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Adam Sandler as (questionable) masculine ‘role model’: towards an analysis of disgust and violence in Adam Sandler’s comedian comedy

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### Abstract

Adam Sandler’s film work has been critically vilified and paid little attention by academics. I argue that his work justifies sustained academic attention. Further I argue and conclude that he offers questionable masculine role models dependent on masculinity being asserted via ambivalent dis-identification with gay men and women. I argue this case via critique of the most sustained analyses of his work - by Taylor (2013) and Chapman (2014a, 2014b) - and close readings of aspects of Sandler’s films. My analysis particularly engages with Chapman to question and dispute her contextualisation of Sandler’s film comedies in relation to the major changes in thinking about masculinity and gay men. These changes have arisen in relation to feminism and the lesbian and gay movement and Chapman asserts that Sandler positively engages with both in his film work. I argue that her contextualisation of, and the ambiguities of Sandler’s engagement with, feminism and gay men needs closer and more critical attention. Further, I argue that Chapman does not treat Sandler’s films as comedic texts but only as stories. Reading them using Seidman’s idea of comedian comedy and focussing attention on such comedies’ tensions with narrative film enables us to focus our critical purposes on the ambivalences present in Sandler’s movies. His films show evidence of resistance to relinquishing some privileges of dominant forms of masculinity (the use and

justification of physical violence) and demonstrate disgust with, and fear of, the sexuality, bodies and behaviour of gay men.

Keywords: Adam Sandler; masculinity; liberal feminism; comedian comedy; violence; disgust.

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Adam Sandler as (questionable) masculine ‘role model’: towards an analysis of disgust and violence in Adam Sandler’s comedian comedy

Sandler’s film work has received popular support through large-scale cinema audiences - his films have made nearly \$4.5 billion dollars - and popular, self-help biographies (cf. Crawford 2000; Epstein 2004; Horn 2006; Uschan 2009; Shuman 2011). However, until recently movie critics have almost universally considered his work puerile and unworthy of sustained attention (Chapman 2014, 1; Taylor 2013, 19-20). Furthermore, his films have had little attention from academics. In fact, his film work has become a marker of their lack in terms of addressing serious themes. For example Morris, in the foreword to Conard and Skoble’s *Woody Allan and Philosophy*, cite him in praising Allan as a potential site for pedagogical activity:

We often see surprised looks of students raised on Adam Sandler [films] ... when they first realise that you *can* actually grapple with *important ideas* on the big screen (2004, ix; my italics)

Academic analysis of Sandler’s work has occurred only in the last decade (Stanley 2006; Bernard 2012; Piontek 2012) and intensified only in the last few years (Taylor 2013; Chapman 2014a, 2014b; Roan 2014). Those scholars have sometimes announced their own surprise that Sandler’s films might address at all, let alone in such engaging and informed ways, such concerns as ‘gay marriage’ and homophobia (Piontek 2012,132; Roan 2014, 756-9) and the seemingly interminable conflict between Israel and Palestine which, according to Bernard, is the object in a Sandler film of an “*unexpectedly sharp critique*” (2012, 204; my italics).

In this article I focus in particular upon the more recent and sustained academic analysis of Adam Sandler's films. I do so because I argue that his films deserve such attention in the light of the large popular audiences his films receive and the important themes that his films address. I also do so to note what I think are some shortcomings in the *contextual* analyses offered of key Sandler films by some scholars and, even more so, in addressing how we should proceed to understand and analyse his films as comic texts. With regard to the former, I address and assess how scholars have contextualised his films; in particular, how they have situated them in relation to the changes and challenges raised by social and cultural movements advocating the rights and perspectives both of (feminist) women and gay men. With regard to the latter, I seek to explore how appropriately to understand Sandler's films as comic texts by noting what is missing if we conduct our analysis merely at the level of narrative. I use the most interesting and fruitful literature on the comic film text - 'comedian comedy' whereby comic performance breaks out of the narrative. This has only once before been used to understand Sandler's films and not in a sustained way (Taylor 2013, 21-2). I use it to explore the ambivalent 'comic' relationship his films manifest towards feminist and LGBT changes. To do so I draw upon Seidman's (1981) classic analysis of comedian comedy in the light of subsequent scholars' consideration of the relationship between comic performance as events that disturb classic Hollywood realist narratives. I do so aware of that relation not so much as a binary but a relationship between comic event / performance *and* narrative, as later uses of Seidman's ideas have suggested (Krutnik 2003).

