

BIG MEN ON CAMPUS: SELLING THE FRAT-HOUSE COMEDY

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by

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ABSTRACT

There is little specific literature on the frat-house comedy despite its prolificacy. The intent of my project is to examine the frat-house comedy film as a subgenre of the gross-out comedy film over the years since the very influential models of *Animal House* (1978) and *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984). This thesis will outline the characteristics of the frat-house comedy. I look at how gross-out humor is typically tied in with revenge and some form of competition. Using theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Mikhail Bakhtin, and William Paul I consider taste, grotesque behavior, and the social maneuvering of the protagonists in these films within the fictional university settings. These films have changed some since William Paul's study of animal comedy a decade ago (but animal behavior has increased exponentially). I look at marketing and how the "unrated" video market functions as the new grind-house by comparing the merchandising style of current trends in home video to earlier marketing strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

The intent of my project is to examine the frat-house comedy film as a subgenre of the gross-out comedy over the two decades since the very influential films *National Lampoon's Animal House* (John Landis, 1978) and *Revenge of the Nerds* (Jeff Kanew, 1984). I will look primarily at recent films that have found new life on unrated videos. These target a young, primarily male, audience. There is little specific literature on the frat-house comedy despite its proliferation as a subgenre in the past few decades. Most criticism involving these films lumps them in between teen male sex quests (Timothy Shary) or the gross-out film genre (William Paul), but the broad definition of gross-out films in previous examinations reduces the effectiveness of the study. Shary, Paul, and Geoff King concentrate their work on key theatrical films from each period, ignoring sequels, imitators, and other successors. I am focusing more on these somewhat neglected films, several of which may not even have had theatrical releases. The direct-to-video market has exploded over recent years, with myriad possibilities to explore in several subgenres.¹ While frat-house films are often lumped into broader categories without particular attention to titles that were not as successful as *Animal House* or *Revenge of the Nerds*, my research reveals more layers beneath the frat-house film in terms of gross-out humor than these earlier studies mention. As with genre study in general, there are generic patterns, but just as often there are exceptions to these patterns, and there are exceptions to how these films are defined.²

Comedy is often defined by its intent, which is to make one laugh, rather than by its overall narrative premise.³ Geoff King usefully addresses comedy as a “mode” rather than a genre.⁴ If comedy is a mode, then any genre might be treated as a subject for comedic potential.⁵ To reduce problems of generic recognition through more specific description, I will concentrate on the college films that feature predominantly male casts, which are set in fraternities, and that are aimed almost exclusively at young males. This partially defines these films by setting. Moreover, they are a subgenre of the “gross-out” film, which is “comedy based on crude and deliberate transgressions of the bounds of ‘normal’ everyday taste.”⁶ In this introduction, I will address the history of the campus film, detailing a few significant campus films that preceded the exploitation and fraternity-based films I call the “frat-house” comedies, launched by the blockbusters *Animal House* and *Revenge of the Nerds* and their successors and imitators. I have chosen a few campus films that are largely unlike the contemporary frat-house films, but do contain elements that have continued in order to better situate the frat-house comedy in its context.

Genre can be a useful tool for marketing films to their potential audience because categorization through marketing makes it easier for interested viewers to identify films they may like based on previous viewing experiences. Through print marketing, distributors are able to target fans of particular genres by providing familiar conceptual designs which link new films to previous ones. These marketing choices are often more interesting and revealing than the films themselves. It is through the marketing of these films that we get a clearer picture of the intended audience. In the case of the frat-house

films, there is usually an element of sexual titillation present in the poster and DVD cover artwork. Animalistic behavior is also on display in the advertising of these films, and that aspect has been overlooked within William Paul's theory of animal comedy.

The earliest campus films I will look at are from what is considered the "simple era", which were the formative years when these films were all the rage, and the latter films are from the "revolution" phase which introduced more radical collegiate behavior into the cinema. These are more clearly defined below. Alongside this, I will specify the major theoretical works that I have researched for the examination of the frat-house film with emphasis on taste, gross-out humor, and marketing, and how my approach can be distinguished from theirs.

My attempt at providing a historical survey of the college film and my specific area of frat-house comedy proved to be difficult. The overall catalog is vast, and there are too many films in too many genres that relate to the campus to cover here in any great detail. While there may be plenty of films, there appears to be a paucity of literature on frat-house films, beyond some studies that focus predominantly on the representation of education in movies⁷ and Krista Tucciarone's detailed study that compared real campus experience versus movie representation.⁸ Most of the studies did concentrate on aspects of verisimilitude in these films, with the notable exception of Wiley Umphlett's study, *The Movies Go to College*. Umphlett's work revealed a helpful timeline, although it largely predates the frat-house film and is virtually free of any substantial analysis. Tucciarone also featured a timeline based on Umphlett's. Both authors divided the

campus film into different eras. I have used a combination of these versions, with slightly altered names and categories for clarity and simplification.⁹

The Simple Life (1910s-'40s)

In this period, college was observed as a haven for the wealthy and privileged.¹⁰ The campus was largely a backdrop to musical plays and sporting events, and the films typically fore-grounded these pastimes. In this period, major college comedies arrived from Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton, who both played underprivileged young men who were at odds with the elitist college system and overcame those odds in order to win popularity and the girls. Harold Lloyd appeared in *The Freshman* (Fred C. Newmeyer, 1925) and Buster Keaton in *College* (James W. Horne, 1927). These films offered a comic vision of college life and pointed to the variations, extensions, and reactions that would follow.¹¹ As I explain further below, this period established certain conventions that would carry through to the subgenre of the frat-house film. Throughout the history of the college film, there are always films that adhere to the traditional American ideals established during this era. Many of these would, however, be period films attempting a certain nostalgic capacity like the football drama *Rudy* (David Anspaugh, 1993), which was also an underdog tale where the protagonist triumphed in the final moments and emerged as the big man on campus.

Academic Bureaucracy and Campus Socialization (1940s-'60s)

Here the importance of a good education was recognized as vital to one's future and the first signs of criticism toward academia, athletics, and the Greek system

emerged.¹² During this period there were many mainstream and exploitation features that dealt both with fraternity and sorority life, and with the challenges that the systems posed to these social divisions. There was an increase in the subject of gender relations and social positions on college campuses. Many of the films began to tackle the student/teacher relationship, particularly when it concerned male professors and female students. Mainstream examples included a wave of studio releases such as *Mr. Belvedere Goes to College* (Elliot Nugent, 1949), *Bedtime for Bonzo* (Frederick de Cordova, 1951), *She's Working Her Way Through College* (H. Bruce Humberstone, 1952), *The Nutty Professor* (Jerry Lewis, 1963), *The Trouble with Women* (Sidney Landfield, 1947) and *Teacher's Pet* (George Seaton, 1958). There were an abundance of short length lower-budgeted exploitation tales that were often part of theatrical double-bills. Examples of these included *All-American Co-Ed* (LeRoy Prince, 1941) and *Sex Kittens Go to College* (Albert Zugsmith, 1960). Some of these B movies portrayed college life as fast-paced and endlessly alluring, in much the same way as the contemporary frat-house films do. Examples included *Betty Co-Ed* (Arthur Dreifus, 1946), *Let's Go Collegiate* (Jean Yarbrough, 1941), and *Campus Rhythm* (Arthur Dreifus, 1947). This was also the period in which appeared some of the earliest examples of campus initiations and hazing by upperclassmen, foreshadowing what would be taken to greater extremes in the next eras. Hazing was a major plot component of *Those Were the Days!* (Theodore Reed, 1940), but the film treated the practice with more levity and light-heartedness than would future films like *Fraternity Row* (Thomas J. Tobin, 1977).

Revolution (1960s-'70s)

Films from this era attempted to depict student life more realistically than the films of earlier stages.¹³ Occasionally, these employed a cinema vérité quasi-documentary technique, as was the case with *The Strawberry Statement* (Stuart Hagmann, 1970). The revolution period was concerned with sexual fascination and socio-political movements. These films pushed boundaries, particularly in terms of depictions of sex and bureaucracy, further than during the previous era. With the breakdown of the Code of Motion Picture Production in 1968, filmmakers were now able to deal with more frank depictions of sensitive contemporary issues like sex and racism, which also contributed to realism in the films of this era. This was the time when the feminist movement and issues of sex and race equality had become predominant topics of debate in American culture. Other films from this period included *R.P.M.* (Stanley Kramer, 1970), *Love Story* (Arthur Hiller, 1970), *The Harrad Experiment* (Ted Post, 1973) *Carnal Knowledge* (Mike Nichols, 1971), *Getting Straight* (Richard Rush, 1970), *The Paper Chase* (James Bridges, 1973), and the previously mentioned *Fraternity Row*.

Party Animals (1978-present)

This is the current era where the animal comedy goes to college and the frat-house comedy comes into its own. Wiley Umphlett introduces these films only briefly, and ties them in with the previous era. He ends his study of college films around 1981 before the frat-house films really become more established as a subgenre. Writers like Geoff King and William Paul pick up on these films with their work on animal comedy. It seems necessary to create another category to distinguish the frat-house films. These

post-*Animal House* films put special emphasis on the “party” lifestyle and the campus as a site for fun, drinking, and sexual adventure. It is the films from this period that I make my focus.

On one hand, these timeline categorizations are useful because they reflect the dominant course of campus films for each period, but they are less useful when looking at individual elements of films that may escape broad categorizing. For example, *The Harrad Experiment* falls into the Revolution category, but the film’s actual storyline has much in common with films of the 1930s and is not as radical as its marketing implies.

The students in the Party Animals period are more interested in their unbridled behavior which consists of hard drinking, smoking up, and having lots of sex. College life is now portrayed as a rite of passage, where senior students can haze new students. While this is accurate of some films, there are occasionally more than prurient behavioral qualities at work in these films. Sometimes the characters are more interested in deeper concerns like true love, or social acceptance. However, gross-out humor has remained a staple of the frat-house comedy since its inception. It is the one element that has stayed consistent. Within the frat-house film gross-out humor serves several functions, but it is linked most frequently to revenge and the comeuppance of the antagonist. Gross-out gags tend to be part of male competition. The heroes of the frat-house film, from John Belushi’s Bluto character in *Animal House* onward, recognize gross-out for what it is. They do not merely wallow in it, but instead they use it to their particular advantage. In Chapter One, I will look at gross-out behavior and its relationship to Mikhail Bakhtin’s

carnival culture in *Rabelais and His World* and Pierre Bourdieu's look at class and taste, *Distinction*. I will look at ways in which gross-out gags function in the frat-house film in terms of male revenge and competition. Gross-out sequences in the campus comedy demonstrate carnivalesque dynamics by bringing those characters that have pretensions or delusions of grandeur down to a lower level. The victims of scatological pranks are typically the antagonists, who are often antagonists not merely because they consider themselves superior to the heroes of the frat-house film, but also because they are manipulative, self-centered, and dishonest.

Both studies are useful in terms of scatological humor and class divisions, but Bakhtin and Bourdieu's studies were of people from very different periods and cultures. Bakhtin's work is somewhat useful in terms of consideration of the audience of the frat-house comedy, but the figures of the *carnivalesque* are too removed from the characters in the frat-house film to be observed as entirely analogous models. They exist in a different time and place with different customs and forms of socialization. Bourdieu's class distinction is a good starting place for the onscreen characters, but as I will explain, any attempts to label these characters is complicated by the unreliable nature and fluid social placement of the quick-witted underdogs who often reveal themselves to be in classes all their own.

While I have mentioned that these frat-house films are a subgenre of gross-out comedy, they are also sexploitation films.¹⁴ To complicate the terminology a bit more, the frat-house films have also been defined as a subgenre of what Paul Bonilla called

Hollywood Lowbrow.¹⁵ Lowbrow films were precisely modeled products that straddled the line between PG-13 and Restricted ratings, and that were targeted at teens-to-young adults.¹⁶ When considering the definition of Hollywood Lowbrow and looking at the films of Bonila's study, I determine Lowbrow to be another term for gross-out comedies that involve sexploitation. So, the frat-house comedy may best be considered a subgenre of both sexploitation and gross-out that is also Lowbrow. I will concentrate on the films that represent what I believe to be the primary focus of the majority of frat-house comedies, social acceptance and competition. This is not a chronological survey, but one that observes key genre trends that are evident from the earliest models. The direct-to-video films that I focus on in later chapters are primarily sexploitation films that relate to earlier models, but evolve during the Party Animal phase.

The earliest campus films were released during the 1920s when, according to Umphlett, there was an infatuation among the general public with college life.¹⁷ Many early campus comedy films depicted protagonists who arrived on campus in the hopes of being accepted by their peers and maybe even allowed into a fraternity. Typically, the characters would be put through some form of social ridicule and would join forces with other outcasts in order to seek revenge and become popular and/or romantically successful.¹⁸ Harold Lloyd's *The Freshman* and Buster Keaton's *College* were probably the most celebrated and noteworthy examples.¹⁹ These films provided insight into the early intents of the campus comedy film and historical perspective for this genre. *The Freshman* was considered a "breakthrough college film because of its sensitive depiction of social reality and the trials and tribulations of campus life".²⁰ Lloyd played Speedy

Lamb, a young man who dreamt of getting into college, becoming a famous athlete, and impressing female co-eds. However, when he showed up on campus and exhibited his specially designed, but absurd, introductory jig he quickly became an object of ridicule for the other young men, including the star quarterback. The film set up what would continue to be a very popular comedy (and sports film) formula. Speedy didn't let the fact that he was inept at football get in his way. Despite the ridicule, his persistence eventually earned him the position of team manager and on the day of the big game Speedy got to participate on the field, due to a high injury count on the team. In spite of his irregular skills, Speedy was able to score the winning touchdown to the surprise of his coaches and teammates. This underdog formula was echoed to some degree in the later *Revenge of the Nerds* and many of the subsequent frat-house comedies. The roots of the formula continued in *College* where Ronald (Keaton) tried out for every sport at his college in order to impress the girl. Ronald's physical prowess made him a more competent athlete than Speedy, and by the climax of the film he was completely transformed from studious "nerd" to pole-vaulting hero.

In those early films, social competition often arrived in the form of college sports, and the will to win was often connected to romantic desire. The heroes of those films were upwardly mobile, struggling to gain acceptance through perseverance in athletics. Football was the sport of choice in the silent era with *College* and *The Freshman*. The basic premise of both films was very similar. The protagonists would not achieve popularity or romantic success unless they succeeded in sports competition, and both

characters were the target of practical jokes and ridicule upon their arrivals at school.

This kind of storyline would become ubiquitous in the frat-house film, as I demonstrate in Chapter One. In the frat-house comedy, competition was a major element, and was often tied in with revenge. Team sports made a sizable contribution to the popular conception of the collegiate experience and the social image of the college male.²¹

Although many of the men who went out for the team in the early days of collegiate sports were socially motivated, they also displayed a patriotic sense of duty and service that inspired them to push hard in representing their school. This sense of honor and pride in an institution is pretty much absent from the contemporary frat-house films, where even the names of schools are rarely mentioned and the sports (and other) rivalries are between individuals within the same school. The sports competition framework does occasionally resurface, but it devolved into more grotesque or extreme forms of competition. There is little by way of traditional sports competitions in the new frat-house comedies.²²

Sports competition and the campus continued to be a staple of the campus film for several decades, turning up in many mainstream and exploitation titles. It was “the most popular inspiration for the fantasy background of the college-life movie [at the time].”²³

Films depicting college-life continued to rely on genre conventions that were developed earlier.²⁴ *Knute Rockne All American* (Lloyd Bacon, 1940) was one of the most successful. An early “bio-pic”, it was not critical of the university or college-life, but was intended to show off a real American hero who lived and died respecting the college

institution. The sports angle in this case was also inspirational to a nation at war that needed to recognize real-life heroes as opposed to fantasy ones.²⁵ And, as mentioned earlier, it also insured the main character romantic success off the field.

During the 1980s, which was the decade that would prove most significant to the development of the new frat-house comedies, there was a proliferation of college films and sports competition had become almost a cliché. This is a likely reason why the newer films tended to mock them, or go over the top. *Oxford Blues* (Robert Boris, 1985) featured boat races between rivals Cambridge and Oxford, and an underdog American student (Rob Lowe) was the driving force. The underdog sports hero was a winning box-office figure during that period of the early 1980s and sequences often revolved around intense competition.²⁶ *Revenge of the Nerds* was a film from this period and it did feature a substantial sequence where the nerds vs. the jocks in traditional sports games (it also ends in a belching contest). There were still sports activities, but more often than not there was an element of animal behavior involved such as drinking contests, farting contests, and even a pig-catching competition that showed up in *Beta House* (Andrew Waller, 2007). Being a football hero seemed a more refined and noble pursuit than what is offered up in newer films, where social acceptance is now measured by one's ability to be a more dominant animal. Becoming a great athlete or high-achieving academic would almost be considered inadequate.

Sexual promiscuity on campus had become evident in films of the Revolution period. Films from this period are relevant toward our understanding of the position of

sexism in the later frat-house comedies. Here, there was still a high degree of social competition, but it came by way of sexual activity and sexual success instead of sports prowess. *Carnal Knowledge* centered on the relationship between males and females. Two university roommates, Jonathan (Jack Nicholson) and Sandy (Art Garfunkel) had set up a competition to see who would sexually conquer Susan (Candice Bergen). The film was interesting in terms of the campus' roles in the formation of the male attitude toward sex and the opposite gender. The film traced Jonathan and Sandy's lives through divergent paths in order to illustrate how their ill-fated sexual lives were the result of misconceptions and false expectations that had been fostered at the university. The film seemed to imply that the superior air cultivated by the two male characters was there to conceal a deeper anxiety toward women. Unlike the frat-house comedies, *Carnal Knowledge* presented a critical look at the male attitude toward women in a university system that seemed to suggest a gendered hierarchy.

The slightly more marginalized film *The Harrad Experiment* also offered an examination of gender relations on campus. The tagline proclaimed "Harrad College... where free, liberated relations between coed students are encouraged!" Husband and wife professors conducted a controlled group project in premarital relations. The students chosen for the experiment were requested to partner up for a month as roommates to see if the ready possibility of intimate physical relations could result in long-term couplings or just aimless promiscuity. The film boasted a fair amount of nudity, easily comparable to the latter frat-house comedies, but it provided a clearer

message that casual sex is not as good as a meaningful relationship. The ample nudity was really the only exploitative aspect of the film, and while its marketing suggested that it was a bold film in the vein of sexploitation, the film was ultimately rather prudish (see Figure 1).

