycling of the Suzanne story, and in fact "hardly a mention is made of the [Suzanne] continuity breach" by fans (86). This inattention to a major continuity break may stem from the relatively lesser number of fans who read *Chasing Dogma* compared to the much greater number of people who saw *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* in theaters and on home video. However, it also has to do with how the View Askewniverse has established its canon.

As the View Askew franchise has grown since 1994, and the View Askewniverse has expanded into various media forms besides film, "Smith's fandom has evolved [. . .] [and now] has more in common with the culture that has coelesced around *Star Wars*" (Miller 87). Indeed, this should come as no surprise since Smith is such an ardent *Star Wars* fan himself. But how exactly does his View Askewniverse emulate the *Star Wars* textual universe in such a way as to negate the effect of the continuity breach created between *Chasing Dogma* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*? By instating a hierarchal canon in which certain texts, i.e., the View Askew films, have the greatest level of canonicity and thus stand as the "official" version of View Askewniverse events, even when contradicted by less canonical texts such as the *Clerks Animated Series* or the View

Askew comic books. View Askew fans understand this hierarchy and thus would not be confused by *JSBSB*'s repeating of the Suzanne episode—in fact, as of its inclusion in that film, that episode would be understood as "officially" taking place *after* the events of *Dogma*.

Despite the less-canonical status of View Askew comics *vis-a-vis* the films, comic book culture, fandom, and especially continuity have been a part of the View Askewniverse nearly from its inception: View Askew's second feature, *Mallrats*, was released simultaneously in 1995 with *The Mallrats Companion Book*, a *Mallrats* screenplay and trivia book that formally resembles a comic, and starting in 1998, Smith began work in earnest on actual comic book stories based on *Clerks*, and of course *Chasing Dogma* itself. But while the *Clerks* comic book and *The Mallrats Companion Book* provided stories or anecdotes involving View Askew characters that were apocryphal or supplemental to the main View Askew continuity, *Chasing Dogma* marks the first time a comic book narrative was offered forth as a necessary component of the overall View Askew story arc. How else do Jay and Bob reach Illinois by the beginning of *Dogma* if not via the road trip they embark on in *Chasing Dogma*?

Indeed, Jay provides a brief recap of the duo's *Chasing Dogma* adventures thirty minutes into *Dogma*: Bethany asks Jay how he and Silent Bob came to be in Illinois, and Jay, referring to the fictional Illinois city of Shermer, the setting of most of John Hughes's 1980s teen films[4], explains:

> See, all these movies take place in this small town called Shermer in
> Illinois, where all the honeys are top-shelf but all the dudes are whiny

> pussies. [. . .] [Best] of all, there was no one dealin', man. Then it hits me: we could live like fat rats if we were the blunt connection in Shermer, Illinois! So we collected some money we were owed, and caught a bus.

Thanks to Jay's explanation, the events of *Dogma*, and Jay and Bob's relocation from Jersey to Illinois just prior, can be understood without reading *Chasing Dogma*. Yet it is noteworthy that Smith and View Askew chose to release a *comic book* as the textual bridge between these two important movies, *Chasing Amy* and *Dogma*. In tone, *Chasing Dogma* actually presages *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*: both star Jay and Bob as central protagonists (instead of their usual supporting roles) and therefore the emphases are on fast pacing, foul language, and sexually and scatologically explicit humor. However, like *Chasing Amy* and its View Askew predecessors, *Chasing Dogma* is chock full of pop-cultural and View Askew-specific references and in-jokes, not the least of which is its presentation of Neil Patrick Harris of "Doogie Howser, M.D." fame as an aspiring porn director.[5] And like *Dogma*, *Chasing Dogma* begins to treat the View Askew characters like comic book superheroes and to plunge them into increasingly more improbable and fantastical situations, including meeting children's television superstar Fred Rogers (he calls Jay a "scumbag"), working as "fluffers" on a hospital-themed pornographic film, and sheltering a fugitive orangutan.

A dedicated View Askew fan, who is very likely comics-savvy and who doubtless encountered references to the *Chasing Dogma* comic book when it was promoted (in its original four-issue form) on the View Askew website in 1998 would be encouraged to

seek out all the explicit, juicy details of Jay and Bob's pre-*Dogma* adventures, readily available in comic-book form.[6]

For while *Dogma* is certainly about spirituality and the Catholic Church, and likely retains its most dedicated and enthusiastic fans largely on the basis of that content, it is first and foremost a comic-book movie, aimed at the same fan demographic that has made up View Askew's core audience since *Clerks* and *Mallrats*: white male slacker comic-book fans. In fact, there was an important precedent, culled by Smith and company from the comic book industry, for putting religious/mythological content into a superhero comic context: Neil Gaiman's incredibly popular comic book series *The Sandman* (1988-1996).

The Sandman recounts the adventures of Morpheus, the Lord of Dreams, an anthropomorphic, immortal personification of all dreams. At the start of the series, Morpheus is captured by an occult group in 1916 and held prisoner for 70 years, but he escapes and sets about rebuilding his kingdom in the contemporary world. *The Sandman*'s storylines primarily take place in Morpheus's dream-realm, called the Dreaming, and the waking world of the contemporary West. However, the character frequently visits other mythological locales such as Hell, Faerie, ancient Greece, and Asgard. In this way writer Neil Gaiman is able to bring together characters and stories from a variety of mythological sources, and in the course of the series Morpheus has doings with a wide array of mythological and folk figures including Lucifer, Loki, Odin, Puck (of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and even other DC comic-book

figures such as John Constantine, a character who originated in Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* and also features in his own series, *Hellblazer*.

The aforementioned *Swamp Thing* comics title bears special mention here, as it serves as the original inspiration for Gaiman's work on *The Sandman*. The Swamp Thing character first appeared in *House of Secrets* #92 (June-July 1971), then, after the success of the short story in *House of Secrets*, DC asked the original creators, Len Wein and Berni Wrightson, to write an ongoing *Swamp Thing* series. Hence *Swamp Thing* #1 (October-November 1972) was created.

In February 1984, soon-to-be-legendary British comics writer Alan Moore took over writing duties for *Swamp Thing*, re-envisioning the titular character as a non-human embodiment of nature rather than a human being fused with plant material. In making the Swamp Thing non-human, Moore also vastly expanded the hero's powers and, most significantly, gave him the ability to access the Green, an alternate dimension that connects all plant life on Earth. Gaiman would later model Morpheus's realm, the Dreaming, upon Swamp Thing's the Green, and like Moore, Gaiman would bring many occult, folkloric, and comic-book figures into the diegetic world of his comic series.[7]

Indeed, Alan Moore's inventive re-imagining of the Swamp Thing character had a profound effect on mainstream superhero comic books writ large, both in terms of content and intended audience. With his work on *Swamp Thing*, Moore began a trend (most notably continued by Gaiman on *The Sandman*) of mining the DC Universe's vast collection of minor supernatural characters to create a mythic atmosphere, and characters spun off from Moore's series eventually gave rise to DC's Vertigo comic book line. Like

Moore's *Swamp Thing*, Vertigo comics titles such as *The Sandman*, *Hellblazer*, and Gaiman's *The Books of Magic* were written with adults in mind and often contained material unsuitable for children. Published under the Vertigo imprint, *The Sandman* became a cult "crossover hit" with adults and women. Indeed, much of *The Sandman*'s readership is female, many are in their twenties or older, and many read no other comics at all (unlike the typical adolescent male superhero comics reader/collector). By the time *The Sandman* series concluded in 1996, it was outselling the titles of DC's flagship character, Superman.

Of course, a comic book fanboy himself, Kevin Smith is certainly aware of Moore's and Gaiman's contributions to "mythological" comics and acknowledges his debt to these sources by thanking Gaiman, Moore, and two other comic writer/artists in the closing credits to *Dogma*.[8]

In fact, *Chasing Dogma*'s very existence indicates that Smith and his cohorts conceive the View Askewniverse in terms comic-book continuity: the fan is meant to move seamlessly from film (*Chasing Amy*) to comic (*Chasing Dogma*) to film (*Dogma*), reading these three texts as one long story. And, at least on the level of plot and characterization, *Dogma* does indeed resemble a *Sandman*-esque superhero comic book in many crucial ways: it features a pantheon of well-known and lesser-known immortals who, in a contemporary U.S. setting, clash over obscure yet world-shattering religious/mythological codes and rituals. Though it retains a sense of comedy throughout, like *Sandman*, *Dogma* is most properly generically classified as superheroic

fantasy grounded in real and pseudo-real folklore, and is decisively set apart from the three previous View Askew films on this basis alone.

Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back takes the postmodern *Sandman* principle one step further, being truly a *pastiche*-based film that skips readily from genre to genre: it is a highly condensed View Askew-style comedy for its first twelve and a half minutes, then becomes in turn a road movie, a live-action version of a Scooby-Doo cartoon, a 1990s heist/action movie, a *Fugitive*-style chase movie, and of course a *The Player*-esque deconstruction of the movie business. And yet, because the sense of comedy is much stronger in *Jay and Silent Bob* than in *Dogma*, I think that the former film actually coheres more fluidly, and is more enjoyable to watch, than its issue-laden and sometimes unexpectedly violent and gory predecessor. Admittedly, the violence in *Dogma* can be explained by the generic shift I have noted, for as a fantasy (rather than teen or romantic comedy) film, there needs to be action sequences and "realistic" battles.[9] Yet the goriness of some of the images in the film's climax nevertheless strike me as incongruous or excessive.[10]

In any case, *Chasing Dogma* sets us up to see *Dogma* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* as literally part of a comic book series's continuity. Unlike *Mallrats*, which centers on a comic book fan (Brodie) and includes Batman-esque fantasy sequences, or *Amy*, which is about comic book artists, *Dogma* goes beyond being *about* comics or the artists who create them to instead become itself a kind of cinematic comic. It is, in terms of narrative, a cinematic version of a Neil Gaiman-esque fantasy, making superheroes out of angels, prophets and muses. And in fact Jay and Bob finally are full-time superheroes

themselves—not only are they the "heroes" of a real, printed comic book, *Chasing Dogma*, they begin the film *Dogma* by vanquishing an evil threesome of supernatural, demonic kids. Silent Bob also kills the Golgothan poop monster as well as arch-demon Azrael—he is Batman/Bluntman, and Jay is his infantilized sidekick, roles that will be finally made literal in View Askew's fifth film, *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back.* In fact it is for their *formal* similarities, particularly their episodic plot structures and superheroic characterizations, that I wish to group *Dogma* and *Jay and Silent Bob* together, as queer road movies and as superhero "comic book movies."

Yet *Chasing Dogma* is not only interesting for how it prepares the View Askew viewer/reader to receive *Dogma* (and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* for that matter) as a cinematic superhero-comic narrative, it also "outs" at least one member of its central buddy duo, Jay and Silent Bob. For while I have argued from the outset of this project that Jay and Silent Bob have been queer all along—remember Jay's first soliloquy from *Clerks* in which he declares that "I'll fuck anything that moves!" and his subsequent offer to suck off Silent Bob "like a circus seal"—it is not until *Chasing Dogma* that we find the first *concrete* linkage between Jay and the actual term "queer," in an episode that echoes that first *Clerks* soliloquy and sets the stage for Jay and Bob's further "outing" in *Dogma* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back.*

The episode in question occurs after Jay and Silent Bob have bought their bus tickets to Illinois and have decided to spend a goodly chunk of their travel time hanging out and smoking weed in the bus's onboard lavatory. After an irate passenger accuses them of committing "George Michaels-type [sic] shenanigans" in there and the bus driver

finally stops the bus and ejects them, Jay wonders aloud to Silent Bob: "What the fuck is this country coming to?!? First, we're accused of brown-humping each other, and then we get kicked to the fucking curb for having a smoke! You know, there was a time when a man could fuck his friend, *and* enjoy a goddamn toke, and nobody said shit!" Jay's tirade is only getting started, and over the next two panels, he expostulates:

> [. . .] What if I *wanted* to fuck you, Silent Bob? (I'd never, because I fucking love chicks, man—even though I know you think about cuddling up to my three-piece set all the time.) But I'm saying "what if" here. Like the comic book—except it ain't about "What if [Spider-man's teenaged alter-ego] Peter Parker had been beating off in the lab, and the spider bit his knob," or some such shit. What if I was all pent up, and all I needed to keep me from going postal on that bus was to bust a nut in your dark and stinky?

This passage is remarkable for many reasons, not least for how it confuses/conflates the kind of "what if" fantasizing that is common amongst comic book fans and writers with Jay's own (homo-)sexual fantasizing. Jay says that the two types of fantasy are different, yet he compares and relates them to each other all the same, perhaps dimly aware that the presence of this statement *in an actual comic book* tends to undermine the difference he is attempting to highlight. Jay's sexual fantasies may be more urgent or real than Peter Parker to *him*, but his fantasizing takes place in a comic book and thus, from the reader's perspective, is not much different from what happens to Peter Parker. Yet there is one more layer to this: Jay at once wants to delineate his sexual "what if"—"What if I *wanted*

to fuck you, Silent Bob?"—as being separate from, of a different order than, comic book fantasizing. His tone suggests that his sexual need to fuck Silent Bob might in fact be more *real*, more pressing, more potentially dangerous than mere comics-based speculations. Yet this *is* a comic book, where such fantasies and speculations do indeed happen, are made real themselves at the level of the artwork and narrative. In short, by evoking a homosexual fantasy in the panels of a comic book, which may be somewhat different but no less real or unreal in this context, Jay runs the risk of having this very scary/desirable fantasy of fucking Silent Bob come true! And while *Chasing Dogma* does not yet go that far, Jay's indignant speech about his *right* to harbor such a fantasy does go one decisive step further.

Two panels later, in a half-page spread centered on the next page, we see Jay, dressed in women's lingerie, golden hair flying, standing upon a literal "soap" box with an American flag behind him, shouting: "[. . .] I should be able to scream—if I so desired—from the bathrooms of the buses that traverse the unending roads of this great country, to the bathrooms of the public parks and rest-stops that dot the landscape like a thousand points of light. . . I'M HERE! I'M QUEER! GET USED TO IT!!!" (see Figure 30).

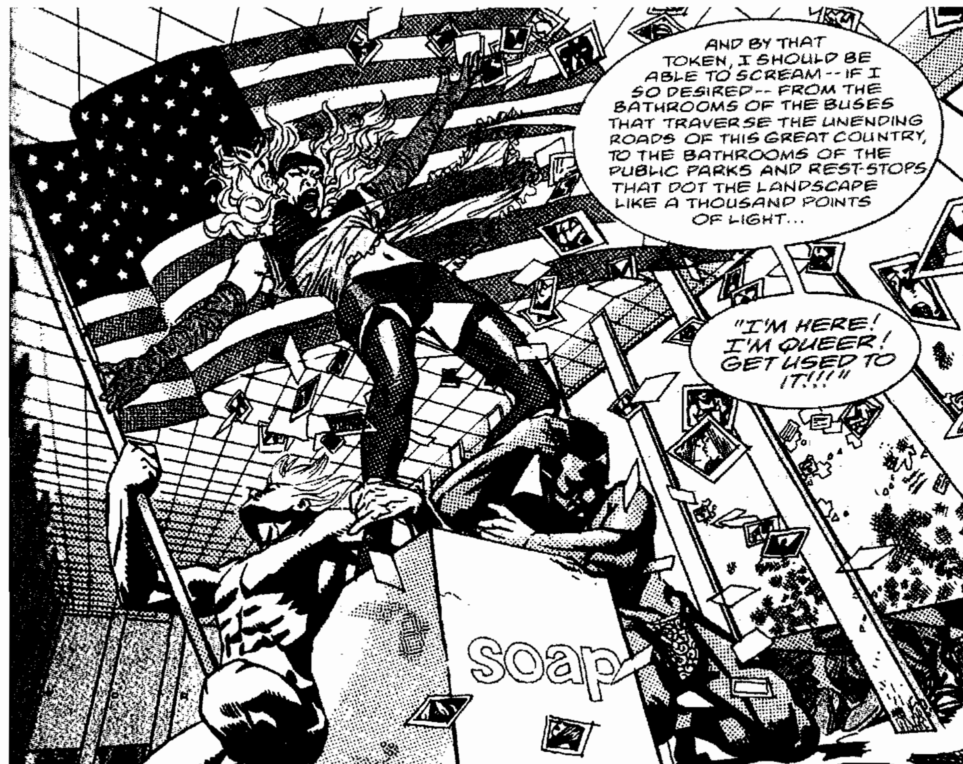

Figure 30: Jay's "soapbox" declaration in *Chasing Dogma*.

This last tripartite phrase the well-known motto of queer rights activist group Queer Nation, and Jay's invocation of it is suggestive enough. Yet the passion with which Jay makes all these declarations, not to mention his hilariously unwitting mention of "the bathrooms of the public parks and rest-stops that dot the landscape like a thousand points of light"—a reference both to the stereotypical notion that gay hustlers often work public rest stops and to George HW Bush's 1989 Inaugural speech about community organizations as exemplars of the grassroots imperative to "pitch in" and help solve social problems—belies his understated disavowals ("if I so desired") and confirms for the reader what has been hinted at in the View Askew films all along: that beneath his tough-talking, working class, New Jersey masculinity, Jay truly identifies as sexually

queer. He may not consciously acknowledge or admit it, but as of this passage, the reader knows it. Jay's fairly explicit outing here creates a site of viewer pleasure that will be increasingly tapped over the course of *Dogma* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back.* For not only does the audience's knowledge of Jay's queerness as of this moment make his forthcoming disavowals more pleasurable—we know something Jay doesn't, we know his homophobic protests are a cover-up—it also adheres to the principle of continuity by revealing a new truth about an ongoing character (Jay) that a loyal View Askew fan incorporates into his bank of knowledge of the character's history. This moment generates a pleasurable inclusion or "knowingness" for View Askew fans who access this particular text, the first View Askew text wherein Jay's long-connoted homosexual feelings for Silent Bob are confirmed.

The wriggling verbal dance Jay performs as he makes his way toward this final not-so-startling declaration is a key example of the difficulty in negotiating the "radical and irreducible incoherence" that separates homosocial bonding from homosexual desire in Western culture (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 85). Jay's contradictory declarations and qualifications are also emblematic of the particular difficulties many working class males encounter in articulating any kind of queer or gay identity. For while historically, queer *practices* have been a part of working class masculinity and have even been somewhat legitimized in certain homosocial environments like the Army or the prison system, queer *identities* have been largely a possession of the middle and upper classes.

In this connection, the American flag in the background of Jay's "soap box" moment, held aloft by a crouching gay muscle man, both helps Jay to disavow the

content of his speech—since the flag and its bearer mark the panel as a fantasy aside, Jay *might* simply be defending queer rights on general principle—and yet simultaneously expresses the conditions that necessitate that disavowal: to be queer is to be un-American, and to be queer (in the sense of identity, not behavior) and working-class is impossible, unexpressable. As Amy Brandzel argues in "Queering Citizenship? Same-Sex Marriage and the State," "[t]hrough legislation that criminalizes sexualities located outside the purview of the heterosexual, monogamous family, the [U.S.] state has constructed heterosexuality as a prerequisite to citizenship and as the unspoken norm of membership and national belonging" (172). Indeed, Brandzel correctly notes that despite the rhetoric of inclusion that adheres to the concept of U.S. Citizenship ("Give me your tired, your poor," etc.), such citizenship is actually a "necessarily exclusive, privileged, and normative" process that has a long history of excluding the queer and differently raced (173). One of the key axes upon which this exclusion occurs is along lines of sexuality, with heterosexual marriage being a major regulatory force in determining who is (and is not) a U.S. citizen: "by promoting and naturalizing heterosexual marriage as the primary institution of American domestic life, the state can not only produce heterosexuality as the norm but also produce heteronormativity as inextricably linked to a properly gendered, racialized, and sexualized citizenry" (179). Thus Jay's scene with the flag and the gay muscle men aligns him with the effort to queer American citizenship, to give voice to the perspective of those who are excluded from heteronormatively gendered, racialized, and sexualized national belonging.

Of course, Jay is also forced to disavow his own declaration of queerness because the person he's talking to, Silent Bob, is also the object of his desire, and he will certainly queer the friendship if his sexual love for Bob comes out into the open. Hence, even after the *sturm and drang* of his queer rights speech, Jay looks nervously at Silent Bob and belatedly says, "Uh. . .all I'm saying is that. . .uh. . .I can't believe they threw us off the bus for smoking weed."

This denial to Bob is similar to the one given at the end of *Chasing Dogma*, on its very last page. The page depicts of a *photo* of Jay and Silent Bob (Jason Mewes and Kevin Smith)—the comic's more photorealistically "real" counterparts, there to comment on the behavior of their drawn selves—with a series of three descending speech balloons positioned over Jay. In the first (top) speech balloon, Jay makes a number of disclaimers about the content of *Chasing Dogma*, claiming that the book is " a work of parody" and that no one should sue them for it. In the next balloon, in reference to a scene from Chapter IV of *Chasing Dogma* in which he gives a male porn actor a handjob, Jay claims he "never. . . *never*. . .jerked no guys off." And then, in the final balloon, he adds, "Snoogans."

Now "snoogans" (and its variants) is a catch phrase that Jay has used since the inception of his character, but not until 2001's *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* does it get specifically defined. In a scene where Justice has just asked Jay to help her "liberate" an orangutan from a testing lab (a revisioning of a similar episode from *Chasing Dogma*), "snoogans" is defined by Jay:

JUSTICE: [. . .] It's for a good cause.

JAY: Oh, it's for the best cause, *mon cheri*: the cause of love. Snoogans!

JUSTICE: What the heck is that?

JAY: What's what?

JUSTICE: Snoogans, I believe it was.

JAY: What the fuck do you think it means? It means I'm kidding!

JUSTICE: (disappointed, then suggestively) Oh. Well, that's too bad.

Of course, Jay *isn't* kidding—we know this because he has already told Silent Bob that he really loves Justice. So the audience knows that "snoogans" is a similar sort of pseudo-disavowal as those that appeared in Jay's "I'm here! I'm queer!" speech: it may fool the person who he is wanting to hide his desire from, but it does not fool the reader/viewer. So his use of this phrase at the end of the *Chasing Dogma* disclaimers is a clear indicator to the reader that his denial of handjobbing guys must be taken ironically, humorously, and with a very large grain of salt.

New Queer Road Movies

In their introduction to *The Road Movie Book*, Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark note that "[a]fter *Thelma and Louise* [1991], Hollywood films began to recognize [. . .] the hospitality of the road to the marginalized and alienated—not only women [. . .], but also gays [. . .], lesbians [. . .], and people of color" (Cohan and Hark 12). Yet as Robert Lang argues in his piece from the same collection, it wasn't Hollywood so much as the independent film sector that specifically cleared the way for what he terms the new queer

road movie: "Clearly, if the road movie as a genre has developed a new, queer variant, it is because of what the independent film in the 1990s makes possible" (Lang 332).

Lang delineates the two main features of the new queer road movie as being the tendencies (1) to feature queer sex workers/hustlers as protagonists and (2) to resist heteronormative closure, i.e., a happy return to home and family, by the film's conclusion. I will return to this latter point in my final section, but first let us consider the figure of the contemporary queer hustler as a road movie protagonist.

As Lang puts it, "the figure of the hustler [. . .] can be seen as emblematic of the queer road movie protagonist" in large part because he already makes his living on the streets: "One of the reasons the hustler can be proposed as an emblematic road movie figure is that, like the nineteenth-century *flâneur*, every hustler can be seen as living his own daily road movie, whether on the open road or on the streets of the city. But, if the *flâneur* is a man of pleasure, the hustler is a worker, he is on the job" (333, 335). Since the hustler as described here is inherently homeless and mobile, he is the perfect candidate to get swept into an adventure on the road. He even has, by virtue of the portability of the commodity (sex, his body) he sells, the means to fund his travel as he goes.

This male hustler figure is also quintessentially queer, according to Lang, in part because his line of work contradicts the usual patriarchal construction of men as agents and women—*only* women—as objects of desire: "The figure of the contemporary hustler [. . .] threatens the very underpinnings of the patriarchy, in which men can never themselves serve as commodities on the market" (333). This alone queers him to some

extent, since he is violating masculine gender codes by selling his body. But in the new queer road movies, the protagonists are also queer in relation to heteronormative social constructions like the nuclear family: "the queer subject learns early that [. . .] he has no place in the traditional family. If he is to be a desiring subject, a sexed body, he must leave the spaces of home and family" (344). And indeed, as we will see, this description of a queer subject who must take to the road simply to find a space in which to *be* queer applies to Jay and Silent Bob as they take to the road in *Chasing Dogma, Dogma* and especially *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*

Early in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, after being ejected from a bus for lack of tickets (in a scene explicitly reminiscent of the bus-eviction episode from *Chasing Dogma*), Jay and Silent Bob encounter an old Hitchhiker (George Carlin) standing alongside the road. This Hitchhiker, it turns out, is a new queer road movie hustler *a la* Lang—a working class and/or homeless man who apparently makes his way in life by trading rides for sexual favors. In fact, he explicitly links hustling (in the form of giving blowjobs for rides) with the rules of "the unspoken book of the road," reinforcing Lang's idea that the road is a liminal space where hustling is a typical way of doing business. Indeed, when Jay and Bob protest that they could not fellate someone in exchange for a ride because "we ain't gay", the hitchhiker admonishes them: "Don't be so suburban! It's the new millennium. Gay, straight—it's all the same now. There are no more lines." And to this quintessentially queer statement he adds, "Hey, all the hitchers do this. Why do you think people pick us up? If you get a ride, it's expected—I don't care who the driver is." In addition to setting up an impending joke involving Jay and a sedan-driving

nun, Carlin's hitchhiker has here perfectly delineated the hustler-based economy of the road, intimating that hustling is indeed so integral to the act of hitchhiking/road tripping that it is, in the new millennium, "expected."

It bears noting that even before his encounter with the hitchhiker, Jay is a full-time drug dealer, which can be read as an alternate form of hustling. Like the sexual hustlers played by River Phoenix in *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) or Jon Voight in *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), Jay lives a life making money on the street—or more to the point, on the street in front of the Leonardo Quick Stop, the setting of *Clerks*. Jay's fairly constant shouting of sexually explicit phrases, including propositioning female passersby, as he stands in front of the Quick Stop aligns him somewhat with the figure of the pimp or hustler, albeit in an exaggerated, comedic way.