Aaron Taylor (2013) explicitly raises the idea that Sandler's movies might have critical roles and be worth considering. He argues that Adam Sandler typically plays 'a social misfit [...] who gradually comes to recognise the necessity of adopting the hegemonic cultural norms that he initially spurned' (Taylor 2013, 21). Returning to this theme he later

elaborates that ‘The narrative of these films follow a similar pattern, tracing the Sandler character’s maturation towards responsible adulthood and concomitant development as a respectable romantic partner [...] aimed at satisfying stereotypical expectations believed to be held by gendered audiences’ (Taylor 2013, 34). Chapman (2014a, 2014b) systematically explores some aspects of Taylor’s formulation and focusses it further. Her defence of Sandler’s work is that Sandler’s ‘audiences are offered masculine role models that are attainable by the “average guy”’ (Chapman 2014a, 2 and 137) thus that his films offer positive ‘lessons in masculinity’ (51). She further claims that the ‘hegemonic cultural norms’ referred to by Taylor as a criticism of Sandler do actually include progressive role models drawn from Sandler’s films’ positive responses to developments in feminist and men’s movement reflections on contemporary gender roles. My general aim is to explore, focus and critique Chapman’s (2014a) argument both contextually and in terms of the analysis she offers (or rather, does not offer) of Sandler’s comic texts *as* comedy. In focusing this argument, I explore the ambivalent identifications Sandler movies offer with, in particular, gay men, and (feminist) women. I focus mainly upon four films: *Mr Deeds* (2002), *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007), *Don’t Mess with the Zohan* (2008), and *Funny People* (2009).

I suggest that in crucial but limited ways Chapman (2014a) is correct – Sandler’s characters do have relationships with career women and his films do represent gay characters. However, a more precise and critical analysis of his films suggests that the masculine formation offered by Sandler has responded only to some critiques and reformulations of gender roles. Further, there is far more tension and contradiction between feminist and men’s movement critiques of those gender roles represented in Sandler’s films than Chapman acknowledges (cf. Connell 1995, 83; Gutterman 1995, 165). That tension is worth further exploration. Additionally, there continue to be aspects of both the content and form of

Sandler's comedy films that suggest reservations in his engagement with the political project that Chapman claims Sandler avows. Further, in some of his films Sandler demonstrates disgust at other characters' behaviour (and even their existence). I will explore this disgust (which usually signals and manifests profound social disapproval - cf. Miller 1998) in relation to physical intimacy between gay men in the purportedly pro-gay rights film *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, which has received some surprisingly positive assessment from film scholars (Piontek 2012, 132 fn 6; Chapman 2014a, 98-111; Roan 2014, 756-59).

I argue, in short, firstly, that Chapman's (2014a) defence of Sandler's films as offering suitable masculine roles models for ordinary men requires serious reconsideration since his uses of feminism and men's movement ideas is tactical rather than seriously offering a popular and more genuinely encompassing revision of gender roles (cf. Eisenstein 1982, 184, 189; Clatterbaugh 1995, 53; Connell 1995, 76; Kimmel 2000, 53, 54). Secondly, I argue that the ways that violence is meted out and disgust attributed drastically narrows the range of persons, aspects of their personae, and behaviours acceptable in the Sandler Universe. Thirdly, I suggest that if we view these films as exhibiting a form of comedian's comedy we more clearly see how anger (and violence) and disgust is directed at those in the periphery of Sandler's moral universe and how the films note and maintain that boundary.

#### *Chapman's claims about Sandler's positive version of manhood*

Chapman argues that both on a personal level (2014a, 32-51) and in his films, Sandler has responded to and been engaged with challenges arising from the 'gender revolution of the 1960s' (11), including response to the claims and arguments of both pro-feminist men and pro-masculinist men (12-18). This has led to Sandler 'using his film vehicles to show that the middle-class American model of manhood, which has been influenced by pro-feminist liberal

values, will see the most success in every area of life' (29). A key element in these films is the heterosexual love interest of Sandler's character, who in many films is a professional, college-educated (apparently) feminist woman (138), which differentiates his films from those of the 'Frat Pack' comedians whose central and sustained trope is ambivalence toward women and domestic life. This analysis is demonstrated in her accounts of his films (99-133), including *I now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (99-112), and by exploring key themes of Sandler's 'Lessons in Masculinity' (52-80). Chapman offers some acute analysis of such themes as the negative role of joking communication in homosocial relationships (78-80, 91-92, 110-111), the mentoring of younger by older males (94-97, 106-110, 132-133), which is a key theme of pro-masculinist approaches generally (Clatterbaugh 1995, 51; Kimmel and Kaufman 1995, 19; Messner 2011, 176), and also positive heterosexual engagement with homosexuality (61-62, 99-112, 137).