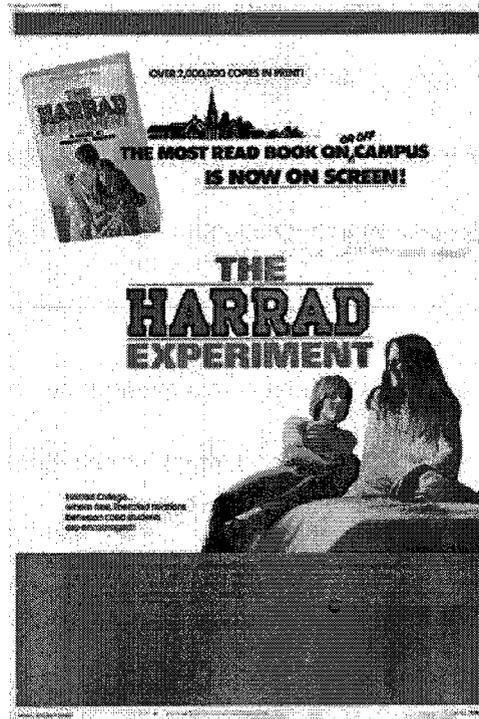


Figure 1: *The Harrad Experiment* Theatrical Poster

1973 was a prominent year for campus-set films. In addition to *The Harrad Experiment*, that year also saw the release of *The Strawberry Statement* and *The Paper Chase*. The protagonists of both of those films challenged the effectiveness of campus administration. *The Strawberry Statement* was one of the more radical and popular films concerning the frustrations of the student-establishment conflict.²⁷ Simon (Bruce Davison) was a student whose interests mirrored those of the average male of that

period.²⁸ Initially, Simon demonstrated an apathetic attitude toward the pressures placed upon college administration as set forth by his fellow students. He was later motivated to fight for the student cause and joined in the demonstrations and sit-ins. The film was based on the factual uprisings of 1969 at Columbia University and it had the look and feel of *cinéma vérité*.²⁹ The film's tagline—"Their dream was to go to college"—was an interesting contrast to the marketing of frat-house comedies, where the dream may still have been to go to college, but the motivations were not academic or political.

Fraternities and sororities were fodder for several exploitation films which capitalized on the possibilities of the elite college systems. The 1939 film *Sorority House* was among the first films on record that reportedly dissected the "social defects" of the collegiate dormitory experience.³⁰ The sorority-based film appeared earlier and more frequently than the male fraternity film. Sorority films offered a sexual lure in later frivolous sexploitation pictures like Roger Corman's *Sorority Girl* (1957), which was marketed heavily toward a teen audience³¹ and *Take Care of My Little Girl* (Jean Negulesco, 1951) which attempted to satirize the uppity behavior of girls belonging to the social organization.³²

One of the most serious films to deal head-on with fraternities was *Fraternity Row*. It was also set in the 1950s, but unlike the hit film *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978) it was not looking back at the period with nostalgic fascination or whimsy, and was very critical in its attack on the fraternity system. *Fraternity Row* was a low-key but hard-edged look at fraternal brotherhood gone awry. Zac (Gregory Harrison) was a young

pledge trying to get accepted into a fraternity led by sympathetic pledge-master Roger (George Fox) and the more sadistic frat brother Chunk (Scott Newman). Zac's girlfriend Jennifer (Nancy Morgan) opposed the entire frat-house system, which she believed to be corrupted, elitist and destructive. The hazing ritual was presented as nearly sadomasochistic, but those initiations were more concerned with punishment in the form of spanking as opposed to the gross-out initiations that I mention in Chapter One. Jennifer pleaded with Zac not to pledge, but a supposedly harmless hazing act ended his life. The marketing emphasized that it was based on a real-life tragedy, and the poster reinforced the film's serious nature with its text.

They didn't smoke grass. They didn't take the pill. They didn't do their own thing. They went to college in the Fifties. They pledged fraternities. They celebrated Hell Week. They were the buttoned-down, bottled-up generation. And sometimes they exploded (see Figure 2).

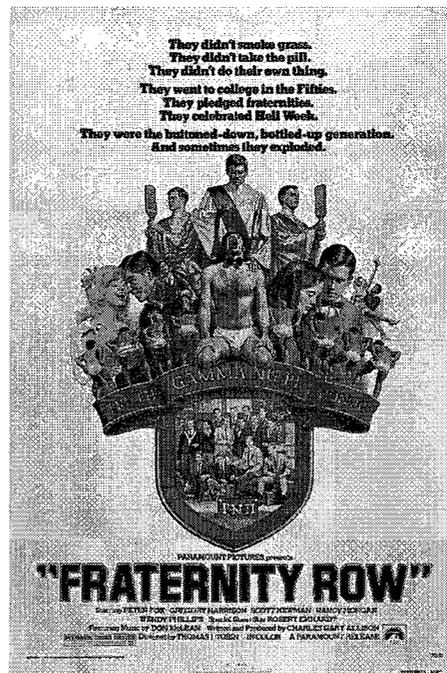


Figure 2: *Fraternity Row* (1977) Theatrical Poster

The film was released by Paramount almost a full year before *Animal House* which was set in the 1960s. *Animal House*, by contrast, had made its fraternity into the victim and the surrounding college was the oppressor.

There was a predominant shift from the more serious treatments of fraternity life and the student empowerment films during the later 1970s. The treatment of academic pursuits and the presence of serious academic faculty became less prominent. Films like *Revenge of the Nerds* and its sequels, *The Party Animal* (David Bearid, 1982), and *King Frat* (Ken Weiderhorn, 1979) led a wave of low-budget and increasingly explicit imitators which recognized the college campus as an ideal location for sex and drug experimentation, and which often presented a utopian vision of college life. This continued with the resurgence of animal comedy, but there were also interesting exceptions to the frat-house film that arrived, including the transgressive *The Rules of Attraction* (Roger Avary, 2002). This was a boldly nihilistic anti-comedy that featured a male protagonist who was a smart but dangerous character. He fed off the basic instincts of vapid college characters, and led some of them to tragic consequences. This film was a rare exception that dished out darkly comic wit alongside exploitative college behavior. It was sort of like *Animal House* re-envisioned as a psychodrama. Like *Higher Learning* (John Singleton, 1995), it went for an alternative approach and was equally shocking in its reinforcement of stereotypes of sex, race, and class differences. Neither of those deviations was as financially successful as the major frat-house comedies like *National Lampoon's Van Wilder* (Walt Becker, 2002) and *Animal House* had been.³³

William Paul coined the term animal comedy for those films that have “an insistent emphasis on animality”.³⁴ These films place physical comedy above verbal comedy, and animals both metaphorically and sometimes literally “are never very far from these films.”³⁵ Animal comedy had become popular as a genre due to the success of those campus-based comedies (he frequently cited *Animal House* and *Porky's* (Bob Clark, 1981) as two of the most influential)³⁶, but simultaneously, it reduced the popularity of the romantic comedy which at that point in the late 1970s was represented by the likes of Neil Simon and Blake Edwards. Romantic comedy went into a decline that lasted until the nineties when it returned in a big way, and arguably entered a “revisionist” phase.

Paul’s examination of animal comedy failed to predict a decline.³⁷ In retrospect, it would have made more sense if Paul had distinguished the frat-house film from the animal comedy. In addition, the majority of discussion of animal comedy, gross-out comedy, and teen-oriented films made little distinction between the high school film and the university or college-bound film. *American Pie* (Chris Weitz, 1999) was about high school students, but in its sequel *American Pie 2* (J.B. Rogers, 2001) those characters moved into university and into complex relationships with greater degrees of freedom. While there were similarities among the high school campus comedies, the biggest difference is that the young men in the frat-house films were not bound by the restrictions of parents and many had already lost their virginity. So the “sex quest” in the college film was more about abundant encounters as opposed to experiencing sex for the “first time”. It was the freedom of the college campus setting that marked one of the biggest

differences. Of the all-time top twenty campus comedy films listed by Box Office Mojo, half of them could be classified as frat-house comedies with at least some “gross-out” elements.³⁸ Those would be: #1: *Animal House*; #4: Todd Phillips’ films *Old School* (2003), and #5: *Road Trip* (2000); #9: *Revenge of the Nerds*; #10: *Accepted* (Steve Pink, 2006); #11: *How High* (Jesse Dylan, 2001); #12: *Revenge of the Nerds II: Nerds in Paradise* (Joe Roth, 1987); #14: *Spring Break* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1983); #17: *Van Wilder* and #19: *Dead Man on Campus* (Alan Cohn, 1998).³⁹

Production of gross-out comedy was reduced for awhile in the early 1990s, perhaps due to a social shift and focus on political correctness, or a simple fade out due to overexposure through a tiresome proliferation of raunchy teen sex comedies that burned out the subgenre for awhile. The horror genre, which was also heavily reliant on bodily fluids, was similarly less active during this period. So briefly, it appeared that Paul’s prediction was right but then the “gross out” film re-emerged, stronger and grosser. In terms of the frat-house comedy, the nearest to the genre during that decade was the aptly titled and remarkably restrained *PCU* (Hart Bochner, 1994) which concerned a frat-house that wanted to rebel against the uprise of political-correctness on campus. But the film itself seemed afraid to take any genuine stab at politically incorrect humor.

It is worth noting that there was a return to more serious depictions of college life in other campus films of that period. Along with *Higher Learning*, there was also *Gross Anatomy* (Thomas Eberhardt, 1992), *Threesome* (Andrew Fleming, 1996), and *Wonder Boys* (Curtis Hanson, 2000). Those films completely eschewed gross-out humor and were more in step with the socially and academically conscious films of the early

1970s.⁴⁰ This may have been reflective of certain cultural issues that were making headlines at the time, and with the dawn of the information age there was more exposure to a wide-range of ideas than ever before in our society. I'm not speaking here solely of the internet, but also of an increase in television programming dedicated to discussion. Talk shows like *Charlie Rose*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Larry King Live* helped to create a forum for discussion on a range of topics (often on subjects of sexuality, equality, and racial politics). The increased ubiquity of the twenty-four hour news network was also a factor. The Persian Gulf War of 1991 was a watershed event for the Cable Network News station (CNN) since that network was able to maintain live broadcast for more sustained periods of time. Breaking News had new outlets. There was also a disturbing amount of racial tension that was partially due to broadcasted stories like the Rodney King beating (and subsequent riots) and the media frenzy that was the O.J. Simpson trial. This was also a period when sexual issues were being debated, including a heightened awareness of queer activism and the continued concerns surrounding HIV AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Taking all of this into account, *Higher Learning* was likely the most ambitious of this socially aware cinematic lot, and used the college campus to examine race and gender issues. The film didn't address traditional fraternities, but there was a major storyline involving a freshman who was rejected by his roommate and other campus social organizations. He ultimately joined with a band of neo-Nazi racists who attempted to strengthen their presence on campus. From the Oscar-nominated director John Singleton, the film eschewed the detailed hazing rituals of *Fraternity Row*. As the

marketing suggested, it attempted an important, more serious and balanced look at campus life and how student's attitudes were shaped by the campus community (see Figure 3).

Gross Anatomy concerned a medical student who prioritized romance, but remained a brilliant student. The film was entirely focused on the demands of being a medical student and how it affected the love lives of those involved. *Threesome* depicted life on campus, but the story was centered on a sexual liaison between three students and the serious implications the ménage a trois had on their friendship. None of these films contained gross-out antics or similarly unruly behavior and the marketing didn't suggest that they were trying to lure a predominantly male audience. There was no sexual titillation evident in the posters, even in the case of *Threesome*, which featured a still of its three main characters sitting together at a cafeteria laughing. All of these films were relative disappointments in box-office terms, and they had received mediocre reviews.⁴¹ This brief wave of campus gravitas is now somewhat forgotten and overlooked. Perhaps William Paul was aware of this trend as it occurred around the time of his publication of *Laughing Screaming* and maybe, at least in terms of campus-centered animal comedies, it had contributed to his belief that the genre was dead or dying.



Figure 3: *Higher Learning* (1995) Theatrical Poster

Campus and sorority-centered comedies with female protagonists like *Legally Blonde* (Robert Luketic, 2001), *Pumpkin* (Anthony Abrams, 2003) and *The House Bunny* (Fred Wolf, 2008) also emerged following this period. They were not exactly feminist revisions, since the plotlines of these films suggested that the female characters needed to be beautiful, dim, and overall adorable in order to succeed. While the female college film lies outside of my thesis topic, these films are useful in terms of contrast, as they do not rely much on gross-out, but do have some similarities in terms of their marketing, particularly in their use of animals and female sexuality.

An interesting example of the changes in the college-based comedy can be found in films from two different eras that shared a common title, *The Nutty Professor* (Jerry Lewis, 1963) and, its loose remake, *The Nutty Professor* (Tom Shadyac, 1996). Both

films relied heavily on physical humor and relationships between student and faculty member at a university, and both were romantic comedies at heart. Jerry Lewis' version had many sight gags, and put the physical emphasis on pratfalls and his character's buck teeth and glasses. Umphlett noted a movement away from what he called the "absent-minded professor film" of the fifties and sixties to the more rebellious post-*Animal House* films.⁴² Eddie Murphy's *Nutty Professor* arrived just as the romantic-comedy and the gross-out film began to merge. His professor was morbidly obese and the humor was more about physical disgust, involving flatulence and bodily humor. In fact, the frat-house comedy rarely featured professors or administrative parties in anything but supporting, and often antagonistic roles. In *The Paper Chase*, professor Kingsfield (John Houseman) was a domineering force. He was an antagonist, for sure, but not the sort that Dean Wormer (John Vernon) was in *Animal House*. Kingsfield liked to embarrass and devalue his students in little games of social humiliation. Umphlett mentions the character as being the first time in a collegiate film that a professorial figure is given the upper hand over his students.⁴³ There remained a romantic entanglement in the film because Kingsfield's own daughter was involved with James Hart (Timothy Bottoms), the student that challenged Kingsfield's position as absolute monarch of the law classroom. The film's conclusion was more ambiguous than we got in the comedies or more traditional genre films. After Hart received the grades that he had struggled for, he threw the unopened envelope into the water. This frustrating conclusion suggested a kind of uncertainty, which could be read as defeat, that the frat-house comedies didn't aspire

to. The male protagonist would most likely succeed both academically and romantically and whether hard work or outright cheating were involved, would have been beside the point.

The history of college humor can also be traced to underground periodicals that were published on university campuses. The first volume of the *Harvard Lampoon* appeared in February, 1876. It was written by undergraduates and modeled after *Punch*, a British humor magazine. The early issues of the *Harvard Lampoon* placed strong emphasis on illustrations and written satire and the wild adventures of “Jester” the magazine's own mascot. The “Jester” could have been understood as a variation of Rabelais’ “trickster” character that I will discuss in Chapter One, and the concept of the “animal” mascot will be discussed in terms of marketing in Chapter Two. The emphasis on visual humor that was present in the *Lampoon* cartoons and the ribbing of academic hierarchies are all themes that recur in the campus comedy film. Several of the writers from the 1970s era of *Harvard Lampoon* were responsible for the creation of *Saturday Night Live*, the program that launched the careers of many of the talents that would grace animal comedies for years to come, including John Belushi and Bill Murray. Also interestingly, the most influential frat-house comedy film *Animal House* carried the National Lampoon banner, as do at least six other campus comedies.⁴⁴

Erik Schaefer and Justin Wyatt have done the most extensive work on film marketing, both sharing a special emphasis on print marketing such as posters and video packaging. I have chosen these two theorists because the frat-house comedies exist as

both high concept blockbusters and lowbrow exploitation films. While *Revenge of the Nerds* and *Van Wilder* both had successful theatrical releases and were genuine blockbusters, their sequels and imitators took more exploitative approaches in terms of marketing. Utilizing Eric Schaefer's work on sexploitation marketing, I will link this marketing approach to more contemporary approaches of direct-to-video marketing, specifically, the unrated edition. I will discuss shifts in the promotional approaches as the films move from theatrical release to home video. There has been a shift in our present situation and filmmakers, like the Farrelly brothers and Judd Apatow, have succeeded in creating a fusion of animal comedy and romantic comedy in pictures such as *There's Something about Mary* (Farrelly Brothers, 1998) and *Knocked Up* (Apatow, 2007). These changes subsequently affected marketing to adolescent males in both print advertising and theatrical and home video trailers. Schaefer discussed print advertising for the "nudie cuties" of the 1970s as having had two versions of copy for newspapers; "hot" ads for more liberal markets, and "cold" ads for the conservative ones. Similarly, today's films are discussed in terms of rated vs. "unrated". Recent teen sex comedies have begun to forego the use of sexualized imagery of females in their distribution artwork altogether. The raunchy teen comedies *Superbad* (Greg Mottola, 2007) and *Sex Drive* (Sean Anders, 2008) had explicitly sexual trailers. Those trailers were "hot", but the print ads were curiously "cold". While there was an absence of scantily-clad females in the posters, the films and trailers still offered the "smorgasbord of females" that Schaefer considered obligatory for the genre. So why were the young women missing from the posters? Was this indicative of a change in the current social climate? Had print

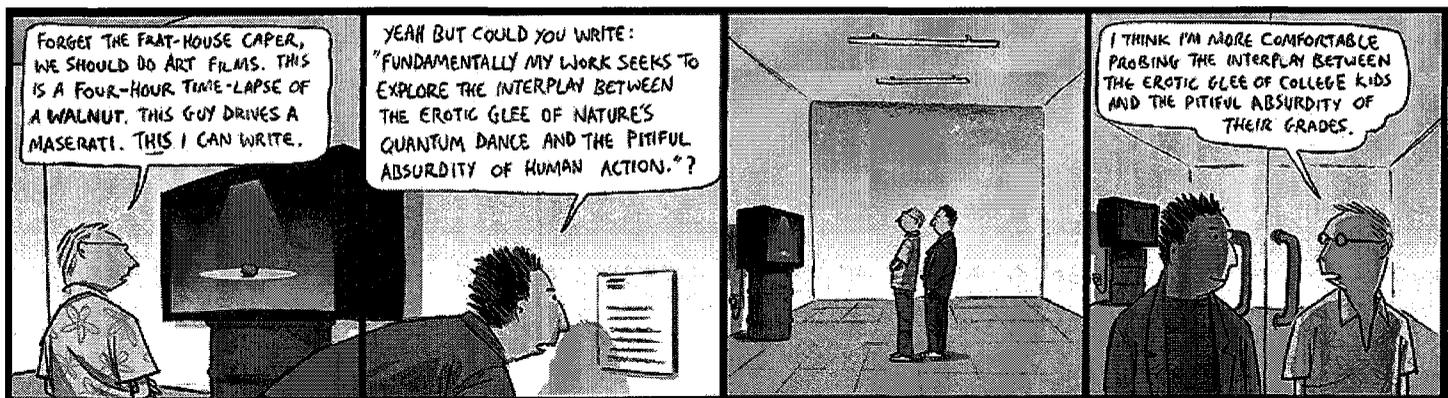
advertising become insignificant? Could it be related to the successful promotional campaigns of gross-out sex comedies that did not revolve around teens like Judd Apatow's films *The 40-Year Old Virgin* (2006) and *Knocked Up* which featured only awkward male characters in humorous poses on their artwork? In Chapter Two I address the print marketing of the frat-house comedy and its connection to both high concept and exploitation marketing, and suggest some reasons these changes may have occurred.

