The unruly woman as straight man: The function of female film characters in gay best friendship

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Portrayals of gay best friendship—here defined as the heterosocial relationship, often erotic but usually non-physical, that develops between a heterosexual, cis-gender woman and a homosexual or queer-identifying man—became an undeniable trend in mainstream Western film at the end of the twentieth century. In particular, the romantic comedy My Best Friend’s Wedding and the romantic drama Get Real were heralded as films exemplifying this “screwball comedy match for the millennium” (Jacobs 1998, 20). Such portrayals of gay best friendship are, as Boze Hadleigh observes, a case of two steps forward, one step back (1993), since the inclusion of non-conforming couples in mainstream narrative requires simultaneous regulation in order to render them palatable to audiences “imbued with heteronormative sensibilities” (Shugart 2003, 68). Due in part to a mass media producer and majority audience, both of which are characterised by heteronormative ideology, this regulation is also achieved by assigning the straight woman a role that, although initially appearing unconventional, tempers the impact of sexual and gender progression beyond heteronormativity within gay best friendship and the broader film narrative. Using the methodology of critical discourse analysis, this study examines Get Real’s Linda and My Best Friend’s Wedding’s Julianne in terms of their appearance, and its effect on their desirability and sexual function, the construction of their gender type in relation to male and female heteronormative characters, and to each character’s respective gay best friend, Steven and George. In addition, this study explores the significance of female ‘unruliness’ to identity politics in gay best friendship (Rowe 1995), and examines how the straight woman is ‘de-gendered’ through her role in gay best friendship.

Portrayals of gay best friendship—here defined as the heterosocial relationship, often erotic but usually non-physical, that develops between a heterosexual, cis-gender woman and a homosexual or queer-identifying man—became an undeniable trend in mainstream Western film at the end of the twentieth century, reflecting the increasing economic viability of
homosexuality in 1990s mass media and the wider trend of ‘queer chic’, a marketing strategy intended to flatter the “liberal leanings” of its target audience by making an appealing statement against the heteronormative majority (Thompson 2004, 41).\(^1\) Related to queer chic, the growing prominence of gay best friendship in films produced within the same period is indicated by the diverse scholarly attention given to the trend. Studies in the fields of film and media (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 2002; Benshoff and Griffin 2004; Evans and Deleyto 1998; Gross 1996; Gross 2001), social science (Dowd and Pallotta 2000; Gross 1995), gender and sexuality (Cover 2000; Maddison 2000b; Preston and Nestle 1994), popular culture (Castiglia and Reed 2004; Doty 1993) and economics (Wilke 1998) intersected to establish Western media portrayals of gay best friendship as the “pop-culture relationship du jour” (Jacobs 1998, 20), as it was tellingly described in 1998.

The films chosen for this study—the romantic comedy *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (1997) and the romantic drama *Get Real* (1998), pairing Julianne (Julia Roberts) and George (Rupert Everett)\(^2\), and Linda (Charlotte Brittain) and Steven (Ben Silverstone) respectively\(^3\)—escaped pejorative connotations associated with ‘fags’ and ‘hags’\(^4\) to be heralded as successful examples of this “screwball comedy match for the millennium” (Jacobs 1998, 20),\(^5\) and have continued to attract scholarly

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\(^1\) Related to queer chic, ‘gay vague’—a term used to describe polysemic advertisements that blur the sexual orientation of their subjects and appeal to both hetero- and homosexual audiences—resulted in the increase of advertising revenues in American gay publications from $73.7 million in 1996 to $117 million in 1998 (Wilke 1998, 30).

\(^2\) The plot of *My Best Friend’s Wedding* follows the attempts of Julianne to break up the engagement of her friend Michael (Dermot Mulroney) and his fiancée Kimmy (Cameron Diaz), motivated by her unarticulated romantic feelings for Michael. Julianne calls upon George for emotional support throughout the film, at one point persuading him to pose as her fiancé in order to make Michael jealous, despite George’s insistence on her honesty. The film ends with Julianne’s confession of her feelings for Michael and their resolution, as he and Kimmy marry and Julianne is last seen dancing with George at the wedding.

\(^3\) *Get Real* centres on gay high-school student Steven’s struggle to disclose his sexuality. Steven falls in love with classmate John (Brad Gorton), who returns Steven’s feelings but insists on their relationship staying a secret, especially since John is popular at school, dating Christina (Louise Taylor) and feeling the weight of family expectations. Linda, Steven’s best friend and confidante, also has romantic difficulties when she finds out her driving instructor and boyfriend Bob (Steven Elder) is married. During the film, Steven becomes close friends with classmate Jessica (Stacey Hart), the ex-girlfriend of school bully Kevin (Tim Harris), a situation that creates further plot tension. The film concludes with Steven’s breakup with John, public coming out at school and plea for acceptance from his family and community.

