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Michael D. Rosen
University of South Florida, mrosen19@gmail.com

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The Apatow Aesthetic: Exploring New Temporalities of Human Development
in 21st Century Network Society

by

Michael D. Rosen

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies
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University of South Florida

Major Professor: Scott Ferguson, Ph.D.
Amy Rust, Ph.D.
Andrew Berish, Ph.D.

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Abstract

This thesis offers a critical examination of what I call the “Apatow aesthetic” in order to analyze the social processes of growing up in contemporary neoliberal network society. While doctors, psychologists and social scientists still proffer a model of mid- 20th century human development centered around a chronologically-determined life cycle, the Apatow aesthetic imagines a non-linear reality where traditional life events and social practices don’t always correspond to specific age groups. Specifically, I argue, the Apatow aesthetic subjects the spectator to the pleasures and pains of these life-cycle disruptions, and reveals the unfolding of a new cultural shift which challenges the legitimacy of mid-century heteronormative, adulthood.

Introduction: The Apatow Aesthetic, Timeless Time, and the Rise of Network

In this thesis, I argue that traditional academic disciplines drastically underestimate the role that media plays in shaping our understanding of human development and the modern process of aging. While the common sense biological understanding of an adult (a person that is of reproductive age) has been rather explicit for centuries, the term *adulthood* has been harder to interpret, as it implies both legal status and a psychological state of being. For decades, scholars have struggled to keep up with constantly shifting social norms like compulsory education or controlled fertility, both of which have revolutionized the developmental life-span in unprecedented ways. Over time, the basic distinction between child and adult (the ability to reproduce) has been replaced by newly proposed stages of development, which are both ambiguous and unstable. Similarly, the transitions between these seemingly abstract stages are also hard to define, as are the various new theories and case studies that have surfaced in response to their rapidly evolving developmental structures.

To help make better sense of such questions, I situate the problem of development in its broad sociohistorical context and put mediation at the center of its analysis. My case study introduces a new theory, built around the heterogeneous constellation of moving image media that I call “The Apatow Aesthetic” (AE). I believe that analyses and close readings of specific texts and moving image media produced by acclaimed and somewhat controversial filmmaker Judd Apatow over the last two decades can effectively reframe the problem of development in an unprecedented manner. These readings can help us recognize and prepare for the possibility that

a nostalgic vision of a stable mid-20th century heteronormative adulthood is no longer psychologically, and economically attainable under the anti-humanistic conditions of neoliberal capitalism. The Apatow aesthetic can be used as a lens to further illustrate the new social possibilities opened up by the proliferation of digital telecommunications technologies and media networks, which are unparalleled in other academic disciplines.

Throughout the 20th century, two scholars in particular, G. Stanley Hall, and Erik Erikson, established new age-based theories of development that were instrumental in problematizing the transition from childhood to adulthood. Hall first popularized the term “adolescence” around 1904, citing the implementation of child labor laws and mandatory elementary education for creating a new social demographic of young people between the ages of 14-24.¹ Hall’s conception of adolescence remained the standard norm for the first half of the 20th century. During the 1950’s German born developmental psychologist Erik Erikson introduced a more detailed conceptualization of the human life-span, divided into eight distinct *stages*. According to Erikson, adolescence occurred between the ages of 13-19 followed by “young adulthood,” or period of the lifespan between the ages of 20-39.²

Most recently, psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett coined the phrase “emerging adulthood” in 2000, which categorizes the experience of young people (between the ages of 18-26) into a distinct period that exists separately between the psychosocial stages of adolescence and adulthood.³ Arnett’s concept of emerging adulthood has certainly gained traction over the

¹ Hall, G. Stanley. *Adolescence; Its Psychology and Its Relations To Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904.

² Erikson, Erik H. *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton, 1950.

³ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory Of Development From The Late Teens Through The Twenties.." *American Psychologist* 55, no. 5 (2000): 469-480.

past decade and a half as a . Since 2003, *The Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood* (SSEA) has served as the preeminent organization dedicated to expanding interdisciplinary scholarship on the topic, even publishing a scholarly journal aptly titled *Emerging Adulthood*, twice a year. Yet, like most of the research methods used in the social sciences, Arnett's new theory relies mostly on qualitative statistical data, and longitudinal case studies built around a narrowly defined social perspective as well as linear perceptions of space and time based on the mechanical clock of the Industrial Age.⁴ While Arnett's research presents significant raw data through demographic pie graphs, charts, and poll-based surveys, his textbooks are limited, and simply can't capture the textures of lived reality the way that popular media and cultural texts can. So while we can acknowledge Jeffrey Jensen Arnett for at least trying to put a name to this complex and ongoing phenomenon he calls "emerging adulthood," we should strive to push forward by examining human development in new contexts, and through the shifting social forms that mediate it.