However, by the end of *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, the Hitchhiker's advice to Jay takes hold, and Jay is a full-blown (pun intended) oral-sex-giving hustler by the time he reaches Hollywood. And while the "road blowjob" Jay gives is sexually straight—when we see him finish going down on a charitable driver as they pull up to a Los Angeles streetcorner, that driver is female—it will not take Jay (or rather, writer Smith) long to land the slacker duo in a situation that will reverse that gender polarity and, significantly, will get as close as View Askew has ever been to explicitly admitting/depicting the homoerotic charge that exists between Jay and Bob.

Once in L.A., the duo seek out the Miramax studio lot in order to sabotage the *Bluntman and Chronic* movie that they perceive to be the cause of their names being slandered on the internet. After Jay and Silent Bob are pursued and caught by Miramax

security guard Gordon (Diedrich Bader) for illegally entering the lot, Jay uses his pimping skills to parlay the duo's way out of going to prison:

> JAY: [to guard] Hey, I'll make you a deal, this guy [indicates Bob] will suck your dick off if you let us go!
>
> GUARD: Ha! Contrary to what you believe, not everyone in the industry is a homosexual.
>
> JAY: How about this deal: he'll suck my dick while you watch and jerk off.
>
> GUARD: All right. [pulls them around a corner] Make it fast—and sexy.
>
> JAY: [to Bob] It's either this or jail—and you know what they do to you in jail.
>
> GUARD: [nods to Bob, confirming Jay's statement] I was a guard.

As Silent Bob consents and gets onto his knees in front of Jay, the guard instructs him: "Alright. After it's all over, you say, 'Oh, what a lovely tea party.'" Silent Bob then opens his mouth wide and slowly inches his face forward toward Jay's crotch. Both the guard and Silent Bob anticipate the coming sexual deed, the former with relish, the latter with some terror (see Figure 31). Their facial expressions generate narrative suspense here—will Bob and Jay finally make sexual contact?—that is meant to be comedic, terrifying, and even titillating: Bob is scared and thereby can serve as surrogate for more homophobic viewers, but the guard is unabashedly excited, having scored quite the deal in getting to see these two go at it, and he provides an entry point into the text for those of us who would finally like to see Jay and Bob consummate their bond in this way. This,

in condensed form, is what all the View Askew films to this point have been about: watching two male buddies who clearly love each other struggle (usually under exaggerated comedic circumstances) with their feelings of fear, horror, titillation, and desire in the face of their own queer sexuality.

Figure 31: "Ooh what a lovely tea party."

Of course, at the last possible pre-fellatio moment, Jay knocks the guard over the head and the duo escapes, but not before Jay says to his longtime "heterosexual life mate": "Oooh, dude, you were *really* going to suck my dick!" Bob shakes his head in denial, but after Jay walks out of frame, Bob turns directly to the camera and nods affirmatively, belying his earlier terror (see Figure 32).

The "What A Lovely Tea Party" sequence is significant for many reasons: it connects homosexual deeds to prison and implicates prison guards in voyeurism, it places Jay in the role of pimp to Silent Bob's hustler, and finally, its *denouement* solidifies what many fans have suspected for some time: that Bob does indeed queerly desire Jay. Literally if not audibly, Silent Bob's "silence" around his desire for Jay is broken with his knowing nod to the camera. Formally speaking, this moment is rendered doubly significant by Bob's breaking of the fourth wall and his offscreen identity as Smith himself. Is *Smith* also nodding to us, admitting to a queer sexuality that extends beyond the Bob character and the cinematic world he inhabits? The film and Smith are delectably, titillatingly ambiguous on this issue.

Figure 32: Silent Bob's knowing look at the camera tells all.

This is one of the most important queer scenes in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* and possibly the entire View Askew *oeuvre*, for it also carefully delineates a type of homosexual desire that is firmly rooted in working-class culture (the guard, Jay) and thus "dare not speak its name." Like Jay and Bob to the hitchhiker early in the film, the guard disavows being homosexual—he does not identify as queer even though he apparently likes watching "deviant" sex acts and hearing them compared to tea parties.[11] However, he clearly has non-heteronormative desires and fantasies, and these desires cause him to take Jay up on his offer of a queer sex show. The fact that Jay and Bob end up as the stars of this would-be fellatio show is the capping joke of years worth of innuendo and highly coded yet very suggestive situations between the two buddies. For the guard, he can disavow his participation in a homoerotic sex act because he is not physically involved, only watching. Jay and Bob *could* disavow their homosexual desires (though Bob doesn't) since they are technically hustling, performing this deed for business reasons, under external duress.

Racing Queerness on the Road

Once our white slacker buddies hit the road, they enter a permissive *milieu* away from home, a wild and transitory place where all kind of queer doings might potentially take place. Thus it becomes increasingly necessary for the members of the buddy pair to find ways to shore up their presumed heterosexual masculinity, and one key way they do this is through association with (ostensibly heterosexual but actually very queer) black masculinity. However, their homophobic disavowals through recourse to cross-racial

appropriation always fail, and in fact seem to emphasize, rather than suppress, the homoerotics that exist between them. The more Jay and Bob "race" away from their queerness, the more they discover that queerness is always already raced and that there is nowhere for them to run.

I now analyze a long sequence that takes place midway through *Dogma*, examining how it brings together discourses of race, queerness and disavowal, and (white and non-white) working-class masculinity. The sequence in question begins shortly after Rufus, the thirteenth Apostle (Chris Rock) joins Jay, Silent Bob and Bethany on the road to New Jersey. The foursome stop for a meal at Mooby's fast food restaurant, where Rufus reveals that as a dead person, he is able to spy on the living from Heaven and see everything that each person does, no matter how private. The following brief interchange ensues between Jay and Rufus:

> JAY: Yo, man, tell me something about me.
>
> RUFUS: You masturbate more than anyone on the planet.
>
> JAY: Ah, fuck, everyone knows that, tell me something nobody knows!
>
> RUFUS: When you do it, you're thinking about guys.
>
> JAY: [aside to Bob] Dude, not *all* the time!

Not only does this episode repeat the exposure/disavowal pattern between Jay and Bob that we saw earlier in the "I'm here! I'm queer!" passage from *Chasing Dogma*, it also represents the first time we have ever been offered external (rather than self-avowed) evidence that Jay does indeed experience same-sex desire on some level. Jay's immediate disclaimer to Bob—" Dude, not *all* the time!"—only confirms for us that Jay

is not *exclusively* homosexually desiring; that is, he is likely bisexual or (as Kevin Smith puts it) "ambisexual" (Kilday 62).

But now that external confirmation of Jay's queerness has come forth, this verbal disavowal on Jay's part is not strong enough to dispel the threat of same-sex desire between Jay and his longtime slacker buddy. Hence the two of them adjourn to a nearby strip club, where, as Jay puts it to Bethany in the next scene, he must "prove to this bastard I ain't gay" by demonstrating his interest in female stripper Serendipity (Salma Hayek). What ensues from here is incredibly interesting and fairly complicated.

To begin with, the only other patrons of the strip bar besides Jay, Bob, Rufus and Bethany are the members of a black street gang, presented in stereotypical fashion, wearing Adidas-like sportswear and red bandanas. The leader of this five-man gang, Kane (Dwight Ewell), gets involved in a bidding war with Jay over the favor and attentions of the stripper, and this sequence unfolds in a series of shots and reverse shots between Jay and Silent Bob on the one hand, and Kane and his right-hand man on the other. This visual rhyme between the two duos emphasizes their similarity to one another, and the internal interactions within each duo align both duos with a stereotypical black pimp/black bodyguard dynamic.

In fact, the Jay/Silent Bob duo has always functioned thus, with Jay as the duo's vocal dealer/hustler/pimp, and Bob as the silent provider of "muscle"/bodyguard. Jay and Bob's identification with this formulation is made explicit in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, when Jay reveals that they have modeled their whole lives after Morris Day and Jerome Benton, the black buddy duo that fronts funk/rock band The Time, and whose

onstage antics, including synchronized dancing and Jerome holding up a mirror so Morris can adjust his hairdo, campily exaggerate this specific type of culturally black buddy structure. Jay and Bob's longtime appropriation of the pimp/bodyguard trope, rendered visible in the *Dogma* strip club scene by the proximity of black buddies enacting the same structure, is deployed as a further attempt to negate Jay's queer sexuality: what could be more masculine and heterosexual than a "black" pimp like Morris Day?

Yet as I have already suggested, even pimp *par excellence* Morris Day subtly deconstructs his own cool image through comedic/camp exaggeration: his pimp-ness is so overbearing and silly that he ends up (by design) playing more the buffoon than the suave seducer of women he seemingly imagines himself to be.[12] As Herman Beavers writes of this same phenomenon in the comic persona of Eddie Murphy, "as Hollywood icon, [he enjoys] the luxury of criminal trespass. He can act [. . .] as a transgressive figure. [. . .] As [a] comedian, even striking a violent pose, he means no harm" ("The Cool Pose" 254). Hence the very quality that allows Murphy (or Day) to assume a "cool pose" in the first place is also what defangs him: in one swoop he is both presented as dangerous, transgressive, cool—and rendered harmless by the comedic, performative nature of that presentation. Of course, this is also what Jay does time and again—enacts a hypermasculine pose that actually reveal him to be a queerly immature buffoon. Jay's failure to adequately perform masculinity is based upon his misperception that Morris-Day-style masculinity is actually masculine and heterosexual, rather than a camp deconstruction of pimp style. Jay's impersonation of a black pimp, like an Elvis

impersonation, is a form of failed, "self-damage[d]" masculinity, a performance of a role that is itself a performance verging on caricature (Lott 201).

In the *Dogma* strip club sequence, the link between Jay/Bob and the Morris Day-esque black pimp/bodyguard paradigm is iterated visually, through Jay and Bob's proximity and similarity to Kane and his lieutenant: in each duo, the pimp (Jay, Kane) repeatedly nudges his attendant (Bob, unnamed gang member), who then produces money for the stripper (see Figure 33). Ultimately, Silent Bob is able to produce more money than Kane's lieutenant does, and so Jay and Bob win Serendipity's attentions, dramatically staging in one swift sequence the history of white appropriation of black culture for economic and sexual purposes.[13]

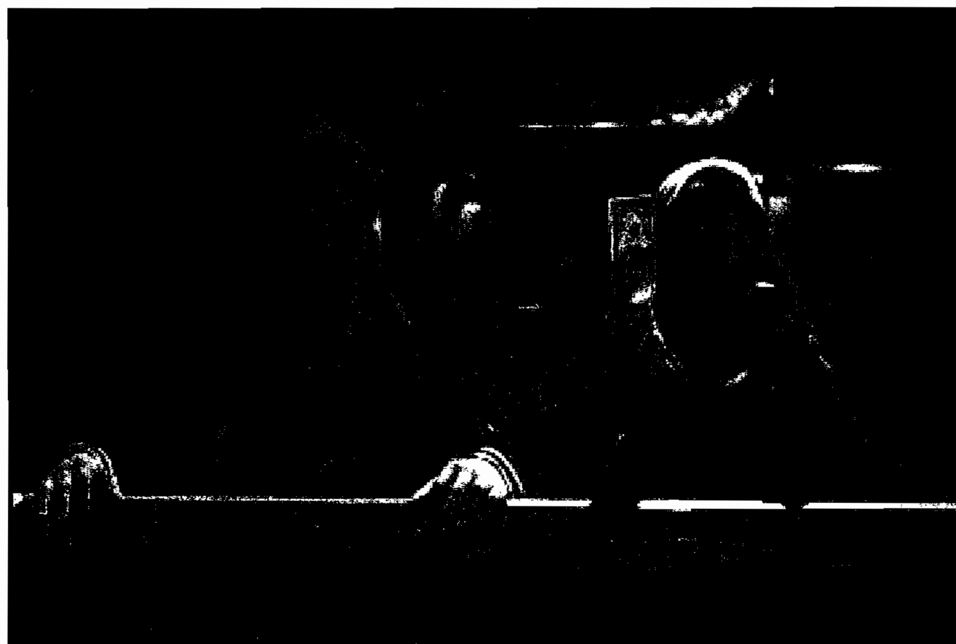

Figure 33: "Bodyguard" Silent Bob bids on "pimp" Jay's behalf.

The entire Jay/Kane bidding competition transpires without any spoken lines: the soundtrack is dominated instead by the music the stripper dances to, New Edition's 1983 hit single, "Candy Girl."[14] This choice of song, accompanied by Serendipity's appearance, serves to infantilize both the black gang members and Jay and Silent Bob: Serendipity wears big glasses frames and her hair in pigtails, emulating a "little girl" look—she even sucks her thumb seductively at one point (see Figure 34). And the song, sung by a then fifteen-year-old boy performer (New Edition lead singer Ralph Tresvant) in falsetto, has a distinctly androgynous sound to it. In fact, this motif of adolescence-inflected androgyny is carried to its conclusion by Serendipity herself once she comes offstage and reveals herself to be a Muse, who, like angels and demons in the world of *Dogma*, does not possess any sexual organs. Thus Jay and Bob and their black counterparts are made the butt of a joke when it is revealed to the viewer (but not to them) that they have engaged in a bidding war over a female-appearing but sexually neutered androgyne. The masculine, heterosexual practice of bidding over a "female" object of desire has turned out to be a sham, a performance—just like the masculinity it is meant to prop up.

Once Serendipity finishes dancing, she comes offstage and is reunited with Rufus, meets Bethany, and the three of them have a conversation while Jay and Silent Bob, now literally incorporated into Kane's group as honorary gang members, joke and drink with the black gang. We do not hear the gang's conversation and none of the black gang members has yet spoken any lines: they are, while boisterous, as voiceless as Silent Bob as far as the audience is concerned.

Figure 34: Serendipity's glasses and thumb-sucking androgynize and infantilize her.

Cut to the strip club bathroom, where one of the unnamed gang members gets up from sitting on the toilet. As he exits, a foul brown ooze bubbles up out of the toilet bowl in his wake, visually suggesting that whatever foulness is about to arise and take shape may be in some way connected to this anonymous black man's excrement—a suggestion that may partially explain the logic of what occurs next. The ooze takes the shape of the Golgothan, a shit-demon assassin sent to kill Bethany. It bursts into the main room of the club, and Kane rallies his gang. He asks Jay if the shit-demon is a "friend of yours?" and Jay replies: "Smoke that motherfucker like it ain't no thang!!" Kane then shouts "Represent!!" and, brandishing a pistol, leads his four black companions into an offscreen battle with the monster (see Figure 35). Perhaps as a result of the black gang member's

suggested complicity in creating the demon—he defecates, then the demon appears—the gang quickly loses this battle: while we do not see the specifics of the fight, we see all the gang members dead at the Golgothan's feet in a subsequent shot.

Yes, the death of the black gang at the hands of the Golgothan poop monster occurs offscreen, which, while no doubt necessitated to some extent by *Dogma*'s budget, also robs the black gang's heroic deeds of impact or importance, revealing that they were primarily placed in the strip club to prop up Jay's own insecure masculinity and to make Silent Bob look better for vanquishing the demon they could not. For after the black gang members have fulfilled their function of permitting Jay to reinvigorate his masculine status through their acceptance of him, they are swiftly ushered offscreen and killed by the poop monster, setting up the demon as a formidable foe that Bob will soon neutralize with a deodorant spray that "knocks strong odors out." Hence, even after their demise, the gang continues to serve as a means of remasculization for both Bob and Jay: after witnessing their deaths, Jay tells Bob that it "[l]ooks like we're in charge of the gang now." Jay and Bob's literal appropriation of the black gang and the pimp-style hypermasculinity it represents is the *raison d'être* for this sequence.

As we have seen, the primary way in which Jay and Bob are connected to the black gang members is through cross-cultural appropriation or *impersonation*. In fact, the slacker duo has been appropriating black culture and language ever since their first appearance in *Clerks*,[15] frequently citing rap lyrics—especially NWA's "Fuck tha Police" (1988) and other works by NWA member Ice Cube[16]—and, as already mentioned, modeling their entire lives after black buddies Morris Day and Jerome Benton. Jay's

entire mode of speaking can be reasonably compared to black vernacular street talk: he uses black slang words like "yo," addresses male associates as "dog" or "G," and he refers to women as "bitches" until Justice advises him not to in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back.* This impersonation/appropriation continues at the extra-textual level: the promotional poster for *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* depicts Jay wearing a huge knuckle-duster (similar to those worn by the character Radio Raheem in *Do The Right Thing*) etched with the film's title

Figure 35: Jay and Silent Bob look on as Kane's gang attacks the poop demon.

Eric Lott argues in his article on Elvis impersonators[17] that working-class white impersonation of black masculinity is a process in which "blue-collar machismo is produced and reclaimed in [. . .] damaged and partial form" (Lott 197). Never able to

"live up to" the original—be that original Elvis Presley (in the case of Elvis impersonators) or black musicians/stars (in the cases of Jay, Silent Bob and Presley himself)—the impersonator is always trapped into performing an image of himself that "enables a phallic self-inflation but also exposes the insufficiency that requires it" (201). Lott also notes, however, that impersonation and the "overblown, [. . .] kitsch" associations that come with it can constitute a form of working-class resistance to middle-class cultural norms: "What reads to many as 'bad taste' may just be a refusal to conform to middle-class [. . .] expectations" (216). This class-based refusal/resistance is very much in line with the typical stance of the white male slacker, who is white and middle-class by definition and uses strategies of apathy, underachievement, stoner-ness, extended adolescence, and—in Jay and Silent Bob's case—identification with/appropriation of black cultural tropes in order to distance himself from his own white, privileged socioeconomic heritage. The slacker feels guilty about his position of privilege and seeks to repudiate it through his slackerism, much as the Boomer generation before him repudiated mainstream values by embracing the Civil Rights movement, Black Power, and other forms of social activism.

Yet I agree with James Snead, in his discussion of white appropriation of black culture in Disney's *Song of the South*, that cross-racial appropriation—exemplified by the white fantasy of "learn[ing] to 'tell Uncle Remus Stories' [. . .] without blacks"—is always premised on the suppression or erasure of black desire and agency, and therefore constitutes a form of racist "cultural plunder" (96, 97). Hence we must remain, I think,

suspicious of Jay and Silent Bob's desire to approximate and inhabit black cultural spaces.

And while there is a refreshing element to be found in View Askew's depiction of black characters who, like Rufus, Hooper X (*Chasing Amy*), and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*'s loudmouthed film director Chaka Luther King (Chris Rock), vociferously resist and denounce the white establishment for its racial inequities, ultimately these films do to them what *Dogma* does to Kane's gang: whisks them offstage and forgets them. Rufus in particular is a frustrating example of this unfulfilled potential. A progressive mouthpiece for the racism of the Bible, who reminds his companions and the audience that Jesus of Nazareth was black, Rufus and his concerns over the "spin on [Jesus's] ethnicity" that constitutes a racist "error you guys have been basing the [Catholic] faith on" are shunted aside at the end of *Dogma*: he asks Metatron if God is "ready to make some of those changes I've been talking about?" Metatron replies with a dubious "We'll see," Rufus rolls his eyes in exasperation and, like Uncle Remus in *Song of the South*, he "is not thanked for his intervention, but merely relegated to a marginal position" and swept offstage with his story left unfinished (Snead 98). Rufus's sole reason for getting involved in the events of the film in the first place—undoing the racist whitewashing of Holy Scripture—is blown off as unimportant and Rufus, like Remus, is consigned to accept white authority, suppress the needs of himself and his ethnic group, and shut up (Snead 96, 98).

Thus, in the end, despite some wonderful characterizations and moments along the way (particularly in the case of Hooper from *Chasing Amy*), View Askew films are

only able to imagine blacks as stereotypical gang members (Kane et. al.), drug dealers (Pumpkin Escobar from *JSBSB*), and Hooper-esque Black-Power extremists (Hooper X, Chaka Luther King from *JSBSB*) who are ultimately laughed at, killed, dismissed, and/or forgotten about by the last reel.

And the Muse, Serendipity, played by Mexican-born actress Salma Hayek, fares no better. That she is a Muse who spends her time "inspiring" cash out of strip club clients she refers to as "Horny retards" is indicative of her level of agency within the *Dogma* narrative. Serendipity's motives for assisting Bethany on her quest to stop the two renegade angels is never articulated, and once her initial stripping scene and confrontation with the Golgothan is over, she is left offscreen for most of the film, only coming back near the end to deliver information it is too late to do anything about.[18] In sum, she shows up long enough to strip and inspire the men, vanishes, then pointlessly reappears at the end to play second fiddle to the white male slackers and the white female Last Scion.

View Askew vs. Disney and Miramax

As I mentioned earlier, a substantial industrial and economic shift occurred for View Askew Productions in the wake of *Chasing Amy*, and the financial success of *Dogma*—it grossed more than $30 million, more than any previous View Askew film—cemented the independent's newfound prosperous status. What this rise in fortunes seems to have provoked at the filmic level for View Askew is an increased distaste for

corporate culture, a streak of corporate parody and critique in the films following *Chasing Amy*. This trend first emerges in *Dogma*, in the form of the Mooby's Corporation, and continues with a vengeance throughout *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*.

For if, on a thematic level, *Dogma* is representative of Kevin Smith's struggle with spirituality and religion, then *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* is his comedically cinematic confrontation with corporate culture, View Askew's increased prosperity, and the notion of "selling out" for bigger studio budgets versus "keeping it real" as an independent filmmaker. Yet, in addition to being a very funny deconstruction of the independent movie business, *JSBSB* is also something of a private gift to his longtime fans, a text that truly rewards the faithful View Askew viewer. Not only do the first twelve and a half minutes constitute one big View Askew in-joke, featuring virtually every significant View Askew regular, but the entire film is, as I have implied, representative of View Askew's rise from small-town unknowns to Hollywood players. And one of the key tropes that View Askew introduces into these later films is a deep suspicion of the very corporate structures that literally underpin their own continued existence.

To begin with *Dogma*, there is a notable scene about halfway through the film—in fact, it occurs between Serendipity's strip club performance and the appearance of the Golgothan—wherein renegade angels Bartleby and Loki visit the corporate headquarters for the fast food chain Mooby's, an obvious reference to McDonald's and its ilk, but also to the Disney Corporation. Pastor Kenneth Stevenson, the head of the church where portions of *Dogma* were shot, is not alone in pointing out that Mooby the cow, the kid-

friendly Mooby's mascot, is incredibly similar in appearance to Mickey Mouse: "if that's not Mickey Mouse, I'll eat my hat without salt!" (*Judge Not: In the Defense of* Dogma). In the sequence in which Bartleby and Loki confront this Mickey-Mouse surrogate and his cadre of corporate executives, they condemn all but one of the executives for their sinful lives and Loki guns most of them down in cold blood. Quite a startling image when one considers View Askew's corporate position at that moment: making a film for Miramax, a Disney affiliate, and showing a group of faux-Disney executives getting shot to death—this is satire of the most brutal cinematic kind!

Early in this chapter I stated that View Askew would make *Dogma* and all its subsequent films in a way that is much more akin to the typical procedures of a major studio production, and that this process would be more or less completed by the time of *JSBSB*, the first View Askew film to be shot almost entirely in Los Angeles, on studio lots. So View Askew's euphemistic attack on Disney, the very company that indirectly financed their entire career since *Clerks* (Disney bought Miramax in 1993), may at first seem contradictory. But I argue that this intense criticism of their own major entertainment conglomerate, appearing just at the time when Smith and company reached the apex of their commercial success, allows them to claim an outsider position *vis-á-vis* Disney, distancing them from the Disney brand and reasserting their status as indie filmmakers.

Ultimately, *Dogma* would become distanced from Disney for an entirely different reason: the corporation refused to release the film due to threats from the Catholic League that they would boycott not only the film but Disney theme parks. As John Kenneth

Muir notes, "Disney, the parent company of Miramax, [. . .] had faced this kind of censorship before and buckled" (123). So Harvey and Bob Weinstein, CEOs of Miramax, "put up $12 million of their own cash to buy the rights to *Dogma*, so Disney would no longer be attached to any of the controversy" (123). Ultimately the brothers Weinstein found a distributor for the film, Vancouver, Canada-based Lion's Gate Films (Muir 123-4).

In fact, this trend of criticizing one's parent company would continue in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, albeit with far less vitriol and violence. In *JSBSB*, Miramax itself becomes the object of ridicule, which is especially apropo given that *JSBSB* was actually financed by Dimension Films, the Miramax subdivision dedicated to releasing light comedies and genre pictures such as the *Scary Movie* franchise. *JSBSB* and Dimension were a good fit, and Smith even claims that his move from Miramax to Dimension was deliberate (Biskind 377). Whether or not this is the case, working for Dimension perhaps allowed the View Askew filmmakers the leeway they needed to wage a humorous but fairly spot-on deconstruction of the highly commercialized and somewhat pretentious entity Miramax had become since the indie days of the early nineties.

This pretentious art-house quality of Miramax's late-90s output is ridiculed early in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*: three scenes into the film, the titular duo meet Brodie in his comics shop and learn that the *Bluntman and Chronic* comic book property (the same one attributed to Holden and Banky of *Chasing Amy*) has been optioned by Miramax:

JAY: Miramax? I thought they only made classy pictures like *The Piano* or *The Crying Game*.

BRODIE: Once they made *She's All That*, everything went to hell.

Silent Bob nods his assent to Brodie's assessment, which is a not-so-subtle extratextual reference to Smith's real-life vitriol against Dimension-distributed *She's All That* during the test-screening phase of *Dogma*: John Pierson reports that "[w]hen *Dogma* started test market screenings [. . .] *She's All That* had either just opened big or was about to open big. The fact of the matter was thrown in Kevin's face" (Muir 156). No doubt this comparison on the part of Miramax bigwigs rankled Smith, who has long been disdainful of independently-produced films with mainstream aesthetics and/or narrative sensibilities. For example, he is particularly venomous toward Edward Burns's *The Brothers McMullen* (1995) on those very grounds: "*The Brothers McMullen* [. . .] was a movie that absolutely could have been made by a major studio. It had as much edge as vanilla ice cream" (Biskind 203-4). To have *Dogma*, his most ideologically risky project ever, held to the same market standard as a mainstream-palatable romantic comedy like *She's All That* obviously stuck with him.