However, there remain issues of conceptualisation and framing that hinder her analysis. Firstly, Chapman appears to be a social constructionist concerning those changing gender roles and assumptions (16-17) in that she interprets masculinities in terms of historically variable expressions of dress and behaviour. However, she also invokes a rather fixed, unchanging notion of manhood as capacity for autonomy and responsibility (3). Although according to Chapman that capacity is not explicitly denied to gay men in Sandler's films (138) it is not at all clear that it is seen as applicable to women. It is, rather, implied as a defining feature of men and women's difference. Secondly, the analysis offered does not go beyond a very narrow liberal model of feminism with no focus on structural factors but a model of choice: for example, as Chapman argues regarding the content of Sandler's films, they assert that 'homophobic fears are misplaced and should be replaced with tolerance for *individual choice*' (110, my italics) (cf. Humm 1992, xi; Kimmel 2003, 95; Halley 2008, 3; Johnson 2009, 78; Kimmel and Ferber 2009b, 9-10). Thirdly, though the central female love



interest is a putatively feminist character who is ‘indispensable in his [Sandler’s character] effort to reach manhood’ (138) she also plays a traditional role in the story as the reward for Sandler’s character’s ‘sacrifice’ of his immaturity - rather than his character developing an ethical sensibility autonomously. This traditionalism is also present in Chapman’s analysis of the kind of gender roles Sandler’s characters represent as transformed by the ‘love of a good woman’. Chapman refers to these as embodying ‘traditional American concepts of gender roles’ (138) even though it is common for his characters - and even other male characters in his films - to have been “clearly influenced by second-wave feminism’s rejection of traditional male patriarchy” (81). In seeking to square this circle she even asserts that - against Taylor’s (2013, 34) assertion that Sandler’s mature characters veer towards patriarchal identities – ‘however, all of his love interests are clearly products of second-wave feminism, so *true patriarchy* is impossible’ (Chapman 2014a, 55, my italics). In short, she offers a rather confused analysis of Sandler’s films’ positioning with regard to feminism and masculinity.

#### *Chapman on the joking relationship in Sandler’s films*

A major object of Chapman’s analysis of Sandler’s films (and especially the relationships between characters) is the joking relationship that is at the heart of (heterosexual) male relationships. She offers a rich and sustained analysis of this relationship (Chapman 2014a, 78-80, 91-92, 110-111) and the broader issue of problematic communication as a bar to good relationships (89-91, 120-121). Central to her analysis is the notion of joking as ‘a method American males use to express their disapproval without ... confronting an issue head-on’ (77) which she argues leads in Sandler’s films to observable ‘miscommunication’ (77) in part because it offers a form of ‘permitted disrespect’ (78). It has, of course, potentially positive

uses in transmitting serious truths but correspondingly, and for the most part, does not invite thoughtful or intimate conversation. She argues that joking communication can be used to ‘sustain gender domination and reinforce male bonding’ (78). Such ‘male bonding’ in *Funny People* (2009) is read as negative in the relationships between the male comedians in which ‘pointed [and often viscerally cruel] repartee’ forms ‘their main form of communication’ (79). Chapman assumes the likely audience understanding of this failure in communication: ‘that it is a poor choice for maintaining friendships and doesn’t attract members of the opposite sex’ (79). Such joking relationships also play important roles in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* where joking and insults form important but negative roles in the lives of the firemen with whom Chuck (Adam Sandler) and Larry (Kevin James) work (110). These jokes are constructed around the rules of male bonding (many of) which the film highlights, lays bare and critiques (111). Chapman’s analysis of joking communication between the characters in Sandler’s films is astute - such as when the comedians in *Funny People* routinely abuse each other. Through ‘jokes’ (‘I’m going to put some glasses on your ass as I fuck you so it looks like you are blowing me’) hostile and distanced communication is encouraged and closer and more intimate communication quashed. However, the analysis is conducted entirely at the level of the characters and their relationships. What is neglected is that these are films, and comedy films to boot. This is hugely important, since comedy films are made up of the very forms of joking communication which she criticises. If joking communication has largely negative consequences for the relations between the men in Sandler’s films, films that demonstrate this *through* joking communication place us in a situation of performative contradiction. The criticism of joking communication is limited in that the films make their meanings and appeal precisely through joking communications (they are comedies). Too little attention is given by Chapman (2014a) to the dark sides of comedy and none, explicitly, to ‘performative contradictions’ involved in ‘civilising manhood’ via

comic superiority (Buckley 2005). Below, I briefly review the idea of comedian comedy and then use perspectives drawn from the literature on it to explore how addressing Sandler's films as comedian comedy can open up contradictions between form and content, which allows us to explore their ambivalences.