\(^4\) For a definition of the term ‘fag hag’, please see Dawne Moon’s discussion in the section subtitled ‘Unruly, Therefore Unworthy?’ (1995).

\(^5\) The success of the films chosen for this study supports the growth of the gay best friendship trend during the 1990s. *My Best Friend’s Wedding* grossed $299.28 million
and critical attention (Alberti 2013; Bordo 1999; Nechak 1999; Ryll 2014; Segal 2016).

Yet portrayals of gay best friendship are, as Boze Hadleigh observes, a case of two steps forward, one step back, since the inclusion of non-conforming couples in mainstream narratives requires simultaneous regulation (1993, 287)—as through film genre—in order to render them palatable to audiences “imbued with heteronormative sensibilities” (Shugart 2003, 68). Moreover, some rework stylistic conventions around gay best friendship, adopting the “delayed consummation” technique that is “core to the classic, mainstream (i.e., heterosexual) romantic comedy genre” to infuse the straight woman/gay man dyad with ‘romantic’ tension (Shugart 2003, 73). Situating gay best friendship within conventional tropes results in a non-radical but also “destigmatised” representation (Connolly 2006, 3), reducing a potentially progressive relationship to fit the prevailing heteronormativity in mainstream cinema.

Due in part to a mass media producer and majority audience, both of which are characterised by heteronormative ideology, this reduction is also achieved by assigning the straight woman a role that, although initially appearing unconventional, tempers the impact of sexual and gender progression beyond heteronormativity within gay best friendship and the broader film narrative. Using the methodology of critical discourse analysis to consider the language, images, gender and social contexts of the films (Gee 1996; Hall 1997), this study will examine the connections between the unruly appearance of Linda and Julianne, its effect on their desirability and sexual function, and the construction of their gender type in relation to male and female heteronormative characters, as well as to each character’s gay best friend. The final discussion will explore the significance of unruliness to identity politics and examine how the prioritisation of this relationship in both films ‘de-genders’ the straight woman, who ultimately provides resistance—by acting as the ‘straight man’—to potentially progressive portrayals of gay best friendship.

Unruly, therefore unworthy?

In Get Real and My Best Friend’s Wedding, the role of the straight female character is defined by her identification with her gay best friend and the subsequent privileging of their friendship. Since Linda and Julianne are and established a defining standard for the gay best friend genre (IMdB Business My Best). Get Real won six awards, among them popular Audience Awards, at various international independent film festivals (IMdB Awards Get).
determined to achieve romantic fulfilment and fix on the correct sexual object, the heterosexual man, neither stray from the heterosexual/homosexual binary. Yet both are models of what Kathleen Rowe calls the “unruly woman”, whose type of femaleness is undesirable by hegemonic standards (1995, 1), and it is this gender nonconformity that aligns them with the sexual nonconformity of the gay man. As a result, gay best friendship in each film is politicised as well as naturalised:

What makes a fag hag a fag hag is not—or not only—what she identifies as (usually, but not always, a straight woman of sorts), but more importantly whom she identifies with (primarily gay men, and secondarily the Queer community at large) (Thompson 2004, 43; author’s emphasis).

Linda and Julianne resemble each other not only in their function as straight women in gay best friendship, but in their unruliness, which manifests in their appearance and demeanour. As Steven’s best friend, Linda appears to incorporate the traditional elements of fag hags, who, Dawne Moon argues, are:

‘fat’ and/or ‘unattractive’ women, who stereotypically ‘can’t get a date’—women who somehow fail to perpetuate the sexist, heterosexual ideal. These women may be “friends,” “confidantes,” and “mother figures,” but they are also often seen as women who, like gay men, have been rejected from or have rejected the heterosexual mainstream (1995, 4).

Linda’s difference is vested in her appearance—her unruliness comes across in her big hairdos, her elaborate application of make-up, her platform shoes and leopard-print pants. Since Linda does not attend school or university but works at Hairobics, her difference to other characters in the film, particularly Steven and his schoolmates, is also class-based. As “a fat girl”, Linda’s weight also underpins her deviation from heteronormative standards, although not in the usual way. Contrary to Kevin’s deduction that Linda is “desperate”, Linda retorts, “you assumed that because I’m a fat girl instead of some slim oil painting I’d be gagging for a quick one in the doorway of Toys-R-Us”. The quick-witted, fat misandrist is also a stereotype, yet Linda indicates that she exceeds this category as well, lamenting to Steven that her fatness—the unruliness that is inherent in it and that she adopts because of it—prevents her from realising romance and sexuality:
Linda: God, it gets really boring sometimes. You haven’t got a monopoly on rejection, you know. At least you’re not me.

Steven: “Cuddly”.