The campus has always been represented in cinema as a microcosm of class and taste. There were those who took education seriously and those who were just there to "meet chicks and party". Pierre Bourdieu continually returned to education as the key divider in class and taste distinctions. Bourdieu wrote of establishments and economic standing as vital to taste distinction and in these films we got fraternities, sororities, and secret societies that encouraged social divisions on campus by their very presence. There were limitations, however, in Bourdieu's system.

A problem with utilizing class distinctions in the contemporary campus films is that the characters themselves do not easily fit into molds of classification, and the frat-houses enable students from different social classes on the outside to co-exist in an environment that may change their own perceptions of where they stand in the social pecking order. The characters in these films also present problems in terms of distinction because their personalities tend to be chameleon-like and able to shift between high and low, just as the marketing of the films seems capable of doing. The films represent a kind of social flux where characters become socially mobile and effectively reduce the

power of social stratification by this ability to move back and forth. While Bluto and Gross-Out (the lead characters in *Animal House* and *King Frat*) were clearly all about animal behavior,⁴⁵ Van Wilder and his protégés were not merely animals and could hold their own with members of upper and lower classes with relative ease. Social mobility in any direction became a kind of strength for these characters that were so often referred to as being lowly. That is typically how they were classed by the antagonist of the films. The frat-house films themselves range in terms of class, quality, and box-office performance. These films are perhaps too outrageous to be taken as any serious examination of dormitory life. The situations and dialogue in some of the new frat-house comedies are reflexive and acutely self-aware. The nerds in *Beta House* no longer get sand kicked in their faces by jocks. They have all the power and the hot women on campus, have adapted and now gather at their fraternity, because these young men will have the most prosperous futures. The women are not as concerned with sports achievement in this newer frat-house film, but they are obviously concerned with upward mobility in a financial sense. Therefore, the nerds are also the antagonists in this particular film. It's a clever switch, and jokes like these assume that the audience has at least some familiarity with the history of the frat-house comedy. These films dish out plenty of humor involving gender, sexuality, and race. They are unafraid of pushing not only the boundaries of taste, but of challenging political correctness - our contemporary version of old propriety - and parlaying it into hysterical laughter irrespective of who may take offense. If *Higher Learning* was too pretentious with its layered examination of

gender and race issues, then maybe the frat-house comedy's return with the irresponsibly funny *Van Wilder* was inevitable. Where do the frat-house films exist in comparison to other generic forms of comedy and to other gross-out films? What are the major characteristics of this subgenre? What makes them male-centric and fraternal by their very nature? And how are frat-house comedies marketed in terms of high concept and exploitation? This is what I will attempt to investigate in the following chapters.



Art House v. Frat House (The Pitchers) from guardian.co.uk Friday March 7, 2008

1. FRATERNAL COMPETITION: GROSS-OUT GAGS AND REVENGE PRANKS

In this chapter I will look at the ways in which gross-out gags serve as scatological set-pieces in the frat-house comedy, usually as the weapons of choice for male competition and revenge directed at either an individual or a rival fraternity. These gags are also at the center of fraternity pledges and hazing rituals of disgust that must be endured in order to belong to the brotherhood. Gross-out sequences in the contemporary frat-house comedy have achieved new lows of repulsiveness in their attempts to shock and entertain audiences that, via the internet and cable, have more opportunity than ever before to see lowbrow material. I will show how gross-out humor and animal behavior have changed since William Paul's earlier study, and briefly demonstrate how the gross-out pranks in the frat-house films relate to horror film and reality television. In looking at excessive fraternal behavior, I will focus primarily on several frat-house films in this chapter: *King Frat*, *National Lampoon's Van Wilder*, *Van Wilder: Freshman Year*, (Harvey Glazer, 2009), *College* (Deb Hagan, 2008), and *Beta House*. I will continue to reference *Animal House* and *Revenge of the Nerds* when applicable.

In frat-house films, the victims of the most embarrassingly grotesque humiliations are nearly always the antagonists. Male competition in the frat-house comedy often involves underdogs vs. the more privileged. This continues a narrative pattern from the earliest tradition of the Keaton and Lloyd campus comedies. These films perpetrate the tradition of a romantic relationship for the hero, which is typically a core aspect of the rivalry between the protagonist and his male competitor, who is often a member of an opposing fraternity.

According to Joseph Boggs, in order for a film to be commercially successful in theatrical distribution, the “12-25 year-old” group who account for eighty-percent of ticket sales, must be appeased.⁴⁶ These films lured their young audience by way of profanity, a tendency toward farce based on scatological, sexual irruptions, and an episodic structure that consists primarily of vignettes.⁴⁷ In the case of the frat-house film, these vignettes would be the revenge pranks and other scatological gags and set-pieces. Most importantly, these films attempted to provide what Justin Wyatt and R.L. Rutsky described as “fun”. In their opinions, fun was a democratic, enjoyable thing and was to be distinguished from “pleasure” that was fraught with seriousness.⁴⁸

In his book *The Anatomy of Disgust*, William Miller stated that in most cultures disgust was a common reaction to the graphic depiction of anything concerning bodily orifices and excretions.⁴⁹ If representations of this disgust were not present in our society, would the gross-out elements in “gross-out” comedies work? Those who avidly watch these films enjoy these graphic depictions, and to some degree they enjoy this material because it is disgusting. Naturally, some viewers find gross-out depictions more offensive than humorous, so gross-out humor may be somewhat of a misnomer. There are expectations created by genre awareness and marketing promises that the frat-house comedy will contain gross-out elements, in the same kind of way that the audience for a horror film expects gratuitous bloodletting. Gross-out gags function as a test of one’s own threshold for disgust, just as the stories test the characters’ thresholds. In the contemporary frat-house film, this threshold is tested by way of competitions and pranks among fraternity rivals.

The practice of hazing is commonly associated with Greek letter organizations. Despite the frequent association, it is often considered one of the most harmful aspects of Greek letter organizations and still poses a major threat to their existence.⁵⁰ As a result, many educational institutions have developed anti-hazing programs, and it has become a rather taboo practice. This may indicate a cultural shift within the North American fraternity and sorority movement since the practice is controversial. Due to the secretive nature of Greek letter organizations, hazing is largely unreported. Most, if not all, hazing activities take place during clandestine pledge activities and rituals.⁵¹ Many Greek letter organizations prohibit their pledges (potential new members) from revealing their association with the organization until they have been fully initiated, so it becomes increasingly difficult for institutions to succeed in any anti-hazing campaigns.

Likewise, it is extremely difficult for pledges to speak out with any success.⁵² Consequently, the initiation rituals of secret societies on campuses have become a popular film trope, especially for genre films like horror and the frat-house comedy. There is almost urban legend attractiveness about the secret society, which one might long to be a part of, or be fearful of. Over the past decade or so hazing practices have turned up even more abundantly in direct-to-video films - some of which are sequels to bigger budgeted theatrical films - and there was usually a creepy or disgusting aspect to the hazing rituals.⁵³ Both *Van Wilder* and *Beta House* are examples of frat-house comedies that have incorporated gross-out acts into initiations scenes, and typically there is an element of public humiliation to these acts as well.

The original *American Pie* was a popular teen sexquest comedy that featured a character named Steve Stifler (Sean William Scott). Stifler is often cited in critical works

on the sexquest as a significant gross-out figure, despite his supporting role.⁵⁴ As is typical for these films, the supporting characters are the victims of most of the gross-out gags. Stifler wasn't an antagonist, but he was that film's guilty pleasure, a wise-ass prankster who was under the delusion that he was a sex magnet. Stifler ended up drinking urine, and having sex with an elderly woman he believed was a young girl. He was constantly reprimanded for his cocky behavior, but it was most often due to his own stupidity and not as result of pranks aimed at him. As the *American Pie* series graduated from high school and moved on to college, Stifler's character increased in prominence through screen time in the subsequent films. After the third film, there were three other sequels that were released as direct-to-video titles. These sequels were not greeted with the acclaim of the earlier theatrical films, which were praised for their sweetness around the subject of teen sexuality. So even though the films still featured plenty of gross-out moments, they were balanced by a coming-of-age story. *American Pie*'s most memorable scene was playfully referenced in the film's tagline: "there's something about your first piece." It featured the main character Jim (Jason Biggs) having sex with a cherry pie, not as part of a prank, but as part of innocent sexual experimentation. This scene led into a comical father/son conversation about sex, after his father (Eugene Levy) caught him on the kitchen table gyrating on top of the pie.⁵⁵ Therein is a key difference in the representation of gross-out gags in some of the teen sex comedies in relation to the frat-house films. There was a sweetness that accompanied gross-out moments in the teen sex comedies, and the laughs were often from moments of embarrassment, like the *American Pie* scene described above. There was seldom a competitive rivalry or malicious intent involved in the gross-out gags. *Porky's* didn't have that many gross-out

moments, but it had plenty of pranks. The pranks were elaborate and sometimes pretty harsh, but they were amongst friends and were ultimately greeted with smiles by the victims. The film's conclusion did contain a true revenge prank. Having been betrayed and deceived by the nasty tycoon Porky (Chuck Mitchell) and his saloon denizens, the pranksters all worked together and brought Porky's enterprise to the ground by burning down his nightclub. In that final sequence, the prank took on a deeper purpose than mere "gotcha" social embarrassment—it was about humiliation and the complete comeuppance of the antagonist. It is similar to the final sequences of *Animal House* and *Revenge of the Nerds*, but those films were all about the social conflicts and competition between rival fraternities. *American Pie* and *Porky's* were foremost about sexual experimentation and losing one's virginity, everything else was secondary in their narratives. The frat-house film is where gross-out as revenge thrives.

Beta House was the last of the *American Pie* direct-to-video sequels and it was a total frat-house film, complete with two versions of Stifler in the forms of his younger brothers (the other sequels also featured Stifler siblings). The film was completely centered on male competition and featured crude and sexual humor in the form of revenge pranks. In the film Erik (John White) pledged to the Beta House fraternity where his raunchy older brother, Dwight (Steve Talley) was a leading member. For initiation, Erik and the other potential brothers performed a checklist of fifty heinous and revolting acts before the semester ended in order to be accepted into Beta House, while they simultaneously embarrassed rival frat houses. The Geek (not Greek) fraternity was their main rival, and as able foes they attempted to win campus supremacy and dismantle Beta House in order to enjoy the honor and pride of being the big men on

campus. In terms of gross-out set-pieces this film had it covered - projectile vomiting, public nudity, graphic ejaculation, and bestiality.

Scenes of gross-out humor seek to evoke responses based on lapses of what is typically permitted in polite society. They test how far the envelope can be pushed, and as William Paul indicated, “how much they can show us before they make us turn away, how much they can push the boundaries to provoke a cry of “Oh, gross!” as a sign of approval, an expression of disgust that is pleasurable to call out.”⁵⁶ Activities that were acceptable in one may not be approved in the other. According to Bakhtin’s conception of the carnival, when these boundaries were put into question it could have a subversive and liberating effect because it breaks through the barriers of dominant cultural norms. In the new frat-house comedy, depictions of unruly behavior as simple as the food fight can be liberating because they upset the balance of expectation. Obviously, there is a degree of decorum expected from students enrolled in an institution like a university. Certain activities are limited to their proper time and place, and to what is considered acceptable.

The differences between the campus comedies of earlier decades and those that emerged since the late 1970s (and the publication of William Paul’s *Laughing Screaming*) are a no-holds-barred representation of bodily fluids onscreen. A belch is no longer sufficiently offensive in these films, and the gross-out humor extends beyond the sounds of burps and farts. The frat-house films allow for the freedom of expressing oneself, unshackled from the restrictions of home and parental authority. The campus becomes a site to experiment with lowered morals and an overall emphasis with the lower body in terms of scatological humor and sexual liberation, rather than on higher

education. The childlike and disorderly characters in these grotesque comedies are mostly male, and they are most often the protagonists.⁵⁷ The scatological humor in these films is often linked to the male protagonist in some way. It is the dominant campus male and his fraternity that controls the direction of the gross-out gags, which are often connected to hazing or revenge pranks, wherein the males derive pleasure by witnessing the effects of gross gags on unwilling participants, through the many celebratory rituals present in these films (binge drinking, fart supremacy, etc).

Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* offered a look at European folk culture during the Middle Ages, and is a useful starting point in discussing gross-out elements of the frat-house comedy. The society depicted in Bakhtin's study had a strict hierarchal code of rank and order. However, during privileged times of festival, what Bakhtin referred to as the *carnavalesque*, these hierarchies were suspended, and resulted in a topsy-turvy effect, with the high rendered low and the low turned high. Comedy in those festivals typically revolved around religious rituals which were distorted to involve obscene behavior. While Bakhtin's description of carnival was based in a specific social and historical context, it is easy to find similarities in university with regards to social behavior. There is clearly a code of hierarchy in the academic system, and there are instances where these codes are broken and challenged. Inappropriate behavior is readily indulged on special occasions, but instead of carnivals with court jesters we get "kegger" and "toga" parties, pub crawls, and even reality-based programming, and video series like *Girls Gone Wild* and MTV's *The Real World* that showcase the wild behavior that take place during spring break festivals.

There are similarities in some of the behavior that is fore-grounded in the frat-house comedy and Bakhtin's carnivalesque. One of the key aspects of carnivalesque was the representation of the human body as a source of the *grotesque*. Carnival's "grotesque realism" altered conventional aesthetics in order to locate a new kind of popular, convulsive, rebellious beauty, one that dared to reveal the grotesquerie of the powerful and the latent beauty of the "vulgar".⁵⁸ The essential principles of carnival were degradation and humiliation, "that is the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity".⁵⁹ As far as the body goes, this involved a concern "with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation..."⁶⁰ And in the frat-house comedy, it is most often by way of the revenge prank that this obscene bodily humor emerges.

The grotesque elements in these films are the gags, but these scenes are not contained within a carnival setting as Bakhtin described. The frat-house has become the carnival within the more rigidly established institution of the university. The frat-house is a site for grotesque experimentation. This is why I assert that gender is ultimately more significant than class distinction in the case of the frat-house comedy. The competitive nature of the male ego is what drives the characters in these films. These gross-out gags can be read as tests for the threshold of disgust that the characters have, and that threshold is at the center of much of the competitive nature.

While it now seems rather mild, the tradition of the frat-house prank from Bluto's (artificial) exploding zit to the more grotesque pranks of *Van Wilder* and *College*, which moved away from fake pranks toward gags involving actual feces, semen, vomit, and

urine. Is all of this a result of a mainstream assimilation of the kind of bad taste film that was once the exclusive terrain of John Waters or the Lloyd Kaufman Troma films? Those movies attained their distinctive popularity through unconventional exhibition practices, like being screened at midnight. This provided a kind of carnivalesque atmosphere and forum for the young adults who attended those films. The cult audience that formed around midnight screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975) turned the entire experience into a carnivalesque ritual that subverted the traditional movie-going experience. Roger Ebert described the phenomenon:

Inside the theater, the fans put on a better show than anything on the screen. They knew the film by heart, chanted all of the lines in unison, sang along with the songs, did dances on stage, added their own unprintable additions to the screenplay, and went through a lot of props like toilet paper and water pistols. They also formed a sort of weird extended family. They met every week, exchanged ritual greetings, celebrated each other's birthdays and other major holidays, and even dated and married and gave birth to a new generation of "Rocky Horror" cultists.⁶¹

These midnight films were very carnivalesque, but their diegetic worlds were often so excessive and unbelievable that they made it more difficult to distinguish between highbrow and lowbrow. Everything was lowered. The effect of the gross-out gag may have been somewhat diminished in those examples as a result of their offbeat worlds.

The presence of the gross-out gag in the frat-house comedy is, in some ways, more effective because it is set against a more credible backdrop than some of the midnight films. In order for the gags to work there needs to be a sense of order to disrupt. Films like Waters' *Pink Flamingos* (1972) had extra-diegetic messages (the criticism of gender roles in society, for example) in their dissident forms. The frat-house comedies are perhaps less subversive in this sense. The audience for John Waters is not necessarily

the audience for *Animal House*. It is useful here to consider William Paul's look at the bodily humor of early Charles Chaplin. Paul found that most of the praises directed toward Chaplin dealt with the facial gestures, pantomime and the work of the upper body, while there was little to address those lower regions which the comedian also exploited. In examining sequences from *City Lights* (Charles Chaplin, 1931), Paul found several examples of Chaplin's humor that emphasized the lower body.⁶² One sequence of particular interest involved Chaplin's Tramp and the revealing of the statues in a public square. Following some indeterminable speeches by community leaders, a large cloth covering was raised to reveal a grouping of large marble figures and Chaplin's Tramp asleep in the lap of the only female statue. Paul described the sequence:

Awakened by the uproar of the respected gathering, he (Chaplin) must emerge from his womb, and the climb down sets his troubles in motion because another figure in the grouping, a reclining male with an upended sword, interferes with the Tramp's progress. There is unfortunately—or is it functionally?—a hole in the Tramp's trousers directly over his anus, and through this hole he is impaled on the erect sword. At one point during his struggles to free himself the national anthem is played, which compels him to stand rigidly at attention until he can resume his struggle. When he finally gets down from his impalement, he briefly sits on the head of the reclining male so that his anus fits directly onto the man's nose, a nice echo of the sword but also appropriate, albeit unconscious, revenge for it.⁶³

Although this scene from *City Lights* unfolded more playfully than Paul's text had suggested, this particular anal anxiety (in the form of revenge) is mirrored in the kind of public humiliation found in the contemporary frat house films. To win at male competition in frat-house comedies, your rival needs to be publicly humiliated in order for the prank to have significance. A common prank is to have a victim on public display somehow with little clothing. In *College*, Kevin, the most sensitive of the male characters, wakes up to find himself duct-taped to a statue in the center of campus. He is

in a very compromising and embarrassing position, with his crotch fixed to the anus of the tall statue. Unlike Chaplin's scene, there is no pushing the boundaries of the humor with any attempt to escape. The joke here is more like a still cartoon from *National Lampoon* or *Playboy*, a cheap gag that is understood in a single glance. This scene obviously has more to do with sexual humiliation than gross-out humor, but the lower region is central to the humor. In *College*, the compromising position is reversed from the Chaplin scene. Kevin is facing the statue and his penis appears to be inserted in it. Both scenes are connected to the anus, but in different ways. This is also connected to the film's position on sexual preference, which, as with many of the frat-house comedies I am dealing with, regards homosexuality as something to be considered both grotesque and humiliating.