### *What is Comedian comedy?*

Seidman's important study defines 'comedian comedy' in relation to the extrafictional, by which he refers to 'anything that interrupts the smooth exposition of a fictional universe, or anything that intrudes upon the depiction of a "real" fictional universe to give the sense that "it's only a movie"' (1981, 15). These interruptions and intrusions can be of a variety of kinds and performance can be foregrounded in such a way that the pre-filmic identity of the comedian floods into audiences' understandings of the film (15-27). Past comedians such as Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel have come from music hall performance traditions that make use of direct address and asides that are actively excluded from the classic Hollywood narrative. Further, the narrative can be revealed as a contrivance in many ways (30-31). The most common way this occurs in these middle-period Sandler films is via slow-motion camera work, which highlights and distends objects of presentation, making us aware of the operation of montage sequences and opening up spaces for comic revelation, such as in the fireman shower scene (discussed below) in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007). Further, through self-reference the fictionality of that which is on display is revealed; in particular, the presence of previous roles and the self-exhibition of the comedian's persona (33). In Sandler's films much of the anger; its manifestation in (often supposedly 'justified') violence and the attribution of disgust that the films involve, such as in *Mr. Deeds* and *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, are most significantly manifest in aspects of comedian

comedy. Scholars have developed Seidman's notion of comedian comedy without necessarily buying into the full binary division between that and Hollywood narrative cinema, but by paying attention to the breakouts from full narrative cinema present in such comedy (cf. Krutnik 2003; Drake 2003). Anger and disgust manifest in forms of comedian comedy delimit the potential for Sandler's films' attempts to sympathetically explore heterosexual men's reactions to the changing status of women and gay men in society and the challenged status of 'traditional gender norms' which Chapman (2014a), I think quite rightly argues, are an important context and setting for Sandler films. If Sandler *is* mentoring young men in the changing meanings and implications of masculinity and manhood via comedian comedy, then what precisely is the (hidden) curriculum through which he is he mentoring them?

I suggest that Chapman is rather selective in arguing for comedy being used as a positive tool for civilising masculinity. Clearly, comedy is offered as enticement to the audience, part of the array of pleasures on offer. One part of the pleasure is seeing initial, unreformed masculinity and male behaviours in displays of gross-out comedy and juvenile acts. The role of comedy thereafter that ensues from non-adolescent, reformed, forms of masculinity is much less clear in her account. I explore whether, in fact, it is crucial to the success and continuing comic purposes of his films that such reform is very much partial and ambivalently expressed - especially in comic asides and performances that break out of the narrative structure.

### *Violence and male power in Sandler's films*

There is a great deal of anger in Sandler's films; his characters often express themselves predominantly through this emotion. Sandler's first two leading roles feature very angry characters (*Waterboy*, *Happy Gilmore*). Two of his most prominent and respected films -

*Anger Management* and *Punch-Drunk Love* (Stanley 2006) - not only involve extremely angry Sandler characters but are *about* anger - in them anger is thematised, analysed, and explored. Though, as Chapman cogently argues, Sandler's characters are often 'primordially' angry and then significantly civilised through the love of a good liberal-feminist woman and / or an appropriate homosocial support group, I argue there are concerns with the roles of anger especially its direction into violence that pervades the films and requires exploration. In my overview of the roles of Sandler's character's violence in the films *Mr. Deeds* (2002), *I Now pronounce you Chuck and Larry* (2007) and *Don't Mess with the Zohan* (2008) below - I am really interested in when anger turns outwards to violence and when that violence is presented as part of the reformed masculinity that Chapman praises. For that anger and its associated violent acts is now righteous, or certainly legitimated by the films' story and comic constellation, even if it is expressed in the breakout from narrative provided by comedian comedy.