Further *JSBSB* gags ridiculing Miramax include a scene in which L.A. crack dealer Pumpkin Escobar claims that Miramax accounts for 78% of his drug-dealing business, and another in which Holden (Ben Affleck) claims that Miramax only casts Ben Affleck and Matt Damon in all their movies, his offhand remark suggesting a sameness and implied art-house pretentiousness associated with the Miramax films in which

Affleck and/or Damon play key roles: *Good Will Hunting* (1997), *Rounders, Shakespeare in Love* (both 1998), and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999).

However, although *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* has a great deal of fun at Miramax's expense, it ridicules its geek/slacker protagonists even more so. Jay and Bob are the butt of countless jokes in the film, an especially key instance of this being when the duo first meet Jay's love interest Justice (Shannon Elizabeth) in a Mooby's fast food restaurant. This sequence undermines Jay's pretentions to sexual prowess and adult masculinity via a formal technique common to geek / slacker cinema of the new millennium: the "realistic" portrayal, and subsequent revocation, of a geek's self-inflating sexual fantasy.

Early in their journey to Hollywood in *JSBSB*, Jay and Bob stop at a Mooby's fast food restaurant to get some breakfast. Before they can order their food, Justice (Shannon Elizabeth) enters the restaurant and catches Jay's eye immediately. In fact, her entrance is presented in heightened, fantastical terms: Bon Jovi's "Bad Medicine" blasts onto the soundtrack, heralding Justice's slow-motion, soft-filtered arrival into the restaurant. This is Jay's point-of-view: as Justice walks in, she makes lascivious eyes at the camera and touches her own body suggestively (see Figure 36). Then Jay walks up to her and they kiss passionately. Seconds later, it is revealed that Justice's suggestive looks and their shared kiss are all in Jay's imagination: he is actually still standing at the counter next to Bob, wriggling around uncontrollably, and Justice walks into frame like any typical person would, *sans* sexual demonstrativeness, and introduces herself.

Figure 36: Jay's fantasy of Justice (Shannon Elizabeth).

This trope of being sutured into a geek or slacker's fantasy world, only to have that world suddenly revealed as fantasy for comedic purposes, is common to much geek and slacker cinema and television. The TV comedy "Scrubs" (2001-present) is premised upon constant depictions of geek protagonist J.D.'s fantasy scenarios, and similar scenes also occur in mainstream geek films *High Fidelity* (2000) and *Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle* (2004). The point of the trope is to poke fun at the geek's inability to fulfill the demands of his own fantasy, which typically involves him vanquishing a more masculine enemy (in *High Fidelity* Rob and his coworkers beat up an intimidating romantic rival) or, like Harold in *Harold and Kumar* or Jay in the Mooby's sequence under discussion, accessing a beautiful woman sexually. The return of the fantasizer to

reality exposes his masculine lack and reminds us that he is an infantilized clown rather than the "manly man" he imagines (or in Harold's case hopes) himself to be.

Yet by the end of *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back,* Jay wins Justice's heart: the film as a whole makes Jay's fantasy come true. This has to do with the geek-as-hero trope that has in fact dominated Hollywood and independent cinema since the 1970s: starting with Woody Allen's protagonists and Richard Dreyfuss's "everyman" characters in the early films of Spielberg, infantilized and nerdy men have increasingly functioned as the central heroes of comedic and melodramatic narrative cinema in the last quarter of the twentieth century. And to accompany this new, geeky protagonist is the figure of the "geek goddess," the beautiful woman who is as dissatisfied with her shallow "mainstream" female friends and identity as the male geek is alienated from traditional masculinity and the social capital that comes with it. Geek goddesses are women who look classically attractive yet are (usually somewhat inexplicably) attracted to feminized, geeky men: key examples include Heather Graham's Lorraine in *Swingers* (1996), Elisha Cuthbert's Danielle (an ex-porn star!) in *The Girl Next Door* (2004), and of course, Shannon Elizabeth's roles in the first two *American Pie* films (1999, 2001) and in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back.*

Shannon Elizabeth's star image is largely determined by her role as Czechoslovakian exchange student Nadia in *American Pie* and *American Pie 2*. Nadia, quite simply, functions as a super-hot, sexually available web-geek fantasy. In the first film, she is caught on a webcam and ogled by every geek in the high school as she undresses and masturbates in sensitive geek Jim's (Jason Biggs) bedroom. Over the

course of the first two *American Pie* films, she loves and pines over the hapless Jim and, after Jim rejects her (!) in the second film, she falls for ultra-geeky geek Chuck Sherman, or, as he calls himself, "The Shermanator" (Chris Owen). *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* explicitly and playfully acknowledges this previous history of Elizabeth's by incorporating *American Pie* star Jason Biggs into its plot: on the Miramax Studio lot, Jay asks Biggs if he ever fucked "that Nadia chick," and Biggs, who shamefully admits that he did not, is ridiculed for the reminder of his cameo by being labeled "the pie fucker," a reference to a key comedic scene from the first *American Pie*.

In *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* Elizabeth's character is rendered even more geek-friendly than the lustful Nadia: after her initial "fantasy" entrance, Justice wears glasses throughout the remainder of *JSBSB*, suggesting that she might be somewhat nerdy herself and thereby rendering her geek-friendly (see Figure 37). Indeed, Justice is so incessantly positioned as an object of geeky male heterosexual fantasy that even in the context of her lesbian diamond thief gang she is singled out for heterosexual affection: in the first part of their van trip, environmental activist nerd Brent (Sean William Scott, another *American Pie* alumnus) singles her out from the other women and makes a pass at her. In fact, Justice's seemingly heterosexualized position in her lesbian gang may to some extent echo Alyssa's rejection by her lesbian cohorts in *Chasing Amy* once they find out she's dating Holden.

Figure 37: Justice wears glasses, rendering her geek-friendly.

Not only is Justice made geek-accessible by her eyeglasses, her de-lesbianization within the context of her gang, and her remorse over setting up Jay and Bob as patsies, she also represents a kind of postmodern ideal of exotically attractive womanhood. Shannon Elizabeth was born Shannon Elizabeth Fadal on September 7, 1973 in Houston, Texas; her father is of Lebanese descent and her mother has English, Irish, German, and Cherokee ancestry. Shannon Elizabeth's status as half Lebanese has rendered her an ideal choice to play ambiguously raced characters such as *American Pie*'s Nadia, who is Czechoslovakian, and it fosters a kind of global postmodern exoticism that makes her the pinnacle of contemporary screen attractiveness. As Stuart Hall writes, "there's nothing that global postmodernism loves better than a certain kind of difference: a touch of ethnicity, a taste of the exotic, as we say in England, 'a bit of the other' (which in the

United Kingdom has a sexual as well as an ethnic connotation)" ("What's this Black" 23). In fact, Elizabeth's Persian ancestry is enough a part of her public persona that after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, she recorded a public service announcement in which she said, "I'm half Arabic, but I am 100 percent American. What is going on affects me the same as everyone else." (IMDB.com News. Retrieved October 7, 2007). In this connection Elizabeth signifies similarly to other recent mixed-race screen ingenues / sex symbols like Jennifer Tilly (half-Chinese American), Rosario Dawson (half Puerto Rican and Afro-Cuban), and pop star Mariah Carey (half Afro-Venezuelan).[19] The popularity of these stars supports Hall's claim that postmodern pop culture in fact thrives on (racial, sexual) otherness, so long as it is carefully managed and contained. This is the very strategy that Smith's work (and much of American independent cinema writ large) has followed all along.

Comedy, Controversy, and Queer Camp

Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back marks a return to form for Smith, who deliberately set out to make a funny, light comedy after the more seriously themed films *Chasing Amy* and *Dogma* (1999). Interestingly, it was precisely this "light" film that drew the first public criticisms of Smith's work from a gay rights organization, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD). GLAAD objected to *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*'s irreverent treatment of queer situations and the alleged homophobia of its titular characters, writing a letter to Smith that claimed:

> We, or course, are familiar with your work as a writer and director and understand that satire is a large part and object of your expression. The intentional excesses of *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* and over-the-top characterizations and situations are fundamental to its nature. However, we believe that satirical sophistication is not a fundamental expectation of an audience bombarded by fag jokes and gags revolving around genitals and simulated sex acts. (posted at News Askew on July 31, 2001)

This letter's claim is premised upon an incorrect assumption about satire, that it is somehow incompatible with "lower" forms of humor and the grotesque. Not only does Jonathan Swift's classic piece of literary satire, "A Modest Proposal," belie this assumption, this idea is also contradicted by more recent popular examples such as the animated TV series "South Park" and Mike Judge's excellent recent film *Idiocracy* (2006).

Indeed, *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*'s main purpose is to satirize homophobic stoner films and the studios that produce them, so for GLAAD to take the film to task for how certain audience segments might incorrectly interpret its jokes seems unfair to the text itself. For while *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* can certainly be read and enjoyed at a very simplistic level as a buddy comedy, I would suggest that GLAAD may be seriously underestimating both the film and the View Askew audience here. As I have argued throughout this chapter, the intended audience for *JSBSB* is a textually sophisticated group who is quite used to taking Smith's comedy ironically. Perhaps I am overestimating this group somewhat, but I would be quite surprised if much of the View

Askew viewership *wasn't* savvy to the fact that the "gay joke" in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* is on Jay and Bob themselves. The textual clues are far too obvious by this point in the duo's View Askew career for any but the most wilfully homophobic viewer to miss that Jay and Bob are queer for each other and that the joke is that they are in increasingly precarious denial of that fact.

Indeed , despite Jay's pervasive homophobia in *JSBSB*, which is itself played for comedy at his expense—remember, since *Chasing Dogma* or certainly *Dogma* the audience knows that Jay is queer—I would be far more worried about the possible negative effect of Banky's anti-lesbianism in *Chasing Amy* or the rather flagrant racism of *Dogma*, couched as these are in much more "serious," issues-based films. Banky and Jay may be related homophobic figures, but Banky is given a melodramatic context and real feelings in *Amy* that urge us to take him much more seriously than we are ever meant to take Jay.

Genre must also be taken into consideration here: *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* is a buddy road comedy, and such is offers free license to all manner of non-politically correct, extreme, and *queer* events and developments during its on-the-road narrative. Insofar as the cinematic space of the road constitutes a kind of escape from the heteronormative dictates of "home," it is very much an anti-moralistic, liminal, queer space. This is why so many queer films are road films—for example, *The Living End, My Own Private Idaho, Priscilla Queen of the Desert,* and *By Hook or By Crook*, to name but a few—and in this sense we can observe that *all* road movies transpire in what Judith Halberstam calls "queer time," a temporality inhabited by those who "live in rapid

bursts" and who therefore appear "immature and even dangerous" to those who adhere to the heteronormative, middle-class values associated with home (Halberstam 4-5).

Yet perhaps *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* is to some extent anti-gay. The text (or its writer, Smith) seems to be aware of how the film's homophobia will be received, and GLAAD's objection is anticipated in the film's diegesis: the character of Hooper (Dwight Ewell) calls the *Bluntman and Chronic* movie "one ninety minute long gay joke" as he exits the theater (with gay lover Banky) at the end of *JSBSB*. Self-awareness does not completely forgive transgression, but it does mitigate it, and in fact Hooper's comment is not the first such textual admission: "Dawson's Creek" star Jason Van Der Beek (playing himself) lectures Jason Biggs about his inappropriate use of the word "gay" as pejorative in one very funny sequence. And while *JSBSB* features a stereotypical trio of "evil" lesbian jewel thieves who are only caught due to the actions of desirable heterosexual femme Justice, these same villainous lesbians also deconstruct themselves, calling themselves "walking, talking, bad girl cliches" in the film's final gunfight. Justice's name alone calls attention to the fact that viewers are to understand these characters more as caricatures or abstractions than as "real" people.

So if *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* is anti-lesbian or anti-gay at points, it is at great pains to point out its awareness of that fact. And whatever else it may be, the text is certainly *queer*, showing as it does how homoerotics saturate buddy duos despite, or as part of, their repeated emphatic disavowals.

Further, as commercially oriented and crude (in terms of its humor) as it may be, *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* may be the only Smith film to achieve something

approximating a queer camp sensibility. Camp sensibility is a "mode of aestheticism" whose primary function is to "dethrone the serious" through an emphasis upon "'style' over 'content,' 'aesthetics' over 'morality,' [and] irony over tragedy (Sontag 277, 288, 287). Camp plays with theatricality, artifice, and surfaces, and often insists that outward appearances are more important (or at least more fun) than the deeper moral and social significances found in objects, persons, or texts. Insofar as camp "neutralizes moral indignation" and "sponsors playfulness" through its ironic aestheticism, it has been deployed (and successfully received) most frequently by the homosexual community, which, according to Susan Sontag, has "pinned [its] integration into [mainstream] society on promoting the aesthetic sense" (290). Sontag thus acknowledges camp's long historical ties to the gay community, though she ultimately insists that "Camp taste is much more than homosexual taste" (290).

However, Jack Babuscio has subsequently argued that camp taste *is* gay taste, that "[the] term *camp* describes those elements in a person, situation, or activity which express, or are created by, a gay sensibility" (40). Interestingly, to accommodate this definition Babuscio defines "gay sensibility" as "a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream," one that "spring[s] from the fact of social oppression"—an energy that might more accurately be called queer (40). For while Babuscio himself does not use the latter term, the uses of camp he describes—as a kind of secret code between knowing members of a marginalized community—have certainly been taken up by queer (not just gay) media producers in the 1990s and beyond, and have given rise to a particular strain of the camp sensibility called queer camp.

Glyn Davis characterizes queer camp as an ironic form of address that "is used by queers to speak to other queers, and although it may occasionally be humorous, it is never 'merely' funny; [. . .] it cannot be used by anyone from 'outside'" and is used to maintain alterity from mainstream culture (57). Further, Davis concludes, while "[t]he 'gay' campness of mainstream cinema [. . .] is fairly democratic and open, [. . .] the queer camp of New Queer Cinema is somewhat elitist and exclusive" (59). While I have said that *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*'s queer humor *approximates* a queer camp sensibility, I do so because it is important, I think, to preserve camp's historical grounding in the gay and queer community, and I am also not yet sure if I am ready to claim Smith's work, or at least *JSBSB*, for New Queer Cinema or queer camp.[20] Yet *JSBSB*'s investment in addressing a small subcultural crowd—a crowd deeply implicated in the disavowed-yet-ever-present structures of queer desire I have outlined throughout this chapter—parallels, and perhaps overlaps with, queer camp's mode of exclusive, elitist audience address.

In this connection, and in addition to the previously discussed queer character types and thematics germane to the road movie that inhere in *JSBSB*, I argue that Jay and Bob's fairly constant litany of homophobic-seeming jokes are in fact a cover for homoerotic feelings they are unable to articulate. And while their humor may not strictly qualify as camp in the sense of it being rooted in the concerns of the "out" or self-aware queer community, insofar as it serves the homosocial buddy duo as a working-class queer coping strategy, it functions in the same way that camp does for "out" gays and queers.

One of queer camp's key features, for example, is a mode of line delivery by onscreen characters that "is 'fake', deadpan, redundant" and thereby, "through exposing

itself as performance, attempts to reveal that there is nothing underneath"(60). While Smith's work, even the highly postmodern *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, is a bit too sentimental and in-earnest to be read completely as queer camp as Davis describes it, there is a sense in which Kevin Smith's elevated and wordy prose has served this function since the outset of his career, perhaps in some way "expos[ing] the supposed 'naturalness' of everyday behaviour and identity as a sham" (59). Especially in the mouths of certain actors who struggle with his dense dialogue—perhaps most notably, Linda Fiorentino in *Dogma* and Smith's wife, Jennifer Schwalbach Smith, in *JSBSB*—this sense of queer (that is, non-essentialist) performativity is highlighted in his films.

Jennifer Schwalbach Smith's appearance in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* deserves further mention, for this casting choice is one way Smith can "have it both ways" in terms of the film's pervasive queerness. Schwalbach's appearance in *JSBSB* functions as a "straightening" strategy for *auteur* Smith, especially since her acting and line delivery are somewhat amateurish compared to that of her immediate costars, Ali Larter (*Varsity Blues, Legally Blonde,* NBC's "Heroes") and Eliza Dushku (*True Lies, Bring It On,* Fox's "Buffy the Vampire Slayer"). Her inexperience calls attention to her presence *as* Jennifer Schwalbach, Kevin Smith's wife, reminding the viewer constantly that Smith has a wife, not to mention a child (that child, Harley Quinn Smith, appears in the film's opening shot as the "young" Silent Bob). Thus it is safe for Silent Bob to come out via his "fourth wall"-breaking nod, confirming his queerness, while Schwalbach's presence here assures us that Smith himself is safely heterosexual. This in no way

mitigates the queerness of the film itself or its characters, but clears Smith of any overt suspicion of queer tendencies in his "real life" public persona.[21]

To conclude, Robert Lang, discussing that most cherished and, by some accounts, most queer[22] of American road movies, *The Wizard of Oz*, states that:

> While it may be true that many gay men and women see Dorothy's escape from Kansas as a potent fantasy that speaks to their own sense of entrapment in a homophobic society, the film, ultimately, is made for that mythically homogeneous heterosexual mainstream audience [. . .] who want ultimately to belong to that mainstream, to take their rightful place in its familial ordering of affective ties and identities. [. . .] The new queer road movie believes in the dream [of Oz, as opposed to the heterocentrist 'reality' of Kansas] – in the sense that queer happiness is understood to be possible – which is why the new queer road movie eschews the 'happy ending' of Hollywood cinema, a tacked-on coda that at best is ironic and at worst a reinstatement of the repressive structures the protagonist(s) sought to escape" (342-3).

Jay and Bob may believe in the dream and they certainly "escape" in some sense of the word, but they also conform economically in that they permit the *Bluntman and Chronic* film to be produced so long as they get a cut of the profits.

A very queer resolution indeed: Jay and Bob end *JSBSB* onstage with The Time, fulfilling their ultimate fantasy of staying on the road in an all-male, nearly all-black organization. Jay may be "hitched" to a woman, but she is a convicted woman who will

be kept out of the way for years to come by virtue of her prison sentence; and the *Bluntman and Chronic* movie gets made anyway, hence Jay and Bob are presumably, like their real-world analogues, financially rich. We will pick up their story again in *Clerks 2*, but first we must turn to Silent Bob's real-world analogue, Kevin Smith, to examine the complex interrelations between his status as writer/director, actor, businessperson and indie icon.

Notes

1. Jay and Silent Bob are "frozen," that is, retired as characters, at the end of *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* only to be "unfrozen" again in order to appear, somewhat improbably, in 2006's *Clerks 2*.

2. Smith and View Askew producer Scott Mosier have called *Chasing Amy* a kind of "calling card" that gained them access to A-list actors for *Dogma*; its critical status and credibility allowed them to woo actors like Rickman.

3. In fact, the *really* dedicated fan would have known at least a few general facts about *Dogma* long before *Chasing Dogma*'s release, as Smith had been working on versions of the *Dogma* screenplay since as far back as 1994 (*Judge Not: In Defense of* Dogma).

4. For more on the connection between the 1980s teen films of John Hughes and their influence on the View Askewniverse, see Chapter III.

5. Neil Patrick Harris is quite a popular icon amongst the slacker set, for he also makes a delightfully irreverent appearance as himself in the recent stoner films *Harold & Kumar Go To White Castle* (2004) and its sequel *Harold & Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay* (2008). Not to mention his role in *Starship Troopers* (1997), a satirical sci-fi favorite of the same (or related) 'smart' film fan set.

6. Not only is Jay and Bob's journey to "Shermer" (actually McHenry), Illinois significant from an industrial/economic standpoint—*Chasing Dogma*, released in serial form in late 1998-early 1999, serves explicitly as a print-form teaser for the then soon-to-be-released *Dogma*—it is also interesting for the way in which its central plot device, a stoner duo traveling across country on the basis of information about *fictional* characters and locales, presages 2001's *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back.*

7. Gaiman acknowledges his debt to Moore's work on *Swamp Thing* in his "Sandman Proposal" found in *Absolute Sandman Volume One* (546).

8. The segment of the credits in which Moore and Gaiman appear is prefaced thus: "'DOGMA' is the culmination of a lifetime's worth of disparate spiritual and satirical influences, which owes a debt to sundry storytellers and word-smiths. [T]hese authors and instigators I humbly thank in no particular order. . ." The two other comics writers mentioned are Grant Morrison (author of the superb *Arkham Asylum*) and Matt Wagner (creator of *Grendel*). Other notables on the list (of over twenty persons!) include Cervantes, John Milton, George Carlin, Sam Kinison, and Spike Lee.

9. The decision to include a poop monster action sequence in *Dogma* actually originated with Miramax rather than View Askew: according to View Askew historian Vincent Pereira, "It was [. . .] a case of making things bigger. [. . .] The Golgothan and the

Stygian Triplets weren't in the first draft [of the screenplay but] were all added to give the film more action" (Muir 113).

10. Muir notes that many critics, including Jeff Giles of *Newsweek* and Bruce Fett of *Entertainment Weekly*, faulted *Dogma* for its use of gore and its didactic "speechifying about religion" (126). Yet its economic success and ongoing popularity among View Askew fans indicates that I may be in a minority in disliking *Dogma* for its violence and didacticism and in strongly preferring Smith's outright comedies like *Clerks, Mallrats,* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back.*

11. The tea party, an upper-class, aristocratic practice—albeit a feminine one due to its historical connection to women—is rendered queer here, despoiled by its conflation with a cheap, backstreet gay hustle. This evocation of the tea party could be a form of class resistance on the part of the presumably working-class guard.

12. This buffoonery/clownishness of the part of Day and Benton is really quite funny and is a major part of what makes the non-musical segments of the film *Purple Rain* (1984) watchable.

13. For excellent sources on the history of blackface minstrelsy and cross-racial appropriation, see Eric Lott's *Love and Theft.*

14. Maurice Starr managed New Edition from 1983-84, but due to financial conflicts, the boy band parted company with Starr in 1984. Interestingly, Starr responded by promptly creating the group New Kids on the Block, essentially a carbon-copy of New Edition, but featuring white, rather than black, teenagers.

15. I am grateful to Kom Kunyosying for first pointing out this connection to me.

16. N.W.A. released the groundbreaking *Straight Outta Compton* on 8 August 1988 including Jay's favorite, "Fuck tha Police," as its second track.

17. Lott's article on Elvis impersonators also includes an interesting mention of Batman's archnemesis The Joker, noting that the Joker is constantly "in *whiteface*" and that the ethnic ambiguity this generates "evokes a threatening racial subtext" for the Joker character (207). Lott adds that the Joker as played by Jack Nicholson in the 1989 *Batman* film plays up that threatening subtext by appropriating black cultural signifiers such as the "Prince soundtrack" and the "rap-rhyming" quality of his speech (207). I would argue that the more recent Heath Ledger portrayal of the Joker in 2008's *The Dark Knight* also plays upon the ambiguous racial coding evoked by the Joker's whiteface to suggest his embodiment of "faceless" middle-eastern terrorists.

18. Serendipity's 30-minute absence through the second half of *Dogma*, which commences only minutes after her first appearance in the film, reminds me of Lieutenant

Saavik (Robin Curtis), inexplicably left behind on Vulcan at the outset of *Star Trek IV*, or even Lieutenant Uhura's (Nichelle Nichols) similar absence throughout much of *Star Trek III*. When the action starts, the women disappear.

19. On the male side, there is Italian-American character actor John Turturro, who an *Entertainment Weekly* film reviewer recently (on June 13, 2008) called "a reliable every-ethnic" (Schwarzbaum 47). Indeed, Turturro has been a staple of both the independent scene (a recurring collaborator with Spike Lee and the Coen brothers) and the cinematic mainstream, playing Spanish, Jewish, Italian, and Palestinian characters, to name a few. Turturro's ambiguous racing and ubiquity on both sides of the independent / studio divide speaks to what Stuart Hall calls "the ambiguous appearance of ethnicity at the heart of global postmodernism" (23).

20. The New Queer Cinema (NQC) refers primarily to a group of queer independent films released between 1990 and 1992, including *The Living End, Paris is Burning, My Own Private Idaho,* and *Poison.* See also my Introduction.

21. My in-progress book project, *Falling Out of the Closet: Kevin Smith and Post-Closet Independent Cinema*, will explore Smith's late-career "married" persona and Schwalbach's ongoing presence as an actor in his films.

22. In this connection, see Alexander Doty's convincing argument that *The Wizard of Oz* constitutes a "lesbian fantasy film" in *Flaming Classics* pp. 49-78.

CHAPTER VI

"JUST ONE PLEASANTRY SHY OF A COCK IN THE MOUTH": KEVIN SMITH'S QUEER STAR TEXT

Six and a half minutes into the 2001 straight-to-DVD release *An Evening With Kevin Smith*, a three-hour documentary of Smith's 1999 college campus question-and-answer tour, the filmmakers take their camera outside the lecture hall prior to Smith's appearance and show us a number of clips of View Askew fans explaining why they love these films and their *auteur*. The fourth such clip depicts a male buddy duo dressed up as their heroes, Jay and Silent Bob: the dark-haired, heavier-set fellow wears a backward baseball cap and holds a cigarette to suggest "Silent Bob," and his friend "Jay" sports long blonde hair and a sleeker, more womanly frame akin to that of real-life "Jay" actor Jason Mewes (see Figure 38). The fan who plays "Silent Bob," interestingly the more talkative of the two, describes their fandom thus: "Me and my buddy Jay here have spent a lot of time mentoring ourselves in the ways of Jay and Silent Bob. [. . .] *Clerks* is really where it started off. It's a whole new breed and a whole new era of moviemaking that [Smith has] brought on, and everything from the Jersey shore has just been wonderful. Kevin, thanks a lot man, it's been a great ride."

This fan's statement actually does a great job of summarizing the key features of Kevin Smith's star text, that collection of discourses that make up what is known about

Smith as a public figure and consumer commodity. The fan mentions: (1) buddies, (2) *Clerks* and New Jersey, and (3) a "new era of filmmaking." Then he concludes with (4) a personal salutation/thanks to Kevin himself. I will briefly address each of these features, plus the fan's decision to dress up as Bob, as a prelude to mentioning the other, unspoken element that this fan leaves out: Kevin Smith's queerness.