Linda: Sweetheart, I’m not cuddly, I’m not a big girl, I’m not well-rounded, I’m absolutely fucking enormous. The only offers I get are from dickheads like Kevin ‘Shit-for-brains’ Grainger and even then after he’s tried every other girl in the place. At the end of the evening, dancing with the desperate.

Steven: Tsk. Men!

Linda is rendered asexual by her unruliness, through the stereotypes connected to her weight, and indirectly, through her role as Steven’s confidante. Although Linda clearly is important to Steven as the only person who knows the truth about his homosexuality, he describes her to John as “a mate of mine”. In consideration, too, of her availability to act as Steven’s ‘beard’ by accompanying him to a friend’s wedding and his school dance, Linda is simultaneously accessible to Steven as a female date and a male mate, further classifying her as sexually indistinct. The film also hints that Linda is a virgin and lives her sexual life vicariously: Steven calls her “jealous” of his sexual encounters in the park, and although she boasts “I’m unshockable”, Linda admits that she does not “feel very comfortable” waiting with Steven outside the public toilets to meet his casual lover Glen.

Julianne’s unruliness is located in the masculinity she is characterised and identified with from the beginning of My Best Friend’s Wedding. Professionally, Julianne possesses assured clout as a food critic and journalist, a field often dominated by men (Albala 2015)—“I will kill your whole family if you don’t get this right”, says a chef to his staff as they prepare Julianne’s meal. It is obvious, too, that Julianne relishes this power as she eats, aware that George, the waiter and the chefs in the kitchen all await her response. Throughout the film, Julianne’s masculine authority is matched by her wardrobe: she wears business suits in subdued colours and boxer shorts and a T-shirt to bed. These outfits also act as a kind of uniform, allowing Julianne’s integration into highly masculine environments like the baseball field or tailor’s establishment. The only scenes where Julianne wears a dress are scenes of her discomfort, such as Kimmy and Michael’s wedding, or when she witnesses
the effects of her plans to break up them up. Owen Pillion points out that Julianne is constantly referred to in masculine terms:

Julianne is told by Michael’s father, “I told him to make you his best man.” Michael echoes his father when he gives Julianne the wedding ring to hold onto and tells her, “You’re practically the best man.” When Julianne comes to pick up Walter ... she refers to herself as “the unofficial best man.” At the pre-wedding brunch Julianne yells at some boys ... they reply with a “Yes sir!” Finally, in her confession to Michael she says, “I’m the bad guy” (2000, 24-5).

Julianne is also coded by behaviours inherent in contemporary heteromasculinity but which render her, as a woman, unruly. Julianne’s commitment phobia is alluded to when Michael enquires, “Any relationships over two weeks I should know about?” Her “restlessness” in relationships and discomfort with the “yucky love stuff” is also mentioned, endowing Julianne with a “lack of emotionality” that reinforces her masculinity (Pillion 2000, 24). When Kimmy vocalises her love for Michael, Julianne becomes so uneasy that she has to leave the room for a cigarette break—and, significantly, splits the seam of her bridesmaid’s dress in the process. In conversation with Michael, Julianne has difficulty even referring to their past relationship:

Julianne: Well, when we were... when you and I were... when we were—

Michael: Together.

Julianne: Mmhm. Well, did I, when—?

Michael: Yes.

Julianne: Yes, what?

Michael: Yes, you pulled away when I tried to hug you in public.

Julianne’s implied promiscuity is also testament to her unruliness and is referred to only in a negative way (“It must have hurt going through so many guys and never finding the right one”), yet it also attests to her ability to attract men. The incongruence of Julianne’s sexual appeal and masculine demeanor is heightened if, as Catherine MacKinnon suggests, sexual attractiveness is bound up in femininity:
[s]ocially, femaleness means femininity, which means attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which means sexual availability on male terms. What defines woman as such is what turns men on (1982, 530-1).

It is difficult to ‘gender’ to Julianne’s sexual appeal since the scenes in which she is most flirtatious also prominently feature her masculinity. Julianne arrives at the baseball game laden with beer and is greeted warmly by the all-male crowd. Operating at one level as ‘one of the boys’, Julianne also performs as a ‘female’: she sits on Joe’s lap, kisses him on the lips and enjoys the excited reaction of the men to her line, “I’ve got moves you’ve never seen”. When weighed against Julianne’s failure to lure Michael away from Kimmy, her physical appeal simply repeats the idea that, like Linda, Julianne’s status as an unruly woman—and the role she plays in relation to her gay best friend—is subject to the perspective of the characters who surround her.