#### *Angry violence in Mr Deeds (2002)*

*Mr Deeds* (2002) - Sandler's remake of *Mr Deed Goes to Town* (1936) - has seven moments of violent or aggressive action. Two are comic and do not involve bodily violence to a person or are consensual and relatively anodyne. One other episode involves Sandler's Longfellow Deeds character playing tennis in an aggressive manner (aiming the ball at his opponent), though that opponent had already been revealed as a power and wealth-hungry 'bad' businessman, the CEO who manipulatively controls Deeds' late uncle's corporation. Another example occurs when Deeds is talked out of going to the *Inside Access* tabloid television studio to punch the journalists who have been making his life a misery with exposés and creatively edited video footage misrepresenting his actions. The other three involve Deeds

punching a man or men. Deeds punches, and knocks to the floor, the star quarterback of the American Football team he inherited, for cussing in front of women, as he belligerently seeks to renegotiate his contract. Deeds is later seen to be supported in this action by the paternal authority of the quarterback's father who approves of his son being taken down a peg or two in this manner. One act of violence also occurs in the original film. Deeds is introduced to high cultural, high society men in a high-tone New York eatery. They pretend to welcome him but mock his attempts at poetry and his whole persona (in front of his new 'companion' Pam Dawson - an alias adopted by Babe Bennett (Winona Ryder), star television reporter of the *Inside Access* show). He punches three of the offenders, knocking them off their feet, including an Opera singer who soils himself incident upon the assault. This assault is a kind of righteous violence that seems to Chapman to be justified as it involves the common man exacting direct revenge upon snooty and insulting elite figures (2014a, 66, 109). Sandler's reformed, mature character is permitted to commit righteous violence that is both the prerogative of his character and a privilege restricted to men.

#### *Comedian comedy violence in Mr Deeds*

The final example of Deeds' use of violence in Sandler's re-versioning of the film is also an example of comedian comedy, since it highlights the performance of the assault through its massive extension in time, its heightened sound effects and its development as an experience to be paid special attention to via the montage sequence through which it is made. It involves Deeds violently assaulting and punching the 'fake' mugger of 'Pam Dawson' who preys upon Deeds' weakness for damsels in distress. Instead of checking to see whether 'Pam Dawson' is injured, Deeds runs to attack the fleeing mugger. The assault is very much more extended than it needs to be to function as part of the rescue narrative. The assault takes up around

thirty-five seconds of film time - with ten seconds devoted to the chase down a side alley from Rockefeller Plaza in New York - the dangerous metropolis contrasting with 'Pam Dawson' as 'small town girl'. Deeds (Sandler) chases and rugby tackles the assailant who falls into refuse bins in the alley. He proceeds to hit the prone fake-mugger with a bin, kicks him hard in the face then straddles his limp body to punch him twice (all the punches are to the face) with his right hand then twice more (we only hear these punches as the camera now focusses on Pam Dawson's flinching reaction). We see two further right-hand punches that are delivered whilst Deeds still straddles the assailant and the camera moves from side view to an angle over Deeds' right shoulder then back to a side view. Deeds delivers three punches with his left hand then pulls up the semi-conscious fake-mugger to deliver a final blow. Clearly, this can only begin to function as 'comedy' if the viewer believes in the righteousness of the assault (Deeds believes him to have snatched Pam Dawson's purse and left her sprawling on the city street). We must note, too, that it is not cartoon violence. We see the graphic nature of Deeds' violence; hear the heightened sound the blows make. We also see the result of the violence which bruises and cuts the face and neck of the pretend mugger, causing severe pain that requires him to wear a neck brace for further scenes of the film. The violence inflicted is very much disproportionate even to the offence that Deeds thought he had witnessed, since he had already scared off the 'attacker' and caught up with him to retrieve the stolen handbag. Sandler's character decides whether to commit acts of violence, decides how extended and damaging such acts can be and is simultaneously rewarded with the attention of his object of heterosexual desire.

*Angry violence in I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry (2007)*

There are several assaults in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007) - I will focus on only one. Unlike those in *Mr Deeds* (2002) they are not conducted because Sandler's character is insulted or wishes revenge for himself (except insofar as we can understand him as identifying with the gay male charade he is involved in), nor as a new version of the violence originally present in the film of which it is a remake. They are all the result of response to homophobic insults or anti-homosexual political activism. After an LGBT costume party that was a fundraiser for AIDS research, Chuck Levine (Sandler) attacks a preacher who has gathered with many other anti-gay activists and not only noisily quotes biblical injunctions against gay lifestyles but calls Chuck and his Costume Ball companions 'queers' and 'faggots' (and Chuck sees that some of them are horrified and in tears over the abuse). Chuck punches him to the floor and corrects him saying that 'gay is the accepted terminology'. It is worth exploring the account of this incident - part of a much longer scene at the Gay Pride Ball to which I return later - offered by Chapman:

Both men are uncomfortable pretending to be homosexual, but Sandler ends up defending the rights of the LGBT community to picketers outside the building. With each interaction, especially those in which he is insulted for being gay, Sandler gains appreciation for the LGBT cause. (2014a, 103)

Chapman's account is in part true - Chuck (especially) and Larry do come to have greater sympathy for LGBT people and are able to empathise with their concerns and experiences. However, the violence could have been avoided, despite Chapman's claim that this is an example of righteous violence. One feature of consequence is that it is a particular (heterosexual) man who gets to decide both the remedy for a harm and inflict the penalty involved, all in the name of protecting those who are 'weaker' and thereby asserting a fairly traditional male prerogative usually performed 'on behalf of' women (Kimmel 2000, 53, 54; Kimmel 2004, 9; McIntosh 2009, 26; Messner 2011, 176).