So what is the connection to be made between Bakhtin's examples and the frat-house films of my discussion? They do exist in different dimensions. Carnavalesque and the trickster figures that inhabited it were grounded in cultural specificities, beliefs and institutions that are not a part of these contemporary commercial gross-out endeavors. "The trickster, generally, is an unruly male figure who breaks the rules, is governed by uncontrollable biological urges for food and sex and who often lacks a sense of unity and control of his own body parts".⁶⁴ So Bakhtin's trickster still exists in the diegesis of the frat-house comedy, but now the "tricks" are employed for purposes of revenge. As it was in the social reversals of Bakhtin's carnival, the high needed to experience the indignity of the low in order for the prank to be effective.⁶⁵ Bluto (John Belushi) in *Animal House* was an unkempt figure of the grotesque with a compulsive desire for sex and food, fitting Bakhtin's description. In a classic bit of animal humor, Bluto, a character of few words,

took a seat at the cafeteria next to his uppity rivals and expressed his presence by belching aloud. A sorority sister called him a “pig”. In these films, the men were often referred to as “animals”.⁶⁶ Bluto smiled at the insult before taunting the group with a verbal challenge: “See if you can guess what I am now?” He then proceeded to stuff his mouth with a cream-filled doughnut. He smacked his cheeks together hard and the creamy filling sprayed the table. The scene erupted into a food-fight, and a cacophony of animalistic fury.⁶⁷ Bluto’s action succeeded as a quick bit of revenge against the rivals, and as a bit of public humiliation as well, since he had left them unpleasantly glazed.

Unruly characters like Bluto were often in more supporting or marginalized roles in the earlier frat-house films,⁶⁸ but in subsequent films, several of these characters have moved into dominant central roles. In fact, the most neglected gross-out film that surfaced in the success of *Animal House* was the blatant cash-in *King Frat*. That film’s tagline boldly stated “More raunchy than *Animal House!*”⁶⁹ The film was quite successful in its initial run, but it was primarily a drive-in title that has gone on to achieve cult status.⁷⁰ I find this film significant for its incessant emphasis on the scatological, and because it is perhaps the most animalistic of the frat-house films I have screened. Despite its successful theatrical release, there was no mention of *King Frat* in William Paul’s work, but its attempt to out-gross (pun intended) *Animal House* was apparent right from the start.⁷¹ The film had an obsession with flatulence and any humor involving the lower body. The main character in the film was J.J. Gumbrowski (John DiSanti), but he was usually only referred to by his nickname, Gross-Out. He was the trickster as gross-out artist, and he was the big man of his frat-house. The film’s title was a bit deceptive, because the “king frat” actually referred to the fraternity itself. Gross-Out was enamored

with his own incessant flatulent behavior. This was an extreme version of Bluto, without any trace of endearing, or humanistic qualities. Gross-Out also loved food, but barely seemed to care about sexual pursuits, and was far more concerned with the effects of his anus. He was seen on the toilet multiple times, even while eating fast food and pizza. In one scene Gross-Out entered the house's dilapidated bathroom and passed by a naked couple fornicating in a broken bathtub. He did not pause to look at them, but continued on to his happy place, the bathroom stall. Gross-Out also seemed uninterested in the scene at the brothel and asked aloud to the young prostitutes, "where's the shitter in this place?"

King Frat began with its characters basically pranking the entire campus of Yellowstream University. They rode around in a converted hearse, mooning every passerby. When they came upon school president McGafferty (Lee Willis) during his morning jog, they farted in his general direction and induced a fatal heart attack. *Van Wilder* also began with its hero involved in a prank. Wilder (Ryan Reynolds) was only superficially acting dignified in the opening segment of his movie. He was a more refined trickster that relied on smarts rather than farts to achieve his goals. In the segment, Wilder lowered his pants and exposed his bare ass, not to rudely fart, but to discourage a fellow campus man from committing suicide. He was still proud of his lower regions, but Wilder was more aligned with the class of trickster that Chevy Chase and Bill Murray embodied in their early films. Wit was his primary tactic, but gross-out pranks were not beneath him. As the title of the film made boldly clear, the big man on campus deserved to have the film named after him. He was *National Lampoon's Van Wilder*. Wilder was not the anarchist that Gross-Out was, but a leader who used his

substantial social skills to help his underclassmen have fun, meet women and make their way through the system. Wilder made the entire campus his “frat-house” and a site for endless sexual and gross-out possibilities. From the start of the film, Wilder had already achieved what the lead characters in most of the earlier frat-house films were seeking to. He was popular and he already *was* the big man on campus. The challenge for him was winning the girl from his sexual rival, which unfolded in a back and forth battle of revenge pranks. Wilder’s pranks were special though in that they involved creative gross-out tactics that disgusted as well as humiliated his opponents.

The recent film *College* contains two tricksters who specialize in gross-out behavior. There is Carter (Andrew Caldwell) who belongs to the pre-freshman group that we are meant to identify with. He is heavy-set and foul-mouthed, clearly in the tradition of Bluto and Gross-Out. Carter brings the desire for sex back into the question, but like my other examples, he is bare-assed in his first scene on a cell phone video he sends to his friend Kevin (Drake Bell). The other gross-out character, Bearcat (Gary Owen), is a member of the wicked fraternity to which our characters long to belong to. He is the descendant of *Revenge of the Nerd’s* Ogre - the gross-out antagonist that revels in disgust and perversion involving his own body in order to torture incoming frosh. As his nickname implies, he is more than one kind of animal. There are fewer problems with identifying Gross-Out and Bearcat as animals. They are perhaps more aligned with William Paul’s theory than the more mainstream examples he pursued.⁷² They are, in truth, more animal than human, and perhaps more like the fools and jokers of Bakhtin’s study.

These films aspire to evoke disgust in the viewer based on a transgression of what is considered acceptable in polite society. They test the limits of good taste, and, as Pierre Bourdieu made apparent in his study of class distinctions, taste is not neutral or fixed. Those who are refined in their taste tend to be those of greater privilege and wealth, and an overall higher position in class distinctions.⁷³ Bourdieu's study essentially declared that taste was a means of demonstrating the higher class individual's attainment of cultural capital, which was a sense of discernment for that which is good and that which is bad due to cultivation and learning.⁷⁴ This sophistication and refinement was primarily to do with establishing class distinctions. The rebellion was a rejection of taste norms, but more specifically, it was a rejection of upper class snobbery. Bourdieu also referred to the intelligentsia as having had acquired status through knowledge rather than by wealth. Knowledge was another element of distinction. This is significant in certain of the frat-house comedies (the *Van Wilder* films, for instance) that featured antagonists who attempted to outwit their rivals in games of condescension. Those characters that wanted to consider themselves "refined" were more likely to dismiss acts of gross-out comedy with its focus on bodily functions and vulgarity. These lower forms of comedy, which were typically unrefined and raw, were most often associated with the young or members of lower social standing; the humor and gags required little cultural capital to comprehend and were accessible to those of lower means. What these frat-house films suggested is that in order to achieve true cultural capital, you needed to be able to encompass both the high and low, without prejudice. Lowbrow humor also offered more extreme and immediate returns of pleasure which Bourdieu observed as qualities fitting of the lower class audiences that sought short-term release from the rigors of their

existence.⁷⁵ And, of course, this humor remains popular with teen audiences seeking a similar release by way of fun. In a way, this blending of high and low can almost be read as a Bakhtinian interpretation of Bourdieu's work.

The members of Delta House in the formative *Animal House* were certainly considered the lowest of the campus by Dean Wormer (John Vernon). Although it was really only Bluto who could be considered a true animal in terms of behavior, they are all underdogs, for certain. The characters in *King Frat* were far more animalistic in their representation of bad taste and lowered morals. That film went much further to represent its reprehensible frat-boys as animals. They were the children of Freud's *id*, free to mess up their animal house, whether it meant puking on the furniture or pissing on the floor. It was the perception of the stuffy, privileged administrators and upper class students in all of these films, though, that the lower fraternities were animals and should have been considered embarrassments. The characters in *King Frat* and some of those in the recent frat-house comedies lived down to this standard, but the characters in the other films were to a degree misrepresented and unjustly labeled by the upper class, and were not as socially repressed as the underclassmen were in the earlier campus comedies.⁷⁶ Still, it is the rise of these fraternal misfits, and the social humiliation of the rivals that matters. It is the gross-out behavior that makes the films memorable. Even though the characters in all these films are enrolled in universities, this does not typically elevate their status in terms of being educated. In *Animal House* the Delta House boys barely attended classes and had the lowest grade point averages at the school. While scholastics are never addressed, all of the male characters in *King Frat* appeared to have been living in their frat house for twenty years.⁷⁷ Van Wilder enjoyed his time at university so much that he

spent seven years as an undergrad until his distant father (Tim Matheson, who played a Wilder-like character in *Animal House*, and who became owner of the *National Lampoon* publication) discovered that he was still in school, and threatened to cut off his tuition payments if he failed to graduate. Wilder was socially in a league of his own and had acquired popularity and legendary status that, it could be argued, made him completely unlike the male protagonists in *Revenge of the Nerds* who struggled with achieving social acceptance from the upstart. When the frat-house male is not striving to achieve social acceptance, he is still competitive, and in Wilder's case the competition was for romance.

Gross-Out and Bearcat spent little time in their upper regions in terms of humor, but it was the lower bodily humor that gives these men a sense of power. There were self-satisfied smirks frequently in these films, conveying a sense of guilty playfulness and identification with their male viewers. Bluto and Van Wilder both winked toward the camera at choice moments in their respective films. In *Animal House* Bluto raised his eyebrows with a wry smile toward camera, prior to spying through a window at sorority sisters undressing. Van Wilder winked toward camera when a gross-out plan formulated in his mind. This technique suggested a kind of social alignment with the perceived audience, but it felt like an intentionally masculine point-of-view. In the Bluto example, the viewer was then subjected to his voyeuristic point-of-view. I don't intend to enter into discussion of the male gaze and its complications here, but there was a keen sense of male power in these subjective viewpoints, and these films offered an unusually steady supply of objectified females, which was evident in the marketing images that I will discuss in the next chapter.

The men in frat-house comedies are often proud of their ability to disgust by urinating, belching, or defecating. In a poignant moment in *College*, Bearcat dimly voices concerns about his lack of ability beyond torturing pledges, and how he never wants to leave the frat-house. “It’s the only thing I’m good at” is his chief concern. His fraternity brothers remind him that nobody in the house takes “bigger dumps” and his look of pride returns. This moment not only reinforces the sense of pride found in scatological prowess, but also emphasizes the fraternal bond and the sense of a utopian fraternity where male bodily emissions reign supreme. Of course, this goes hand in hand with the ritualistic binge drinking in all of these films. Drunken parties with lots of beer enable the male characters an excuse to relieve themselves before the festivities end.

These characters display characteristics of immaturity and ignorance that set them apart from the other males in the films. *Gross-Out* and *Bearcat* were childish figures. Their preoccupation with their own bodily functions suggested an indulgence with the anal and oral urges of Freud’s description of pre-Oedipal sexuality. For *Gross-out* and *Bearcat*, their impulses fit Freud’s idea of a pre-Oedipal stage resembling early childhood before we begin to fully occupy our relatively stable positions in the adult social arena, particularly in terms of sexuality.⁷⁸ *Gross-out* and *Bearcat* derived pleasure from their grotesque bodies as did nearly all of the characters in *King Frat*. However, the fact that the male characters in the recent examples *are* disgusted by these acts, and that it is assumed the viewing audience will be disgusted too, places the films in a debatable position. According to Freud’s perspective, the pleasure in this kind of comedy rested in the opportunities it offered for vicarious releases from the usual adult requirement of repression in the anally (and orally) engrossed stages of the pre-Oedipal. This is not

dissimilar to the release of social repression found in the carnival, only on an individual level in this case. As Freud would have suggested, feeling disgusted by the bodily gross-out gags is a movement away from the pre-Oedipal, and toward the internalization of more adult social and cultural standards.⁷⁹ It depends perhaps on whether the viewer is childishly delighted by the scatological elements, or repulsed by them. These possible reactions may also have a basis in gender and taste, but the frat-house films often direct their gross-out gags toward infuriating villains that audiences may share at least some delight in seeing foiled.

An interesting comparison could be made when considering the slasher horror film, which was born roughly around the same time as the frat-house comedy, and was prolific throughout the 1980s and into the present. William Paul has cited many similarities in his study of horror and comedy, but overlooked is the revenge prank; a tool that was used often by both genres to different gross-out purposes. Notable 1980s slasher films *The Burning* (Tony Maylam, 1981), *Slaughter High* (Peter Litten, 1986), and *Prom Night* (Paul Lynch, 1980) opened with scenes that featured groups of young teens engaged in games or elaborate pranks that would end up causing serious or grave harm to an unsuspecting individual. Something would typically go horribly awry, and would leave the prank victim disfigured, psychologically scarred, or likely, both. The pranksters each got their comeuppances in the form of gross-out murder set-pieces over the course of the films. That was the basic slasher film formula. *April Fool's Day* (Fred Walton, 1986) was a slasher from the same era that featured as many pranks from start-to-finish as the typical frat-house comedy. In the case of that film, the viewers were pranked too, since all of the murders were actually faked.

When you consider the frat-house films that I am discussing, the major group pranks usually fall toward the end of the film, and they don't go awry, but serve as a point where the heroes can enjoy the cleverness of their revenge and experience the humiliation of the rivals without regret. As the title *Revenge of the Nerds* promised, the nerds triumphed in the end. But *Animal House*, *College*, *Beta House*, *King Frat*, and the *Van Wilder* films also saved the biggest pranks for the final act. It could be argued that both the horror film and frat-house film are about what is theoretically called "the return of the repressed".⁸⁰ The difference is that the victims in the slasher horror films return to kill, while in the frat-house film the repressed underdogs return to get even by out-pranking the competition.

The victims of scatological pranks in frat-house films are typically what Pierre Bourdieu might have considered refined persons, but that is not their issue. They are antagonists not because they are tasteful, but because they consider themselves tasteful and because they are manipulative, self-centered, and dishonest. They are the ones enforcing class and taste distinctions, and by doing so, they infringe upon myths concerning egalitarianism in American culture. In *Van Wilder*, the preppy antagonist Richard Bagg (Daniel Cosgrove) was defeated by a laxative prank that left him with a bout of explosive diarrhea that he let go in a small trash can in front of the academic administrators who had his future in their hands. Earlier in the film, Bagg was the victim of another Wilder prank—the film's gross-out high point (or low, more accurately). Wilder and his cohorts filled éclairs with the semen from the oversized testicles of their bulldog mascot, and served it up disguised as treats from the sorority sisters. Those are extreme examples from a film that seemed proud of its level of grotesquery. Van Wilder

hesitated and appeared to be sickened by his prank. He was repulsed and he knew that it would repulse his enemies. Wilder was not the animal here - the dog was. At other moments in the film, he demonstrated that he had some level of taste. He was able to successfully engage in conversation with the academic hierarchy when Bagg set him up to look foolish, because he was capable of being disarmingly charming. Wilder eschewed class separation in other scenes without pranks or animal behavior, as when he agreed to put together a party for the socially repressed nerds on campus, who just wanted to meet girls.⁸¹

College involves an animal in its grand comeuppance sequence, too. Carter and his friends sabotage the enemy “animal house” members that have been responsible for torturing them throughout the picture. This time a pig is fed laxatives, so that when a hung-over bully awakens he slips in the animal’s feces. In the same sequence, the repressive frat-king Bearcat is glued to a toilet seat with his pants down, seemingly undone by his own scatological pride. In *King Frat*, the entire university ends up in the “shitter” so to speak, with Gross-Out taking over as President of the university in the film’s unlikely final twist. The closing shot of the film is of a young boy with a shirt that says Class of ‘99. The boy smirks mischievously before belching into the camera, foreshadowing an equally crude generation on the rise.

Certainly Bluto and Booger (Curtis Armstrong), the award-winning belcher from *Revenge of the Nerds*, are pleased with their body’s abilities to provoke and disgust. The belching contest from *Revenge of the Nerds* was savagely eclipsed by the actions of Gross-Out, Van Wilder, and Bear Cat. The feuding couples in John Water’s classic example of outrageous behavior *Pink Flamingos* were trying to out-gross each other and

to determine who the filthiest person alive was. This underground film is best recalled for its outrageous scene involving Divine's consumption of dog feces. As the story made clear, it was gross for gross' sake. This sequence appeared as an extra-diegetic tag-on at the end of the film. It was not part of the linear narrative. The gross-out characters in these later films have a similar quest, but while Water's film was out to shock its audience, the frat-house characters were out to shock their adversaries. Van Wilder was visibly disgusted as he prepared his own prank involving éclairs filled with dog semen. He was not eating the éclair himself (as Divine might have). Clearly, it would have repulsed him to do so. He was out to make his enemies eat something disgusting. There is a distinction in terms of social humiliation and power relationships between Water's kind of gross-out and what is on display here in the new frat-house comedies.

If there is to be a kind of film that could serve as synthesis to the theme of this chapter, it is *Van Wilder: Freshman Year*. This film is only concerned with male competition and revenge pranks and there is little room made for anything else. As critic Brian Orndorf states: "*Freshman Year* doesn't exist in a world of logic, but one of gags executed, preferably by any means necessary."⁸² The direct-to-video "prequel" has Van Wilder (now played by Jonathan Bennet) arriving at a very conservative early version of Coolidge University that is run by the Wilder's nemesis Dean Reardon (Kurt Fuller). Like in the original film, Wilder has an elusive love interest, Kaitlin (Kristin Cavallari). She has a boyfriend, Dirk Arnold (Steve Talley) who is one of Wilder's chief rivals. Reardon is more like an extreme version of *Animal House*'s Dean Wormer, and this film pretty much lifts from every frat-house cliché including toga parties. But Wilder is more prone to prank anyone in this film. Early on he affixes vibrators under the seats of the

choir girls in the campus church, and during a rousing (or arousing) sermon, the girls scream out in ecstasy. The scene is pretty ludicrous and it, naturally, lands Wilder in trouble with the Dean. The Dean works steadily throughout the film with Dirk attempting to set up Wilder and his fraternal cohorts. Their scheme to set him up for drug possession is foiled by Wilder's dog with the oversized testicles, Colossus, who consumes the evidence.