**Gazer and the gaze**

While the straight woman’s role involves exploring the “multiple processes of identification with” her gay best friend, it also necessitates “identification as against” (Sedgwick 1994, 61; author’s emphasis). This opposition is largely achieved by contrasting the unruly woman with the heteronormative female, who is posited as ideal because of her “collaboration with homosocial structures” (Maddison 2000a, 274). In contrast to the unruly figure of Linda, “Christina ‘Supermodel’ Lindmann”, John’s official girlfriend, is Linda’s antithesis simply by the fact of her handle. When she appears in the film Christina is shot appraisingly, dancing in a silver dress at the school ball, or accompanied by emblems of her status, such as her black sports car or even John himself. Indeed, Christina is less of a character in the film than a symbol of a homosocial ideal, at least in terms of heterosexual masculine desire: this is measured by her male-defined status as “the most beautiful girl in town” and by Jessica’s observation that any rival would “have to be pretty special to take John away from her”. As Steven’s sympathetic classmate, Jessica herself is suspended between the unruly woman and the ideal woman—she is both Steven’s substitute confidante when Linda is inaccessible and at the same time, the ongoing object of Kevin’s desire.

It is in her interaction with the male characters in each film, however, that the ideal woman is positioned to provide the most contrast to her unruly counterpart. Perceptiveness regarding men is a characteristic that
defines all major female characters in *Get Real,* yet is exaggerated in Linda because of her unruliness. Summing up Kevin with the comment, “Just because he’s got a prick he thinks he’s God’s gift to womankind”, Linda just as accurately characterises her driving instructor love interest Bob as “a married bastard with kids”. Her unruliness is also a weapon when dealing with the shortcomings of heterosexual men: when Steven expresses how sorry he is that Linda’s relationship with Bob has ended badly, she nibbles on a block of chocolate and smiles, “Don’t feel sorry for me”, as the camera cuts to show her revenge. By contrast, Christina’s collected response to John’s neglect barely registers irritation: “You do recognise me, then”. Because not enough screen time is given to Christina to ascertain if she is aware of John’s homosexuality, it is unclear whether their relationship, unlike the one Linda shares with Steven, is defined by their identification with each other.

In *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, Kimmy, Julianne’s rival for Michael’s affection, is, like Christina, a symbol of the ideal woman, and is deliberately feminised in manner and appearance to differ from Julianne. Marking a “return to the idealized values of the 1950s in which the gender roles are clearly defined”, Kimmy’s wardrobe is nostalgic and middle-aged (Preston 2000, 242). In all her scenes Kimmy wears either a dress or skirt, twinsets with her cardigan draped over her shoulders and accessorises with a string of pearls or an Alice band. Unlike Julianne, Kimmy’s clothing never exposes her midriff or décolletage and her modesty helps to verify her cousin’s statement that “Kimmy’s a virgin”.

The gender opposition between Julianne and Kimmy naturally centres on Michael. As representative of the correct “brand of femininity”, Kimmy succeeds where Julianne fails and wins Michael’s love and commitment at the end of the film (Pilion 2000, 27). The ideal woman is a conservative woman, as Kimmy illustrates through her resolution to stop studying after she is married: “I’m not coming back senior year ... I think the most important thing is for us to be together”. Yet there is a flaw to Kimmy’s rendering as the stay-at-home wife. The resistance she sometimes presents, while always resolved, places her in a similar position to Jessica—between the unruly and ideal woman. Kimmy admits to being career-focused and practical like Julianne until she met Michael,

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6 Mrs Carter (whose given name is never mentioned) is portrayed as much more observant and in tune with Steven than her husband. She perceives the homoerotic element in Steven’s photographs of John, whereas Mr Carter does not. Despite her gentleness, Mrs Carter is the only one who can effectively silence Kevin’s bullying—“if you do anything to hurt [Steven], I’ll have your bollocks for earrings”—and never defers to her husband’s patriarchal posturing.
whereupon she was transformed into “a sentimental schmuck”. Although provoked by Julianne, Kimmy’s genuine rebelliousness emerges when she exclaims angrily to Michael, “What, all of a sudden I’m supposed to drop out of school? Forget my family, forget my career, forget all the things I had planned for my life?” While Kimmy’s ideal femaleness is eventually confirmed through her submission (“You’re so, so right. I was so wrong”) and marriage to Michael, this outcome obliges the repression of her unruly desire to create “a life of [her] own”. In this way, as Pillion suggests, the fairy-tale ending may not be as happy as it appears,

as the two newlyweds disappear to their honeymoon destination (Michael’s next job assignment), we are left to believe that it will be a while before Kimmy attains her college degree (2000, 28).

The unruliness that characterises Linda and Julianne further influences their sexuality because their femaleness—as well as that of the ideal woman—is constructed in reference to the masculine gaze within their respective narratives. In describing female sexuality, MacKinnon explains that heterosexual male power

extends beneath the representation of reality to its construction: it makes women (as it were) and so verifies (makes true) who women “are” in its view, simultaneously confirming its ways of being and its vision of truth (1982, 539).