*The right and capacity for angry violence in You Don't Mess with The Zohan (2008)*

Zohan Dvir (Sandler) is an Israeli counter terrorism officer who has the powers and skills of a superhero and can engage in combat, armed and unarmed, with great success and virtually no chance of being hurt. He displays these qualities early in the film in counter-terrorist actions. However, in order to realise his dreams of becoming a hair-stylist (he reveres Paul Mitchell) and avoiding the military actions that he can no longer bear, he stages his own death in an incident with the Palestinian hero 'The Phantom' (John Turturro) and travels incognito to New York, picking up the alias Scrappy Coco and claiming to be an Australian-Tibetan, along the way. Once successfully in New York, where he at first escapes recognition, he no longer needs to use all of his fighting skills. Instead, if people annoy him (or they are antisocial) he ties them into a knot (a pretzel) of intertwined arms and legs from which they appear unable to release themselves. After he is recognised by migrant Palestinians and Arabs who contact the Phantom to dispose of Zohan 'again' he uses his capacity for inflicting violence to unite Jews / Israelis and Arabs / Palestinians against corporate developers seeking to squeeze out their businesses and livelihoods. The developers hire some right-wing racist white Americans to promote dissension among the Jews / Israelis and Arabs / Palestinians by vandalising their stores whilst in disguise. The Phantom and Zohan combine forces to defeat that unholy alliance and though that battle lays waste to the stores, what rises in its place is a cooperative mall with affordable business space for all.

Though the film is attributed as articulating an '*unexpectedly sharp critique of the "Israeli-Palestinian conflict" of metropolitan popular culture*' (Bernard 2012, 204, my italics), the fact that Zohan is the central character who 'gets the girl' and that the Israel / Palestine situation is seen without a focus on questions of unequal power in the region (including

power to inflict violence), makes the critique less sharp. Further, the notion that it is a 2000-year-old quarrel permeates the film (as it does in the *West Wing* - see Bernard 2012) and reduces complex geopolitical contexts to a feud without end only resolvable via accessing 'American Freedom' in New York. In each case who can perpetrate violence, who decides what violence gets perpetrated and the conditions that make such violence possible and legitimate is assumed to be clear: it is associated with the prerogative of Sandler's character and limited to men. It leaves, however, the roots of violence, its conditions, who is allowed (naturalised) access to violence and the decision to inflict the same un-investigated. Chapman does not acknowledge any problems with Sandler's character's use of violence even though she does (2014a, 8) recognise that male violence was part, even, of liberal feminism's concerns. Male violence remains a crucial aspect of feminist understanding both in the domestic sphere and wider arenas of society as a space of male power and associated privileges (Sterba 2008, 141-143 and 148-157).

#### *The ambiguous status of comedy in Funny People (2009)*

The ambiguity of comedy as joking communication is revealed especially succinctly in *Funny People* (2009) - a film that is closer to narrative than comedian comedy film. It is the only one of the Sandler films upon which I focus in this article not made by Happy Madison or Madison23, Sandler's own production companies. It is based upon Judd Apatow's stand-up experience but actually feels like a partially autobiographical film concerning Sandler himself. This is because it comes the closest to being a comedian comedy in that the central character has a similar film career to Sandler's and that it uses actual video footage from Sandler's young adulthood as part of its central character's life. It is also a bromance. George Simmons (Sandler) is a very successful stand-up comic and film comedian who is diagnosed

with blood cancer and hires as his PA Ira Wright (Seth Rogan), a novice stand-up, who accompanies him to hospital appointments, helps him with his treatment, as well as writing him gags. When Simmons recovers after experimental treatments, Wright accompanies him on a stand-up comedy tour and personal attempt to reunite with his ex-girlfriend. The world of comedy is presented as narcissistic and harsh - each comedian of Simmons' acquaintance wanting more to top him comically than to sympathise with his plight. Ira is very different - a model of the new sensitive man: he aids George, puts George's feelings and needs first, shares his own best comic ideas with George, and accepts George's insults, short-temperedness and selfishness. There is learning of the kind Chapman (2014a) argues is central to Sandler's films. For instance, in the final scenes George attends Ira's friends' thanksgiving dinner and heals the fevered tempers of Ira and his comedian friends; he also visits *Otto's* deli-counter where Ira returns to work once dumped from his PA position by George. In this visit, George shows he can put the needs and interests of another ahead of his own as he shares comic ideas with Ira to benefit Ira's performances. What is never established, however, is whether the masculine language of comedy as killing and triumphing over audiences and other comedians is or should be renounced. In short, can Chapman's (2014a, 78) criticism of 'Joking communication' among *male characters* in Sandler's films be sustained without proper recognition that the 'joking communication' of the *films* provide audiences with the comic incentives to attend to Sandler's films in the first place?