Figure 4: Colossus goes down in *Van Wilder: Freshman Year*

The noteworthy element here is that the frat-house hero is always the one to invent the more revolting and successful gross-out prank. Van Wilder answers the Dean's lame attempt at framing him with a truly repulsive revenge-prank sequence. Believing that his beautiful new Oriental masseuse is performing fellatio on him, Dean Reardon is shocked and humiliated when his wife enters the office and they both realize simultaneously (as Wilder has perfectly arranged it) that it is actually Colossus licking peanut butter off of the Dean's genitals (see Figure 4). The prank has many levels of

humiliation and gross-out satisfaction, but it doesn't quite have the impact of the Dick Bagg revenge scenes that I mentioned earlier, from the original *Van Wilder*. Speaking of Colossus, did William Paul ever imagine that the animal comedy would end up containing sex with animals? *Beta House* features an initiation sequence where pledges have sex with sheep, and there are other references to bestiality throughout the gross-out comedy canon.⁸³

While animals certainly contribute to a higher gross-out factor in these recent frat-house comedies, the gross-out power of the antagonist's own body is still tough to beat. Paul Bonila called Hollywood Lowbrow just another name for "revenge of the body."⁸⁴ He cited moments in a variety of gross-out films where characters couldn't control their bodily urges. This is the undoing of several frat-house antagonists. During a strange competition in the new frat-house comedy *Beta House*, fraternity rivals face a challenge where they must resist getting erections while attractive young women perform lap dances on them. The head of the Geek Fraternity Mike Coozeman (Jake Siegel) is doing well resisting the stripper, but he can't resist becoming aroused by a sheep that is paraded in front of him. Of course, bodily revenge usually has more to do with diarrhea. There is perhaps no better example to return to than the laxative prank in *Van Wilder* and the prolonged discomfort experienced by Dick during that sequence.

Perhaps the male frat-house comedy needs to push further past grotesque boundaries in order to distinguish itself from the gross-out behavior increasingly on display in the more female-gendered romantic comedy. There seem very few taboos left to be broken. The explicit use of semen in gags is a relatively recent phenomenon in

Hollywood film, but anal emissions have been around in the mainstream for a long time. *There's Something About Mary* featured the now famous semen as “hair gel” and *American Pie* featured a memorable gag where semen winds up in a kegger. Both of these were precursors to the dog semen éclairs in *Van Wilder* that made things more revolting. At what point does the scatological humor cease to be funny, and become merely grotesque? Is the gross-out gag no longer the exclusive domain of male-centered comedy? The big screen adaption of *Sex and the City* (Michael Patrick King, 2008) featured a sequence that involved two gross-out gags, one involving unshaved pubic hair and the other a case of diarrhea. In both instances, the characters were subject to ridicule by their female friends, but this cannot be considered the same as the public humiliation found in the frat-house films, because in neither case was the gross-out moment tied to any prank or comeuppance. The ridicule was presented as playfully mocking, and meant to demonstrate the strength of the female. The film goes out of its way to establish that there is no competition between these friends, and that they are fully accepted despite their potential for grotesque behavior. The humor is intimate and the jabs are accompanied by laughs devoid of mean-spiritedness. The diarrhea gag was also not explicit and is played out purely by facial remarks and gestures. Critics on the male-dominated review site *Spill.com* referred to the moment as more like Adam Sandler than *Sex and the City*, but their reading seems misguided since it ignores the context of the scene overall, which is much different than those of the frat-house comedies I've been discussing.⁸⁵

The recent documentary film *In the Gutter* (Jeffrey Schwarz, 2008) compared the gross-out gags in frat-house films like *Van Wilder* to the current trend in “reality” gross-

out films like *Jackass: The Movie* (Jeff Tremaine, 2002), but drew few conclusions about the similarities beyond the fact that the gags in the latter films are done for real, and without special effects. The film did suggest that these movies should be considered documentaries of bodily humor, but that point could also have been extended to a documentary like *Super Size Me* (Morgan Spurlock, 2003) which featured its director and star indulging in gluttonous behavior and then vomiting before the camera. Spurlock wasn't being gross for the sake of it, though, and he used gross-out factors to make an argument against the consumption of fast food. Fast food was, ironically, the very indulgence that earlier frat-house tricksters like Bluto and Gross-Out were so fond of. In *King Frat* and many of the gross-out films that would follow in the 1980s, fast food culture was aligned with hipness and youth.⁸⁶ The Spurlock documentary focused on the negative aspects of gross indulgence, but attempted to gross-out the viewer all the same.

What is more interesting to me when comparing frat-house films to documentaries or so called "reality" television is that pranks have become predominant in our culture, including ones based on revenge. More to the point, there is much to suggest that the contemporary audience is interested not only in authentic representations of gross-out gags, but in watching televised revenge pranks. Some of the current shows that feature pranks on a regular basis are worth mentioning here. *Punk'd* (2003-present) is the still-running series where Ashton Kutcher behaves like a celebrity version of Van Wilder, pranking his celebrity friends sometimes to the verge of terror and tears. The term "punk'd" (meaning tricked or fooled) is now part of the pranking vocabulary created by the series. Kutcher laid out a competitive challenge, and has yet to be successfully "punk'd" in return. The entire show has a frat-boy quality because we are always seeing

the reactions of Kutcher and his young male cohorts as they gleefully watch their often mean-spirited gags play out. The cancelled *Scare Tactics* (2003-2005) featured a similar “candid camera” kind of approach, but its gags were inspired by scenes from science fiction television series and movies. The victims of the gags witnessed everything from alien abductions to vanishing trains. The interesting thing about some of those gags is that they involved shocking and sometimes gross-out effects. One involved a graphic murder scene that caused the woman being pranked to vomit. The TV series version of *Jackass* (2000-2002) often featured gross-out pranks, too, and its cable placement allowed for more extreme and graphic pranks. All of these shows enabled the viewer to take some delight in the momentary discomfort or outright public humiliation of celebrities and non-celebrities alike.

Perhaps this popular form of entertainment lessens the impact of what the frat-house film has been trying to show us in terms of these gags. Does the real thing make it more “fun” and make the scripted prank almost redundant? Competition also factors into these kinds of reality shows, too. *Fear Factor* (2002-2006) was the game show that was high on the gross-out factor when it came to the challenges its contestants faced weekly. There was almost without fail a segment where the contestants would be asked to eat some kind of grotesque insect in order to pass the test. These challenges were very similar to what we witnessed during the “staged” initiations sequences in *Beta House*, but because they are supposedly real, there was a stronger gross-out factor to what we were seeing. In a twisted way, even the news magazine *Dateline NBC* (1992-present) has served up a version of revenge prank in the form of their sting-operation airings of *To Catch a Predator* where potential sex offenders were lured through internet chatroom

conversations to houses where they met a young woman claiming to be in her early teens.⁸⁷ Actually these women were portrayed by actresses who were about nineteen, and were always dressed provocatively. Once the men were inside and propositioned the decoy, they were greeted (or punk'd) by NBC host Chris Hansen who confronted them about their predilections for contacting minors for illicit sexual liaisons before he let them know they were being filmed. The film crew then emerged as the men were asked to leave the house, and then were promptly (and sometimes violently, with tazer guns) arrested by awaiting police. The audience got to witness these “creeps” and “deviants” get their comeuppance on broadcast television. Prank, humiliation, and revenge against the sex offender were served up as investigative journalism.⁸⁸ There may not have been a gross-out factor involved in this last example, but it was certainly exploitative. With this kind of real-life competition, how does the frat-house comedy hope to lure potential viewers? The cultural zeitgeist has changed since *Animal House* and voyeurism has found its way into our homes in ways beyond mere fictional representation.

2. PLEDGING THE MALE SPECTATOR: MARKETING THE FRAT-HOUSE COMEDY

In a competitive market the frat-house films fall into a curious zone somewhere between mainstream comedy and exploitation. Today, traditional methods of marketing high concept films continue alongside new strategies available on the internet. While there is relatively little comprehensive writing on film marketing, I find it useful to employ Justin Wyatt's theories of marketing the high concept film and Eric Schaefer's increasingly extensive work on sexploitation. The films I consider fall both into high concept and exploitation categories. Like Wyatt and Schaefer, I am concentrating primarily on print marketing, so I have found their studies the most relevant. The marketing images that are frequently chosen appear to be geared toward a predominantly male and heterosexual audience. These films face stiffer competition in their attempts to lure prospective viewers from other male-focus genres like action films, and readily available pornographic content. These films still fall into the category that William Paul refers to as animal comedy, but Paul's study stops short of addressing marketing strategies. The animal has become visible and, particularly in direct-to-video and foreign markets, the animal itself appears as a selling point that is as ubiquitous to the form as the suggestively posed female body.

High concept originated within the Hollywood studio and television system as a useful term for designating those screenplays that had an easily identifiable, and therefore

an easily marketable concept.⁸⁹ The marketability of the film's concept must also possess a *visual* form which can be utilized in trailers, television spots, and print ads. The problem with the term "high concept" as Justin Wyatt uses it, is that he presumes that the films have an inherently easy-to-follow structure that is logically extended into the marketing.⁹⁰ This is certainly true of a great many examples, but sometimes the film being marketed was not as high concept as the advertising implied. *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Robert Wise, 1979) and *Exorcist II: the Heretic* (John Boorman, 1977) had strong marketing campaigns and the strength of name recognition. *Star Trek* had its loyal fan-base from the television series it was based on, and *Exorcist II* was a big budgeted sequel to the hugely popular original film.

Wyatt discusses films like *Heartbreak Hotel* (Chris Columbus, 1986) and *The Hunger* (Tony Scott, 1982). Those were high concept films that had marketing campaigns that didn't define their concepts distinctively, and that may have contributed to them falling short of their box-office potential.⁹¹ While *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977) delivered the high concept story its marketing promised, other features didn't necessarily do so. Marketing does not always work to accurately reflect a film's true content or intention. Wyatt's study didn't involve exploitation cinema, and those films would have more often made attempts to mask their narrative deficiencies behind catchy and enticing marketing campaigns. In most of the more recent frat-house comedies, the emphasis on objectification and opportunities for the male gaze may not ultimately be part of the actual film. Some marketing campaigns take advantage of the male "eyestopper" even though it is inappropriate in terms of a film's actual content. Frat-house comedies tend to emphasize the sexualized female body, regardless of how

integral it is to the concept of the final film. Also, the early frat-house films have marketing ties to some of the “nudie-cuties” which were often campus-related comedies themselves.⁹² The exploitation film made many promises to the viewer just to get them through the door, but not all promises were kept. Even in the case of the frat-house comedy, there are films that circumvent the most basic ingredients that may have been prominent in their marketing campaigns.

Take the unusual case of the nearly-forgotten frat-house film *The First Time* (Charlie Loventhal, 1983), an effective example of exploitation marketing betrayal for this genre. Its revisionist approach to frat-house humor and more likable characters would have perhaps succeeded better amidst the post-slacker generation comedies popular today. The poster or video box art, which was more widely seen in this case, completely represented this film as a lowbrow campus sex romp.⁹³ The lead character Charlie (Tim Choate) was wearing suspenders and an excited expression. He was surrounded by Schaefer’s “smorgasbord of female bodies” in the form of bikini-clad cuties that were completely focused on him, their bodies draped over his. The film’s suggestive and deceptive title spilled over in bold red text below his crotch. An equally misleading tagline drew us in: “You never forget...*The First Time*.” This was deceptive because the lead character was not a virgin. This was not a sexquest, and while Charlie had a strong romantic interest, this was not a film that was preoccupied with sexual endeavors. The film was a low budget frat-house comedy, but it was an anomaly and one that clearly had more than sex on the brain. The “first time” in this case referred not to a first sexual encounter, but actually to Charlie’s directorial debut by way of his first student film. The film’s primary connection to lowbrow cinema was that Charlie’s character, an

autobiographical depiction of the film's own director, was trying to make an action parody, but struggled at school because his professor (Wallace Shawn) and his colleagues looked down on his project which didn't fit with their more highbrow taste. Unlike the examples from my previous chapter on gross-out pranks, these snobs got their comeuppance in subtle and smart ways that avoid messy scatological functions in favor of a more honorable sort of public humiliation. When the student film showcase arrived, the minimalist experimental films by Charlie's colleagues were jeered, while his own frantic comedy short was singled out for applause. My brief summary here could make the case for a high concept scenario, but in truth, the film meandered a lot and there were insufficient laughs, making it somewhat difficult to classify it as such. The film's audience really needed to understand the politics of commercial versus art-house cinema, and I'm not sure that was the case back then. It is not surprising at all that at the time of its release, a campus comedy about characters outwitting film snobs that contained few pranks, and even less sex (there was a romantic subplot, and it was truly romantic) would ultimately languish in a forgotten zone. The film did receive a glowing review from *The New York Times* following its premiere in 1982, distinguishing it somewhat from its counterparts.⁹⁴ At the time I can assure you that it was disappointing to this young male viewer going into the film both expecting and wanting the sexquest hi-jinks that the box art had promised. However, I still remember this little film and can't help but wonder if it was ahead of its time. If it were released today perhaps it would have found a more appropriate and less misrepresentative poster art campaign, since recent teen comedies like *Adventureland* (Greg Mottola, 2009) and *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007) have allowed

for coming-of-age stories about more than just sex to become successful without any need for deceptive marketing.

Advertising remains crucial to the success of most films. How and where a film is marketed is integral to its box-office returns. The internet provides a new venue for promotion and its potential is still being explored. Perhaps more important than the websites that are set up by the marketer, is the potential for word-of-mouth to travel via the internet in a more encompassing way than it ever could before. Marketing strategies for the new medium are not all that different from earlier approaches. Trailers, TV spots, and posters are still the primary means of visually representing a film, even online. As I mention above, it is difficult to classify some of the frat-house films I have been discussing as high concept in Wyatt's full use of the term because the screenplays are often poorly constructed and fragmented. This results in the films often being needlessly convoluted or aimless, and often more concerned with moving from one trickster set-piece (the gross-out pranks or voyeuristic hi-jinks) to the next than with continuity and motivation. One thing that Wyatt's study somewhat overlooked in terms of high concept is that, in many cases, it is only the marketing strategy that could effectively be considered high concept. The problem with Wyatt's consideration of high concept is that the film itself need not be high concept in order to have employed a high concept marketing approach. Wyatt does detail in his study a number of examples where a high concept story got lost in marketing attempts that failed to succinctly define its concept.⁹⁵ What this means, told simply, is that when the chosen image was somehow too abstract or too convoluted, the quick and effective understanding of what the film was about could become lost, even if the idea itself was straightforward and generic. In the case of

the new frat-house comedy, the marketing may effectively convey what it needs to, even if the simple film it promises is not always exactly so. Of course, this is part of the exploitation tradition.

National Lampoon is a recognizable brand name, as is the trademark which accompanies it. This banner has come to represent successful frat-house comedy since its first appearance onscreen in *Animal House*. The only exceptions would be the *National Lampoon's Vacation* (Harold Ramis, 1983) films that starred Chevy Chase, which had lost the banner by the time the fourth film in the series, *Vegas Vacation* (Stephen Kessler, 1997), was released. While these were not frat-house films, they still were in same comic vein and would have been popular with the same audiences. Like John Belushi and Bill Murray, Chevy Chase was a recognizable former *Saturday Night Live* star. In this sense, the *National Lampoon* banner originally stood for a kind of comic movement of the period, brought about also by the success of some of these new comedy personae. These *National Lampoon* films featured abundant "college humor" that was sophomoric and vulgar.⁹⁶ The *National Lampoon* publication was an extension of the *Harvard Lampoon* and of similar humor magazines.⁹⁷

The poster art for *Animal House* was an elaborate cartoon sketch revolving around the Delta House and its inhabitants and had more in common with the style of *National Lampoon* rival *MAD*, a magazine which frequently featured the work of artist Harvey Kurtzman. Kurtzman drew very detailed comic scenes that would have to be observed for a moment in order to be fully appreciated.⁹⁸ His illustrations often featured the kinds of characters that would be present in frat-house films and animal comedy, and there was a raucous unrestrained quality to them (see Figure 5). The style would have

been familiar to *National Lampoon* readers, who had recently graduated to that publication from *MAD*. Essentially, the *Animal House* poster consisted of multiple scenes happening simultaneously and involved humorously drawn caricatures of the major characters in the film, each one demonstrating something appropriately characteristic in trait. This fun but elaborate artwork may not seem congruent with the ideal high concept poster that Justin Wyatt discussed, specifically because there was too much going on and it was not reduced to a single marketable image.⁹⁹



Figure 5: Sample Harvey Kurtzman Illustration

One of Wyatt's examples of potentially ineffective poster art was for Robert Altman's *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975) which assembled head shots of that film's twenty-four principal characters. This certainly reflected *Nashville*'s large cast and its structure of multiplicity, but it may have posed challenges to anyone wanting a simple answer to: "What's the film about?" I believe that while *Animal House* eschewed high concept reducibility in its graphic, the overall at-a-glance impression worked all the same. It reflected the irreverent youth-based attitude of the *MAD* illustrations through its

evocation of the Kurtzman style. The poster flaunted the Delta house denizens in illustrated action snapshots laughing, cavorting, and spilling out of windows, and this succeeded in quickly conveying the essence of the film - it's going to be a wild, good time (see Figure 6).

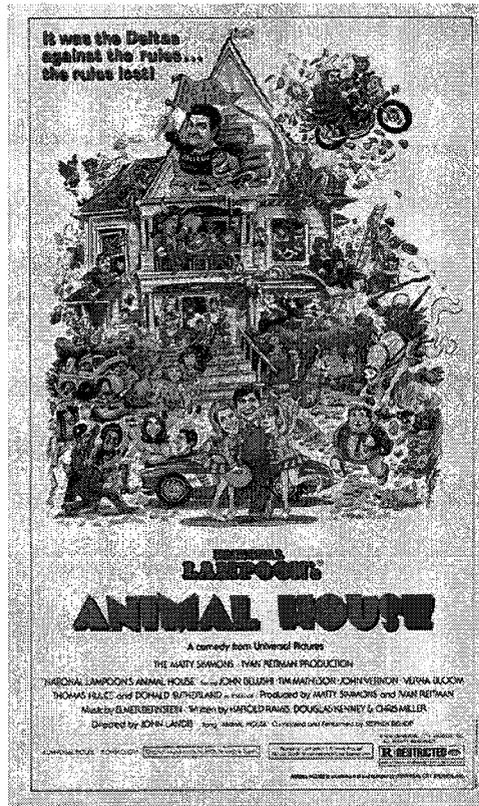


Figure 6: *Animal House* Theatrical Poster

In reconsideration of Wyatt's discussion on poster art, I believe there are overlooked distinctions to be made in terms of high concept films and high concept advertising. Certainly, the image of Bluto grinning while drinking and swinging his beer mug is the most prominent element within the overall poster image. It could be argued that that image alone would make for an effective campaign sans its dynamic supporting cast. But when considering the marketing to a male audience, less may not always be

more. Emerging at a time when *MAD* and its style of humor was still popular; it could be argued that the *Animal House* poster found a clever and appropriate way to represent itself to its intended audience.¹⁰⁰ The image was like an overstuffed exploitation trailer that, in this case, contained a succession of recognizable gags and sexual humor.¹⁰¹ The runaway success of *Animal House* and the fact that its artwork was imitated in subsequent comedies suggests that this approach had potential and worked as an overall promotional tool.