If women are “only walking embodiments of men’s projected needs” (MacKinnon 1982, 534), the unruly woman is far from satisfying the ideal of female sexuality and thus fails to achieve romantic success. Linda’s sexuality is never acted on until she becomes the object of Bob’s sexual interest and notably, during these scenes, she is uncharacteristically modest: she wears a scarf wound high around her neck and is softly-spoken as she pleads with Bob to try reverse turns again. Linda extends this display of behaviour as her relationship with Bob develops, romantically comparing their first kiss to a moment in a film “when two people stare into each other’s eyes and they both just know” and relating to Steven that “making love” with Bob was “better than I thought it could be … [he was] so gentle and kind”. So disguised, Linda’s unruliness does not preclude her appeal yet it ultimately prevents romantic fulfilment—as her encounter with Kevin shows, Linda’s true nature attracts the wrong type of man and Bob turns out to be “a bastard”. Linda subsequently reasserts her unruliness in her revenge on him by painting ‘Free sex with every lesson’ on the side of his driving instructor’s car, scaring away a
new female pupil. Of course, since her unruliness means she is not a ‘real’
woman, Linda’s heartache is rendered comedic instead of tragic and the
humorous results of her actions dispel sympathy for her predicament.

Like Linda, Julianne recognises the appeal of the ideal woman to the
heteronormative man and transmutes her unruliness to replicate her.
Despite her resolution, Julianne’s uneasiness with her role is obvious:
when she speaks of her plan to “break up a wedding and steal the bride’s
fella”, Julianne transforms from her “hyper-composed self” into a neurotic
(Dreisinger 2000, 5)—her voice cracks, she fluffs her hair wildly and drags
fretfully on a cigarette. In a later scene she slumps in a hotel corridor and
labels herself a “dangerous, criminal person. I do bad things to honest
people”. Julianne also loses physical control, indulging in “death by mini-
bar” and constantly losing her footing. Again like Linda, Julianne’s self-
deceit cannot last and she must accept her position as “less-than-
feminine” and, because of this, “unworthy of romance” (Pillion 2000, 26).
In one of the many hints that Julianne will not succeed with her scheme,
Julianne and Michael run toward each other during their first scene as if to
embrace, but instead bump awkwardly into each other, showing they are
indeed a “wrong fit”. As with Linda’s revenge on Bob, however, the unruly
woman’s story cannot end without her re-embracing or acting out her
true nature. Julianne’s realisation is presented as poignant rather than
comical in her speech as Kimmy’s maid of honour:

    Julianne: I had the strangest dream. I dreamt that some
    psychopath was trying to break the two of you up.
    Luckily, I woke up and I see that the world is just as it
    should be. For my best friend has won the best woman.

Since Julianne remains an outcast from the world “as it should be” due to
her unruliness, it only remains to affiliate her with George in the same
way as Linda is connected to Steven, although even the gay best friend is
granted the “privilege of being in a dominant position in relation to
women” (Pease 2002, 127). Whereas Linda’s sexuality is dependent on
Kevin and Bob, it is only his closeted status that renders Steven publically
asexual. When John appears in his bedroom after the dance, Steven is
allowed the power to assert his sexuality, cancelling his planned “night of
debauchery” with Linda without telling her why, leaving her outside his
house and literally in the dark. In the scene following his coming out
speech, Steven is positioned between Jessica, who dabs at him with a
handkerchief, and Linda, who holds his hand, supporting the view that
the norm in our society still is that men are accustomed to receiving service from women, and gay men are raised to these roles in the same way as are their heterosexual brothers (Mushroom 1994, 71).

While Steven accepts this treatment passively, his authority is never in doubt: when Linda announces, “Steve, I’ve got a bit of a surprise for you. It’s not quite as big a deal as you telling the whole world you’re gay, but it’s a surprise anyway”, Steven leaves her side, absently instructing her to tell him later. Similarly, while Steven yields to Mrs Carter’s embrace, she releases him after he complains, “Mum, you’re embarrassing me”.

John exercises this power to a greater extent in his relationship with Christina, convincingly accessing the heterosexual male privilege that characterises him despite his relationship with Steven. In addition to his relationship with Christina, John is a star athlete from a wealthy family who is destined to become an “Oxford blue” like his father, substantiating Maddison’s argument that

the more that gay men are able to acquire social and economic power or to pass as straight, the more privileges they can acquire by colluding with the functional homophobia of homosocial bonds, and with the resultant commodification and exchange of women (2000b, 274).

Since Christina is presented as the ideal woman—she is eroticised by her profession as an underwear model and barely speaks more than two lines in the film—John uses her to perpetuate his own heteronormativity, thereby transforming her into a sexual object, although not his sexual object:

John: I guess I went out with Christina tonight because I wanted to feel good about myself ... All I felt was that I was going through the motions. Holding her, kissing her, hoping we’d ride past Kevin and the gang so they can see me with the most beautiful girl in town.