In *Funny People* (2009) the reconciliation of George and Ira does not specify whether they are now fully inside each other's moral community, but many other persons and groups lie outside it (are not cool enough, have not shared their bromance breakthrough from employer-employee to mutual friends). That model of comedy is one of superiority in which an other - viewed as a comic butt is abused and abased by a comic to an audience (sometimes butt and audience are the same). If, as Buckley (2005) convincingly argues, comedy requires

a butt who is held up to ridicule, then a reformed comedy which is sensitive to the needs of all is not in any ordinary way possible. The butts of Sandler's humour across his films include those who many others would also wish to pillory, such as narrow-minded, even bigoted, traditionalists, and destructive and insensitive corporate leaders. However, his humour is also based upon women's relatively subordinate place and gay men's only partial inclusion through a discourse of tolerance, in a world defined through privileging heterosexual masculinity. Below, I consider the performative contradiction of such comedy in investigating the presence and role of disgust in Sandler's films.

### *Disgust in Sandler's film comedy*

I draw here upon Miller's (1998, 35) analysis of disgust as a moral emotion that - as a generalising moral sentiment - casts blame on whole styles of behaviour and personality. All forms of disgust for Miller relate antithetically to things felt to cause pollution and all produce a common feeling and reaction against those polluting things - senses of disgust, violation and contamination and the feeling and desire to be rid of the offending sensation (100). Parts of the body can be very problematic producers of such feeling of disgust - the anus especially is noted by Miller (100). Disgust is visceral yet also cultural (xii, 15, 17-18). I argue here that such visceral yet cultural sense of disgust is present in the Sandler film that pays the closest attention to gay men. Chapman has already suggested that Sandler's difficulty is more with gay men than heterosexual women, though both are the focus of heterosexual male othering which stabilises masculine identities and constructs homosexuals as failed men (2014a, 100, 101). Though both Chuck and Larry do become more sympathetic to gay men and help other closeted gay men 'out' themselves, a profound ambivalence is still manifest. I will discuss three key scenes from *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007)

the latter two of which provide examples of comedian comedy's break from narrative. In the first example Chuck and Larry attend an LGBT Costume Party for an AIDS charity. Chuck and Larry are extremely nervous at attending the costume party. Their fear seems especially linked to use of the toilets - the implicit fear is (sexual) vulnerability to the gay men present, since using the toilet requires intimate unclothing of the body. There is clearly fear of penetration by a gay man. Larry has to use the toilets and this is made more difficult as he is wearing a giant apple costume, which is unwieldy and imbued with back and front flaps for access; the one to the rear of the costume appears easier to access by another than by Larry himself. This produces panic and feelings of potential humiliation to Larry (arising out of some imagined predatory gay male activity). Chuck's concern about attending the party leads him to refuse to use the toilets at all, saying that he 'peed three times' before he left their house to avoid it. The party is early in the film so it could be claimed - as Chapman (2014a) argues - that they are only slowly gaining mature masculine wisdom.

The deferred 'gay kiss' in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007) cannot be interpreted in the same way, since it occurs very near the end of the film. Chuck and Larry attend a disciplinary proceeding to examine whether they are really, or are only masquerading as, a gay married couple and therefore qualify to receive the occupational benefits Larry in his grief in becoming widowed neglected to claim after the loss of his wife. They have virtually won their case when they are requested, then cajoled into kissing each other in the presence of their firefighter colleagues, Larry's children, their friends, and the whole board of inquiry. They prepare to kiss and in a thirty-second slow-motion close-up and montage shot - puckered lips moving minutely closer to puckered lips, the camera cross cutting to reactions from those assembled - they prove unable to kiss, with looks of disgust and anxiety present on each of their faces at the very idea. Chuck and Larry are shot side on in close-up but with the rest of the room and court of inquiry in view. Reverse shots show them moving toward