Throughout the period following, there were plenty of films and franchises that employed that style or something quite similar, including the comedies *Can I Do It 'Till I Need Glasses?* (I. Robert Levy, 1979); *Hot Dog: The Movie* (Peter Markle, 1984); *National Lampoon's Class Reunion* (Michael Miller, 1982); *The Cannonball Run* (Hal Needham, 1982); *Up the Academy* (Robert Downey, 1980), as well as the highly successful *Police Academy* (Hugh Wilson, 1984) and its five sequels. Both *Up the Academy* and *Police Academy* were set at military and police schools, respectively. Like the frat-house comedies, they also consisted of large casts of characters, gross-out and sexually explicit humor. The structural and character elements were taken from the same mold, with a misfit group challenging the authority of establishment in much the same way as the Delta House boys in *Animal House*.

The producers of *King Frat* exploited another opportunity at uninspired imitation in their theatrical marketing by blatantly borrowing from the predecessor's design, with diminished results. The initial design featured the Gross-Out character peeking out of the upper window of the frat-house, just as the Bluto character had appeared atop the Delta House in the poster from *Animal House*. *King Frat*'s poster was modeled after the more

successful film but had poorer artwork, which featured expressionless characters who strangely lacked eyeballs. This resulted in several other poster designs being attempted for subsequent theatrical releases and for the VHS and DVD versions.¹⁰² The imitation continued in marketing the more recent *Fraternity House* (Tony Prizevoits, 2008) which again featured a Bluto clone (complete with toga!) in its unrated DVD packaging (see Figure 7).

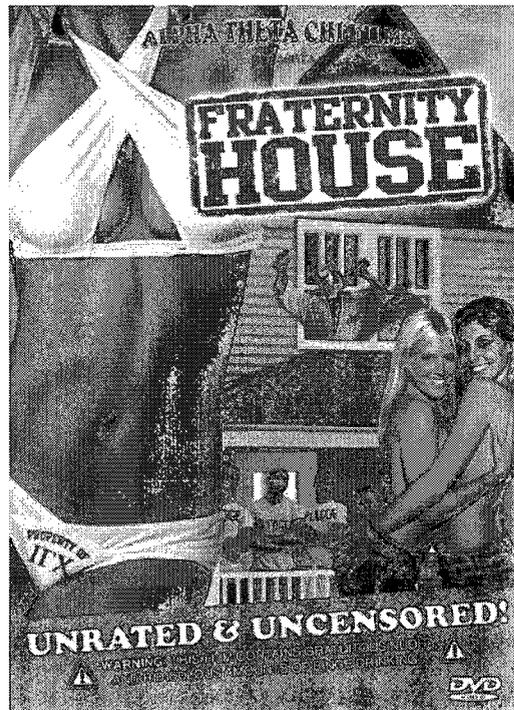


Figure 7: *Fraternity House* DVD cover

High concept is, of course, a limited approach in regards to looking at marketing of these particular films. Most of these films cannot be considered high concept to the full extent of Justin Wyatt's definition as these frat-house films are a stem of the sexquest

comedies that emerge from what Timothy Shary called the multiplex generation. Those were the free-spending children of the 1980s raised on saturation marketing and product tie-ins.¹⁰³ I believe that it is in the marketing where high concept matters most. In Hollywood, the first step in getting a film green-lighted for production is successfully pitching the story in twenty-five words or less.¹⁰⁴ This process of selling a producer on a concept of only a few words is not really much different than selling the audience a film based on a strong tagline and a memorable image. Marketing strategies are often quite diversified, and it helps to look at exploitation marketing as well. In truth, there may not be much difference between the marketing of high concept films and exploitation films, as Wyatt described the former, except in terms of production budget and the diversity and widespread marketing that the higher cost enables.¹⁰⁵ These films typically fit within exploitation genre categories. While the gross-out comedy is a more recent development, it is part of a wave of films that emerged during a specific period, and those films shared common characteristics and were aimed at a common audience.¹⁰⁶ The new frat-house comedies fall into the gross-out category and are actually high concept exploitation pictures that target male audiences by effectively using a combination of marketing methods, along with newer approaches that emerge because of improved technologies (in this case, specifically digital home video and the internet).

The marketing of exploitation films helps in understanding the current strategies used to market the frat-house film. Erik Schaefer examined the marketing choices of the sexploitation genre, which tapered off when hardcore entertainment gained in popularity and accessibility.¹⁰⁷ Advertising methods for this genre were almost exclusively trailer and newspaper print ads, before a ban on the latter practice in the 1970s.¹⁰⁸ Before home

video, sexploitation fare was often featured at the grindhouse cinemas located in neighborhoods that entertained primarily male patrons, and used racy photographs and posters on billboards across the theatre's exterior.¹⁰⁹ Thanks to explicit advertising, audiences were not left questioning whether or not a film was mainstream or exploitation. However, the distinctions were made more difficult when the advertising for particular titles arrived in both "hot" and "cold" versions.¹¹⁰ "Hot" ads were more sexually explicit and geared toward luring male patrons that wanted to see more explicit content. The "cold" versions were reserved for more conservative print-ad placements (often newspapers that shied away from any content that they deemed unsuitable for the entire family).

The frat-house film is more closely linked to sexploitation and soft-core pornography in both content and marketing. These comedies typically emphasize sex and the willingness of college-aged women to partake in it. The "nudie cuties" and sexploitation films are relevant to the representation of sexuality that these more contemporary frat-house film advertisements offer because the images are typically more concerned with playful titillation and male characters that enjoy getting intoxicated and pursuing hedonistic gratification.¹¹¹ *The Immoral Mr. Teas* (Russ Meyer, 1959), considered the first of the "nudie cuties", was a film in which the main character endlessly fantasized about nude women. It was the first non-naturist film to openly exhibit nudity and was, because of that, widely considered the first pornographic feature.¹¹² For the next few years a wave of "nudie-cuties" were produced for the grindhouses.

These films were followed by a series of edgier underground films which began to test the boundaries of sex mixed with violence. Russ Meyer again led the way with *Lorna* (1964), a rape-revenge story that was anything but cute. This marked the end of the “nudie cutie” and the rise of what was referred to as sexploitation. Sexploitation films initially played exclusively in grindhouses and second-run independent theaters. However, by the end of the decade they were playing in more established cinema markets.¹¹³ Customers who attended screenings of sexploitation films were often characterized by the mainstream media as deviant, “dirty old men”.¹¹⁴ Some newspapers began banning promotional material for the films.¹¹⁵ Sexploitation films were typically a class of independently produced, low budget features most prolific during the 1960s. They were intended for the exhibition of non-explicit sexual situations and gratuitous nudity.¹¹⁶ Grindhouse theatres were forerunners to the adult movie houses that would arrive in the next decade. These featured more explicit hardcore content. The sexploitation genre eventually declined due to advertising bans as well as due to the closure of many grindhouses and drive-ins. But most particularly, the genre was eclipsed by hardcore pornography.¹¹⁷

The good-natured and joyful appearances of the male characters in the posters of the “nudie-cuties” were meant to offset more lascivious readings of the masculine presence and to distinguish the films from hardcore pornography.¹¹⁸ The drunkenly, smiling male that appeared in the marketing of the “nudie cuties” has much in common with the male characters in the posters for the new frat-house films. Even the taglines on the posters maintain the tongue-in-cheek humor that insists all of the wanton frivolity is, in the end, just young men being young men. Tagline humor is fairly consistent with the

early exploitation films, but the male presence has become cheekier and more central in the new frat-house films. Male characters had less of a presence on the posters in the sexploitation era. The artwork in the posters for *The Cheerleaders* (Paul Glickler, 1973) and *The Swinging Cheerleaders* (Jack Hill, 1974) featured happy-go-lucky cheerleaders in a variety of enticing poses (see Figure 8). The former film featured lobby card photos of the girls doing provocative stretches and exercises in their underwear. The taglines went further to emphasize the sexual looseness of the female characters: “Come huddle with the Cheerleaders” and “everything you’ve heard about cheerleaders comes true” (*The Cheerleaders*); “They gave their all for the team!” (*The Swinging Cheerleaders*). These were precursors to the frat-house films. The emphasis was on the female body, and the number of girls featured in the film. The trailers for these films, and others like them, would often splash similar taglines across the screen and accompany them with a male narrator who would introduce the female cast and describe each of the girl’s talents and sexual proclivities. The business of film trailers and promotional clips has changed significantly. Recent frat-house films follow a more high concept and narrative-driven approach to the trailers than earlier examples.



Figure 8: *The Swinging Cheerleaders*

A decade later, during the 1980s, following the success of the high school sexquest comedy *Porky's*, many imitators were also marketed by way of abundant female flesh. Unlike the earlier posters, the young women in most of the print advertising for these films were reduced completely to fleeting body parts that were usually running away from the young men in the same images. The young men were often chasing these female figures, and were usually reduced in size indicating that the female body was either unattainable, or it was larger than life. In *Hot Moves* (Jim Sotos, 1985), the young male cast hung on for dear life from the bikini bottom of an enlarged female body, while the protagonist on the poster for *Goin' All the Way* (Robert Freedman, 1982) clung to inflated breasts as if he were dangling from a cliff side (see Figure 9). The suggestion in marketing to the young male was that you would get a peek at female sexuality, but it might be a quick one, and the goal of obtaining sexual experience would be difficult. Most of the films in this genre featured female nudity in terms of bikini montages and peephole perspectives that were somewhere in between the “nudie cuties” and hardcore pornography.¹¹⁹ They aimed more for titillation than for full-on arousal, and this may suggest that some of these films were perhaps more enticing to pre-pubescent boys more able to be sufficiently excited by something like a wet T-shirt contest, or just the presence of young women in various stages of undress. This succession of nude female bodies was ideally crafted for those who, driven by hormonal desire, wanted visual stimulus. To erotically satisfy a curious and younger male audience, and one that is not supposed to be exposed to hardcore pornography, it is significant that these images served to stimulate desire rather than to satisfy it. These films did not “go all the way”, and this inability to offer much beyond some erotic titillation is reflected in the poster images. The women

were not only more elusive in the images, but they were dominant. This is contrasted, to a certain degree, in the frat-house posters which often featured more dominant images of the male.



Figure 9: *Goin' All the Way* Theatrical

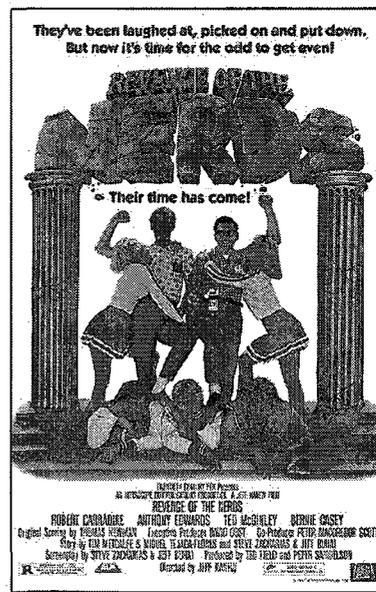


Figure 10: *Revenge of the Nerds* Theatrical

The poster art for the frat-house hit *Revenge of the Nerds* promised in its print ads that the young men would be triumphant, and would succeed in getting more than just a peek at female flesh (see Figure 10). *Revenge of the Nerds* opened with a car arriving at Adams College campus, and a conversation between head geek Louis Skolnick (Robert Carradine), his best friend Gilbert Lowell (Anthony Edwards) and Louis's father Mr. Skolnick (James Cromwell). Mr. Skolnick was giving a pep talk on the importance of becoming a freshman in university and how it is a rite of passage and a ticket to manhood. Mr. Skolnick pretty much guaranteed that sex with women will no longer be a fruitless challenge, and no longer forbidden. This was echoed in the film's poster art that featured Louis and Gilbert as God-like nerds who have mastered the female body, as

evinced by the cheerleaders wooing at their sides, and have trumped the lousy jocks that have been their nemeses. The film's tagline was compliant with the image, "Their time has come". *Revenge of the Nerds* did make good on its promises, and the beautiful but snotty sorority sister Betty Childs (Julie Montgomery) did end up having sex with Louis, although she was duped into doing it, and at first believed she was having sex with her quarterback boyfriend. It was a slightly creepy scenario, but the film treated the act as a trickster prank and not revenge by rape, although it felt more deceptively mean-spirited than it was perhaps intended to. The young men in the frat-house comedies were no longer satisfied with mere voyeuristic gazing, and as the advertising suggested, there would be a total sexual payoff this time. The poster for the frat-house vacation comedy *Spring Break* (Sean Cunningham, 1983) featured little men and enlarged female body parts just like the teen sexquests of the period - but this time the message was different (see Figure 11). In a clever parody of the raising of flags at Iwo Jima, the giant suntanned curves of a female body represented a site of conquest for the young frat boys.



Figure 11: *Spring Break* Theatrical (Re-release)

Perhaps of utmost importance in the marketing of the frat-house film is that the product will be one of escapist fun for the young male, and that the university is indeed a utopian masculine fantasy. “Don’t graduate, celebrate” was another tagline for *Van Wilder*. This reinforced the idea of the childish id, or more accurately, of the will of a man-child that refused to grow up, graduate, and move on. This man-child aspect could also go further to explain the reduced size of the men in many of the posters. If the campus is to continue to be sold as a hedonistic pleasure-dome then the man-child needs to find a way to stay there as long as possible, like Van Wilder did, in order to become a living legend.

Much of the work I’ve read surrounding marketing made little or no distinction between theatrical and home video advertising. Wyatt and Schaefer stuck pretty exclusively to theatrical marketing in the Domestic United States. Barbara Klinger and Joshua Greenberg have written on home video viewing practices, but their studies were not particularly gendered or genre-specific, and focused more on technology and cinephilia than on marketing tendencies. Klinger tended to focus more on art house films that would wind up in *The Criterion Collection*.¹²⁰ There is little academic discourse devoted to the more recent strategies of marketing films for DVD. Along with the potential for marketing bonus features and supplements, there is the emergence and availability now of multiple versions of films, including director’s cuts and restored versions. Instead of “hot” and “cold” print ads¹²¹ we now get two distinct versions of many of these films, the rated version and the unrated version. In some cases, a DVD will contain both versions in one package, but more often there are two versions available with variations in packaging design that are occasionally significant. The more recent

frat-house comedies, some of which are direct-to-video, take full advantage of the opportunity to exploit the term “unrated” as a persuasive tool designed to entice the male video enthusiast by promoting the inclusion of extensive special features on the DVD packaging.

In the sexploitation era, theatres featured lobby stills which were additional, often provocative, images from the films. DVD and home video packaging affords an opportunity to include additional pictures on the back of the case. If a lesson can be taken here from the marketing of pornographic films - the back cover is vital. It is unlikely that a consumer would buy or rent a film of that nature without glimpsing the back cover, which contains as much visual representation of female nudity as possible.¹²² Films that have theatrical releases arrive in theatres with an R rating, but may end up with DVD releases that are “unrated” such as *Van Wilder*, its sequel *Van Wilder 2: The Rise of Taj* (Mort Nathan, 2007), and *College*. The selling point is the promise that they are offering more than the previous version in terms of explicit content, which is usually defined as more nudity. The marketing of an early Russ Meyer “nudie cutie” contained the tagline promise “you’ll NEVER see this on TV.” Today’s unrated DVD taglines are similar. There is a prominent example on the DVD case artwork for *The Rise of Taj* which conceals the semi-nude bodies of some female students, and proclaims “Too Hot for Theatres!” With the fall of the grind-houses and adult cinemas, the audience for material of a more explicit nature is now watching at home. With the rise of the multiplex, the cinema is increasingly a site for more family-oriented entertainment. While the Restricted rating is still in play theatrically, it now seems antiquated in terms of home distribution where “unrated” is the new marketing tool.¹²³

Reports in *Variety*¹²⁴ and *Advertising Age*¹²⁵ indicated much higher sales for DVDs that are marketed as unrated. The Entertainment Merchants Association reported that since debuting in 2002, unrated versions of films have sold approximately 64% more discs than their restricted counterparts.¹²⁶ They have become so marketable that retailers that once refused to stock unrated material (notably the mega-chains Wal-Mart and Blockbuster) are now carrying unrated versions, but ironically still refuse to handle some films that are rated NC-17, the somewhat dreaded rating that was introduced in the early 1990s meant to counter the pornographic stigma of an X rating.¹²⁷

In the past several years a market has opened up for direct-to-video sequels and films that are served up only in unrated versions and do not have theatrical exhibition. Many of the current frat-house films fall into this category.¹²⁸ The cover art for these is often more explicit than what is currently displayed on posters at cinemas. The recurring image is of female students, often faceless, provocatively posed or semi-clothed “eye-stoppers”.¹²⁹ There are some exact compositions being duplicated from the “nudie-cuties” era. One particularly common graphic that is almost ubiquitous in today’s campus comedies and teen sex romps, which from what I’ve gathered, may have first appeared as the poster art for *Paris Ooh-La-La!* (Jose Bénazéraf, 1963),¹³⁰ is a rear view of a female form with long attractive legs spread wide and framing the male character(s). The female buttocks are clearly displayed and provocative underwear or lingerie is usually visible, almost an up-the-skirt point-of-view. This particular image is contrary to images of women in the teen sexquests that I mentioned earlier, in that the pose suggests a young woman who is “ready and willing” to partake in sex as opposed to an unattainable or fleeting female body part. The body is still fragmented and sexualized, but the wide-

legged stance implies a sexual willingness that was not conveyed in earlier posters like *Hot Moves* or *Goin' All the Way*. Another element the recent comedies have in common with the “nudie cuties” is playful taglines that “displace direct erotic appeal with humor”.¹³¹ One of the taglines for *Van Wilder 2: The Rise of Taj* is “The Legend is Growing” and features Taj (Kal Penn) posing in his underwear, while two attractive young women have their arms wrapped suggestively around his thighs, one girl’s hand inching up his boxer shorts (see Figure 12). This poster visually connects to *National Lampoon’s Vacation* which featured a very similar image of Chevy Chase in its marketing. Again, the women here appear willing to bow down to the male hero. In the tradition of Bluto, Taj is also wielding a hefty beer mug. These images of the male protagonists in the frat-house film are graphic depictions of young men living by their id. They are amoral and egocentric and tend to be governed by what Freud called the “pleasure principle”; stressing personal pleasure and gratification over responsibility and not getting what one wants.