In My Best Friend’s Wedding, the control George and Michael exercise over Julianne is comparable, confirming Rowe’s idea that the unruly woman is limited to a “single narrative ... that of her relation to men” (1995, 124). Similar to John’s control over Christina, Michael appears reluctant to relinquish his sexual claim to Julianne, commenting when he walks in on her partially clothed, “I’ve seen you a lot more naked than
that”. Despite Julianne’s reminder that “things are different now”, the relationship and history between Michael and Julianne remains an issue that Kimmy must learn to accept—she acknowledges that Michael has Julianne “on a pedestal and me in his arms”. Michael’s territorial attitude increases when George is introduced not only as Julianne’s “best friend nowadays”, but as a heterosexual man and thus a definite rival. In an attempt to assert his greater intimacy, Michael reminds Julianne that she never wears pink and glares as George corrects him, “She does, Michael, sometimes she does wear pink”. Michael is surly during George’s demonstrations of affection for Julianne and later admits to being “crazy jealous”.

By contrast, George’s control over Julianne takes various forms. Portrayed as having a “powerful, unilateral influence over Jules’s life”, George offers paternal responses in her moments of panic—“Grow up and take responsibility!”—or remorse—“Good girl, I’m proud of you” (Shugart 2003, 86). More frequently, however, George demonstrates his sexual power: the very ease with which George is able to adapt his sexuality, even in a performative sense as Julianne’s fiancée, contrasts greatly to Julianne’s fixed state as an unruly woman. Although Julianne willingly places herself under George’s control by pleading with him to find her “irresistible”, he exploits his access to her by lavishing Julianne with physical attention, compliments and pet names. The results of George’s control are humorous rather than offensive as Julianne responds in irritation, peeling his hand off her breast in the taxi and mouthing the words, “Get off me”. George’s heterosexual coding, however, proves problematic in a way that his safe eroticism as a gay man does not. As Julianne’s fiancé, George acts as a surrogate for the “sexist sex play that many straight men are conditioned to idealise” (Shugart 2003, 88). As he continues his parody of heteromasculinity, George confides to Michael’s family that he is “just in town for a quick pre-conjugal visit”, and slaps Julianne on the bottom. Later, he does the same to Kimmy, who shrieks in surprise. The fact that George “is the one slapping—not the women” is a further example of his greater sexual access (Shugart 2003, 81). While George’s dominance over Julianne during their fantasy engagement evokes a “glittering Doris Day-Rock Hudson extravaganza” in more than the obvious way, exerting sexual control over his straight friend is not the chief means through which the gay male character is normalised. Instead, gay best friendship in each film is redressed through identity politics and the gay man’s sexuality through his partnership with the unruly woman.
**Mutual containment**

Owing to their particular constructions of gender and sexuality, the unruly woman and gay man develop a friendship based on their identity—“who one is rather than one’s roles and statuses”—which is inevitably portrayed as the most important relationship in each film (Nardi 1999, 204). Because the role of the straight woman is to desexualise her gay best friend, however, identity politics in *Get Real* and *My Best Friend’s Wedding* signals only the potential for the “denaturalisation” of gender and sexual difference (Maddison 2000a, 282). In both films under discussion, the sexuality of Steven and George is matched by the unruliness of Linda and Julianne and, combined with their shared identification, is by those means contained.

Gay best friendship in *Get Real* originates from a mutual departure from heteronormative standards: what oppresses Steven as a homosexual “is the product of the same system whose rules and relations oppress” Linda as an unruly woman (Rubin 1975, 182). This system is embodied by Kevin, whose blond machismo is fitting for his role as the male chauvinist enemy—he calls Steven a “queer fuck” and describes Linda as “not exactly an oil painting”. Although Steven and Linda are seen to actively oppose “heterosexualised manhood” through their interaction with Kevin, political resistance is incidental (Maddison 2000b, 12). Despite its intimations of class differences between its characters, *Get Real* is careful to disengage its focus from social politics, as is *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, concentrating instead on the identity politics in gay best friendship.

The solidarity between Linda and Steven is portrayed as “an escape from the dictates and pieties of social life” and that goes beyond “the basic structures of their cultural institutions into an involuntary and uncontrollable disclosure of self” (Nardi 1999, 204). Thus, while Linda and Steven are united by the numbing experience of living in the suburbs (“Sweetheart, no one ever wants to go back to Basingstoke”) with their families and face adolescent issues like school and driving lessons, their intimacy is otherwise indicated. Their physical comfort with each other is repeated throughout the film: on the dance floor Steven moves away from Jessica and back to Linda when the fast song changes to a ballad. In another scene, both are shown lying on Steven’s bed together discussing their love lives, a conversation punctuated by affectionate mockery:

Steven: Are you sure you’re not getting the wrong signals?