Figure 38: Two View Askew fans dress up as Silent Bob and Jay.

We have already seen throughout this project that Smith's View Askewniverse films always feature at least one and usually two or more male buddy pairs. In Chapter II I traced Smith's indebtedness to the conventions of the buddy road comedy and showed (in that chapter and in Chapter V) how this is a cinematic subgenre that is particularly open to homoerotic and queer readings. By mentioning buddies, and dressing up as one

member of View Askew's most iconic and popular buddy pair, this fan acknowledges and reproduces the buddy dynamic that is central to understanding Smith's work as a whole. While we have already discussed the way these buddy pairs function in Smith's *films* at length, in this chapter we will examine how buddy dynamics and buddy-based homosocial male groupings shape the relations between Smith-as-star/*auteur* and his various creative collaborators at key stages of his career.

The fan also mentions *Clerks*, saying that that film is "really where it started off." The "it" he refers to here is undoubtedly his own fandom: he mentions *Clerks* in order to establish himself as a certain type of Kevin Smith fan, that is, one who got into Smith's work early and who may well be something of an indie film aficionado, as I was in the early nineties. Mentioning *Clerks* shows off his knowledge of the origins of Smith's corpus and establishes him as a View Askew fan who has been there from the beginning, from the debut "cult" feature that few people knew about in the pre-*Mallrats* and -*Amy* years. In fact, this is a behavior common to many Smith fans and indeed, fans of many other media texts: to describe how (or with which specific text) one became a dedicated fan. On that score this fan is clear: I got onboard with *Clerks*.

However, this fan's mention of *Clerks* is also significant due to the ways in which that 1994 feature and its production continues to be a constitutive part of Smith's public persona via its foundational place in the narrative of his rise to cinematic niche-stardom. Indeed, alongside Robert Rodriguez's famous (if slightly misrepresentative) claim to have made *El Mariachi* (1992) for a mere $7000,[1] Smith's "origin story"—that he made *Clerks* for $27,000 of his own money while working full-time in the convenience store

where it was shot—is arguably one of the most well-known and enduring rags-to-riches tales in the history of American independent cinema. And as we shall see, it is largely on the basis of this story, and Smith's enduring love for the ostensibly blue-collar state of New Jersey, that Smith attempts to maintain his independent "street cred" in the face of his ever-increasing economic success and mainstream-media recognition.

The Silent Bob fan's claim that Smith has "brought on" a "new era" of filmmaking is not entirely incorrect either, for as we discussed at the outset of this study, the independent "slacker" film is one of the two or three most dominant genres in the 1980s-90s independent filmmaking sector. Along with the indie gangster film (exemplified by the work of Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino) and the films of the *bona fide* queer cinema (of Todd Haynes, Gregg Araki, Gus Van Sant, Rose Troche, and others), the slacker cinema has all but defined the independent film movement of the 90's, and Smith, due in large part to the popularity of Jay and Silent Bob, is slacker cinema's most iconic writer/director.[2]

In fact it is the *public visibility* that Smith incessantly fosters through his frequent question and answer sessions, his DVD commentaries and introductions, and his strong internet presence that encourages fan access to/identification with him. As this chapter shows, Smith is well aware that his cinematic work creates a site for fan investment in the "real" Jay and Silent Bob, and in himself as acknowledged *auteur* of the View Askewniverse. So the fact that this fan (a) dresses up as Bob and (b) addresses "Smith" (the camera) directly in a casual if congratulatory tone, is not at all unusual within the realm of View Askewniverse fandom. In fact, the *An Evening With Kevin Smith*

documentary cuts from this fan delivering his pre-show speech outside the auditorium to his appearance inside the auditorium during the Q & A: a friend at the questioner's microphone points to the dressed-up Jay and Bob duo and asks Smith, "Do you think that this guy looks like you over here?" then asks Smith is he would like to hang out with him and his friends after the show. Again we see the pattern of adoring fandom, exemplified by the act of two fans dressing up *for Smith to see*, conflated with seeming casual familiarity, as in the fan's invite to hang out afterwards:

> FAN: We [. . .] wanted to know if you wanted to hang out with us after, you know, maybe go home and drink some beer, you know. We've got a big house.
>
> SMITH: (sarcastically, indicating dressed-up fans) Yeah, especially after that, yeah!

These fans' concurrent adoration and hope/assumption that Smith will actually hang out with them speaks to the efficacy of Smith's self-presentation as simultaneously a privileged media star and an "average Joe," a dichotomy that will guide much of our analysis of Smith's public persona in this chapter. It is a contradictory combination that Smith humorously acknowledges as somewhat unnerving in his reply to the microphone-wielding fan's invitation to hang out.

Although the Silent Bob-garbed fan's talkativeness at first appears at odds with the figure he is imitating—the onscreen Bob is, after all, Silent—he and his quiet buddy's rendition of what might be called "Bob and Silent Jay" actually replicates the *real-life* stage dynamics between Smith and Mewes. That is, when Smith (as opposed to Bob)

appears in public, he is quite verbose, and actor Jason Mewes says very little, a trend that is consistent across all their onstage Q & A appearances and DVD commentary performances. In fact, Smith's public persona can be reasonably understood as the very *opposite* of the Silent Bob character he plays, a kind of "verbose Smith" who incessantly articulates his own stardom through multiple media outlets, including but not necessarily limited to: the lecture tour documented in *An Evening With Kevin Smith* and its 2006 straight-to-DVD sequel *An Evening With Kevin Smith 2: Evening Harder*, an abundance of commentaries and introductions on the DVD versions of his films, his postings on the View Askew website, a collection of essays written by Smith called *Silent Bob Speaks* (2004), and most recently, a book-length collection of his blog entries, *My Boring-Ass Life* (2007). I argue that this plethora of materials and appearances represents Smith's effort to (1) encourage the kind of loyal fandom he is familiar with from the subcultural, niche-market world of superhero comic-book consumption (see Chapter III), and (2) carefully control what is believed and said about him, *particularly* regarding his sexuality and personal sexual politics—that is, his potential, incessantly suggested queerness.

For amongst this veritable over-abundance of words and multimedia discourses, what is conspicuously left out? The one central feature that the Bob-emulating fan leaves out of his litany of Smith's prevalent characteristics is the pervasive homoerotic content of the View Askew films and Smith's star text. As I stated in the Introduction, the current project is in part intended as a corrective to the view that Smith's View Askew films are *not* queer cinema: I have a clear investment in calling attention to how his work functions *as* queer(ed) slacker cinema. However, a crucial component of this queer

reading strategy is to examine the way in which Smith himself negotiates the queerness of his own work, and how he publicly manages the contradictions/incoherencies around male same-sex desire that his films repeatedly, almost obsessively, expose. In this context, it is helpful to examine both what Smith *says* on this matter, that is, in what ways he laughs off, denies, or "explains" the queerness of his work when confronted with such questions by fans, but also what he *does not say*, that is, those things he leaves ambiguous through dismissive jokes and silences.

Thus, in this chapter I argue that Kevin Smith deliberately "plays" with his star text when speaking or writing for public consumption, using jokes to address questions about queerness and always maintaining an ambiguity with respect to his own sexuality that is immensely interesting when considered in light of queer readings of his key cinematic works.

Fortunately, as mentioned above, Smith has produced a wealth of extra-textual materials that articulate his stardom, though for reasons of space I will confine myself to close analysis of only a few of these. My three main texts will be the straight-to-DVD documentary of Smith's college Q & A tour, *An Evening With Kevin Smith* (2002), a View-Askew produced documentary found on the *Clerks* Tenth Anniversary DVD, *Snowball Effect: The Story of Clerks* (2004), and Smith's published essay collection, *Silent Bob Speaks* (2004). The latter of these is especially interesting in that its title, *Silent Bob Speaks*—also the tagline of the *Evening With Kevin Smith* DVD—attests to the slipperiness that exists between the figures of "Kevin Smith" and "Silent Bob." I argue that this ambiguity between Bob and Smith has played a central role in helping Smith

achieve and maintain his multimedia popularity, as his portrayal of Bob onscreen affords him an exceptionally high level of visual recognition, not to mention a site from which he can generate interest in his off-screen identity as *auteur* of the entire View Askewniverse.

Chapter VI also briefly examines the multiple media in which Smith's stardom is articulated, including (in addition to the aforementioned film, print, and online sources) his television appearances, his work in the comic book industry, and finally, his role as a commodifier of his own characters via Jay and Silent Bob's Secret Stash, a specialty store (now in two locations, Red Bank, NJ and Los Angeles) that sells comics and View Askewniverse products of all kinds. It can be fairly said that Smith currently heads a minor multimedia "empire," and his vehement defense of George Lucas's recent *Star Wars* prequels may have as much to do with a shared penchant for intelligent marketing practices as it does Smith's well-documented love for the original *Star Wars* films themselves.

This emphasis on the role of film *economics* in the construction of cinematic *auteur*ship and/as brand recognition is aligned with "industrial auteurism," an approach (advanced in the work of Jon Lewis, Timothy Corrigan, and Justin Wyatt) that analyzes the tendency for "distribution companies [to] use film authorship as an industrial category to increase the market value of individual filmmakers in a largely undifferentiated media marketplace" (Tzioumakis 60). Smith and his company, View Askew Productions, are outgrowths of an era wherein industrial auteurism has become the norm, where cinematic authorship is constructed and promoted by the distributors of the films themselves rather than granted to a filmmaker by film critics as a result of an extended body of cinematic

work. Hence, while Smith himself may in fact qualify for more traditional, textually based *auteur* status post-1997 (the year the pivotal *Chasing* Amy was released), since Smith and View Askew are so actively involved in producing and managing what is known about the figure of Smith, my primary interest here is in those supplementary texts—DVD extras, Q & A appearances, documentaries like *Snowball Effect*—that offer evidence of how Smith himself constructs his public persona. This makes sense in the independent film marketplace of the 1990s, which increasingly depends upon industrial constructions of authorship, and especially in the case of Smith and View Askew, who promote Smith's *auteur* status with such gusto in their abundant secondary materials.

Just as I have had to limit which of those many secondary texts I will analyze at length in this chapter, I have also had to make a few other provisional exclusions. For one, while View Askew fandom is of great importance to understanding Smith's work, as has been clear since our discussion of comic book fan culture in Chapter III, the present chapter will *not* constitute a thoroughgoing fan reception study but rather an analysis of how Smith presents himself to his fans, how he manages his own star text. My textual choices thus include only widely available published works, since any kind of reasonable analysis of, for example, Smith's online persona and its reception by online fans would take far more research and space than the present project can accomodate.

In terms of historical scope, this chapter will sketch and analyze Kevin Smith's public persona or *star text* from its inception circa 1994 until the end of its first broad phase in roughly 2001, the year of the (presumed) final View Askewniverse film, *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*. While, as we shall see, there have been many changes to Smith's

circumstances and public persona over time, his pre-2001 star persona tends toward a certain degree of stability, as it hinges upon the same small grouping of primary characteristics delineated so well by the Silent Bob emulator I just described. It is not until right around the turn of the millennium that two major events take place which significantly alter Smith's public persona: (1) He meets, marries, and fathers a child with Jennifer Schwalbach (Smith) in 1999, and (2) He writes and directs his first non-View Askewniverse film, *Jersey Girl*, in 2003-04. Hence my present analysis will focus on Smith's pre-1999 star text, the persona he maintained fairly consistently from *Clerks* (1994) until at least *Dogma* (1999).[3]

Silent Bob Speaks

Kevin Smith's star text is made up of a wide variety of discourses that are beyond any one person's or corporation's control or full comprehension. As Paul McDonald writes:

> Stars are mediated identities, textual constructions, for audiences do not get the real person but rather a collection of images, words and sounds which are taken to stand for the person. From their familiarity with a range of star texts, moviegoers form impressions of the person so that the star becomes a collection of meanings. [. . .] It is never possible for any individual member of the audience to comprehensively know all the textual sources through which the star's identity is represented. (6, 7)

In Smith's case, despite a wide array of media in which these discourses appear, the core *content* of his star text remains fairly stable though the 1990s, repeating the same stories and biographical "facts" about Smith from his emergence at Sundance 1994 through the period of transition that began in 1999 with his marriage to Jennifer Schwalbach Smith. Thus, when relating certain oft-repeated stories in this chapter, I will only directly cite one key source for each story or fact, thereby avoiding the messiness of listing the multiple sources in which these pieces of information get circulated. I will provide occasional endnotes that specify additional secondary sources for some of the anecdotes and biographical facts I include.[4]

"Silent Bob Speaks" is the tagline for the straight-to-DVD release *An Evening With Kevin Smith* as well as the title of his book of essays, *Silent Bob Speaks*. This title, which attributes "speaking" or authorship to Silent Bob, conflates *actual* View Askew author/creator Smith with the onscreen character he plays. And although Smith himself claims that his decision to play the role of Silent Bob in *Clerks* was more or less accidental (a point I will return to shortly), his self-casting in the role of Silent Bob has yielded innumerable textual and economic benefits to Smith and his View Askew product. For the oscillating conflation between Smith and Bob not only enriches the intertextuality and self-reflexivity of his films, it is a primary factor in making the View Askew brand name recognizable: Smith is at once its owner, founder, *auteur*, and mascot, or at least half of its primary duo of mascots. Hence the image of Smith, whose slackerish off-screen appearance is no far cry from Silent Bob's ubiquitous trench coat and backwards baseball cap, becomes a super-condensed signifier, *the* central visual

emblem, of View Askew Productions and its cinematic output. When Smith makes public appearances, then, he not only enhances his own *auteur*ist star text, he functions as a living commercial for the films themselves, encouraging brand-name recognition of the View Askew brand via the iconography of Silent Bob.

In fact, Jay and Silent Bob collectively constitute a "commercial intertext" that Smith and View Askew deploy in order to "brand" their cinematic and extra-cinematic products. And while the use of stars as a means of product differentiation and brand recognition has been well-established in Hollywood since at least the studio era of the 1920s and 30s, McDonald notes an increased blurring between stars and their texts starting in the "high concept" 1980s: "To describe this close integration of cinema with marketability, [Justin] Wyatt uses the term popularised by the industry in the 1980s–'high concept'—which he describes as 'a form of narrative which is highly marketable'" (79). Of course, the presence of iconic characters Jay and Silent Bob in every single View Askew film qualifies those films as high concept and helps to make Smith's narratives highly marketable, particularly by the time of the later films when the slacker duo have become beloved to the core View Askew audience. Interestingly, in citing a key example of high-concept filmmaking, McDonald chooses Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), a film we know to have been influential on Smith. McDonald states that *Batman* helped solidify the "trend for high concept production in the 1980s" and goes on to explain that "[i]n the era of high-concept filmmaking, [. . .] the image of the star [was used] as a means of illustrating the premise. [. . .] [T]he star became the premise, and the premise was the thing that made the film and other products marketable (79). As we will see, Smith

seems to have understood the high concept approach from very early in his career: he transitions from using other people's popular corporate logos as characters in his high school sketches to using his own characters, particularly Jay and Silent Bob, as logos for View Askew Productions, the duo of slacker stars that would become the central "premise" for each of his first five films.

As previously suggested, Smith's presence as one of the two members of View Askew's central starring duo has helped him to become more recognizable off-screen, and has helped View Askew and Miramax to market Smith himself, in his role as independent writer/director, as a media star whose public identity exceeds that of "the actor who plays Silent Bob." In fact, Smith is one of the most notable beneficiaries of the 1990s indie-film-sector trend toward marketing the independent director as a star in his own right. The tendency toward what James Schamus calls "infantilized auteurism," the promotion of first-time indie directors as full-blown cinematic *auteurs*, was becoming increasingly widespread by the time Smith sold *Clerks* to Miramax in 1994: "There are few first novels in filmmaking, efforts that go into the drawer or up in flames, because there are no—or very few—second chances. Or, to put it another way, indie film is almost exclusively a cinema of first films" (qtd. in Biskind 474). As Liz Manne, one-time head of marketing at Fine Line, bitterly describes the post-1994 indie scene,

> [i]t was the independent-director-as-rock-star syndrome. These people [like Smith] were getting their auteur stripes based on one film. And it was no longer Andrew Sarris writing about them, it was some dipshit on E! sticking a microphone in the face of somebody [. . .] who's never seen a

> Bernardo Bertolucci film in his life, and would not know Antonioni if he bit him in the ass. It became a mockery. (qtd. in Biskind 165)

As opposed to the prior system, in which *auteur* status is conferred by a respected film critic like Sarris assessing a director's sustained body of work, the 1990s independent film business granted *auteur* status to promising first-time directors through/as marketing leverage, using the "director-as-rock-star" technique to make new films and filmmakers recognizable and thereby sellable. Manne's complaint that this form of *auteur*ism is a "mockery" results from *who* is delineating indie *auteurs*, that is, the distributors, promoters, and light entertainment journalists like those at E!, and *what* kind of *auteurs* they are promoting, that is, first-time, unproven, and often cinematically ignorant first-timers.

Smith and Miramax have done a particularly effective job at promoting Smith as an *auteur* and all-around independent-media figure. It helps that Smith *knows* his persona generates interest/fandom and that he encourages his audience to identify him with View Askew and its productions:

> I spend inordinate amounts of time at my company's website, interacting with people who like our flicks, and [. . .] I do panels at three or four big comic book conventions and numerous college Q & A's per year. [. . .] [I]f the performer puts enough of himself or herself out there that the audience can identify with, the work—and the quality of the work—sometimes takes a back seat. It can sag a little, so long as they like you. (*Silent Bob Speaks* 108-9)

Not only does this passage repeat Smith's trademark self-deprecatory assessment of the quality of his own films, it shows that Smith is well aware of the economic value of the fan identification generated by his likeable persona and tireless efforts at self-promotion.

Additionally, Smith's role as Silent Bob, one of the two most beloved and enduring characters in the View Askewniverse, is foundational in this context. While his incessant blogging, message-board posting, and college Q & A appearances keep him in the public eye and encourage his fans to view him as "just one of them," accessible and likeable, it is his role as Silent Bob that has made him so *visually* recognizable. That image—an overweight, bearded slacker in a trench coat and backwards baseball cap who chain-smokes silently at Jay's side—has altered not one whit since the introduction of the character in 1994. And in fact, as I have already mentioned, Smith's own wardrobe has tended to emulate that of Silent Bob, particularly in Smith's preference for trench coats and slacker-esque knee-length shorts.

Perhaps most importantly, Smith's star text writ large—the accumulation of what is publicly known or perceived about him—is kept relatively consistent and stable over time through constant repetition of the most salient features of his personal myth, to wit: Kevin Smith is from New Jersey, he loves comic books and *Star Wars*, he is an average Joe who made it big through hard work and $27,000 of his own money, he is loyal to his (male) buddies and co-workers, he is a writer more than a visual filmmaker, and he is at least partially responsible for instigating Gen-X slacker cinema. These points emerge again and again in his Q & A sessions and in star-text generating special DVD features such as the straight-to-DVD documentary, *Snowball Effect: The Story of* Clerks (2004).

Snowball Effect is included as a bonus feature on the 2004 *Clerks* Tenth Anniversary DVD, *Clerks X*, and is immensely interesting for the way in which it succinctly articulates and links together all the canonical stories about Smith's rise to independent-sector stardom. It reprises the well-known story of *Clerks*' production—it was shot nights in the convenience store where Smith worked at the time—and reveals that in addition to using credit cards to finance *Clerks*, Smith also sold parts of his comic book and videodisc collections to complete production of the film. It tells of his meeting and subsequent collaboration with Scott Mosier, a point I will return to in the next section. And most importantly, by showing scenes of his New Jersey hometown, interviewing his mom and brother, and telling us that after his success with *Clerks* and the deal with Miramax, Smith returned to New Jersey and helped his friends fulfill their dreams of making their own films (Bryan Johnson, Vincent Pereira) and opening a comic-book store (Walt Flanagan), *Snowball Effect* reminds us that Smith is still just a hometown hero who does not forget his buddies.[5] We will complicate this latter model in upcoming sections, but the point holds that *Snowball Effect*, released by Miramax with *Clerks X* and produced by View Askew Productions, is evidence of Miramax and View Askew's ongoing canny management of Smith's public persona.

And while Miramax's skill at promoting and marketing their films and filmmakers is well-documented, Smith himself seems to have been aware quite early on of the potential appeal of placing his own image as creator/star at the center of his films. For the construction of Smith's star text began even before *Clerks* or *Snowball Effect*, with his short student film produced during his brief tenure at Vancouver Film School:

Mae Day: The Crumbling of a Documentary. *Mae Day* depicts, through interviews with the crew including Smith and producing partner Scott Mosier, how a group of film students led by Smith and Mosier lost their film's subject—a transvestite drag performer named Mae who leaves town unexpectedly before shooting can begin—and subsequently made a film about the failure of their project instead. Smith (usually in two-shot with Mosier) is the most prevalently featured interviewee in *Mae Day*, thus positioned as the director, star, and co-*auteur* of the work. *Mae Day*'s comedic tone, foregrounding of Smith and Mosier as *auteurs*, and ubiquitous use of two-shots hints at what is shortly to come in *Clerks*: raunchy comedy, Smith and Mosier in key on- and off-screen roles (Silent Bob/writer-director and Willam Black/producer, respectively), and generous use of two-shots. In terms of Smith's broader post-*Clerks* career, I see *Mae Day* as a harbinger of both his multifaceted stardom (he writes, directs, and stars) and of the increasing self-reflexivity (*Mae Day* is a movie about filmmakers unable to make a movie) his work would evince over the course of the 1990s.

Once *Clerks* was purchased and distributed by Miramax and became a niche-market hit, Smith's career and public profile were further abetted by his friendship/professional relationship with influential producer's representative and independent cinema guru John Pierson. Pierson included Smith as a "conversational collaborator" on his 1995 book about his career in indie cinema, *Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes*, and also featured Smith as a guest on his Independent Film Channel show, "Split Screen" (1997-2000). These appearances, backed by Pierson's unmatched

credentials and reputation, helped solidify Smith's position as a visible representative, perhaps *the* visible representative, of 1990s independent cinema.

Smith has also been extremely successful at marketing himself as a writer. He has frequently said that he considers himself more a writer of dialogue than a strictly visual filmmaker, and while it would be too reductive and misleading to accept his self-deprecating claim that he has "no visual style," nevertheless it is as a writer that Smith has particularly flourished. For example, Smith's post-*Chasing Amy,* Pierson-supported image as a credible writer/*auteur*, plus the critical success of *Chasing Amy* in 1997, attracted the attention of the major film studios, who would begin to tap Smith as a screenwriter for comic-book-related projects like the reboot of the *Superman* cinematic franchise (as Smith humorously relates on *An Evening With Kevin Smith* disc 1, chapter 23). Further, Smith has diversified into other writing projects: he worked as a writer of mainstream superhero comics (most notably on *Daredevil* at Marvel Comics from 1998-2000 and *Green Arrow* at DC from 2001-03) an essayist (writing a monthly column for UK-based *Arena Magazine*), and in 2006 his talents as a wordsmith were recognized publicly when he won the UCLA Jack Benny Award for Comedy.[6]

Indeed, Smith's emphasis on his identity as a writer, albeit true to his talents, positions him ideally as a "rock star" director/*auteur* within the 1990s independent cinema marketplace. A brief anecdote about another iconic indie writer/director of the same period, Quentin Tarantino, illustrates how important writing credit is to an upcoming independent media *auteur*:

> [Quentin] Tarantino's attorney [. . .] was faxing over a rider to [*Pulp Fiction* co-screenwriter Roger] Avary's *Pulp Fiction* contract according to which Avary gave up his co-screenwriting credit in exchange for "story by" credit. [. . .] Avary called his friend [Tarantino] and [. . .] [a]ccording to him, Tarantino replied, "Well, yeah, I want the credits to end with a title that says, 'Written and directed by Quentin Tarantino.'" The reason for that, says Avary now, was that "when you're positioning yourself to become a media star, you don't want people to be confused as to who the star is." (Biskind 170)

This story suggests that Tarantino, like Kevin Smith, is well aware that keeping a close grip on the writing, the most crucial component of cinematic creatorship alongside directing, is essential to establishing and maintaining media stardom in the independent film sector of the 1990s. While Tarantino needed to fudge the facts to lay claim to his *Pulp Fiction* writer/director credit, Smith's dedication to screenwriting and control over the writing and delivery of his films' dialogue is legendary.[7]

Another similarity between Smith and other successful 1990s independent film *auteurs* is his insistence on appearing in his own films. Tarantino gives himself roles in *Reservoir Dogs* (as Mr. Brown) and *Pulp Fiction* (as henpecked house-husband Jimmie), and Smith's hero Richard Linklater appears (as himself!) in the very first scene of *Slacker* (1991) and near the end of *Waking Life* (2000). Smith adheres to this trend and makes it work for him in a unique way by having his onscreen character, Silent Bob, say nothing except at key dramatic moments—usually the climax—of his films. The moment when

Bob breaks his silence thus becomes a much-anticipated occurrence in each new View Askew film, and the fact that it is Smith himself, a highly recognizable figure due to his recurrence as Bob and the similar (if talkative) slacker persona he portrays off-screen, delivering these lines heightens the impact and humor of Bob's pronouncements. The knowing View Askew fan knows that Bob will eventually speak, and that it is "really" writer/director Smith speaking, and as such Bob's speeches take on special significance and create audience investment in the character and the Askewniverse.

What, then, does Silent Bob say?

The table below outlines Silent Bob's speaking instances for all five of the View Askewniverse films we have examined so far in this study.