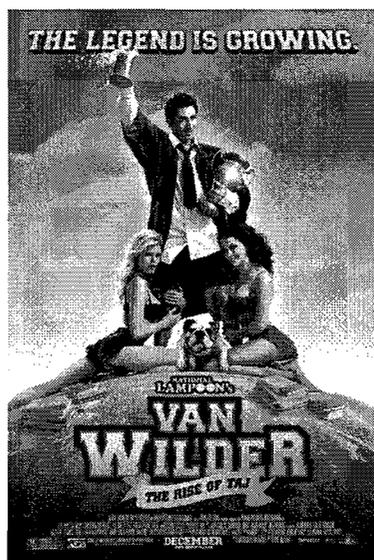


Figure 12: *The Rise of Taj* (Theatrical)

In Linda Ruth Williams' study of erotic thrillers, there is a chapter called "Softcore on the Sofa" which is helpful in considering how the frat-house comedy, which also contains soft-core titillation, may offer viewers an enhanced personal experience on DVD. Something like the erotic thriller may feature more abundant nudity, but that genre may be lacking somewhat because of its concentration on sexuality geared toward erotic coupling, and its lack of voyeuristic gazing opportunities that a young male viewer seeks. The hidden video camera, and spying on sorority girls through peepholes hasn't faded since *Animal House* and *Revenge of the Nerds*, but the technology has improved. Webcams, cell phone cams, and other surveillance devices are employed in the new campus comedies. Barbara Klinger's thorough examination of home video practices features a chapter on the pleasures of repeat viewing. In the frat-house film, the gross-out moments and the naughty bits are those sequences most bound to be watched repeatedly. A viewer can skip to, pause, or revisit scenes of sexual titillation or gross-out humor. The breakthrough DVD release of *Van Wilder* features a number of firsts in the special features department that would end up being imitated including menus that sport a topless female and what it calls "Drunken Idiot Kommentary" [sic]. The latter is an audio commentary track featuring inebriated members of the cast and crew. Here, even the special features adhere to the dismissal of refinement and the rejection of good taste.¹³² These DVD features seem to have been created with a young male audience in mind and with a sense of irreverent fun. The information used to sell the special features on the packaging not only appeals to the irreverent or sexually explicit nature of the features themselves, but simultaneously appeals to the savvy of the technophile who is excited

both by the capabilities of the digital technology, and by his ability to collect and own the films and these features.¹³³ These features serve as another strong way to market the film.

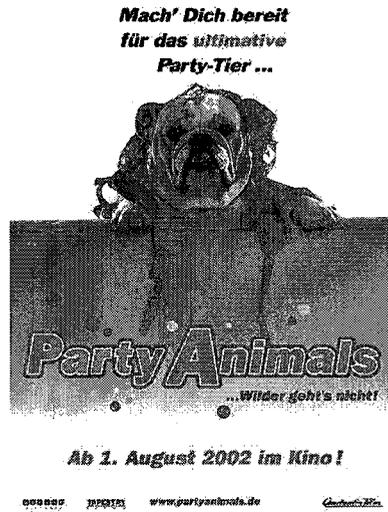


Figure 13: Party Animals (Van Wilder)

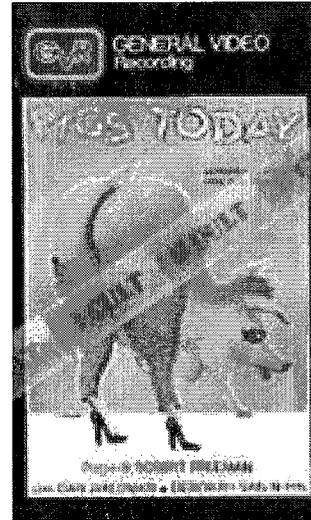


Figure 14: Pigs Today (Goin' All the Way)

Although William Paul's work on animal comedy provides a bit of framework, I've made interesting discoveries regarding, in particular, the use of actual animals and the increase of their overall presence in the marketing of the campus comedy. Monkeys and dogs are present in the artwork for the *Dorm Daze* (David Hillenbrand-Scott Hillenbrand, 2003) and the *Van Wilder* franchise films, while sheep turn up in the poster art for *Beta House* and *Extreme Movie* (Andrew J. Epstein-Andrew Jacobson, 2008). This reinforces the animal behavior of the title characters, but since the animals are also now characters within the films, they may be considered more than just motifs or mascots.¹³⁴ The word animal has turned up frequently in advertising these films to

overseas markets. In European markets, several of the films I've looked at have fallen under alternate titles and used different images for their theatrical marketing. *Van Wilder* became *Party Animals* in Germany and Sweden (see Figure 13), while *Dorm Daze* became *College Animals* in the same markets. There are even stranger cases. The German video artwork for the film *Goin' All the Way* was changed to *Pigs Today* and its poster became a bizarre hybrid of gross-out animal and a suggestively posed female (see figure 14). A pig wearing make-up and high heels was bent over at the knees exposing curvaceously feminine buttocks spilling out over tight pants.

The animals in the new frat-house images tend to be aligned with the male, reinforcing the gendered nature of the comedies themselves. The dog in the poster for *The Rise of Taj* even has his paws on the young women. In campus comedies aimed more at the female audience the animal is also present, but to a different purpose. *Legally Blonde* and *The House Bunny* feature a toy breed dog and a cat in their respective marketing campaigns (see Figure 15). The plots of these films often involve intellectually challenged female protagonists who go on to succeed in institutes of higher learning. There is more emphasis on refinement and being socially accepted by way of style and poise. While occasional gross-out behavior and scatological humor may surface, vulgarity is not treated as a rite of passage as it is in the male frat-house comedy. The animals in the posters of the female campus comedies are domesticated and obedient pets. The female campus comedy is about taming the beasts.

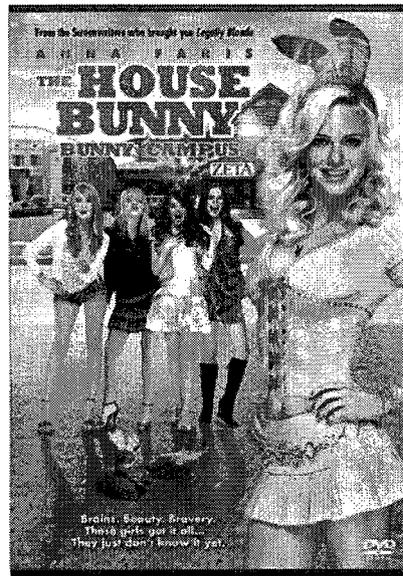


Figure 11: *The House Bunny* Theatrical

There are distinctions in the representation of female sexuality and recent changes in the marketing of some successful, and not so successful, gross-out sex comedies. In the past few years there has been an interesting shift in marketing print media for some of these films that are contrary to Schaefer's findings in exploitation, and to what existed previously in any marketing toward adolescent males in the past. Several recent teen-oriented sex comedies have avoided using sexualized imagery of females in their distribution artwork. The frat-house film *College* and the sexquest films *Superbad* and *Sex Drive* all have explicit trailers featuring lots of females and sexual situations. They also used red-band trailers online, which allow nudity and language but are not approved by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and that go even further. Green-band trailers are the more common and are approved for all audiences, while the red trailers are intended for restricted audiences only. These red-band trailers could be considered "hot", a new variation on the practices of the early exploitation newspaper ads that came in both racy and less-explicit versions. The absence of females in the posters

and the print advertising in these most recent examples is perhaps signaling a marketing shift of some kind. The films do feature a “smorgasbord of females” just like the films Schaefer discusses, but why are the young women missing from the posters suddenly? The marketing seems to be attempting to distance itself from the styles of earlier sex comedies, pornography, and direct-to-video material. It also seems related to the success of gross-out (post frat-house) sex comedies like *The 40-Year Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2006) and *Observe and Report* (Jody Hill, 2009), which are seemingly intended for an older crowd, but featured only awkward male characters in ambiguous close-ups in the print advertising. Perhaps the print advertising is meant to appeal to both genders by being less provocative. The question worth asking is just how important print marketing is in creating awareness about a particular title?

College played out as a total homage to the earlier frat-house film, but it was actually about adolescent males pretending to not still be in high school, who were experiencing their first big college party weekend. The theatrical trailer focused largely on sexual possibilities. In a succession of enticing scenes featuring sexy young women it closely followed the tried and true “sex sells” formula of sexploitation marketing. The theatrical poster, however, was unusual (see Figure 16). The image here could be compared with other exploitation images that Schaefer referred to, specifically, ones that showed the traumatic results when women took part in “lewd” behavior. But unlike those ads, that were typically accompanied by stern warnings to young women, like “Don’t Let This Happen to You!” the tagline for *College* clearly offset negative readings of its image by declaring in bold caps: BEST. WEEKEND. EVER. The selected font even resembled the embroidery on varsity sportswear, indicating that a drunken recovery was

just a natural part of being “on the team”. Interestingly, the film was one of the only examples I have encountered of a frat-house film representing itself by gross-out gag rather than female sexuality. The scene of a young man having vomited into a toilet did suggest gross indulgence of alcohol, but at a price. At first glance it resembled posters that might appear in high school clinics warning of the dangers of binge drinking, but the tagline suggested that the movie represented a weekend so incredible that any hangovers that may have ensued were well worth it. *College* wound up being somewhat of a critical and commercial failure in cinemas.¹³⁵ The artwork for the subsequent DVD release ended up being slightly modified, and scantily-clad young women could be seen running to the rescue in the background in the now “unrated” feature (see Figure 17).

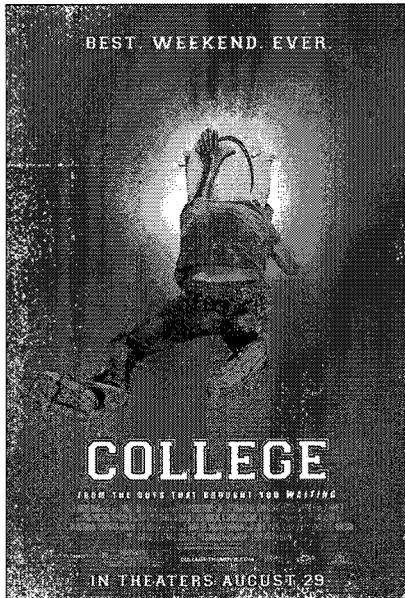


Figure 2: *College* Theatrical

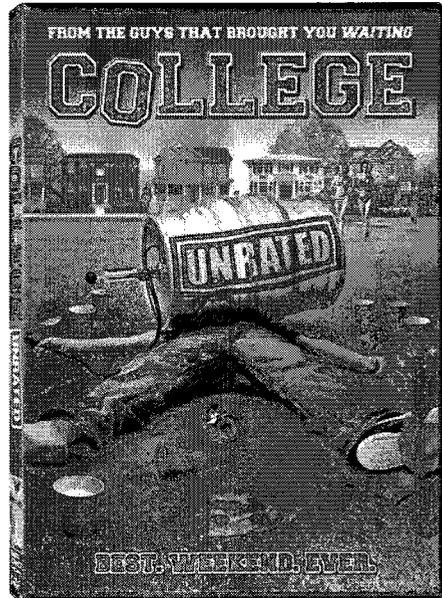


Figure 17: *College* DVD Cover

Another film that has shifted its marketing approach from the theatrical release to unrated DVD more radically was *Miss March* (Zach Cregger-Trevor Moore, 2009). The story concerned two college buddies who go on a spring break trek to find a *Playboy* Playmate. It was initially marketed with a rather tame image of the male leads holding up an opened copy of *Playboy*, obviously checking out an unseen centerfold. For the recent DVD release, the image was entirely changed. Now, there is a scantily clad female featured front and center with a banner titled unrated covering her private areas, and bold print calling this the “Fully Exposed Edition”. The male characters have been reduced in size and now appear on either side of the female model. This poster perhaps contains the direct and clear statement regarding the heterosexual male audience it seeks. In smaller print on the banner, the tagline warns: “DO NOT OPEN NEAR WIFE, GIRLFRIEND, MOTHER, SISTER, BOSS, GRANDPARENTS, BABYSITTER, CLERGY, etc.” (see Figure 18).

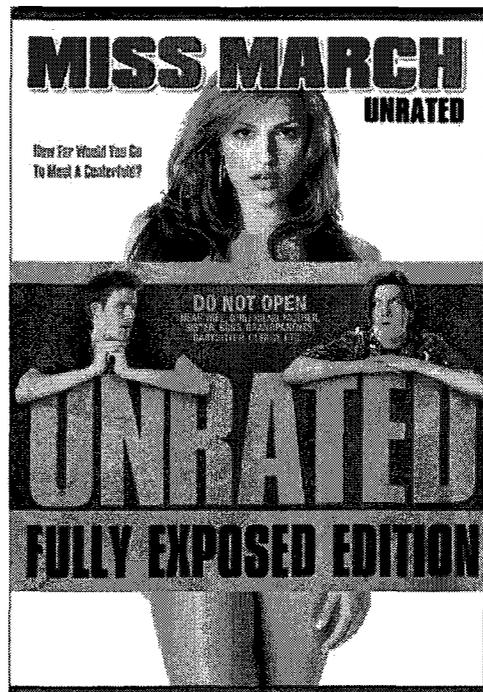


Figure 18: *Miss March* DVD Cover

There is little need to stress that the marketing here was being designed to entice a particular heterosexual male audience, the same audience I believe Schaefer acknowledges in terms of exploitation when he evokes Bourdieu.¹³⁶ I'm not sure if taste in this case does work to classify the classifier, but the marketing approaches here seem desperate to align these films with animal behavior terms. The recent release of *Van Wilder: Freshman Year* skipped a theatrical release altogether and arrived direct-to-video in an *unrated* release that is perhaps the grossest and most sexist frat-house film I have seen. In addition to the dog fellatio I mentioned in Chapter One, there is a scene in which a character eats dog feces. Although we are not actually witnessing a character devour real feces, this scene is somehow rendered more sickening than Divine's stunt in *Pink Flamingos* on account of the visible kernels of corn. The DVD art combines two images that have been used in many previous examples (see Figure 19). This time, though, the marketing team makes little attempt to hide the fact that the series has pretty much gone to the dogs.

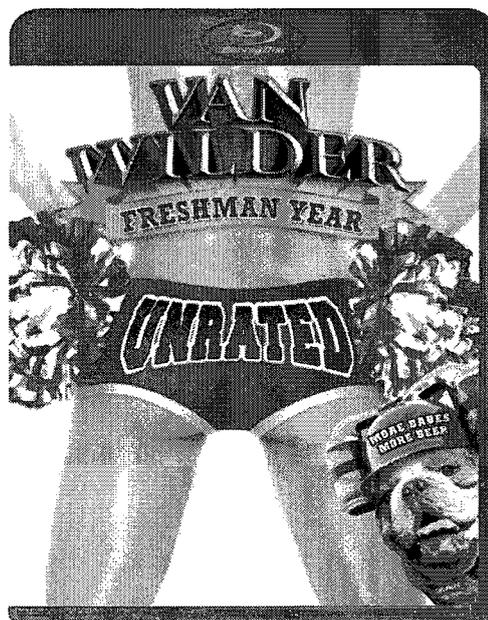


Figure 19: *Van Wilder Freshman Year* (Blu-ray)

Upon writing this, the Blu-ray release of *Van Wilder: Freshman Year* has been cancelled. The movie has only been released to the more dependable, and saturated DVD market, since the newer format has less of a market share and any release is more carefully considered.¹³⁷ The *Van Wilder* series began with a successful theatrical film in 2002 and ends here with a questionably marketed third-rate direct-to-video product. The images no longer seem shocking or titillating, and they certainly don't seem fresh. There are two versions of the DVD available, the other being a rated version with a tamer cover featuring Van Wilder and his love interest holding beers, the campus behind them in the distance. The entire package appears even more generic. Over the past several years there have been other frat-house direct-to-video releases that I haven't covered here in much detail.¹³⁸ Interestingly, all of these films are ones I've seen in relegated to bargain bins at stores like Wal-Mart and Zellers. This could be suggestive of overstocking, or just the ubiquitous and disposable nature of a subgenre that has again worn out its welcome. Since William Paul's prediction of the end of gross-out comedy didn't come true, I dare not make a similar depiction with the frat-house film. There are shifts, declines, and resurgences with most any genre. Genre is cyclical, and we have seen the long-defunct musical return in a big way in recent years. It just takes the right film to come along during a period where a particular genre or subgenre may have been considered dead. Right now there appears to be a slight shift away from these more uninspired gross-out films, with the new more sensitive and character driven comedies like *Pineapple Express* (David Gordon Green, 2008) and the Judd Apatow films I mentioned earlier. The frat-house comedy belongs to that larger gross-out genre. Gross-

Out is a site that appears to be in constant motion. What worked as shocking or repulsive yesterday, may become normalized. And then, it starts again.

CONCLUSION

My initial problem in dealing with gross-out comedy was that the genre was too broad and needed to be narrowed to one subgenre. I chose the frat-house comedy because it seemed overlooked critically, but rather popular. I wanted to define more clearly what constituted a frat-house comedy and to distinguish it from other campus oriented films. In doing so, I watched many films from different eras that had any relation to university campuses. I narrowed my critical research to material that dealt with taste and social behavior, and gross-out comedies. The major works that I looked at were Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction*, Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, William Paul's *Laughing Screaming*, and Sigmund Freud's work on the ego. I also did a survey of literature on the related film comedies which included work by Wiley Lee Umphlett, Paul C. Bonila, Geoff King, and Timothy Shary. For my second chapter on marketing, I looked primarily at Erik Schaefer's articles on sexploitation and Justin Wyatt's *High Concept*.

Bakhtin's concept of the trickster was a bit more applicable to the frat-house film. Perhaps the biggest difference is in the way Bakhtin's carnival tricksters engaged with the grotesque. In the carnival, the activities of tricksters involved scatological play, often with urine and feces. The tricksters in the frat-house comedies often employed similar scatological elements in their revenge pranks, but as I have shown, they do not always revel in it. They are disgusted by it and they know that their enemies will be too. The contemporary trickster understands the potential for grotesque bodily humor, but also uses intelligence and creativity in planning how best to use it against their rivals.

The work of Bourdieu was useful in determining the role of taste and class distinction within the frat-house comedy. What I found in the newer frat-house comedies is that the lines of distinction were constantly blurred and in flux. While the earlier example *King Frat* featured a cast of frat-boys that cherished their reputations as the lowest on campus, the characters in later films like *Van Wilder* and *Beta House* were more aware of social distinctions, and were socially mobile.