Linda: Steve, [Bob] kissed me.
Steven: Where?

Linda: On the ring road.

Steven: No, I mean—

Linda: On the cheek.

Steven: Oh, it must be love then.

Linda: What would you know about love? The best you ever manage is a quick one with a complete stranger.

The equality in their friendship is also reflected through the synchronicity of their romances—Linda and Steven’s relationships are both started, consummated and ended at the same stages in the film—and in an early scene, both are depicted enthusing over John’s sex appeal from the same distance: “He is sex on legs”, Linda sighs, only to be answered by Steven, “Yeah, I know. Every time I see his ‘Head Boy’ badge I wish it were an invitation”. Moreover, it is only Steven (and the audience) who have the privilege of understanding Linda as she prepares herself for a date with Bob, carefully applying make-up as her brother uncomprehendingly exclaims, “Blimey, I thought you had a driving lesson”. Linda, in turn, is the only person to discern Steven’s agitation over John at the wedding and offer a solution: “Well, let’s just go”.

The scenes exploring the relationship between Julianne and George also depict their solidarity as an expression of identity politics, however differently their friendship is constructed to that of Linda and Steven. Possessing the high cultural and economic capital of established professionals, Julianne and George live in New York and work in the same industry—“George is my publisher”, Julianne explains. Yet while Julianne appears to be in transit (her flat looks like a hotel room filled with her personal paraphernalia), George’s life is stable. Various shots show him participating in a sophisticated cultural sphere, attending book readings or hosting dinner parties for arty-looking guests. Although these scenes stereotypically define George’s homosexuality, the liberal milieu he belongs to indicates his friendship with Julianne is not, as is Linda and Steven’s, based on a mutual enemy or for the purposes of defense. Such is their sexual freedom that George and Julianne effectively swap places:
she acts out the promiscuity traditionally attributed to a gay man and he shares an apartment with his steady partner.\footnote{7}

The identification between Julianne and George is most prominent when contrasted against the friendship between Julianne and Michael. Although Julianne comments that Michael is similar in character to George, “only straight”, Michael is shown to be “blithely ignorant of Jules’s true needs, the same needs to which George is so attuned” (Dreisinger 2000, 6). Julianne’s greatest need, of course, is for Michael to recognise her love for him, yet it is revealed that Michael considers Julianne to be a woman who is “not up for anything conventional or anything that’s assumed to be a female priority”, such as marriage, romance and love. Moreover, Michael fails to interpret the changes in Julianne’s behaviour—he recalls her problem with public displays of physical intimacy, even though in a later scene they end up dancing in each other’s arms under the scrutiny of an audience (an act that reduces Julianne to tears for maybe the fourth time in her entire life). Celestino Deleyto likewise notes that throughout the film there is a marked discrepancy between the conduct Michael ascribes to Julianne and how she actually behaves:

\[\text{[i]n the course of the narrative, it has been suggested that Julianne’s failures in love are caused by her coldness, her inability to show her feelings and, as usual in contemporary romantic comedy, her tendency to overvalue her career and her personal freedom. Yet in her scenes with George, all of these problems cease to exist, and she is honest, affectionate and sharing (2003, 181).}\]

Naturally, George matches these qualities in Julianne. In a scene that repeats the intimate aerial shot of Linda and Steven’s faces as they lie together on his bed, George and Julianne are able to discuss her love for Michael (and her other shortcomings) frankly:

\begin{quote}
George: Jules, do you really love him? Or is this just about winning? Seriously?

Julianne: In the beginning, it was mostly this prior claim. He belonged to me. But now, when I’m with him ... He’s just so wonderful. How come I never knew that when I could’ve had him?
\end{quote}

\footnote{7 The sharp viewer can glean hints of George’s boyfriend Werner, who, although never identified on screen, is pictured in a photograph in George’s apartment and heard on his answering machine.}
George: It’s amazing the clarity that comes with psychotic jealousy.

Julianne: George, believe me, if he was feeling what I’m feeling, then he would know how I feel. It’s horrible... What?

George: Just tell him you love him. Julianne, tell him you loved him for nine years, but you were afraid of love.

In a reversal of the circumstances in Get Real, it is the unruly woman who requires the support of the gay man as she pursues her object of desire, yet together, Julianne and George demonstrate the same intimacy and physical comfort that characterises the friendship between Linda and Steven.