View Askew Film	Silent Bob Says. . .
Clerks	encourages Dante to stay with Veronica
Mallrats	quotes Yoda from *The Empire Strikes Back*: "Adventure? Excitement? A Jedi craves not these things!"
Chasing Amy	speaks as Smith, tells "Amy" story
Dogma	Quotes Indy Jones from *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*: "No tickets!"
Dogma	"thanks!" - as Smith
Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back	Yells at Jay – is Bob growing up?
Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back	Negotiates with Banky – Bob's surprising business acumen

Table 4: What Silent Bob Says

Certain trends stand worthy of note here. First, I note Silent Bob's increased number of speaking instances in the later films, as if once Smith had taken Bob to the extreme of *Chasing Amy*, telling an entire *story* that is rather transparently Smith's and

the film's, he created increased audience demand for Speaking Bob. Second, the *content* of Bob's speaking occurrences shifts depending upon the film and at which stage in Smith/Bob's career it takes place. In *Clerks* and *Amy*, Bob offers heartfelt, wise relationship advice, and these early films are Smith's most personal and autobiographical works: the former humorously documents his time spent working with Bryan Johnson in the Quick Stop prior to the release of *Clerks*, and the latter is a fictionalized conflation of details from his own relationship with Joey Lauren Adams and Scott Mosier's writings about his circa 1994 crush on Guin Turner (see Chapter IV). In the less personal, more comic-bookish films like *Mallrats* and *Dogma,* Bob tends to quote other pop-cultural texts, mostly for humorous effect. Of course, these pop-cultural citations also reinforce the Bob-Smith connection, for Bob loves the same 1980s mainstream films that Smith does, and Smith frequently quotes from the same movies in his public appearances and in his film scripts (for example, see Randal's incessant *Star Wars* and *Jaws* references in *Clerks*).

Silent Bob's second speaking performance in *Dogma*, and both of his verbal moments in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, are especially notable for how they "develop" or complicate the figure of Bob and, perhaps more importantly, even more strongly conflate him with Smith.

The second time Silent Bob speaks in *Dogma*, it is during the film's *denouement*, after the battle with the two renegade angels has ended. Bob speaks in response to an admonition from Rufus, the Thirteenth Apostle (Chris Rock)—a reprimand that, within the diegetic world of the film, is certainly directed toward *Jay*, not Bob:

RUFUS: And if you clean up your language, I just might put in a good word [in heaven] for *you*, too.

SILENT BOB: Thanks!

Jay knows Rufus's line is directed at him and points an accusing finger at Bob, scolding him for responding to Rufus in his place. But the knowing audience member easily grasps the non-diegetic implication here: that it is *Smith* Rufus addresses, admonishing him for his well-known penchant for blue language in his View Askew screenplays. Whereas the Smith/Bob conflation in the "Chasing Amy" story sequence of *Chasing Amy* still retained some ambiguity—for the uninitiated or overly literal audience member, Silent Bob *could* have been telling a story that was indeed his and that had little to do with Smith's autobiography or *auteur*ship—this moment from *Dogma* firmly concretizes the Smith-to-Bob equation since Bob's general silence, relative lack of foul language use when he does speak, and proximity to Jay clearly exempt him from Rufus's admonition. So, unlike the scene from *Amy* that can be read as the character of Bob and the figure of Smith co-inhabiting the image of Silent Bob, the *Dogma* scene really can only be read as Smith: to imagine Silent Bob responding to Rufus here is diegetically absurd. In short, this moment at the end of *Dogma* drops the diegetic veil that separates Silent Bob from Smith, and therefore marks the first unambiguous, *bona fide* appearance of Smith-as-Smith in a View Askew film.

Given that the ending of *Dogma* baldly (if only momentarily) reveals Bob and Smith to be the same person, and given that *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* is View Askew's most diegetically self-reflexive and fantastical (as opposed to "realistic"—see

Chapter V) film to date, we would expect Bob's speaking moments in *JSBSB* to maintain this slipperiness between Bob and Smith and to possibly take it to yet another level of self-reflexivity and postmodern humor. And indeed it does. Bob's first speech in *JSBSB* is a shouted diatribe at Jay, in a moment where Bob is exasperated at Jay's inability to observe crucial details (the sign "Creatures of Hollywood" on the back of the car that abducted their orangutan) and to understand his (Bob's) hand movements as he tries to gesturally describe the sign to him. In some ways this moment is an extension of a moment from earlier in the film, when Holden McNeil (Ben Affleck) wonders aloud why the more sensitive, mature Silent Bob doesn't detach himself from Jay:

> HOLDEN: Don't you ever want anything more for yourself? [indicates Bob] I know this poor, hapless sonofabitch does. I look into his sorry, doe eyes and I see a man crying out. He's crying out: When, Lord? When the fuck can your servant ditch this foulmouthed little chucklehead to whom I am a constant victim of his follies?!

Bob nods with dawning understanding during this speech, although he also quickly reassures Jay with a dismissive shake of the head. But by the time of his shouting fit at Jay an hour into the film, one wonders: has Silent Bob begun to consider the limitations of his relationship with Jay? Is a long-felt but long-suppressed exasperation finally coming to the surface? In short, is Silent Bob growing up and considering other options besides a permanently arrested homosocial buddy pairing?

Of course, these considerations echo those of Kevin Smith at the time of *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*'s production: he intended the film to be the last of his New Jersey

chronicles and Jay and Silent Bob's swan song. By marking the official ending of the View Askewniverse and the Jay and Bob characters, Smith hoped to dissociate himself from his "dick and fart joke" reputation and re-make himself as a more "mature" filmmaker with his follow-up to *JSBSB,* 2004's *Jersey Girl*. It is particularly notable that the scene that sets up Bob's anti-Jay diatribe, the scene where Bob first visibly questions his partnership with Jay, takes place in the presence of Holden, who himself struggled in *Amy* between "selling out" (making a "Bluntman and Chronic" cartoon) and creating something more artistically respectable (his *Chasing Amy* comic). This struggle is echoed in Smith's career.

Silent Bob's possible maturation beyond his relationship with Jay, and Smith's analogous maturation within the world of independent cinema, is reflected in Bob's second speaking instance in *JSBSB*. In this segment, Jay and Bob have confronted Banky Edwards, now sole owner of the Bluntman and Chronic property and executive producer of the fictional *Bluntman and Chronic* movie, and are demanding their share of the film's profits. Banky tries to deny them their due, and Silent Bob launches into a lengthy speech about the legalities of character likeness rights when they are transferred from one artistic medium to another. Banky, convinced by Bob's speech, offers the duo one-half of his movie profits, and they accept. This sharp movie-business acumen on Bob's part cannot help but suggest Smith's own canny knowledge of multimedia marketing and business practices: like George Lucas with *Star Wars* or Warner Communications with the Batman franchise, Smith and View Askew have demonstrated over the course of their career a canny knowledge of how to market their intellectual property across a variety of

media including feature films, short films aired on "The Tonight Show," comic books, posters, action figures, and straight-to-DVD releases like *An Evening With Kevin Smith*. In short, Bob's intricate knowledge of copyright law not only reaffirms the Smith-as-Bob condensation, it specifically reflects that aspect of Smith that has heretofore been glossed over: Smith's acute industry know-how. We will return to the elision of Smith's multimedia promotional skill at the end of this chapter, but for now let me end this discussion of Silent Bob with a few remarks about his queerness.

Like Dante from *Clerks*, Silent Bob is more feminized than queered, sensitive and accommodating but not particularly (queerly) sexualized. He also fits the geeky "achiever" role as opposed to the clownish "slacker" role in his buddy duo, just like Dante. Yet it is primarily Bob's silence I want to focus on here, a silence that leaves so many questions about his sexuality ambiguous. In his first appearance in *Clerks*, Bob remains silent as Jay proposes sucking him off, then accuses him of being a "faggot." Then in *Dogma*, he calmly accepts Rufus's revelation that Jay thinks about guys when he jerks off—a piece of information that queerly implicates Bob and his buddy relation with Jay. And of course, there is the nod to the camera and incessant queer jokes in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, the humor of which all seems to center on the veracity of that nod: "Yes, indeed," that nod seems to say, "We have been queer all along!" In this context, Bob's ubiquitous silence and one brief nod serve as the knowingly ironic counterpoint to Jay's vocal protestations against the duo's queerness. In short, Jay's insistence that he is straight is not funny unless the audience knows—as Bob seems to know—that Jay is in fact queer. Bob's apparent knowledge and constant silence combine

to create a rich ambiguity around Jay and Bob's sexual relationship to each other, and by extension to all the buddy duos in the Askewniverse.

For Bob's silence taken alone can be read as indicative of culturally silenced/suppressed desires, as in the infamous "love that dare not speak its name." Indeed, Alexander Doty and Eve Sedgwick both refer to the incoherence in the male homosocial continuum as being characterized by cultural "silences and gaps" (Doty, *Flaming Classics* 3 and Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 3-4, 67-71). Silent Bob, with his seeming awareness of the cultural expectations around his behavior, may be responding to broad social imperatives *not* to express his non-straight desires, and he may be further compelled toward silence by his immediate social circumstances: even if Bob reciprocates Jay's homoerotic desire, which his nod to the camera in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* implies, still those kind of desires could not be openly expressed to Jay himself, Bob's sexually queer yet overtly homophobic best friend. Thus it makes sense that his affirmative nod to the camera in the wake of the "What a Lovely Tea Party" sequence is to *us*, the audience: it is a shared (closeted) secret that the viewer shares with the figure of Silent Bob. And as we shall see, through a dualistic separation of his public persona, Smith is largely able to leave that open secret onscreen with Silent Bob, all the while verbally obsessing over queer sexuality in true Randal- or Jay-like fashion in his public speaking appearances.

Dueling Personas

How does Smith's oscillation between the character "Silent Bob" and the public figure "Kevin Smith" help him to coyly sustain yet carefully contain the homoerotics that accrue to the onscreen buddy relation of "Bob" (Jay and Bob as possible lovers) and the cinematic output of "Smith" (the pervasive homoerotics of the View Askew films)?

To respond to these questions I would like to briefly discuss *The Dueling Personas of Kevin Smith*, a master's thesis-cum-vanity press book published by "View Askew Books" in 2003.[8] This work, originally a master's thesis by Emory University film student Matthew Miller, provides a helpful model for conceptualizing the dual address of Smith's stardom by identifying two main aspects of his star text: the comic book fanboy, represented by the character of Banky from *Chasing Amy*, and the critically acclaimed artist, represented by Banky's cohort Holden from the same film. Miller maintains that after the runaway critical success of *Clerks* and the subsequent critical failure of the fanboy friendly *Mallrats*, Kevin Smith pitted his "two biographies" against each other in *Chasing Amy*, and that "the narrative resolution of the film finds Smith's critical persona [Holden] winning out while the 'fanboy' persona [Banky] is disavowed" (9). He further argues that the supposed triumph of the critically acclaimed artist over the lowbrow fanboy helped pave the way for a positive critical reception of the next View Askew film, 1999's *Dogma.*

However, while Miller's overall model of two Smith biographies working in tension with one another is convincing, it is too reductive. For one, his claim that Smith's fanboy persona is "disavowed" at the end of *Amy*, while accurate with respect to

the Banky character, fails to acknowledge how profoundly comic-bookish *Dogma* really is, how indebted it is to the work of Neil Gaiman and other Dark Age comics—see my Chapter V. Hence, I see *Dogma* as evidence of the fruitful *interplay* of Smith's two personas, a film that is *both* a critical favorite (for its "serious" spiritual themes, A-list actors, and well-crafted dialogue) *and* a fanboy's delight (with its postmodern mythological references, sci-fi-esque angels and monsters, and the presence of Jay and Silent Bob). Thus, I accept Miller's model of two opposing personas detectable in the work and star text of Smith, but I cannot agree with Miller that they are kept rigidly "separate" immediately post-*Amy* (73).

In fact, a possible motivation for Miller's insistence upon the separation of Smith's "Holden" and "Banky" personas becomes apparent when we examine his analysis of those two characters in the context of *Chasing Amy.* For Miller seems completely unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge the homoerotics that pervade and motivate *Amy*'s narrative, despite his admission (in his Introduction) that "[a]n exploration of the tenets of the homosocial bond is implicit in most of Smith's work, and *Chasing Amy*, *Dogma*, and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* explore the boundaries between the homosocial and the homosexual in the pairings of their characters" (10-11). In his analysis of *Amy* he claims that "personal issues" come between Holden and Banky, and that "Banky's involvement with the main plot, *that of the relationship between Holden and Alyssa*, is largely tangential" (44, 50, emphasis added). When I first read these passages I was not surprised to find the author referring to homoerotic desire as "personal issues," for euphemistic or non-specific language is often used to cover over

queer sexuality in homophobic texts, but I admit I was shocked by Miller's blatant misreading of *Amy*'s plot in the latter half of his analysis.[9] Miller wants very badly for the Holden-Alyssa relationship to be the narrative focus of *Amy*, yet as my own analysis of the film shows (see Chapter IV), the film is ultimately concerned with the relationship between the two buddies, Holden and Banky, and to call Banky's role in the erotic triangle that impels the film's narrative "tangential" is simply erroneous. However, Miller is not alone in wanting to write out, downplay, or disavow the homoerotics of Smith's work, and his textual strategy of acknowledging queerness *generally*—akin to Smith's oft-repeated claim that he likes to "throw a little gay content in there"—but disavowing *specific* instances of homoerotic manifestation is one we will see repeated by Smith himself many times, perhaps most emphatically to a lesbian Q & A participant during *An Evening With Kevin Smith*, discussed at length in an upcoming section.

Further, Miller's mapping of the two personas that constitute Smith's star text onto the characters of Holden and Banky is immensely interesting, for, in its disavowal of Banky the fanboy and its centralizing of the (presumed heterosexual) relationship between Holden and Alyssa, it suggests a dual equation of Artist = Holden = heterosexual and Fanboy = Banky = homosexual. This happens to agree (more or less) with my own arguments from the beginning of this project: that one member of the homosocial buddy duo (in this case Holden) is a feminized underachiever, an apologetic slacker who knows he should be striving to be something more, and that the second member of the duo (here Banky) is a queered clown, an unapologetic slacker who is perfectly content to live in the

present, accompanied by his porno, his comic books, and his best friend. To graph this onto my duo chart from previous chapters, this looks like:

	Buddy #1: Geek	**Buddy #2: Slacker**
Character Type	Apologetic geek, (under-) achiever	Unapologetic slacker, clown
Characters	Dante (*Clerks*), T.S. (*Mallrats*), Holden (*Chasing Amy*), Silent Bob	Randal (*Clerks*), Brodie (*Mallrats*), Banky (*Chasing Amy*), Jay
Gender	feminized – whiny, passive, gets dumped and/or manipulated by masculinized women and is troubled by it	masculinized – snarky, rebellious, cares more about pop culture, video games, and/or comics than heterosexual relationships
Sexuality	seemingly straight	queer – into deviant sexuality and is frequently asexulized *vis-a-vis* women
Development	aspires toward maturity but fails	puerile, infantilized
Temporality	mired in past and/or future	lives in present
Role	romantic protagonist/superhero	comedic "sidekick"

Table 5: Buddy Pairs in *Clerks, Mallrats,* and *Chasing Amy*, Expanded

Interestingly, though we might expect Smith to follow Miller's suit in denying the possible homosexuality/bisexuality of the Banky and Randal (queered fanboy) figure, he has in fact never shied away from acknowledging that Jay is "ambisexual" (Kilday 62), and the textual evidence in *Chasing Amy* (not to mention the *denouement* of *JSBSB*) makes clear that Smith conceives Banky as gay. And yet, as we shall soon discuss in detail, Smith himself seems broadly to *identify* with the (feminized, artistic, sexually conservative) characters on the left side of this chart, and to *desire* (or want to be) the (queer, fanboy, deviant) characters on the right side. As we shall see, Smith's onstage

persona during Q & A sessions primarily emulates that of Randal/Brodie/Banky: he acts as an outwardly confident, talkative, joke-cracking figure who is also sexually queered. In short, he plays out his desires by inhabiting the role *opposite* that which he plays in the films, thus producing a tripartite ambiguity between the onscreen character Silent Bob (left side of chart), his onstage character Kevin Smith (right side of chart), and the *auteur* Kevin Smith, who is some slippery combination of both of these, and more. This ambiguity allows for much queer titillation without much specific avowal, and is characteristic of the entire process by which Smith's star persona is produced and maintained.

The very existence of *The Dueling Personas of Kevin Smith* as a published work is further evidence of the ambiguous way in which Smith and View Askew manage Smith's self-promotion. Not only is the book published by vanity press View Askew Books, it also carries an endorsement from Smith himself on its back cover: "I get handed about ten thesis papers about me a year. [*The Dueling Personas of Kevin Smith*] is the most fascinating one I've read." Although this comment actually says very little of substance, its presence on the back cover of this View-Askew-published book implies Smith's approval, and I think Smith's endorsement is very interesting in light of Miller's misreading of the erotics of *Chasing Amy*, and the suppression/disavowal of homoerotics that so often accompanies descriptions of Smith's cinematic work. For Smith and Miller seem to agree on at least one key point: acknowledging or discussing the *homosocial* (male buddy relations, bonding practices, and non-sexual affection) in View Askew films is okay, but the minute that homosociality blurs into the *homoerotic* it must be

disavowed, written out, or laughed off. We will see how Smith himself negotiates this precarious dance in the sections that follow.

Real-Life Buddy Duos

While in the previous section, following Miller, I analyzed one duality that characterizes the figure of Kevin Smith primarily *through his cinematic work*, in this case a model based upon characters and themes from *Chasing Amy*, now I wish to return to the *extra-textual* side of Smith's star persona, examining some of his real-life buddy relationships as they are (re-)presented by Smith himself.

For while I refute the idea that Kevin Smith's films directly reflect his life in some simple, one-to-one ratio, nevertheless the buddy duos in his films, especially his critically acclaimed debut *Clerks*, are promoted in View Askew materials as being based upon certain of Smith's friends and life experiences. Hence it pays to briefly examine those real-life buddy duos that inspired some of his most enduring cinematic creations, and to see how Smith's corporate and production practices are reflective of/relate to View Askew's cinematic-textual output.

The View Askew-produced documentary *Snowball Effect: The Story of 'Clerks'* reveals that Kevin Smith's creativity, perhaps even his nascent *auteur*ist approach to writing and directing, took shape in the context of a group of male buddies / co-collaborators as early as high school. In his high school days, Smith co-founded a troupe of live sketch comedy performers called S.C.M.O.D.S. with friends Ernest O'Donnell and Mike Belicose. The group's name is an acronym for "State County Municipal

Offender Data System" and is a reference to the 1980 musical-comedy film *The Blues Brothers*. The troupe was so named because O'Donnell and Smith loved *The Blues Brothers* and dressed up as the Blues Brothers characters for Halloween during middle school: hence, shared boyhood fandom leads to public performance of that fandom and subsequent original performance work written and overseen by Smith. For, according to *Snowball Effect*, Smith wrote and directed S.C.M.O.D.S.'s sketches, applying elaborate makeup for all the actors and, as O'Donnell succinctly puts it, doing "everything" to prepare the skits for stage. The trio of Smith, O'Donnell and Belicose performed Smith's sketches at six of the school's frequent talent shows, garnering local accolades for their work.[10]

However, in late high school Smith's social group shifted—O'Donnell and Smith had a "falling out" senior year—and the aspiring comedy writer met and befriended the man who would introduce him to comic book collecting, Walter Flanagan, and the "prototypical slacker" who would serve as the template for *Clerks*' Randal, Bryan Johnson. Yet despite this change to his "cast of characters," Smith's desire to write material and co-produce it with his friends remained intact, and when he departed for Vancouver Film School four years later, it was with the ostensible plan to return to New Jersey, "teach Bry, Walt, and [friend] Ed [Hapstak] how to operate something [on a film set] and we'd be off and running" (*Snowball Effect*). Smith may have been the instigator, writer, and director, the Dante-esque achiever reaching for something more, but he always had his close, male, slacker friends in mind when he hatched his creative schemes.

And it was through his homosocial buddy networks that Smith met some of the key individuals who would continue to work with him into the View Askew Productions period. The most significant of these is Jason Mewes, who would literally become the onscreen "Jay" to Smith's "Silent Bob." Though Mewes is four years younger than Smith, the two met when Smith was hanging out at the Highlands Recreation Center with Bryan Johnson, Walt Flanagan, and Ed Hapstak. Johnson and Flanagan in particular embraced the younger Mewes, and that is how Smith met him and realized he was a "comic genius," a foul-mouthed muse for his View Askew films.

Interestingly, Mewes and Smith began as rivals, for Smith's friends enjoyed Mewes for the same—and thus, in Smith's mind, competing—reason that they liked Smith: his sense of humor. On *Snowball Effect* and elsewhere, Smith recounts the story of one of the first times he met Mewes, when the younger man accompanied Smith's group to an out-of-town comic book show. As Smith relates it, Mewes was making Flanagan and Johnson "crack up" during the whole drive to the show, while Smith sulked in the backseat of the car, thinking to himself: "He's not so fuckin' funny." Yet in time, Smith and Mewes would become close friends and eventual longtime housemates, and most significantly Smith would develop Mewes's sixteen-year-old personality—the version of Jason he so resented on that fateful car ride—into his most popular View Askewniverse character, the loudmouthed stoner "Jay."

This pattern of rivalry-turned-close bond repeated itself when Smith met fellow aspiring filmmaker Scott Mosier at the Vancouver Film School in early 1992. Indeed, in this case the initial dislike would be mutual. On *Snowball Effect* and elsewhere Mosier

notes that his first impression of Smith was that he looked like a "smartass [in his] trench coat," and he (Mosier) dubiously wondered: "Who the fuck is this guy?" As for Smith's reaction to Mosier, he says he thought the soft-spoken Washington native looked like a "pretty boy, [. . .] he looked like a 90210 kid, [with] product in his hair," a style that the duo would sum up together in an interesting way in 2004:

> MOSIER: I had just came [sic] from L.A. [. . .] I was pretty much—
>
> SMITH: Gay.
>
> MOSIER: (smiles) Yeah, I was gay.

Their mutual labeling of Mosier as "gay," and Mosier's subsequent assertion that what ultimately brought them together was their shared "disdain for authority" (*Snowball Effect*), is remarkable for its Freudian implications: as Troyer and Marchiselli maintain in reference to cinematic "dude cinema" buddy pairs, buddy duos are always "confused adolescent homophobes, frightened of, yet bent on escaping, paternal controls and fixated on the talismanic bodies of women" (267). I would add that the "paternal controls" slackers resist can be embodied by masculine, phallic women such as *Clerks*' Veronica or *Chasing Amy*'s Alyssa, and hence the slacker duo's fear and repulsion toward the father or masculine principle can be—and usually is—directed against phallic mothers. I would also add that the "talismanic bodies of women" can also be substituted with feminine, pretty-boy, dare I say "gay" male bodies! Hence, enacting the same dynamics as their onscreen buddy duos, Smith and Mosier became cohorts when both were called into the office for talking in class, an experience that bonded them together against an oppressive father-principle and led them to realize that they also had "a common sense of humor"

according to Smith. And perhaps Mosier's pretty-boyishness also helped catch Smith's eye?

From these homosocial beginnings would emerge one of the most consistent and successful director/producer teams in 1990s independent film. Mosier and Smith's professional teaming and off-screen friendship would not only enable Smith's writing to come to life onscreen, it would impact the content of the films themselves, as when Mosier plays the "gay pretty boy" version of himself during the roof hockey sequence in *Clerks*, or when Mosier's crush on *Go Fish* star Guin Turner would provide raw story material for *Chasing Amy.* Further, despite Mosier's quietly phlegmatic attitude and seeming willingness to follow Smith's artistic lead, he has also exerted a strong influence upon Smith's career at key points, most notably when his misgivings and/or lack of interest in a mainstream film project functioned as a decisive factor in Smith's choice to turn down the directorship of the studio-produced *Green Hornet* film in 2003.

So, in the context of his artistic career, Smith has moved from homosocial group to homosocial group, depending upon his circumstances: during high school and S.C.M.O.D.S., O'Donnell and Belicose were his collaborators; in the "slacker" period after high school when Smith worked at the Quick Stop, it was Johnson, Flanagan, Hapstak, and eventually Jason Mewes; and once he attended Vancouver Film School in 1992, he would fall in with future View Askew producer Scott Mosier and future *Clerks* cinematographer David Klein.[11] Thus, despite changes to the exact names and faces who inhabit Smith's inner circle, the overarching structure of a homosocial group of male buddies who also serve as Smith's artistic co-collaborators remains consistent from

Smith's high school years (1984-88) through the initial phase of View Askew's inception and initial success, 1994-2001.

Bryan Johnson himself obliquely comments on Smith's movement from group to group when he says on *Snowball Effect* that he was "surprised Kevin didn't ask me to go with him" to the Vancouver Film School. Apparently, Johnson, a "prototypical slacker," did not have the self-motivation or desire to go to film school under his own steam, but felt strongly enough about his buddy relationship with Smith to register surprise (and possible hurt feelings?) at being left behind when Smith went away to Vancouver. Johnson's comment reflects the values of arrested-development buddy groups who, like Peter Pan and his band of Lost Boys, never want to grow up and wish to preserve their boyhood buddy relations forever.

Yet, despite Johnson's worries, after film school Smith would not forget his old friends: he cast O'Donnell in minor roles in *Clerks, Chasing Amy*, and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, cast Johnson as Steve-Dave in numerous View Askew films, and used Walt Flanagan in so many roles in *Clerks* that he would nickname him the "Lon Chaney of the 90's." Further, he gave Johnson money to make his own film, *Vulgar*, and hired comic-book fanboy Flanagan to be the proprietor of his Red Bank, NJ, comic book shop, Jay and Silent Bob's Secret Stash. Hence the Secret Stash store, the characters of Steve-Dave and fanboy (played by Johnson and Flanagan), and frequent references to "Walt Flanagan's dog" in multiple View Askew films all serve as cinematic and extra-cinematic tributes to Smith's pre-Vancouver Film School days at the Highlands Recreation Center. What's more, over the course of his career, even as he gained access to increasingly

professional and sought-after Hollywood talent, Smith would continue to cast Flanagan, Johnson, O'Donnell, and *Clerks*' Brian O'Halloran in his View Askew films, enacting the "making movies with my friends" ethos with which he set off to Vancouver Film School in the first place.[12]

Perhaps the most significant contribution Smith's hometown friends made to his later film work, besides the aforementioned Jason Mewes providing the template for "Jay," would be Bryan Johnson's serving as the model for *Clerks*' clownish slacker, Randal. In *Snowball Effect* Smith describes Johnson as someone who "[set me] on the course to being who [I am] essentially for the rest of [my] life" and even claims during the "*Clerks* Tenth Anniversary Q & A" that "I wanted to *be* [. . .] Bryan Johnson." Further, since the release and success of *Clerks* Smith has admitted that Randal is based on Johnson (and Dante on Smith himself), a fact which takes on added significance when we note that in the original casting for *Clerks*, Smith himself planned to play the Randal role! Thus the connection between Smith and Randal is quite literal: he wanted to BE Bryan Johnson who was the model for Randal who Smith was slated to play in *Clerks*. And while he ultimately gave up the Randal role in his debut film to Jeff Anderson, as we will see in the next section, Smith has been able to fulfill his desire to *be* Bryan-like or Randal-like in his onstage Q & A session appearances, shedding his own self-deprecating, Dante-like propriety in favor of a funnier and snarkier version of himself that is far more reminiscent of his clownish, unapologetic slacker characters.[13]

As the work of Eve Sedgwick and this study have shown, the homosocial always carries the threat of the homoerotic, and Smith's real-life buddy relations pervasively

evince this. The most frequent source of homoerotic joking, teasing, and suggestion for Smith occurs between himself and Jason Mewes, who frequently joins Smith onstage for his college Q & A sessions. Perhaps the most condensed version of the eroticizing of their relationship takes place early on disc one of *An Evening With Kevin Smith*, where Smith explains how he taught Mewes how to be "Jay" on-camera for *Clerks*. He notes that Jay was very nervous in front of the camera in the early days and needed to be fed his lines by Smith on many occasions. Smith illustrates this point by making a hand gesture like he is sticking his arm up Mewes' rectum and manipulating him like a ventriloquist's puppet, a gesture that both violently reasserts Smith's authorship over the "Jay" character and is suggestive of the "fisting demonstration" sequence from *Chasing Amy*, a mapping of gay male sexual practice onto Smith and Mewes.