The campus setting in some of the more exploitative films I discuss (like *Van Wilder: Freshman Year* and *King Frat*) is made very carnivalesque, particularly the frat-houses themselves. Toga and kegger parties (and spring break excursions) are the frat-house comedy equivalent of the carnival. The central principal of carnival is degradation, which in the case of the frat-house film, arrives most often in the form of the revenge prank. The frat-house party may offer a forum for social humiliation to take place in, but the party is about breaking free of formal constraints and having fun. The revenge prank is part of a social competition. In these films, rivals are not often at the same parties and therefore the degradation does not always occur at the carnival. So, in that sense, the frat-house does not exactly function like Bakhtin's carnival. I believe that it is the prank itself, along with the competitive male nature in these films that distinguishes the frat-house comedy from other comedies.

In marketing terms, the frat-house comedy did blend high concept with exploitation, but it went in other interesting directions too. The sexualized women were represented differently than they were in the teen sexquest. Those differences were largely in how their images were presented in relation to the men, and particularly in terms of size and space.¹³⁹ The increased presence of the animal in the newer advertising

may represent heightened awareness on the part of filmmakers of the influence of the animal on this subgenre. Imitation remains high with the most exploitative frat-house titles, and there is lots of repetition in marketing choices.¹⁴⁰

I think that the frat-house comedy and similar gross-out films have been overtaken largely by a revisionist form of romantic comedy, led by the works of filmmakers like Judd Apatow, Jody Hill, and David Gordon Green. These new Hollywood comedies are comprised of elements of traditional romantic comedies - mixed with gross-out humor - and a kind of self-reflexive comedy that was once most associated with filmmakers like Woody Allen and Albert Brooks. I will not echo any predictions, like William Paul had, about the demise of the frat-house film. I do think that the limited critical and commercial success of the recent frat-house comedies, *College* and *Van Wilder: Freshman Year* indicates a downturn, or at least a setback.

I didn't touch on a few potentially interesting aspects of the frat-house comedy that could benefit from further exploration, but which are outside the scope of this study. It would be interesting to read feminist or queer approaches to these films. The women in the new frat-house films are represented in ways that they were not previously. Taboos are being broken in terms of female flatulence and menstruation, and a number of gags have been popping up in these films and in related gross-out comedies that bring women into the scatological realm. In terms of potential queer readings, there is a curious abundance of male cross-dressing in frat-house comedies. Typically, these scenes cater to male voyeuristic fantasy through scenes depicting the infiltration of men into female spaces in the guise of women (as in Jack Lemmon's and Tony Curtis' masquerade in *Some Like It Hot* [1959]). Sometimes the cross-dressing could be

interpreted differently. There is a party in *Van Wilder* in which Wilder emerges wearing a dress and makeup, in place of a toga. His motivations for wearing the female clothes aren't made clear. It can't be denied that the frat-house has other closets and rooms to be explored.

Notes

¹ I use direct-to-video here as all inclusive in terms of the popular viewable formats: DVD, VHS, and Blu-Ray.

² In horror study, Carol Clover's initial look at the *final girl* in the American slasher horror film was ultimately deemed insignificant because she overlooked titles that featured male protagonists that would emerge as the final heroes, thus making her study too narrow in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993).

³ The western genre, for example, is more defined by its location and its narrative concerns.

⁴ Geoff King, *Film Comedy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 2-3.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, 63.

⁷ David Hinton's *Celluloid Ivy: Higher Education in the Movies* (New Jersey: Scarecrow Publishing, 1994) dealt with some of the earlier fraternity films, but concentrated on aspects of academic performance. Hinton's filmography also stops around 1989, and there isn't often distinction made between college and high school student life. Similarly, Mary Dalton's *The Hollywood Curriculum* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999) was concerned almost exclusively with the relationships between students and faculty. Timothy Shary had an article called "Film Genres and the Cinematic Image of Youth – A College Course File", *Journal of Film and Video* (53:4, Winter, 2002) which, again, made little distinction between high school and college-related films. William Paul had a small piece in *Film Comment* called "What Rough Beasts: Confessions of a Gross-out Maven" that introduced concepts of animal comedy and the pioneering example, *Animal House*. These articles both dealt with college films and gross-out humor to some degree, as do the major works by Shary and Paul that I address later. The problem with these studies in relation to the frat-house comedy is that they all tended to concentrate a bit too much on the accuracy (or lack thereof) of the college and classroom experiences in American cinema. The frat-house comedies I discuss don't attempt much by way of realism, and the frat-boys aren't typically that concerned with higher education or the strengths of their academic relationships.

⁸ Krista M. Tucciarone. *Blurring the Boundaries Between "Real" Reality and "Reel" Reality": "National Lampoon's Animal House" versus the College Experience*. (Missouri: Proquest, 2004).

⁹ The dates and titles are adjusted more closely to Tucciarone's timeline, but the descriptions remain primarily true to Umphlett.

¹⁰ Wiley Lee Umphlett, *The Movies Go to College: Hollywood and the World of the College-Life Film* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1984), 15-44.

¹¹ Ibid, 16.

¹² Ibid, 45-91.

¹³ Ibid, 150-171.

¹⁴ Sexploitation was a term generally used for exploitation films that aimed for the sexual arousal of the spectator, but were distinguished from pornography in that they were soft-core.

¹⁵ Paul C. Bonila, "Is There More to Hollywood Lowbrow Than Meets the Eye", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*.22:17-24, 2005.18

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 37.

¹⁹ Harold Lloyd was more celebrated at the time, but in subsequent years the appreciation for Buster Keaton has grown, particularly in the field of films studies where he is regarded as an auteur, even though he is uncredited as a director on most of his film projects.

²⁰ Umphlett, 38.

²¹ Ibid, 27.

²² Although competition remains at the core, the contests now involve challenges that up the ante in terms of danger or gross-out potential.

²³ Umphlett, 93.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Films like *The Karate Kid* (John G. Avildsen, 1984) and its sequels were the most prolific and helped to popularize the training montage set to a motivational soundtrack.

²⁷ Umphlett, 157.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ It is also based on the non-fiction book by James Simon Kunen, which chronicled his student life at Columbia University from 1966-1968, and dealt largely with April 1968 takeover of the dean's office by student radicals. James Simon Kunen (1995). *The Strawberry Statement: Notes of a College Revolutionary* (New York: Wiley, John & Sons Inc., 1968)

³⁰ Umphlett, 135.

- ³¹ Ibid, 181.
- ³² This attack of the snobbery nature of sorority sisters continues in the new female campus comedies like *Pledge This!* (2006).
- ³³ Peter Bart, *The Gross: The Hits, the Flops, and the Summer That Ate Hollywood* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 210-211.
- ³⁴ William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 86.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Ibid, 216.
- ³⁸ Brandon Gray, "Comedy – College: 1978 – present", Box-Office Mojo, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=collegedcomedy.htm> (accessed on August 16, 2009).
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ These are also more the sorts of films dealt with in the Hinton and Dalton studies of campus pictures.
- ⁴¹ According to the popular film review website *Rotten Tomatoes.com*, *Higher Learning* earned 48% positive reviews and 52% negative, *Gross Anatomy* score 30% negative and 70% positive, and *Threesome* received the worst with 27% positive reviews and 73% unfavorable. <http://www.rottentomatoes.com>. (accessed on August 24, 2009).
- ⁴² Umphlett, 149.
- ⁴³ Ibid, 154.
- ⁴⁴ *National Lampoon, Inc.* was a company formed in 2002 in order to use the recognized brand name "National Lampoon" in comedy and entertainment.
- ⁴⁵ Although in the post-script scenes of *Animal House* and *King Frat* we learn that despite their proclivities, these men do move on to successful careers. We are told that becomes a Senator, while Gross-Out becomes Dean of Yellowstream U.
- ⁴⁶ Joseph Boggs, *The Art of Watching Films*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 110-113.
- ⁴⁷ Bonila, 18.
- ⁴⁸ R.L. Rutsky & Jason Wyatt, "Serious Pleasures: Cinematic Pleasure and the Notion of Fun." *Cinema Journal* 30.1 (1990), 3-19.
- ⁴⁹ William Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 89-108.
- ⁵⁰ Barbara B. Hollmann, (2002). "Hazing: Hidden Campus Crime". *New Directions for Student Services* 2002 (99): 11-24.
- ⁵¹ Some even encourage the closure of chapters that consistently partake in illegal and risky activities and pose threats to their local and university communities. According to Hollmann, 22.
- ⁵² Hollmann, 23-24.
- ⁵³ *The Skulls II* (Joe Chappelle, 2002) and *The Skulls III* (J. Miles Dale, 2005) are two examples of direct-to-video sequels of campus films revolving around hazing rituals and secret societies. There is even a third sequel to *Poison Ivy* (Katt Shea Ruben, 1992) called *Poison Ivy: The Secret Society* (Jason Hreno, 2009) which concerned a cult of campus debutantes that pursued rich older men.
- ⁵⁴ King, 65-66.
- ⁵⁵ This happens in the unrated DVD version, but in the theatrical cut Jim is standing upright with the pie clinging to his crotch.
- ⁵⁶ Paul, 22.
- ⁵⁷ King, 129-130.
- ⁵⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 18-19.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid, 19.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid, 21.
- ⁶¹ Roger Ebert, "The Rocky Horror Picture Show", *The Chicago Sun-Times*. January 1, 1975. <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19750101/REVIEWS/501010356/1023> (accessed on July 27, 2009).
- ⁶² William Paul, 'Charles Chaplin and the Annals of Anality', *Comedy/Cinema/Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 109-129.
- ⁶³ Ibid, 118.
- ⁶⁴ King, 64.
- ⁶⁵ Bakhtin, 19-41.
- ⁶⁶ Paul, *Laughing Screaming*, 93.
- ⁶⁷ This example is a rather mild version of the gross-out revenge sequence in comparison to scenes from the contemporary frat-house films that followed.
- ⁶⁸ King, 69.
- ⁶⁹ Most of the films that I discuss include explicit reference to *Animal House* in their promotion. This will be discussed further in my chapter on marketing.

⁷⁰ *King Frat* had appeared under various titles since its initial run, where it was a huge drive-in success. The first VHS release was censored. The latest DVD version, which I screened for this thesis, is the complete theatrical version which had only been available in the UK for many years.

⁷¹ *King Frat* has a bit of a checkered history, and there is some debate among fans as to whether or not the film was legally challenged by the producer's of *Animal House* for its liberal similarities.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0079406/board>

⁷² Paul does focus on Bluto primarily.

⁷³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984) 13-14.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 53-54.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 67-70.

⁷⁶ I'm not just referring to *Animal House* and *Revenge of the Nerds* here, but to the earlier campus films starring Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd.

⁷⁷ The cast members all appear to be in their late twenties, or early thirties.

⁷⁸ Sigmund Freud and Peter Gay, *The Ego and the Id* (New York: Norton, 1989), 28-29.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 29.

⁸⁰ Carol Clover, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film" in *Screening Violence*, ed. Stephen Prince. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998) 125-128.

⁸¹ Wilder is reluctant until he learns that he will be paid. Still, he ends up providing exactly what he promises.

⁸² Brian Orndorf, "Van Wilder: Freshman Year (Unrated)" *DVD Talk*. July 14, 2009.

http://www.dvdtalk.com/reviews/38017/van-wilder-freshman-year-unrated/?__rd=1 (accessed on August 13, 2009).

⁸³ Bestiality turns up in a number of recent gross-out comedy titles including: *Clerks 2* (Kevin Smith, 2006), *Sleeping Dogs Lie* (Bobcat Goldthwait, 2006), and the frat house films *Beta House*, and *Van Wilder: Freshman Year*.

⁸⁴ Bonila, 22.

⁸⁵ The Spill Crew, "Sex and the City", *Spill.com*. May 30, 2008. <http://spill.com/Movie-Reviews/MovieReview.aspx?Name=Sex+and+the+City&VideoId=406705> (accessed on June 11, 2009)

⁸⁶ *Hamburger: The Motion Picture* (Mike Marvin, 1986) was about a McDonald's like chain that opens its own university in order to better educate its employees on the art of fried food and secret sauces.

⁸⁷ There were several editions of "To Catch a Predator" from different states that aired on *Dateline NBC* between 2004 and 2007. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10912603> (accessed on August 20, 2009).

⁸⁸ In Canada, the televised news magazine *W5* duplicated this format for a special investigation in 2006.

⁸⁹ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1994), 1-10.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 5-6.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 131.

⁹² Films like *The Swinging Cheerleaders* were usually set on college campuses.

⁹³ *The First Time* had a very limited theatrical run and its box-office earnings were ultimately insubstantial. The film is rarely referred to in terms of teen comedies in any literature (academic or otherwise) surrounding the genre, and most of the information I was able to obtain came from the Internet Movie Database (Imdb.com). I would also like to point out here that I was unable to obtain a useable graphic to include, because the only websites that featured images had copy protected the work.

⁹⁴ Lawrence Van Gelder, "The First Time (1983): 'The First Time' Campus Fun" *The New York Times*. July 13, 1983. http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?_r=1&res=9A06E1D81138F930A25754C0A965948260 (accessed on April 15, 2009).

⁹⁵ Wyatt, 115.

⁹⁶ Recently there have been more exceptions to this in the National Lampoon canon, but the most popular National Lampoon titles have been campus-related comedies, e.g. *Animal House*, *Van Wilder*, and *Class Reunion*.

⁹⁷ *National Lampoon* was a satirical monthly started by Harvard graduates and was published from 1970 to 1998.

⁹⁸ *MAD* actually lent its own name to help promote another animal comedy. Set in a military school, *MAD Magazine Presents Up the Academy* (Robert Downey, 1981) was so critically lambasted that *MAD* publishers decided to legally challenge the film's producers and were successful in having the publication's name dropped by the time the film hit home video. The film's bizarre epilogue still contains a reference to the magazine in the form of an actor wearing a giant Alfred E. Neuman mask and holding a sign that asks "what...me worry?"

⁹⁹ Wyatt, 117.

¹⁰⁰ Desmond Devlin, "The Untold Story of Mad Magazine", *DCcomics.com*, March 29, 2007.

<http://www.dccomics.com/mad/?action=about>. (accessed on March 15, 2009).

¹⁰¹ Indeed, the *Animal House* trailer succeeds in doing all of this.

¹⁰² There is some uncertainty to ownership of the rights to *King Frat* since its initial video release. There are many illegitimate copies in distribution since the film has developed a cult following.

¹⁰³ Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Contemporary Youth in America*. (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2002), 27.

¹⁰⁴ Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1994), 24-26.

¹⁰⁵ If *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) is considered the ultimate example of total high concept, it must be observed that the film is essentially a bigger budgeted exploitation film. The marketing approach is more refined and glossy than the earlier films were, but it is the same kind of fish, so to speak.

¹⁰⁶ Shary, 12-16.

¹⁰⁷ Erik Schaefer, "Pandering to the Goon Trade: Framing the Sexploitation Audience through Marketing" in *Sleaze Artists*, ed. Jeffrey Sconce (Durham : Duke University Press, 2007), 19.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Erik Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Classical Exploitation Films* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 113

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ There are many kinds of exploitation films that Schaefer studies, and I will not be getting into the vice and drug subgenres, or the more deviant material that focuses on rape and degradation here, as it doesn't fit with the films of my emphasis.

¹¹² Schaefer, *Sleaze Artists*, 20.

¹¹³ John Ronald Weitzer, *Sex for Sale, prostitution, pornography, and the sex industry* (NY: Routledge, 2000), 51.

¹¹⁴ Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 52.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 19.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 35.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 52.

¹¹⁸ Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 22.

¹¹⁹ The earlier films were closer to material found in soft-core pornography.

¹²⁰ Klinger's study in *Beyond the Multiplex* addresses gender selectively in terms of home theater and surround sound. Linda Ruth Williams' study of the erotic thriller addresses direct-to-video titles and gendered viewership, but not much on marketing.

¹²¹ Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 19.

¹²² In the VHS days, pornographic films were housed in much larger cases than most other genres, specifically to fit more pictures on the box.

¹²³ Of course, "unrated" doesn't necessarily promise more nudity. It only means that the version of the film wasn't submitted to the MPAA for a rating. It may not actually contain any more objectionable material than the theatrical version.

¹²⁴ Marc Gracer, "In pic-to-DVD shift, 'unrated' rates high", *Variety*.396:4 (2004), 61.

¹²⁵ T.L. Stanley, "Uninhibited, Uncut, Unrated DVDs Fly Off the Shelves; Raunchy Content Could Bring Happy Ending to Weak Box-office Returns" in *Advertising Age* (Oct. 31, 2005) <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-132127834.html>. (accessed on May 11, 2008).

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Gracer, 61.

¹²⁸ Recently all the titles that carry the name *National Lampoon* are exclusively direct-to-video, which is the closest thing to the drive-in B movie that exists today.

¹²⁹ Eye-stoppers are the term that Schaefer uses throughout his work, and credits Vance Packard with coining it in his early exposé on advertising techniques, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: David McKay Co., 1957).

¹³⁰ This image choice was made more famous by the poster art for the James Bond film *For Your Eyes Only* (John Glen, 1981) and has continued to be used in many film posters, ads, and magazine covers.

¹³¹ Erik Schaefer, *Sleaze Artists*, 23.

¹³² Most of the films I refer to have special features of this kind. *Beta House* offers what it calls a Boobie "Yule Log", which shows close-ups of women's breasts jiggling to the sounds of various Christmas favorites like "Jingle Bells."

¹³³ Barbara Klinger focuses more on cinephilia and collecting than on special features in *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) and Joshua Greenberg discusses early VHS viewing practices and history in *From Betamax to Blockbuster* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).

¹³⁴ Although the alignment of the male character to an animal mascot has been a known staple of fraternities, the animals in the frat-house film are not always represented as masculine, or dominant.

¹³⁵ *College* was budgeted at \$7 million, but failed to break even after worldwide theatrical profits according to *Box-Office Mojo.com*. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=college.htm>. (accessed on August 24, 2009).

¹³⁶ Erik Schaefer, *Sleaze Artists*, 19.

¹³⁷ Juan Colange, "Lower Blu-ray Replication Pricing", *Blu-ray.com*. May 20, 2009. <http://www.blu-ray.com/news/?id=2725> (accessed on July 17, 2009).

¹³⁸ Some titles include *Dorm Daze* (David Hillenbrand, 2003), *Pigs* (Karl DiPelino, 2007), *Pledge This!* (William Heins-Strathford Hamilton, 2006), *Cougar Club* (Christor Dudd, 2007), and the list goes on.

¹³⁹ With the exception here of the DVD cover of *Miss March* which deviates from its theatrical poster, and returns to a kind of dominant "giant" female.

¹⁴⁰ And as I've indicated, the unrated DVD appears to be the biggest marketing innovation for the contemporary gross-out comedy.

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