The theme of identity politics in gay best friendship is never in question throughout each film and is ultimately emphasised as more important than any of the characters’ sexual or romantic journeys. Steven’s solidarity with Linda is based on their state as social outcasts, formed as a necessary defence against their mutual oppressors—the nuclear family, patriarchal capitalism and, above all, heterosexual men (Stanley 1982; Connell 1995). In this regard, their friendship could easily be a negation if Get Real did not end in the affirmation of heterosocial bonding, which attempt[s] to resist [negative] formations of women and gay men by producing alternative models of gender relations that resist the dysphoria of homosociality. Narratively, heterosocial bonds are often concerned with displacing the dominance of homosocial representations of women and queers, which constitute male subjectivity, by foregrounding bonds that express our interests (Maddison 2000a, 275).

The final scene of Get Real involves Linda driving her brother’s car down a winding road while Steven, sitting next to her, tosses aside her L-plates, expressing the matching transmutation of their desire from a male object to their attainment of emotional and physical freedom: Steven has publically revealed his sexuality and Linda has exponentially increased her independence. This scene directly follows the one in which Steven ends his relationship with the closeted John but, significantly, this does not enter Linda and Steven’s closing dialogue. Uniting the unruly woman and her gay best friend in this way ultimately continues to “question the cultural demarcation between the queer and the straight” as Steven is not
coupled with the man of his dreams, but is content to drive off into the sunset with Linda (Doty 1993, xv-xvi).

Although *My Best Friend’s Wedding* marries off the “best woman” to Michael and condemns the “bad guy” to a romantic wasteland, the dubiousness of Kimmy’s prize and the return of George at the end of the film redress the importance of Julianne’s identification with her gay best friend and her role as straight woman. Like the coupling of Linda and Steven, Julianne and George’s final scene together carries some unhappy connotations. Both can be seen as “marginalised characters” who come together “from a perspective of alienation” (Cover 2000, 78); the outcome also suggests that as an unruly woman, and a single, educated, working one at that (Pillion 2000), Julianne must consequently “make do’ with an ...wholly inadequate substitute for romantic love” in George (Deleyto 2003, 170). Moreover, the idea of Julianne losing one male best friend and gaining another implies, as with her succession of boyfriends, that she will forever be caught up in both these cycles until she becomes more, perhaps, like Kimmy. Combined with the mise-en-scène and soundtrack, however, the ending of *My Best Friend’s Wedding* creates an “atmosphere of celebration and optimism” similar to the final scene in *Get Real* (Deleyto 2003, 170-1). With George’s reappearance, his friendship with Julianne takes precedence over the heterosexual union that has gone before them and the homosexual union in which he is presumably still involved. Their gay best friendship is more important, in fact, because it can now be expressed apart from the disruptive element of sex:

George: ... and although you quite correctly sense that he is gay, like most devastatingly handsome single men of his age are, you think, what the hell. Life goes on. Maybe there won’t be marriage. Maybe there won’t be sex. But by God, there’ll be dancing.

The final scene featuring the celebratory dance between Julianne and George is established as non-erotic, with rules firmly laid out: the homosexual George is “the un-boyfriend” just as Julianne, the unruly woman, has proven to be the “un-wife”, and it is with their identification that the film concludes its happy ending (Dreisinger 2000, 7). Julianne and Linda fulfil their character function by containing the effects of the gay man functioning sexually apart from their friendship, within their friendship—and resolve their own unruliness by seizing a male, if not heterosexual, partner at the conclusion of their narrative journeys.
Film director Pedro Almodóvar believes that, in mainstream film, a woman “can only be the dumb love interest of the hero who needs him to save her, or who’s there so he doesn’t appear to be gay” (Maddison 2000a, 273). As such, the straight woman is always a conduit for gender normalcy, operating to enhance, reduce or cover up, to play opposite a man in any gender or sexual form. In both *My Best Friend’s Wedding* and *Get Real*, the characterisations of both Julianne and Linda are used to contain the transgressions wrought throughout on the binary divisions of male/ female, heterosexual/ homosexual and even essentialist/ constructionist. While films featuring gay best friendship depict straight female characters as separate to a traditional heterosexual coupling, allowing them to experiment with gender roles in their relationships with gay men, any disorder or progression is a short-term experiment and often develops chaotically. Only the reversion to an essentialist notion of gender roles, in which the sexuality of the straight woman and that of her gay best friend is fixed, ensures that each film ends by reaffirming heteronormativity.

Yet I hope, too, there remains the possibility to question whether indeed everything is ‘back to heteronormal’ for Linda and Julianne, however successful each is in fulfilling her role, or however strongly gender conservatism reclains her. In *Get Real* and *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, Linda and Steven as well as Julianne and George are united—necessarily for the completion of the straight woman’s function, but also in perhaps the only true depiction of contentment and love in each film. Instead of attempting a conversion of Linda and Julianne’s unruliness and matching them with a male heterosexual partner while sustaining their gay best friendship, the directors of each film depict the final scene as a celebration of misfit couples and binary fence-sitting. These images, however transient, are a sign that woman’s evolution as a more complete character in mainstream Western film is advancing.

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