This sexualizing of Mewes, this positioning of him as a kind of sexual play-toy, is perpetuated by Smith and Mewes throughout the Q & A session, where Mewes' status as a sex symbol is repeatedly remarked upon by Smith and the audience alike, and where Smith shares a fantasy in which Mewes is his personal fuck-buddy: he says Mewes "looks like he sucks a lot of dick" and imagines a scenario in which there are "no chicks, we went and saw some movies" and then Smith asks Mewes, "Hey, you want to suck my dick?" Smith then provides Mewes' fantasy reply: "Alright, Moves." This fantasy, which is presented jokingly, explores the same question as does so much of Smith's cinematic work: Why is it so difficult for close male buddies to cross the line into being sexual with one another? Why can't two buddies who have just returned from a movie date fellate one another guilt-free? Smith's invocation of Mewes' private nickname for

Smith, "Moves," heightens the irony here, bringing the two longtime friends' real buddy relation into dangerously close discursive contact with Smith's Mewes-centered homosexual fantasy.

Smith even implies that he would like to keep Mewes as his personal puppet/fisting-mate for the indeterminate future. At two different points during *An Evening With Kevin Smith*, Smith explains how he had to teach Mewes how to be "Jay" on-camera even though the character is based upon a younger version of Mewes himself. During one version of this humorous narrative, Smith contends that Mewes is "a comedic genius without knowing it," a somewhat underhanded compliment that both credits Mewes with providing the basis for Jay's humor while positioning himself (Smith) as the conscious artist who shapes and guides Mewes's unconscious talent into becoming something screenworthy (*Evening With* disc 1 chapter 9). This metaphor of Smith as Mewes's puppeteer is presented as a visual joke during an earlier sequence (disc 1 chapter 2) wherein Smith mimics the motion of putting his hand up Mewes's rectum and manipulating him like a hand puppet (see Figure 39). The hand motion Smith makes here looks surprisingly similar to the "fisting" demonstration Alyssa gives to Holden in *Chasing Amy* and is certainly sexually suggestive. Hence, when Smith later states that he hopes Mewes still doesn't realize his own comedic abilities, it suggests that Smith would like to retain Mewes as his unconscious puppet so he can continue "fisting" him.

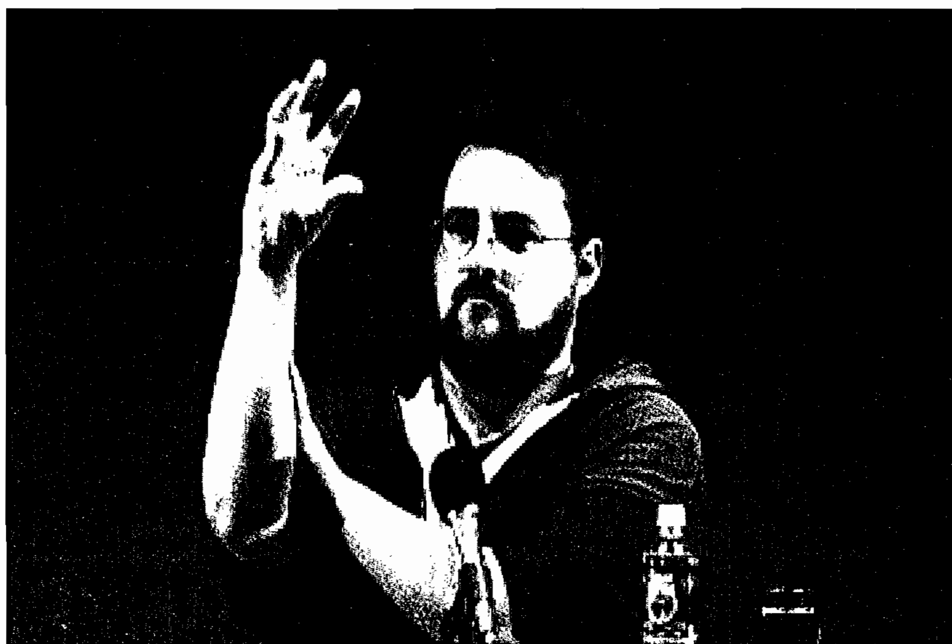

Figure 39: Kevin Smith mimics puppeteering / fisting Jason Mewes.

Interesting in this connection is Jason Mewes's physical resemblance to Highland Recreation Center-era Bryan Johnson, who like Mewes sported long blonde hair and a slender figure. Taken together with the previous comments on Smith's initial impression of Scott Mosier as a gay-looking pretty boy, one begins to wonder at Smith's trend of choosing blonde pretty boys as his closest friends and collaborators. And while I do not suggest that Smith himself is necessarily conscious of this tendency, nor do I offer this as evidence that the actual person Kevin Smith is bisexual, nevertheless it is notable, especially when viewed in light of the way Smith frames his relationship to Mewes onstage. For the onstage Mewes, who shows up for the Q & A performances but says very little, is presented as a sex symbol, Smith's "bitch," a reversal of their onscreen Jay-and-Bob dynamic. A clear instance of Jay's onstage role is found late on the first

Evening With disc, when Jay is shot from a low angle sitting on a love seat with a small tubular object held in his crotch, simulating masturbation while Smith attempts to answer an audience member's question. This image, of Mewes "jerking off" while Smith talks, says it all: with his long blonde hair, suggestive facial expression, simulated large member, and lack of audible voice, Mewes is a phallic yet feminized (passive) sex symbol, androgynous and femininely beautiful. And he is but an added attraction or sideshow to the main event, that is, Smith's virtuoso verbosity.

One astute *Evening With* fan addresses Mewes' queer sexualization by asking: "In the comics and the movies, does Jay's tiny dick and latent homosexuality come from his escapades at the Rec Center? Or is there something else behind that?" Smith coaxes Mewes into answering this query, despite Mewes' insistence that Smith should answer it since "you write this shit." Yet Smith prevails, and Mewes responds with a fairly standard denial that leads to a suggestive joke that itself turns into defensively homophobic vitriol: first he says "I love pussy," then jokes that "I like the cock in my mouth," then concludes by telling the questioner, "Why don't you put a cock in your mouth and shut your face!" Mewes here repeats a pattern of coy suggestion and homophobic denial that he shares with his onscreen alter-ego Jay, a pattern that characterizes the buddy dynamics in all five View Askewniverse films and leads one *Evening With* audience member to ask bluntly: "How come Jay and Bob didn't just get it on [in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*]?" This recognizable pattern of homoerotic suggestion accompanied by immediate denial pervades not only Smith's cinematic work

and onstage appearances with his co-stars, but also his writings about his male friends and cohorts.

In his essay collection *Silent Bob Speaks*, Smith frequently refers to close friend, Hollywood superstar, and View Askew regular Ben Affleck, the next-most sexually fetishized of Smith's male buddies after Jason Mewes. Smith is always effusive in his praise of Affleck's professionalism and acting abilities, often repeating the joke that "if they remake *Jaws*, Affleck could even play the shark." However, his expressions of professional admiration and personal friendship with Affleck often bleed into the homoerotic, as when he confesses that "It's no secret that I've got a heterosexual crush on him. If I were gay, I'd let him plow my fields of anal gold in a heartbeat" (*Silent Bob Speaks* 33). The "if I were gay" caveat deployed here allows Smith to engage the fantasy of being anally penetrated by Affleck without necessarily outing himself as not-exclusively-straight, and Smith's subsequent comment that ""'[as] I'm just straight ol' me, I'm simply a fan of the man—personally and professionally" is interesting for the way it frames Smith's assertion of straightness with a cute cliche–"straight ol' me"—that is tonally reminiscent of the way someone who is flirting but doesn't want to admit it might say "What? Little ol' me?" Further, by equating his feelings for Affleck with fandom—"I'm simply a fan of the man"—he positions himself as a star-struck admirer whose personal and profession admiration blurs into the fanatical and possibly sexually desiring.

Smith makes his homoerotic attraction to Ben Affleck even more clear a bit later in *Silent Bob Speaks*, when, contrasting him to the apparently less desirable Ryan Phillipe, he writes: "I fantasize about [Phillipe] tackling me on a lawn a few yards from

his own home (no homoerotic subtext, mind you; the boy's no Affleck)" (60). Not only does this anecdotal admission belie Smith's possible desire for the disavowed Phillipe—for why does Smith need to offer his parenthetical denial if not for the fact that his fantasy of being tackled by the *Way of the Gun* star does indeed carry a homoerotic charge?—but it also makes clear that Smith is aware that his attraction to Affleck goes beyond personal and professional admiration. This passage reveals that there is indeed a homoerotic subtext present in the relationship between Smith and Affleck, and is later supported by another very revealing passage that reads: "[T]hat's what Ben is to me—a really good friend. I admire his talent and I cheer on his successes, but mostly, I rib him as much as I can—solely to mask what would be more or less rightly construed as an almost homoerotic blind allegiance. [. . .] I'll always love him" (188). Not only does Smith once again use the term "homoerotic" to refer to his friendship with Affleck, he displays an awareness of the way typical homosocial buddy dynamics attempt to cover over or suppress those erotics: through "ribbing," which can be construed as both teasing or joking but can also lead to full-on physical fighting as in the "Catharsis" *denouement* of *Clerks*. This the most frank extant admission by Smith of the way in which ribbing, joking, and homosocial bait-and-switching function "solely" as masks for homoerotic love, and supports the idea that at some level, buried beneath the jokes, ambiguity, and occasional defensiveness, Smith may indeed be aware of the homoerotic imperatives that drive his work.[14]

Before moving from these individual cases to a broader look at the View Askew homosocial collective in general, a few words must be said about Smith's closest and

most central cinematic co-collaborator, Scott Mosier. Mosier may not be an obvious sex symbol like Mewes and Affleck are, yet we have already noted his "pretty boy" appearance when he first met Smith, and his post-1992 dressing down of his appearance has not exempted him from being considered as something more than a mere co-worker and friend in Smith's writings and public comments. In fact, the most frequent terminology Smith has used to describe his relationship to Mosier has been that of marriage: on the *Clerks* 10th Anniversary Q & A he explicitly says that his 1999 marriage to Jen Schwalbach necessitated his "divorce" from Mosier, and in the introductory reference glossary at the opening of *My Boring-Ass Life* Smith calls Mosier "my first wife" (n.p.). While this language downplays the sexual aspect of their bond to one another, it nevertheless implies a relationship that is much more personal, intimate, and binding than that of simple friends or co-workers. In fact, one might surmise—as I will discuss in a forthcoming book project chapter—that much of Mosier's professional burnout after *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* and particularly *Jersey Girl* may find its origin in the new dynamics he and Smith had to negotiate after Smith became a literal husband and father in 1999.[15]

However, rarely one to leave a homoerotic stone unturned, Smith discusses Mosier in overtly sexual terms in a passage from his *Jersey Girl* production diary found in *Silent Bob Speaks*. This diary opens with a "gay joke" Smith plays upon himself: "Dear Diary, There's this boy in class that I'm just dreamy over. He's got pretty blue eyes, brown hair, and a huge, monster cock that barely fits up my. . . Shit. Wrong diary. Lemme start over" (257). Part of the humor here is the way this passage feminizes

Smith—he uses the word "dreamy" as he pines away after a boy—and, more bluntly, its juxtaposition of the phrases "a huge, monster cock that barely fits up my. . ." and "Shit" is suggestive of anal sex. On the next page, Smith reveals that in this fantasy, "naturally, I'm talking about me and my longtime producer, Scott Mosier; *everyone* wants to know if we're really fucking or not" (258). By identifying Mosier as the object of Smith's "schoolgirl fantasy," this passage evokes (in a comedic way) Smith's first meeting with Mosier in Vancouver Film School, eroticizing their relationship retroactively from the moment of their first meeting forward. And Smith's statement that *everyone* is curious about the possibility of sexual attraction between the filmmaking duo is itself suggestive: if everyone wasn't already curious about this, they sure will be now. And, as this passage reveals, it is obvious that Smith has thought long and (ahem) hard about this possibility himself.

Marginalized Women

Male homosociality by definition implies the exclusion/marginalization of women, and this trend is evident in not just the films but the corporate makeup of View Askew Productions: View Askew—or at least its most consistent core membership—constitutes a homosocial boys' club. The most consistent and consistently promoted players on the View Askew team are all men, a phenomenon easily grasped by a quick look at the lists of commentary track participants for the first five View Askew DVDs. As the table below shows, not one woman graces these commentary tracks, despite significant co-starring performances by Marilyn Ghigliotti and Lisa Spoonauer (*Clerks*),

Shannen Doherty, Claire Forlani, and Renee Humphrey (all *Mallrats*), and perhaps most significantly, repeat contributor and *Chasing Amy* star Joey Lauren Adams. While this omission can be partially explained by the availability of certain of these women—Doherty, Forlani, and Adams in particular have busy film careers that may have prevented them from showing up for a commentary recording session—nevertheless the consistent presence of extremely busy male A-list actors like Ben Affleck and Jason Lee suggests that getting the boys back together is a higher priority to the View Askew commentary producers than including the women contributors.

DVD	commentary participants
Clerks (original 1995 DVD)	Smith, Scott Mosier, Jason Mewes, Brian O'Halloran, and others
Clerks X	Smith, Scott Mosier, Brian O'Halloran, Jeff Anderson, and Jason Mewes
Mallrats	Smith, Scott Mosier, Ben Affleck, Jason Lee, Jason Mewes, Vincent Pereira
Chasing Amy	Smith, Scott Mosier, Ben Affleck, Jason Mewes, Bob Hawk, Jon Gordon, Vincent Pereira
Dogma	Smith, Scott Mosier, Vincent Pereira, Ben Affleck, Jason Mewes, Jason Lee
Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back	Smith, Scott Mosier, Jason Mewes

Table 6: Commentary track participants on the first five View Askew DVDs

In fact, this shunting aside of women and the structural misogyny it suggests is supported by passages from *Silent Bob Speaks* in which Smith describes some of his female collaborators. For example, writing of his *Jersey Girl* experiences, Smith lauds both Jennifer Lopez's and Liv Tyler's acting skills, saying Tyler is "in the running, alongside Lopez, for best actress I've ever worked with" (284). Yet a mere five pages

later, addressing the issue of the negative publicity that accrued to Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez's relationship during *Jersey Girl*'s production, Smith prints *in its entirety* an anti-J-Lo email he received on his View Askew message board, ostensibly to refute it but nevertheless committing to print phrases referring to Lopez as "J. Ho," a "materialistic user," and someone who "lies to God" (289-95). And while Smith does refute this nasty email point-by-point, he spares male *Jersey Girl* co-star Jason Biggs this potentially humiliating treatment, opting to "forego the standard pie-fucking jokes" and focus on commending the actor for his talents.[16] In fact, despite Smith's high regard for Tyler's and Lopez's skills, it is male co-star Biggs who he plans to ask back to View Askew again: "I love this fellow Jersey boy. Look for him in more of our stuff, if he'll come back" (287). In short, men come back and become part of the consistent View Askew team, whereas women are praised for their talents then brushed aside, especially if they dare to have a star text that impinges on View Askew's ability to promote its films properly. One also wonders if Smith's carefully veiled disdain for Lopez might relate to his own (previously discussed) feelings for Ben Affleck?

And to be sure, some of the women who have been dropped quickly from the View Askew roster have been involved in failed romantic relationships with various View Askew men. The most notable of these after Jennifer Lopez would be Smith's own relationship with Joey Lauren Adams, which provided some of the basis for *Chasing Amy* and gave that film its female star. Yet after their breakup during the production of *Amy*, Adams drifted from the View Askew fold and was not included on the commentary track for the *Amy* videodisc/DVD. Also notable is the Lisa Spoonauer – Jeff Anderson

romance that blossomed on the set of *Clerks*, led to their marriage in 1998 and subsequent divorce in 2000. Interestingly, Smith and Anderson fought over money in the wake of *Clerks*' success and did not speak for many years, yet by 2003 they had reconciled their differences—but Spoonauer herself has not been seen or heard in View Askew circles again ("*Clerks* Tenth Anniversary Q & A").

While the commentary participant chart and these cases suggest a marginalization or exclusion of women from the View Askew production team, there is also a detectable strain of active misogyny in the View Askew films and secondary materials. Many have noted the misogynist humor in *Clerks* and *Mallrats*, perhaps the most extreme example of this being the climactic joke in *Clerks* wherein Caitlin Bree (Spoonauer) unknowingly has sex with an anonymous dead man. And despite its openness to possible pro-lesbian readings, *Chasing Amy* does ultimately marginalize Alyssa's desires and lesbian identity in favor of taking Holden's male point of view.

In terms of supplemental materials, we have seen Smith's willingness to publicly expose his own fans' virulent critiques against actress Jennifer Lopez, but his most emphatic personal animosity is directed against popular independent and Hollywood actress Reese Witherspoon. Smith is quite open and public about his distaste for Witherspoon, calling her "Greasy Reese" in his *Arena* column and lambasting her for being "faux-erudite as hell, and condescending to boot" (*Silent Bob Speaks* 55). Smith claims that Witherspoon "held [a grudge] against me for not letting her audition for *Mallrats*" and that she subsequently re-sparked his ire by "sneer[ing] at [Smith's then-girlfriend] Joey [Lauren Adams]" at a *Details*-sponsored party in late 1996 or early 1997

(58). Yet the final straw, the slight that caused Smith to become "livid" with Witherspoon, is her rumored joking comment on the set of her 1998 film *Overnight Delivery*—for which Smith scribed an early screenplay draft—that, due to Smith's contribution, "[the] dialogue sucked" (*Silent Bob Speaks* 59). As we have seen, Smith is particularly proud of his writing and strongly identifies as a writer of sharp and hilarious dialogue for films. So for his arch-nemesis "Greasy Reese" to publicly slam him for dialogue that "sucked" is a bigger insult than even the usually forgiving Smith can bear. I suggest that Smith's rage at Reese is also an outgrowth of the larger homosocial and misogynistic tendencies of his own social / professional group.

For Smith, who is one of the few figures in 1990s independent cinema to actually *get along* with the famously unpleasant Miramax co-CEO Harvey Weinstein, does not limit his scathing remarks to Witherspoon, though she is clearly his favorite target.[17] Smith also rants against Lindsay Lohan and Hilary Duff on *An Evening With Kevin Smith 2*, calling Lohan "trashy" and suggesting that a good movie might be where Lohan and Duff be forced to fight one another with broken beer bottles (disc 1, chapter 6). As these examples show, Smith targets female actors as objects of derision, and I have yet to find a published source where he is so vitriolic against any male actor or filmmaker. In short, there is a pronounced gendered dimension to Smith's public assessment of other film-business figures.

This fear and anger toward women relates to slacker cinema's fascination with / fear of masculine women, phallic mothers, and lesbians. As feminized male underachievers who, "by remaining juvenile, [. . .] [evade] guilty memories of the

original patricide [or phallic-matricide] on which [their] privileges pivot" (Troyer and Marchiselli 267), slackers are particularly threatened by willful, high-achieving women such as Witherspoon and the characters she portrays, and so it is no wonder that an iconic slacker like Smith should so despise her in particular. It pays also to think here of View Askew's foreclosure/erasure of Alyssa Jones's lesbian identity in *Chasing Amy*, for, as we will see in the next section, there is perhaps no greater threat to the male slacker's homosocial buddy *milieu* than an out, outspoken lesbian.

Slacker versus Lesbian: "*Chasing Amy* Politics"

In this section, I analyze a key scene from *An Evening With Kevin Smith* which centers on Smith's response to a lesbian audience member / question-asker named Lela.

An Evening With Kevin Smith, a two-DVD set released straight to video in 2002, is by, for, and about Kevin Smith's View Askew fans. It constitutes a selective visual record of Smith/View Askew fandom as it manifested on five college campuses in the years between *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* and *Jersey Girl*, 2001-02. As earlier discussed, the question-and-answer format of the stage shows allows Smith to play around with/in his Randal/Bryan Johnson persona, make jokes, and tell stories that expand the mythology/continuity of his star text. As I argue, in these appearances Smith literally and symbolically reasserts his control over that ever-expanding, ever-shifting text. Favoring the more Randal-like aspects of his personality, which we can describe as unapologetic, in-your-face, and opinionated, gives Smith an advantage in this: as we shall see, he can brashly seize control of the rhetorical situation at any time under the guise of

humor. As we might guess, Smith avoids the more Dante-ish side of his personality, the apologetic, "forever backing down" persona who might be so receptive to the input of his fan-questioners that he lets that discursive control slip.

An Evening With Kevin Smith is marketed toward the videophile crowd, which is to some extent the crowd it depicts: university students and their friends. Indeed, it is also the same general demographic that Smith's View Askew films have targeted all along: Generation X pop culture geeks who consume not just home video materials but also comic books, film soundtracks, *Star Wars* toys and paraphernalia, video games, etc. The overlap between (predominantly white and male) comics fans, science fiction fans, and DVD collectors/videophiles is reflected at the broader cultural and film-industrial level in the recent boom of highly successful blockbuster films based upon comic book properties, such as the *Spider-Man*, *X-Men*, and *Batman* franchises. Furthermore, the influence of web-based reviews upon film commerce, parodied in Smith's *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, is significant enough to have been noted in the April 2007 issue of TIME magazine: "[T]he fanboy, the typically geeky 16-to-34-year-old male [. . .], [is] having his way with Hollywood. [. . .] [These] fans are enjoying an unprecedented era of influence, through blogs, podcasts and movie-news sites that have become trusted sources of movie information for millions of filmgoers" (Keegan 63, 64). In a similar vein, mainstream pop culture magazine *Entertainment Weekly* ran two articles in July and August of 2007 documenting the increased imbrication of film and comic book cultures, noting that comic book conventions have become key sites for the early marketing of science fiction and superhero films (*EW* #945 9-10, *EW* #947 34-7). At the microcosmic

level, Kevin Smith is himself a comics fan *and* an avid videophile, a laserdisc collector who reportedly sold that collection to partially finance the shooting of *Clerks*. Thus Smith is here metonymic for the overlap of videophile, 'smart' cinemagoer, and comic book fan subcultures.[18]

Indeed, the straight-to-video success of not one but *two* volumes of *An Evening With Kevin Smith*, plus plans for a third volume to be released in 2008, demonstrates how effectively Smith's off-screen relationships create a site of audience investment. What are Mewes and Smith (who cohabitated with Smith even after Smith got married!) *really* like off-screen? This speculation creatively fuels and economically finances the existence of both *Evening With Kevin Smith* volumes, which taken together add up to over seven hours of edited question-and-answer footage. Smith's fans want to talk with him, and he is plenty happy to talk: it is well-known that Smith considers himself to be first and foremost a writer and that he likes to use words to convey his ideas. For just as in his famously tight-scripted feature films, his Q & A appearances prove him a potent wordsmith who is able to verbally manipulate his own fans' perception of his persona and work.

The general tone of the Q & A sessions documented on *An Evening With Kevin Smith* is light and joking, and most of the stories and information Smith discusses consist of humorous revelations about Smith, his collaborators, and the A-listers (like *Batman Wild Wild West* producer Jon Peters and rock superstar Prince) he meets in his professional life. However, the scene where Lela appears and asks Smith about the possible anti-lesbian message of *Chasing Amy* abandons its jokiness fairly quickly and

takes on a more emotionally charged tone that is unusual for the Q & A encounters. Indeed, the DVD chapter where Smith meets Lela is entitled "*Chasing Amy* Politics" (*Evening* disc 1 chapter 19), a title that uses "politics" to contain Lela's queerly inflected critique. Smith announces early on in Lela's stating of her question that "This is political!" as if to set her critique apart from the usual, non-political questions and answers that get discussed onstage at the Q & A's. From the beginning of this filmed encounter, then, Smith works to marginalize Lela's concerns, bracketing them off into a special (and infrequently visited) realm called "politics."

Even earlier in "*Chasing Amy* Politics," Lela's self-introduction establishes that she is an "out" lesbian, a piece of information that seems to make Smith mildly uncomfortable and leads him to want to contain that revelation as well. After saying and spelling her name, Lela begins her question by mentioning lesbian poet Adrienne Rich, at which time Smith interrupts her (the first of a series of such interruptions) and asks: "Are you coming out?" Lela replies that "they all know me" and when Smith asks, "Are you out?!" Lela says matter-of-factly "Yeah" (see Figure 40). Lela's being out is greeted by applause and moderate cheering from the audience, indicating a queer-friendly crowd, perhaps more overtly at ease with Lela's lesbianism than Smith is. For Smith jokingly admonishes the audience to "calm down" and says, "This is college—you all act like you've never seen a lesbian before," perhaps mistaking their support of Lela for (his own?) agitation over her revelation of confidently out lesbianism.