each other and clearly reveal the tension and expressions of disgust on their faces - all in slow-motion. Reaction shots are shown in sequence - Larry's children (concerned), their Lawyer (bemused), their firefighter colleagues (mostly tense and / or a bit queasy), the newly 'out' firefighter Fred Duncan (delighted), Teresa (strangely aroused) - then the whole charade is called to a halt by Larry and Chuck's boss Captain Phineas J. Tucker (Dan Ackroyd). He loudly declaims 'I'd rather change my grandfather's diaper than see straight guys kissing'. The film endorses this as a shared view of Chuck and Larry's attempt to kiss (no one objects or even shows signs of disagreeing). The disgust is evoked by the idea of straight men kissing producing a feeling resembling that produced by excrement in close-up. That the Captain refers to his "*grandfather's* diaper" is presumably meant to refer to the incongruity that the elderly (can) become like babies again, and the incongruity that a senior male professional will ever actually have to deal with the toilet needs of his own elderly male relatives. His utterance also raises various side issues whose meaning is problematically present - such as would it be OK, or at least better, to see two actual gay men kissing?

The final scene from *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007) that I wish to discuss is a shower scene amongst the group of firemen who now fear that Chuck and Larry are gay. Firefighters are constructed as über-masculine cultural figures. They spend much of their lives in a homosocial environment and fictive kinship situation. The film scene breaks out of narrative via performance and it is presented in slow-motion as a comedy action scene. The firemen live in bodily contiguity with each other and are now troubled that Chuck and Larry are no longer what they seemed before, as the story of their gay marriage has gone public. About half-a-dozen firefighters are showering or shaving in a shared shower-room at the firehouse. All are naked or, if shaving, dressed just with a towel covering their lower half. The firefighters are discussing TV sports from the night before and are happy and relaxed in the heteronormative environment. Chuck and Larry arrive in their towels and the former

harmony of activity is now disturbed. They look askance and nervously at the two men. Tense music swells and provides additional focus and attention. One firefighter drops his soap - and his slow-motion concerned reaction distends the anxiety already palpably present - and then another firefighter also does so and the whole 'script' of the dangers of dropping the soap in the shower in a prison movie is evoked and played out. The tension is slightly cut by the arrival of Fred Duncan (Ving Rhames), a new, slightly mysterious, reputedly dangerous and potentially violent, black firefighter. He is large, broad shouldered and bodybuilder muscular. He picks up one of the dropped bars of soap and washes himself under a centrally positioned shower head. The rest of the firefighters look on in confusion: they do not know how to read his figure and actions. He begins slowly to spin under a shower head and starts to sing (what is now a gay anthem) 'I'm every woman' (Chuck then Larry join in to harmonise). The camera draws back to reveal the words 'bad' and 'ass' tattooed across the left and right-hand cheeks of his buttocks. Though Fred carries with him unstable and unreadable signifiers ("bad ass") the heavy muscularity and song he chooses could have been used by the firefighters to construct him as gay or construct him, in a racist discourse, as a tough and dangerous criminal in the prison 'script' but at this point they do not do so at all - perhaps because they are already flooded by their anxious concerns about Chuck and Larry.

Chapman's (2014a) account does not do justice at all to the meanings in play in the scene and more generally to the ambivalent meanings associated with the character, Fred Duncan (Chuck and Larry's fake gayness encourages Fred to 'come out' and eventually marry in Canada in a fairly traditional scene of comic reconciliation). She concludes '[a]s a large, muscular, black man, Rhames [Fred Duncan] speaks to the fact that LGBT people come in all shapes, sizes, colors [sic] and personalities' (2014a, 106) but discerns none of the ambiguity and ambivalence his character is used to explore and exemplify.

### *Conclusion*

Sandler's films would benefit from being studied further. Chapman (2014a; 2014b) adds to the literature a detailed focus on Sandler's characters and worlds. However, her contribution is let down by contextualising his work in relation to a fairly narrow model of liberal feminism and a fairly conservative model of manhood. Though she is right that Sandler interestingly engages with the world of gay men, she does not discern the ambiguities and ambivalences of these presentations. In the end, for all the interesting content in Sandler's films (and Chapman's analysis) heterosexual masculinity continues to define itself somewhat against gay men and women. Further, I argue that Chapman does not treat Sandler's films as comedic texts but mostly as stories. Giving attention to them via Seidman's idea of comedian comedy and the tension between that and with the stories of narrative film allows us to give focussed attention to the ambivalences in Sandler's relinquishment of only some of the privileges of dominant forms of masculinity (physical violence) and disgust with, and fear of, the sexuality, bodies and behaviours of gay men.

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