Figure 40: Lela, the out lesbian audience member who asks penetrating questions about *Chasing Amy*'s treatment of lesbian sexuality.

In setting up her question for Smith, Lela states that "I did feel that [*Chasing Amy*] sort of made the point that all a lesbian needs is a good, deep dicking." But before she can continue and fully articulate her question, Smith interrupts her again, saying, "Did you? Excellent point!" These two short sentences are spoken loudly and heartily, a bit *too* enthusiastically, as if Smith welcomes this kind of question. However, his subsequent comments will make clear that his enthusiasm is exaggerated, and Smith's rhetorical mission from this point forward will be to close Lela's line of inquiry down, covering it over with the same stock defenses he has offered in response to this critique in the past (see Figure 41). It is worthy of note that the audience does not boo Lela when she says she does not like *Amy* nor when she makes the "deep dicking" claim, though they cheer and laugh at Smith's clipped response, mistaking its meaning: he means that

her point (in bringing the question up in the first place) is excellent, but their laughter indicates that they think he means that the "deep dicking" assertion itself is excellent. In short, they think he is making fun of her and they laugh. So despite the tolerance / friendliness of the crowd when Lela first declares her out-ness, this is a group who is nevertheless willing to cheer Smith on when he, in true Randal-like fashion, seemingly dismisses her question with a snarky reaction.

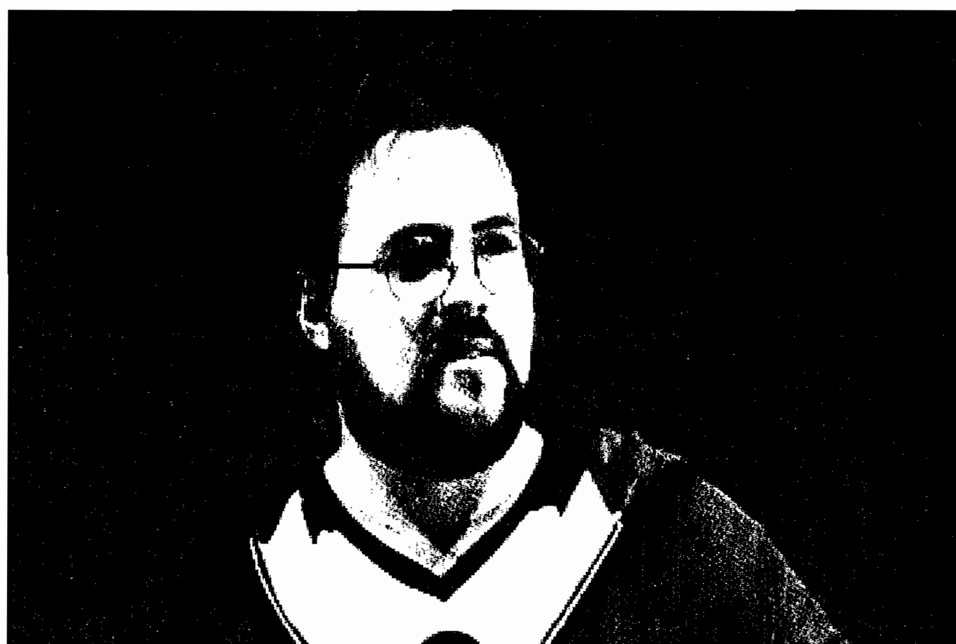

Figure 41: Smith gets defensive.

And while Smith does not intend his comment in quite the way the crowd takes it, and offers a clarification, the audience is nevertheless reading his *intent* correctly, for from this moment forward he takes charge of the verbal situation and barely lets her speak for the rest of her time onscreen. And his manner changes: he gets touchy,

defensive, and begins a proactive verbal assault on her (as yet not fully stated) position. Is *he* afraid of a lesbian, and/or the lesbian critique of *Amy*? His defensiveness here suggests that his earlier admonition to the audience, "you all act like you've never seen a lesbian before," could refer to some part of his own self, the self he acknowledges when he states in a 2000 article that "[I] wasn't always so enlightened [my]self" (Kilday 62). Yet his 2000 admission that he used to be unenlightened with respect to queer issues implies that he now is enlightened, and while he has probably made huge strides since his growing-up years in suburban New Jersey, his fearful reaction to Lela remains evidence of a lingering paranoia / appropriative guilt around the issue of lesbian representation.

After this interruption, Lela attempts to continue asking her question, but Smith jokingly yet firmly cuts her off again, claiming that he "let [her] go on [talking] for like two hours" when in fact Lela only gets one and a half minutes at the mic before Smith takes charge. The incredibly short amount of time he allots to Lela for articulating her question is particularly significant in light of the fact that Smith frequently lets non-"political" weirdos waste tons more mic time than he gives her.[19] Perhaps on some level sensing that he is cheating her of mic time, Smith says, "It is like the Kevin Smith show." He says this obsequiously, and yet it *is* the Kevin Smith show, and he is reminding Lela (and us) of this fact as he seizes control of their debate. His mention of whose show it is and his ability to take control rhetorically indicate that Smith is in the power position here, just as Banky—whatever his "idiot" status may be—is in the power position over Alyssa in *Chasing Amy*: he is the Iago who, albeit at self-destructive price, successfully undermines Desdemona's relationship with her beloved yet too-jealous Othello.

Once Smith has wrested verbal control of the situation from Lela, he uses what he *thinks* she was going to ask him—she never finishes asking her question—as a springboard from which to move into (1) his oft-repeated "Banky" defense of *Chasing Amy*, which I will recount, (2) an assertion of himself as a "simple" entertainer without a political agenda, and then (3) his standard "origin story" that explains why View Askew has a "little gay content thrown in there": the existence of Smith's gay older brother.

To begin with the first of these points, Smith's initial response to Lela after he heatedly interrupts her is to assert that his "feelings on that [issue of *Amy*'s anti-lesbianism] have been the same since 1996 when I wrote it," another reminder of his privileged "insider" position as the film's writer. He then goes on to explain that since the controversial, offending assertion that "all a lesbian really needs is a good, deep dicking" is put forth by Banky, described by Smith as *Amy*'s "idiot character," then Banky's obvious status as a fool deflates or invalidates that position. However, as I discussed in Chapter IV, this "Banky-as-idiot" defense overlooks both (1) the ways in which the *narrative structure* of *Chasing Amy*, and hence the film itself, never contradicts Banky's heterocentrist belief, and in fact supports it through a sympathetic focus on Alyssa's heterosexual relationship with Holden, and (2) Banky's sympathetic portrayal in the film, which may lead an audience to laugh at and/or be disturbed by his misogynistic views but certainly does not actively encourage us to dismiss or discredit him.

Interestingly, the audience in *An Evening With* is strangely silent when Smith offers his "Banky-as-idiot" defense of *Amy*—my sense is that there is some skepticism or at least less-than-full acceptance implied there, but it is hard to tell.

Smith next explains that "[a]ll I can do is make movies the way I want to make them, the way I want to see them, as entertaining as possible. And if I can whip a little bit of message in there, that's more than most cats do." This claim is interesting on many levels. For one, characterizing the impetus behind his work as a desire to make films that are "as entertaining as possible" downplays the ideological (or "political") content of the films, attempting to deflect accusations of questionable politics via the hackneyed defense that the films are "only entertainment." This is simply not true: Lela's comments and half-formed question demonstrate that *Amy* contains messages that provoke strong reactions from members of various communities, perhaps especially lesbians and their allies in this case.

Smith's concomitant claim that it is his intention to "whip a little bit of message in there," and that that is "more than most cats do," while seemingly in harmony with his previous statement that he is first and foremost an entertainer, nonetheless becomes the basis for the remainder of his defensive argument. So while he begins by claiming "entertainment first, a little message second," the "little bit of message" becomes the fact on which he will now attempt to convince Lela and the audience that he is in fact doing "more than most cats do" in the area of politically progressive filmmaking. Further, this "more than most" assertion reads like the ultimate slacker disclaimer, a Dante-like argument that says it is okay to under-achieve so long as you do a little more—perhaps just the bare minimum more—than most people.

Lela calls Smith on the weakness of his argument, though she does so in a way that only seems to further agitate him. Attempting to support her anti-lesbian reading of

Chasing Amy, she states that many of his fans are misogynist and objectify women, and that "it wasn't maybe your fault but I think that movie put that [misogynist message] out there."

Lela is complicating the issue here by addressing the misogyny of Smith's *audience* as opposed to the text. And yet there is a connection between the two issues, although Smith tries to deny this by saying that "that [misogyny amongst my fans] has nothing to do with this [issue of *Amy*]" and telling Lela to "stay on topic." Yet what he fails to see is the salience of her underlying (if haltingly presented) point: that there is a fundamental, constitutive connection between male misogyny (hatred / devaluation / objectification of women) and the heterocentrist anti-lesbianism that Lela claims characterizes *Amy*. Both serve patriarchy by equating maleness with subjectivity and insisting upon male, penetrative sexuality as the only "real" or legitimate form of sexuality. Lela has a real and important point here, but Smith isn't listening: he has his own defense planned and is pushing their conversation steadily in its direction.

For all this is a lead-in to the story Smith really wants to deliver, the story he frequently uses to assure his audience of his gay-friendliness: the tale of his gay older brother. This story delineates Smith's desire to provide cinematic content for his out older brother that would relate to his life as a gay man. Smith says that his brother, a longtime supporter of Smith's comedy sketch writing, would complain to Smith that few films being produced had any kind of content he could relate to as a homosexual man, and Smith thus explains that: "The movies we've made have always had a little gay content in there [. . .] so that my brother will know that I'm throwing it in there for him."

This story is interesting for the way it admits to a pro-gay agenda and gay content in the View Askew films, yet places the responsibility for that agenda and content upon Smith's brotherly relation, a homosocial yet avowedly non-sexual paradigm.

But Smith needs more than just his usual "gay brother" story to convince Lela, so he also takes the opportunity to suggest that "[a] large portion of the gay community loves the stuff we [View Askew] do, while a very small pocket is like 'He's a closet[ed] fag-hater' and blah, blah blah—not knowing the amount of cock I chug myself." Smith claims to know that "a large portion" of the gay community (whoever that might be) is in favor of his work, and that it is only a vitriolic minority, which in this context implicitly includes Lela herself, who opposes his deployment of queer characters and content. Then he ends on a joking assertion that he himself "chugs cock," an attempt to assert queer-insider status through coy reference to his possible bisexuality.

So, although Smith chides Lela for not staying on topic, it is in fact *Smith* who leads the discussion off-topic by first asking Lela—once again asserting his rhetorical control, his "authorship" of their scene together—if she agrees that there is gay-friendly content in his films, eliciting her uncomfortable assent (she seems to know she's being railroaded here), then launching into his gay brother story. This story has the tripartite purpose of (a) asserting Smith's gay-friendliness through his connection to his brother, (b) leading his and Lela's conversation away from her specific concerns about *Amy*, since the story involves his whole career writ large ("from *Clerks* onward") and *not* any specific film, and perhaps most importantly, (c) *reasserts Smith's position as auteur* by connecting the core content / intent of View Askew's films to a personal inspiration

based upon his experiences with his brother. Hence, by the end of the story, Smith has drawn attention away from Lela's question about *Chasing Amy*'s possible anti-lesbianism and refocused the debate upon the possible gay-friendliness of his entire film career.

Beyond constituting Smith's uncomfortable attempt to exert damage control over the homophobic/misogynistic elements of his own work and star text, the recounting of his gay brother story on *An Evening With* shows that the filmmaker is well aware that queer sexuality, or at least queer male sexuality, sells: during his debate with Lela he admits that "When I found out we [View Askew] had an audience, I threw *lots* of gay content in there." Smith claims in this context to have added more "gay" content to View Askew's films in order to fulfill an educational mission, to intentionally "fuck with [the] heads" of his misogynistic and/or queer-bashing audience members. This self-portrayal of Smith as a filmmaker with an explicit gay political agenda is at odds with his moments-earlier claim to be primarily an agenda-free entertainer. As I think this study has shown, Smith's View Askew films are absolutely brimming with (often contradictory) sociopolitical and psychosexual meanings and implications. And in truth, *both* of these characterizations of Smith—as the simple entertainer and as the politically motivated educator—belie the *economic* advantages that accrue to Smith as a result of his including queerness in his film comedies.

Near the end of his time with Lela, Smith admits an awareness of the profitability of his controversial and misogynistic use of queerness when he jokes that he "sold a lot of merchandise on our website" to homophobic View Askew fans, and, in reference to such fans, that "I'll make a profit on their backs." On the one hand, he claims to be "very

uncomfortable" with the misogynist members of his audience, yet, on the other, admits he needs their money and ongoing patronage. This latter implies that Smith's films will continue to deal with queerness obliquely and ambiguously, walking a precarious line between queer tolerance and the profitability of misogynistic and homophobic humor. After all, as Eileen Meehan points out, "[p]rofit, not culture, drives show business: no business means no show" (48), a fact of which Smith is well aware.

Unfortunately, even after the gay brother narrative, perhaps sensing that Lela remains unconvinced, Smith is still not finished railroading his lesbian questioner. Smith next makes a reference to "focus groups" and asks Lela "have you ever been in a focus group?" Whether or not she has been in a focus group is irrelevant to the discussion but highlights Smith's relative experience in the movie business, contrasting it with Lela's ignorance (she hasn't been in a focus group). So the "focus group" story, ostensibly about a homophobic audience member who reacted badly to the Banky character's revealed gayness at the end of *Amy*, is *really* about reminding Lela and the *Evening With* audience (in the room and those watching the DVD) of Smith's self-valorizing educational mission—Smith insists that viewing *Amy* may have made that homophobic viewer reevaluate his own homophobia—and highlighting his greater experience and movie-business knowledge compared to Lela.

For once it is revealed, in the wake of the focus group discussion, that Lela was only eighteen when *Amy* came out, and is only twenty-two at the time of *An Evening With*'s taping, Smith wastes no time in snarkily labeling her a "bi-curious girl from college"—an insulting remark that, in an eerily accurate echo of *Chasing Amy*'s diegesis,

baldly attempts to undermine Lela's ability to call herself a lesbian. By calling Lela a "bi-curious girl from college," Smith implies that her avowed lesbianism is not only phantasmal, a product of immature bi-curiosity and thus not "true" committed lesbianism, but also a mere phase that will pass once she leaves college. I can hardly imagine a more insulting or homophobic remark.

Not that Lela is completely blameless in how this increasingly uncomfortable exchange unfolds: after Smith calls her "bi-curious," she somewhat passive-aggressively calls *Chasing Amy* "dumb but harmless," a point she could have introduced more tactfully and specifically, thereby *possibly* eliciting a more measured response from Smith (italics indicate my dubiousness on this point). She instead confronts him head-on with the queer-appropriative and misogynistic elements of his most critically lauded, professionally important work, which triggers a defensive reaction from Smith: he attempts to bury her critique under a flurry of his own pre-meditated arguments. To be fair, Smith handles the situation with a fair amount of aplomb given how reactionary he can get when his work is threatened: we have seen how Reese Witherspoon's disdain for his writing made Smith "livid" and "enraged," and Lela's attack upon *Amy* is not significantly different in kind from Witherspoon's (*Silent Bob Speaks* 59). But even if, unlike Smith's ongoing public spat with Witherspoon, "*Chasing Amy* Politics" ends on a note of ostensible reconciliation, the happy ending feels forced—by Smith himself. Like the film to which it refers, "*Chasing Amy* Politics" makes me feel like a bullying session has just occurred, the slacker having once again used his position of male, *auteur*ist privilege to silence, shout down, and/or elide the lesbian. Indeed, the parallel with the

diegesis of *Amy* is quite *apropo* here since Smith's need to verbally control the rhetorical situation the moment a "political" or hot topic is raised seems related to his identity as a writer who, in his role as director, insists that his actors always stick to the written word of his screenplays. In short, Smith is used to being in control of verbal content in his position as writer/director, and even in an impromptu setting like the Q & A session he has difficulty relinquishing that control.

For Smith concludes the discussion by humbly asking for Lela's support: "You have to give me credit—I have done flicks that are far more gay friendly than most?" Lela smiles and says "yeah" but it is obvious that she is dissatisfied with their exchange. Once again, by referring only to his "flicks" in general, Smith has utterly elided the specifics of *Chasing Amy*, his most queerly visible and potentially lesbian-offensive film. Given that Lela's critique of *Amy* as anti-lesbian is far from unwarranted, by ignoring the specifics of her question Smith avoids hearing her charges of homophobic appropriation and in the process enacts an iconic scene that Banky himself would be proud of: that of the slacker versus the dyke. At the conclusion, Smith wins Lela's halfhearted complicity, but at the expense of answering, or even truly hearing, her real question: in fact, he mutters "I've heard this one" even before she's finished asking it. Like Holden in *Chasing Amy*, Smith is so fixated upon maintaining the *facade* of his own artistic integrity and "political correctness" that he is willing to shout Lela down to prevent ugly facts—such as his economic exploitation of lesbian imagery in *Chasing Amy* at the expense of lesbians like her—from coming to presence during the *Evening With Kevin Smith* Q & A.

The scene with Lela is an example of the way in which Smith tries to control and manipulate to a high degree the discourses surrounding himself and his work. As we have seen, this control is evident in Smith's writing and directing of the View Askew films themselves, his active interaction with fans on the internet, and in "live" instances like the *Evening With* encounter with Lela. However, most importantly, what the scene with Lela particularly illustrates is that *Smith's need to control the discourse surrounding him becomes most urgent when the issue is queer sexuality.*

We have seen that Smith is able to rabidly defend himself against accusations of homophobia despite his acknowledgement that his work is attractive to homophobic moviegoers, a stance which might suggest Smith still has unresolved homophobic beliefs of his own, or that (as he might be subtly implying in his response to Lela) the limitations of keeping his core audience onboard prevent his work from being more openly queer-friendly. Smith may not be actively anti-queer, yet he definitely shies away from acknowledging his own investments in queer desiring structures and queer culture. In spite of his large vocabulary, Smith rarely uses the word "queer," and never the word "bisexual," even though these terms accurately describe much of his work, especially the much-debated *Chasing Amy*. As my Chapter IV shows, a queer/bisexual reading of *Amy* reveals that, despite heterocentrist plot elements and Lela's valid claim that the film ultimately undermines Alyssa's lesbianism and subject-hood, this film actually leaves open many more queer possibilities than it forecloses, and is very sympathetic to a central character (Holden) who is struggling with his own bisexuality. Hence discussing *Amy*'s truly queer elements could have helped Smith justify his narrative choices in *Chasing*

Amy and opened up a rich dialogue with Lela on *An Evening With Kevin Smith*. Yet when confronted by Lela the lesbian, Smith the slacker shuts down her queer critique of *Amy*, much to my and Lela's shared disappointment and his detriment.

In sum, Smith is at great pains to be gay-friendly yet cannot stop doing a curious and self-contradictory verbal dance around the queerness of his persona and work. The end results are incoherent, affirming-yet-denying "answers" like Smith's response to Lela, responses that freely intermix and exemplify the compulsory homophobia, prevalent bi-curiosity, and confused gendering and sexuality of the Gen-X white male slacker, particularly in the face of the out, confident lesbian.

***Snowball Effect*: Working-class Hero versus Multimedia Mogul**

Filmmaking is collaborative, and Kevin Smith frequently acknowledges his View Askew coworkers and uses "we" and "us" to talk about View Askew Productions and its releases. Yet, as *An Evening With Kevin Smith* exemplifies, Smith's voice and image dominate public discourse about View Askew's output, and Smith is the acknowledged creator, *auteur*, and star of the View Askewniverse. Indeed, Smith has excelled at placing himself front and center, taking advantage of the "indie decade's" *auteurist* predilections and using his image and charm to promote View Askew's films and related merchandise.

Indeed, this ability of Smith's to use his personal appeal to market his work has been observed by many critics, including Andrew Sarris, who notes in a 2000 *Esquire* piece that Smith has a "flair for merchandising" and is possessed of a "cultural

ambidextrousness" that serves him well in the contemporary media marketplace (Sarris 218). Similarly, a *Houston Press* reviewer notes in his 2001 review of *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* that "Smith long ago stopped being a filmmaker and instead [has] turned into a franchise-maker" (Wilonsky 50). Smith does not deny this, and in fact encourages this "multimedia mogul" view of himself through frequent self-comparisons to *Star Wars* franchise-maker George Lucas. At two different points in *Silent Bob Speaks*, Smith admits to modeling aspects of his career after Lucas's, and in the introduction to his recent View Askew comics omnibus *Tales From the Clerks* (2006) he explicitly claims that he got the idea for doing comic book stories featuring his film characters from the Marvel *Star Wars* comic books of the late 1970s (*SBS* 9, 38, *Tales* n.p.). In fact, Smith seems to resonate with the concept of "creator" as it is deployed in the comics industry (and, incidentally, television), and discusses this idea explicitly with Marvel Comics founder and *uber*-creator Stan Lee. In an interview Smith conducts with Lee on the straight-to-DVD *Stan Lee's Mutants, Monsters & Marvels* (2002), Smith and Lee agree that just as Lee created the Marvel Comics universe, inventing many of its most enduring characters such as the Incredible Hulk, the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, and the X-Men, so too does Smith stand as the creator and public figurehead of the View Askewniverse and its fictional denizens.

However, despite Smith's occasional public acknowledgement of his media and business savvy, he is constantly at much greater pains to downplay his cinematic abilities and emphasize his lack of skill with a camera. In his Q & A appearances, he makes frequent offhand remarks about his "lack of [cinematic] style" and loves to remind

audiences that he dropped out of Vancouver Film School halfway through the program. This emphasis upon the unskilled, untrained nature of his cinematic success evinces Smith's need to keep the legend of his humble origins alive in order not to damage his independent street credibility. In fact, the entire premise and title of *Snowball Effect* (in addition to its reference to Willam the Idiot Manchild's favorite queer sexual pastime in *Clerks*) is to ground Smith's success and talent in his hard-working (if not exactly working-class) New Jersey origins, to demonstrate that even when he makes it big he is loyal to the people who supported him when he hadn't yet achieved national fame.

Yet as we have seen, Smith's relationship to his various successive buddy groups is complex: remember that while Bryan Johnson may "love" that the character of Randal is based upon him, he nevertheless felt hurt that Smith left him for film school, and Ernie O'Donnell and Mike Bellicose were frankly bewildered at being cut out of *Clerks*. I do not suggest that Smith should have dragged these old friends with him into the indie film industry, but rather that their abandonment reflects a pattern for Smith: when O'Donnell and Bellicose weren't up to the task of performing his work, he simply moved on to other associates (actor Brian O'Halloran, producer Scott Mosier, cinematographer David Klein) who were. Smith may not have forgotten his old friends but he did not cast them in major roles in *Clerks* as he initially promised, suggesting that for Smith the creative work of making and marketing his films generally takes precedence over the friendships he makes such a big deal out of in *Snowball Effect*.

To be fair, Smith has remained loyal to many of his collaborators over the years, and even turned down the opportunity to direct *Green Hornet* in order to continue

working with his longtime producer Scott Mosier. What is important is that while Smith does value his relationships, he also values his career, and he is very adept at making those two things work together, both in the sense that he frequently works hard to cast his friends but also uses those friends as a key part of his user-friendly, down-home image when it comes to publicly promoting his films.

All that said, Smith is something of a genuine "hometown hero" and his New Jersey roots are central to understanding his public identity as a filmmaker. Once *Clerks* hit big, Smith returned to New Jersey to set up his base of corporate operations there: the View Askew offices are located in Red Bank, NJ, as is Smith's comic book store, Jay and Silent Bob's Secret Stash (established in 1995). Even after his move to Los Angeles in 1999, Smith continued to host View Askew film festivals called Vulgar-a-thons every other year in New Jersey, and even commissioned Miramax's private charter jet in 1999 to fly his wife Jennifer cross-country so that his daughter, Harley Quinn Smith, would be born a New Jerseyan (*Evening 2* disc 2 chapter 27). Not that these deeds are disingenuous or are explicitly intended as publicity stunts, but Smith's fierce loyalty to his New Jersey home is nevertheless reinforced by high-profile acts like the private Jersey plane flight and by the cinematic efforts of Phil Benson, the director/producer of *Snowball Effect*, which couches Smith's career almost entirely in terms of his Jersey upbringing and high school friends.[20]

Smith has also been active in financing and promoting his New Jersey friends' film projects, including Bryan Johnson's *Vulgar* (2000), Vincent Pereira's *A Better Place* (1997), and most recently, Jeff Anderson's directorial debut *Now You Know* (2002).

Smith's generosity with his filmmaking friends is genuine, but promoting the public profile of *Vulgar* and other such projects through his executive producership and frequent onscreen guest appearances in these films helps reinforce his image as a humble, giving, and down-to-earth hometown hero, an image that plays well in the larger independent film marketplace and especially with Smith's many adoring fans.

Another way in which Smith tries to "keep it real" by downplaying his talents and financial success in public is to encourage the idea that his cinematic output has "no style," that he is a talentless hack who is very lucky to be where he is. Yet Smith's claims about having no cinematic style need to be questioned. Smith's humility about his craft is charming but covers up the fact that "no style" is still a style, and in fact the low-key, low-budget, self-referential style of *Clerks* was actually in high demand at the time of its 1994 release. Indeed, at Sundance 1994, the year producer's representative John Pierson describes as "the year when the ultra low-budget aesthetic was totally dominant," *Clerks* flaunted a low-budget look that was at the cutting edge of what it meant to be cool and hip in the independent film sector (Pierson 286). *Clerks'* indebtedness to (and closing-credits acknowledgement of) prior independent films such as Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), and Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991), reveal that Smith is a filmmaker who knows his indie cinema precursors well, and probably surmised even before *Clerks* was accepted to the Sundance Festival that it was the type of film an independent distributor might be interested in circa 1994. *Clerks*' formal similarities to *Slacker* and especially *Stranger Than Paradise*—shot in low-budget black and white and built out of a series of loosely connected

vignettes linked by text-based intertitles—reveal that Smith actually *does* have a style, and a fairly derivative one at that. In fact, to put a name to it, Smith might be the last practitioner of the early-90s low-budget indie style.

Interestingly, Smith admits on *An Evening With Kevin Smith* that he himself is the main source of the "no style" legend that surrounds him: he says that "I don't really have a style *per se*," yet admits that *he* proliferates the notion that he's not very talented "visceral[ly] or visual[ly]" in order to preemptively deflate that argument before it is brought against him by a film critic (*Evening With* disc 2 chapter 26). Once again, this demonstrates that despite his pretense to being a simple man with humble suburban origins, Kevin Smith is actually incredibly clever when it comes to framing his public image and controlling his multimedia career.

From time to time, Smith admits to his marketing savvy and his privileged position in the contemporary film industry. For example, Smith's industry know-how is explicitly on display during a moment from *An Evening With Kevin Smith 2: Evening Harder* (2006), when Smith uses the term "revenue stream" to describe how he makes money from his films: he states that in the age of DVD, the box-office success of theatrical release is not important since a film's theatrical exhibition functions as "one big commercial" to stimulate an ongoing "revenue stream" including "the real money" to be made in DVD release and ancillary markets (*Evening 2* disc 2 chapter 26). Furthermore, in a separate essay Smith candidly states that he knows he truly hasn't been an indie filmmaker since 1994: "I sold out a *long* time ago. [. . .] [I]n truth, I haven't been an indie since the first two weeks of '94. The moment Miramax bought *Clerks* at the

Sundance Film Festival, [my] 'indie' title became negligible" (*Silent Bob Speaks* 155). These admissions merely confirm what Smith's career has exemplified all along, that Smith and his associates, with the backing of Miramax/Disney's money and resources, have been very canny at finding their audience and marketing their films and merchandise to that audience.

A key part of Smith's finding his audience has been his prescience in using the internet as a marketing and fan relations tool. In Chapter III we discussed how Smith uses the world wide web as a fan forum, analogous to how published letter columns were at one time used to interact with fans in the comic book industry. Taking his cue from this aspect of comic book fan culture, and becoming a web geek long before it became a widely occurring phenomenon in the late 1990s, Smith has tapped into a cultural resource that both keeps him close to his fans and helps position him as a key Hollywood tastemaker in the 2000s. Indeed, he was one of the first filmmakers to capitalize on the power of the internet, setting up the first official View Askew fan website in 1995 (imdb.com). His ongoing home-video success and constant web presence since 1995 has increased Smith's visibility and options within the geek demographic, especially as the aspects of geek culture Smith specializes in—slacker cinema and comic-book properties—have entered the mainstream in the new millennium. In fact, in recent years it has become possible to view Smith's influence in much more wide-ranging, mainstream terms: for example, in 2007 he directed the pilot episode of superhero-themed comedy "Reaper" on the CW network, and he has also served as a guest reviewer on "Ebert and Roeper At the Movies" during Roger Ebert's occasional periods of illness.

Furthermore, Smith's body of cinematic work has paved the way for the recent boom in high-grossing slacker comedies such as *Knocked Up* and *Superbad* (both 2007), making possible the rise of Gen-Y slacker cinema producer *par excellence* Judd Apatow, named by *Entertainment Weekly* as 2007's smartest person in Hollywood (*EW* #968, December 7, 2007). Yet amidst all this cultural affirmation of what Smith has been doing since 1994, his ongoing web presence (he is online every day), combined with his signature self-depreciating humor and humility, keeps him accessible to his fans and encourages them to see him as "just another webgeek" who surfs the web and hangs out at MySpace just like them.[21]

Yet the aspect of Smith's persona that involves playing up his humble origins serves one other important function as well: it lets him off the hook for any transgressions he might commit against groups he does not understand, and, furthermore, valorizes him for any political correctness or sensitivity he has gained since his early days in suburban New Jersey. In 1999 Smith admitted to gay publication the *Advocate* that "he wasn't always so enlightened himself" and regrets some of Jay's homophobic remarks toward Dante in *Clerks* (Kilday 62). Smith's candor on this matter is refreshing, and I might hope for him that he will one day look back and say a similar thing about his treatment of Lela on *An Evening With Kevin Smith*. Yet the most interesting thing about this admission is its revelation of the class basis of homophobia: back when Smith was stuck in suburbia working thankless, low-paying jobs, he ignorantly participated in anti-gay culture, yet frames himself now, *after* his enormous success as a filmmaker, as more enlightened in these matters.

Strangely, Smith's admission of *Clerks*-era homophobia somewhat belies (or at least mitigates) his claim that he has always attempted to make his films gay-friendly for the benefit of his out gay brother. The truth is, as depictions of Generation X males wrestling with their gendering and sexuality in the queer 1990s, Smith's View Askew films are bound to evince both homophobic and pro-queer tendencies. As this study has shown, this homophobic/pro-queer dualism—which is also a form of dual address—is seen in all five of the View Askewniverse films produced between 1994 and 2001. And if Smith's rise in class status and increased public profile since the days of *Clerks* necessitate his closer adherence to the tenets of political correctness, the GLAAD case against *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* in 2001 reveals that at least some members of the queer community take issue with the homophobia that still lingers in his work. It is an edge that cuts both ways.

My Chapter VI title is taken from a statement made by Kevin Smith during the "*Clerks* 10th Anniversary Q & A" session included in the *Clerks X* 3-DVD set. Smith first explains that he thinks women have an easier time in U.S. culture becoming erotically involved with their female friends, a bit of male fantasy projection on his part that once again reveals the androcentricity of Smith's work and worldview. Confirming this, Smith next argues that "with guys, you don't have that fluidity, it doesn't work. You're never just like: 'I fuckin' love you.' 'I love you, too.' 'Let me suck your cock.' Everything stops one step shy of that. [. . .] That's how I see male relationships: just one pleasantry shy of a cock in the mouth." This statement could easily sum up Smith's entire View Askewniverse *oeuvre*: constantly riding the line between humorous

pleasantries and explicit queer male sexuality. Smith's claim during this same Q & A session that he doesn't necessarily intend for his films (or at least *Clerks*) to depict "how these two dudes are totally fuckin' queer for each other" does not alter the pervasive homoerotic content of his films, and, interestingly, frames the discussion of his work much as I have here, around the concept of *queer* (even if it is predominately *male* queerness).

As I have argued throughout this project, Kevin Smith is a savvy Generation X media producer who knows what sells in the independent film marketplace of the 1990s and the new millennium. As such, there exists, if nothing else, an economic imperative for his View Askew films to engage with non-straight sexualities. As Maria Pramaggiore argues in "Straddling the Screen":

> Films that depict alternatives to heterosexuality have found profitable markets, a situation that calls to mind (yet another) fence: that straddled by film producers seeking a wider audience [. . .]. The economic imperative of the mass market informs even the most well-intentioned attempts to move beyond compulsory heterosexuality, however, and subtends recent film narratives that attempt to have their sex both ways. (275)

As we have seen, Smith's attempts to have his sex and his market both ways is a slippery negotiation indeed, and calls to mind his closing comment to Lela during *An Evening With Kevin Smith.* Lela asks him: "Did you know you were straight when you were eighteen?" To which Smith replies: "Ma'am, I'm *still* not sure." Once again, Smith leaves open the possibility of his own bisexuality. Is he a repressed bisexual at heart? Or

does he, as a multimedia icon of the 2000's, ultimately want to leave this question tantalizingly open so as to appeal to all possible comers? Is impossible to tell.

Yet I think the very unanswerability of this question is another register in which Smith and his work play it both ways. Maybe his position, which is also the position of so many of his geek protagonists, indicates that rather than falling out of the closet, the Gen X male has instead seen the walls of the closet fall down around him. Suddenly immersed in a cultural milieu where queer is hip and straight is square, in order to keep ahead of cultural trends he has no choice but to acknowledge and engage with the homoerotics that have underpinned his position all along. In this sense the slacker's attempted step away from the white male privilege of his symbolic father, appropriative and fraught as it is, may equal a step toward acknowledging alternate modes of masculinity and sexuality, modes that integrate the feminine, the homoerotic, and the queer. And these alternative modes may be best understood via the image of the bisexual fence as opposed to the homosexual closet: "Bisexual epistemologies [. . .] acknowledge fluid desires and their continual construction and deconstruction of the desiring subject" and take as their central emblem "the fence, a permeable and permeating structure, [which] is most akin to the mutually inclusive 'both/and' rather than the exclusive 'either/or'" (Pramaggiore 3, 4). Smith's work and persona are certainly characterized by this sense of "both/and" rather than "either/or," and as such may be as permeable, inclusive, and queer as recent cinema tends to get. That this degree of gender and sexual fluidity is present in a body of cinema still widely considered to be "by, for, and about"

homophobic male fanboys is of no small interest, for whatever else Smith's films may foreclose or disavow, their straddling of the fence of queer sexuality is undeniable.

Notes

1. Rodriguez's actual budget for *El Mariachi* (1992) after post production costs is estimated at $220,000 (imdb.com).

2. Despite Richard Linklater's having made the pivotal *Slacker*, Smith trumps Linklater as the most iconic of Gen X slacker directors, due to his much higher public profile, more aggressive marketing, and tendency to milk his status as director-as-star via his online accessibility to fans, college Q & A appearances, and the like. Not to mention Smith's consistent onscreen appearances as one half of the iconic duo Jay and Silent Bob. Linklater's high-art aspirations and cineaste-inflected intellectualism (see his films *Slacker, Before Sunrise,* and *Waking Life*) keep some of his key slacker works, especially the eponymous *Slacker*, out of the reach of many less intellectual filmgoers.

3. I will address the shifts that characterize Smith's post-millennial star text separately in an in-progress book project, *Falling Out of the Closet: Kevin Smith and Post-Closet Independent Cinema.*

4. I use mostly primary texts for my analysis, since not much critical work on Smith precedes mine, especially in terms of analyzing his public persona, and since I am particularly interested in how Smith constructs his own public persona in the era of industrial *auteur*ism.

5. According to Brian Johnson on *Snowball Effect*, his straight-to-DVD film *Vulgar* was funded partially by Miramax through a deal Smith had with them, and partially funded by Smith himself.

6. Kevin Smith is the 24th recipient of this annual award. Past recipients of the prestigious UCLA Jack Benny Award include Johnny Carson, Steve Martin, Chevy Chase, John Belushi, Rodney Dangerfield, George Burns, Joan Rivers, David Letterman, Bill Murray, Lily Tomlin, Robin Williams, John Cleese, Billy Crystal, Whoopi Goldberg, Carol Burnett, Candice Bergen, Roseanne Arnold, Leslie Nielsen, Kelsey Grammer, Ellen DeGeneres, Conan O'Brien, Adam Sandler, and most recently Mike Myers.

7. Smith turned down directing *Green Hornet* because "It would never be *my* movie" (*Evening 2* disc 2 16:00) – he has a strong investment in his own authorship/creatorship, and admits that he "likes to hear [his] own stuff."

8. To the best of my knowledge, *The Dueling Personas of Kevin Smith* is the only book ever published by View Askew Books. All other published works pertaining to Smith have been put out by established presses: Muir's *An Askew View* is printed by Applause (a division of Hal Leonard music publishers), *Silent Bob Speaks* is published by Miramax/Hyperion, and *My Boring-Ass Life* by London-based Titan Books.

9. See also my analysis of the popular reviews of *Chuck&Buck* in "A Stalker's Odyssey: Arrested Development, Gay Desire, and Queer Comedy in *Chuck&Buck*" in *Jump Cut 49*, http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/CarterSoles/index.html.

10. Smith's S.C.M.O.D.S. sketches, which he calls "*SNL*-type sketches," typically featured protagonists appropriated from pop culture: Ronald McDonald, the Jolly green Giant, the Keebler elves, James Bond (*Snowball Effect*). These pieces offer a foretaste of Smith's later cinematic criticisms of corporate culture (*Dogma, JSBSB*) and knack for witty intertextuality (all View Askew films). The sketches and the troupe were frequently singled out by the local paper and Smith in particular was lauded for his sharp and funny writing in those articles (*Snowball Effect*).

11. Intriguingly in this connection, Smith and Dave Klein would twice play onscreen lovers: they would provide the voice-overs for the porn films Randal watches during *Clerks*, and play an onscreen television-show-producing gay couple in the Bryan-Johnson-directed and View-Askew-produced *Vulgar* in 2000.

12. Smith's "making movies with my friends" ethos would return with a vengeance in *Clerks II*, which I discuss in my in-progress book chapter on that film.

13. Smith's very funny critique of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies ("they're about walking") from *Evening 2* (disc 2 1:48:40) is put directly into Randal's mouth in *Clerks 2*. Thus Smith gets to play out his fantasy of being Brian Johnson by indulging the Randal part of his persona onstage.

14. Smith also crushes on Tom Cruise in *Silent Bob Speaks*, writing of his first meeting with Cruise that "as the mighty biceps of Cruise enfold me, I realize [. . .] I'm in love" (199).

15. For more on Smith's post-1999 star image, see my in-progress book project, *Falling Out of the Closet: Kevin Smith and Post-Closet Independent Cinema.*

16. As the lead in the hit teen sex comedy *American Pie* (1999), Biggs was involved in a famous scene in which he has sexual intercourse with a freshly baked apple pie.

17. For more on the figure of Reese Witherspoon as a strong "unruly girl" in contemporary cinema, see Kathleen Rowe Karlyn's Reese Witherspoon chapter in *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers* (forthcoming). For more on Harvey Weinstein's legendary ability to alienate filmmakers and actors, see Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures*.

18. On *Evening 2* (disc 1 37:20) Smith even refers back to jokes and incidents from *Evening 1,* further evidence of the intertextuality of View Askew texts and continuity knowledge of View Askew fans.

19. My favorite example of a non-“political” time-waster is one notable woman on the *Mallrats* Tenth Anniversary Q & A who never really asks a question but instead gets sidetracked into talking about her own ethnic background and the various places she has lived over the years, giggling all the while. Indeed, many View Askew fans make jokes, perform stunts, and tend to ask non-threatening and/or absurd questions when given a chance at the mic at a Smith Q & A.

20. Benson appears to be a View Askew insider: in addition to producing and directing *Snowball Effect* and a few other features on the *Clerks X* DVD, Benson associate produced Smith’s *Jersey Girl* and has worked as a sound editor on the View Askew films *A Better Place, Dogma*, *Vulgar,* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*. Also noteworthy in this connection is documentarian J.M. Kenny, the producer and director of both *An Evening With Kevin Smith* DVDs and producer of the *Judge Not: In Defense of Dogma* documentary that appears on View Askew’s *Vulgar* DVD.

21. Smith is so dedicated to encouraging internet-based View Askew fandom that in 2006 he thanked all 30,000+ of his MySpace friends by listing their names at the end of the *Clerks II* end credits.

APPENDIX

SHOT LISTS

Sequence Analysis: *Clerks*, "Veronica Rescue"

Key: CR = Chewlies Rep, WCS = Woolen Cap Smoker

Shot	Time	Mise-en-scene	Cinematography / Editing	Sound
1	9:45	QS doorway interior	ms of V entering store	CR: "He *smells* the change is coming!"
2	9:47	QS counter with D internally framed	ls over the shoulders of mob accusing D	CR rant continues
3	9:50	CR in front of counter	ms of CR	CR rant continues
4	9:51	D behind counter	r cu of D	CR rant continues
5	9:52	mob in front of counter	ms of mob throwing cigarettes	"Cancer merchant!"
6	9:55	back of mob throwing cigarettes;fire extinguisher discharges all over them in a white cloud	r ms of backs of mob	blast of fire extinguisher discharging
7	9:57	V stands atop freezer case holding fir ext. at waist level, f.e. nozzle at chest level	camera starts at V's feet and tilts up until her head and shoulders and the nozzle fill the frame	pick-squeal into distorted guitar chord; V: "Who's leading this mob?"
8	10:02	mob	ms of mob (same as shot 6)	mob coughing; WF: "That guy."
9	10:05	QS doorway interior; CR leaving; he stops and turns around at V's command	ms of back of CR	V (vo): "Freeze!"

Shot	Time	Mise-en-scene	Cinematography / Editing	Sound
10	10:11	V gets down from freezer and walks to CR	ms of V; pans to follow her to CR	V tells CR to get out
11	10:30	Donut rack with sign: "NEW! Singles" V stands to r of rack		V tells mob to "go commute!"
12	10:43	front counter with WCS and D; WCS orders cigs than D storms off out of r of frame	ls of counter	WCS: "Pack of cigarettes?"
13	11:00	behind counter somewhere	cu of cigarette rolling in D's fingers	
14	11:03	D and V to one side of counter; he sits on floor at l, she kneels at r; dirty mags over D's l shoulder	mls of D and V; long take	
15	11:45	handwritten sign on counter: "Please leave money on the counter. Take change when applicable. Be honest." Near end of take a customer leaves some change.	cu of sign	
16	11:50	D and V behind counter; she sits behind him; he paints her nails	long take	
17	12:58	D's chest; their hands	cu of D painting V's nails	
18	13:05	same as shot 16	long take	
19	14:44	D and V stand up behind front counter; Willam stands in foreground at r of frame, back to camera, staring into space	mls of D and V, internally framed at front counter	

Shot	Time	Mise-en-scene	Cinematography / Editing	Sound
20-7	14:50+	W standing at counter; D and V behind counter; etc.	s/rs sequence of conversation between V and W	
28	15:32	mirror on wall above "self service" sign; in mirror we see W exit, bumping into newspaper rack on way out	ms of W in mirror on wall above "self service" sign	V: "That was Snowball."
29	15:36	counter; D restocks cigarettes as he and V talk	mls of D and V, internally framed; long take	"37" talk; ends with D: "My girlfriend sucked 37 dicks!" Cust: "In a row?"
30	17:18	QS doorway interior; V heading out, D catches up		discussion, incl. D: "Why did you have to suck their dick, I mean, why couldn't you sleep with them like any other decent person?"
31	18:07	QS exterior		D: "Hey, try not to suck any dick on the way through the parking lot!"

Sequence Analysis: *Clerks*, "Syntax"

Shot	Time	Mise-en-scene	Cinematography / Editing	Sound
1	21:13	Intertitle: Syntax		silence
2	21:14	Dante at counter reading, lft of frame, internally framed, lots of clutter. Randal enters, grabs a cellophane-wrapped item from offscreen, and leans on counter at rt of frame.	ms of both characters in two-shot	R: "Some guy just came in refusing to pay late fees [. . .]" D: "A shocking abuse of authority." R: "I'm a firm believer [. . .]"
3	21:30	Fruit pie sign: Dave's Apple and Cherry (opposite sides), "Real Fruit Filling"	cu of revolving fruit pie sign – rotates clockwise	R: "You want something to drink? I'm buying." D: "No thanks."
4	21:33	Randal at drink cooler, takes a Gatorade out of the cooler, reads the label then walks down aisle, convex mirror in background	ms of Randal, handheld camera, moves backward as R walks down aisle	R: "Who was on your phone this morning at like 2:30? I was trying to call for a half an hour" D: "Why?" R: "I wanted to use your car. (Snack cake.)"

Shot	Time	Mise-en-scene	Cinematography / Editing	Sound
5	21:41	Randal joins Dante behind counter, walking in from rt of frame, stands just behind him with newspaper as Dante adds figures with calculator and notes them on clipboard (NOT internally framed)	ms of both characters in two-shot	D: "You don't wanna know." R: "You call Caitlin again?" D: "She called me." R: "You tell Veronica?" etc. – see attached
6	23:44	store exterior:Jay dances, Bob smokes, Jay holds out his hat to Bob, Bob puts something (cigarettes? weed? money?) in Jay's hat	ms of Jay and Silent Bob in two-shot	Rock music (which began at end of previous shot): "Making Me Sick" by Bash & Pop
7	23:53	RST Video interior, Randal behind counter (NOT internally framed)	ms of Randal at rt of frame, mother in profile at left holding daughter, mother wears "B.U.M. Equipment" jacket	Rock music fades but remains barely audible. Female customer: "Excuse me, do you sell videotapes?" R: "Yeah, what are you looking for?" [. . .] R: "Okay, I need one each of the following tapes: *Whispers in the Wind, To Each His Own,*"
8	24:21	Randal behind counter, black videocassette cases line wall behind him	cu of Randal in profile	"*Put It Where It Doesn't Belong,My Pipes Need Cleaning, All Tit-Fucking Volume Eight*"

Shot	Time	Mise-en-scene	Cinematography / Editing	Sound
9	24:26	video store interior, mother holds daughter in white dress, ceiling-high videotape shelves behind	reverse ms of mother looking a bit dismayed	"*I Need Your Cock, Ass-Worshipping Rim Jobbers,*
10	24:29	Randal behind counter, black videocassette cases line wall behind him	cu of Randal in profile	"*My Cunt Needs Shafts,* [. . .]"
11	24:40	mother in video store interior [same as shot 9]	reverse ms of mother looking increasingly displeased	"*Girls Who Crave Cock,* [. . .]"
12	24:44	Randal behind counter [same as shot 10]	cu of Randal in profile	"*Men Alone Two: The KY Connection, Pink Pussy Lips,* and oh yeah, *All Holes Filled With Hard Cock.* [. . .] What was that called again?" Rock music fades back up.
13	24:55	QS interior, Dante walks into frame from rt, crosses in front of counter to left holding cat litter box. Has a thought, sets litter box on	ms of Dante in profile	Rock music.
14	25:03	Dante walks to phone	ms of Dante at phone	Rock music, which abruptly ends once Dante finishes dialing.

Sequence Analysis: *Clerks*, "Catharsis"

Shot	Time	Mise-en-scene	Cinematography / Editing	Sound
1	1:24:00	Intertitle: Catharsis		gong ringing
2	1:24:02	RST Video exterior; night. R emerges from door at left of frame and locks it behind him. Walks out of frame to the right.	ms of Randal	gong still ringing; fades
3	1:24:11	interior of top third of Quik Stop door; New Jersey Lottery sticker prevalent, with bell dangling down in front of it. Fire extinguisher barely visible in lower rt. of frame. R enters, says line, then D's hands reach from rt. of frame and pull R out of frame by the throat.	cu of Randal	R: "Dante?" Aggressive rock music begins when Dante's hands grab Randal's throat. Sound bridge to next shot.
4	1:24:17	D at left standing, choking R who kneels to rt. R pushes D back, camera pans to follow, taking R out of frame. D staggers against magazine rack, steadies himself, lunges toward rt. of frame.	ms of D and R from side	Rock music
5	1:24:22	D tackles R; they fall behind counter from l to rt with D on top. Internal framing of counter	camera shooting across counter; D's lunge matches from previous shot	Rock music
6	1:24:23	D atop R behind counter, they wrestle, R hits D with a Pringle's can and then kicks, scooting away on his ass	extreme high-angle ls	Rock music

Shot	Time	Mise-en-scene	Cinematography / Editing	Sound
7	1:24:28	bread bin shot from one side, baguette loaves stacked, R reaches in and grabs top one	cu of R's hand reaching into bread bin	Rock music
8	1:24:29	D's face, loaf swings in from rt and hits him	cu of D's face being struck by loaf from rt to l	Rock music
9	1:24:30	black cat on counter, looks to rt of frame	fs of cat reclining on counter; eyeline match - cat	Rock music
10	1:24:31	D and R on aisle floor, struggling, D l, R rt. R has partial bread loaf in rt hand, drops it as he kicks his way out of rt of frame, throwing something at D as he retreats	high angle ls	Rock music
11	1:24:38	black cat (similar to shot 9)	eyeline match - cat	Rock music
12	1:24:39	aisle floor with debris lying around; more products fly into frame from rt	ha ls (same position as shot 10)	Rock music
13	1:24:42	fight over; debris on floor; camera tilts up to take in D and R seated against product shelves, R l, D rt.	ms of debris; tilts to mls two-shot	Rock music fades out. R: "How's your eye?" D: "The swelling's not that bad. The FDS stings." [. . .]
14	1:26:25	R throws yet another candy bag at D, which flies into frame from l, hitting D in the face	cu of D's face	R: "[. . .] [without even] discussing how he felt with his present one."
15	1:26:28	R yelling and pointing his finger toward frame rt	cu of R	R: "You wanna blame someone, blame yourself. [. . .] You're here of your own volition."

Shot	Time	Mise-en-scene	Cinematography / Editing	Sound
16	1:26:45	D listening	rs cu of D (rs)	R: "You overcompensate for having what's basically a monkey's job."
17	1:26:47	both sitting up	mls two-shot	R" You push fucking buttons."
18	1:27:06	R talking	cu of R	R: "[. . .] You know, that guy Jay's got it right [. . .]"
19	1:27:10	D listening	rs cu of D	R's speech continues
20	1:27:13	R talking	cu of R	R's speech continues
21	1:27:17	D listening	rs cu of D	R's speech continues
22	1:27:19	both sitting up, R finishes speech and walks out of l of frame	mls two-shot	R "[. . .] If we're so fuckin' advanced, what are we doing working here?"
23	1:27:30	next intertitle: Denouement		

Sequence Analysis: *Mallrats*, "Shannon Beats Up Brodie"

Shot	Time	Mise-en-scene	Cinematography/Editing	Sound
1	42:07	fast food counter, Shannon enters from left of frame and looms over B, grabs him and yanks him out of frame to left	ms of Brodie and Shannon	B: "Fill this with Coke, no ice." sinister music.
2	42:16	maintenence hallway; B thrown into frame from right, S follows and punches B in the stomach	ls of Brodie and Shannon	
3	42:22	hallway; S removes his coat as B slides down wall to seated position on floor facing S	mcu	
4	42:28	hallway; S talks	ls	S: "Mallrat kids"
5	42:38	hallway; the two talk, then after B's line S kicks B all the way to the ground	mcu of S – pans to B on his line	S: "No shopping agenda" B: "Motivated salesmanship"
6	42:46	hallway; S leans down and presses his face next to B's; whispers line menacingly in B's ear	cu of S in B's face; lying sideways so S is literally on top	
7	42:51	hallway; S picks B up and shoves him against the wall, punches him	mcu of B and S	S: "You see, Bruce. . ." B pants heavily
8	43:21	hallway; B ineffectually attacks S, S laughs	ls	
9	43:26	in mall; Gwen and T.S. talk, eventually spot Brodie and hasten over		
10	43:41	candy store; B on ground framed by Jay and Bob	ms	B tells Jay that the Easter Bunny beat him up
11	43:50	store; G and TS arrive; J and Bob leave	ls	
12	43:59	candy store	ms	B: "Am I still glowing?"

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