Through close readings of Apatow's vast assortment of moving image media, I identify new patterns in the perception of time, resulting from the emergence of what media scholar Manuel Castells calls "Network Society." In his seminal text, *The Rise of Network Society (1996)* Castells cites the shift from mechanical to electronic telecommunication networks in the latter half of the 20th century for transforming the social perception of time and space into a nonlinear and "flexible" experience. Building on the earlier work of Marshall McLuhan, Castells sees modern network society as "the constitution of a new culture based on multimodal communication and digital information" that has created a paradox, which, to use McLuhan's

⁴ McLuhan, Marshall, and Quentin Fiore. *The Medium is the Massage*. New York: Random House, 1967

words, both “extends” and “amputates” human senses.⁵ While McLuhan was undoubtedly optimistic about the possibilities of electronic media, Castells is somewhat more ambivalent, or even troubled by the anti-social, and often-oppressive trends that have emerged from decades of neoliberal privatization fueled by the instantaneous commodification of time. In particular, he worries that age-based social practices, which have traditionally been determined by mechanical time, have become radically disrupted within the new global Network:

I propose the hypothesis that network society is characterized by the breaking down of the rhythms, either biological or social, associated with the notion of a life-cycle... Time as a sequence was replaced by different trajectories of imagined time that were assigned market values. There was a relentless trend towards the annihilation of time as an orderly sequence, either by compression to the limit, or by the blurring of the sequence between different shapes of future events. The clock time of the industrial age is being gradually replaced by a new concept of *timeless time*: the kind of time that occurs when in a given context such as the network society, there is a systemic perturbation in the sequential order of the social practices performed in this context.⁶

The Apatow aesthetic exists not merely as a singular object, but rather, as a polymorphous set of concentric circles that radiate along the temporal fissures of Castells’ chaotic Network Society. Replacing the orderly sequencing of mechanical time, these “systemic arrhythmias,” or what Castells’ calls “timeless time” will serve as the underlying paradigm through which the multiple

⁵ McLuhan, *The Medium Is The Message*

⁶ Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Cambridge (Mass.): Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

circles of the Apatow aesthetic mobilize. Apatow's ambiguous relationship to adulthood and subsequent anxiety over the future registers the unraveling of an orderly process of aging, as well as the collapse of the public safety net. I argue that this "breaking down of rhythms associated with the life-cycle" is embodied in the Apatow Aesthetic's dynamic plasticity that creates openings, which allow us to see, hear, and feel the textures of a new reality born out of the chaos and complexities of a globalized world. They invite us to grapple with the avalanche of conflicting sensibilities that encompass our daily lives today in 21st century America.

Many psychologists have identified the socio-cultural side-effects that shifting perceptions of space and time have had on human development in network society. Psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett has practically built an empire of discourse on his idea of *Emerging Adulthood*, or a period of delay in between adolescence and adulthood. James Cote has published numerous articles and a book *Arrested Adulthood*, which all reiterate the same problems surrounding a resistance to grow up. Yet the issue is much larger than merely the fulfillment of adulthood. The entire lifespan as we've known it for the past century is crumbling in the wake of neoliberal capitalism, and there's nothing that social scientists can do to stop it, despite numerous attempts to cram these heterogeneous and non-linear phenomena into older homogenous and linear patterns. The issue is larger than the social sciences attempt to control it, and that more than anything, makes the Apatow aesthetic especially important. Likewise, media theorists have also recognized the transformative effects of new temporal and spatial configurations on the developmental process. Neil Postman published his study on "The Disappearance of Childhood" back in 1982.

In order to fully grasp the social, political and economic significance of my distinct theoretical framework, my thesis is composed as one central chapter, broken down into three

main subsections. These subsections are used to explicate and distinguish between each radiating circle, which together, trace the formal structure of the Apatow Aesthetic. This will form the basis upon which I can then illustrate how the intersection of each concentric circle function on multiple levels to form a more accurate understanding of the evolutionary effect that Network society has towards human development. Mainly, these circles are focused around registering various transformations to heteronormative adulthood, the nuclear family, reproductive technology, and queer homosociality, which all demonstrate new ways of thinking about the nature of our existence never before considered.

Circle One: the “Apatow Network”

Since the beginning of his career in the early 90’s Apatow has been preoccupied with questions of media. While various critics have identified the aging process as the definitive theme in Apatow’s work, they often neglect to consider the treatment of media in Apatow’s multi-layered media world. Before we can interpret Apatow’s assumptions towards adulthood and the lifespan, however, it will be necessary to understand the significance of the sequential structure of the Apatow aesthetic in the broader context of network society and timeless time.

Depending on one’s periodizing schema, Apatow’s oeuvre spans over two decades and includes some of the highest grossing comedies of all time. My analysis focuses specifically on the “Golden Age” of The Apatow aesthetic, roughly between 2004-2012. His first directorial feature, *The Forty Year Old Virgin* (2005) brought in just over \$177 million dollars worldwide, despite its \$26 million budget. Since then, Apatow has written, directed and/or produced more than 20 films, including *Talladega Nights*, *Anchorman*, *Knocked Up*, *Superbad*, *Pineapple Express*, *Get Him to the Greek*, *Bridesmaids* and the HBO series *Girls*. Together, these films have grossed well over \$1 billion dollars compared to the more than the \$8 billion brought in by Marvel’s top 37 most lucrative action films of the same time period. The difference being that each Marvel action film is released by one studio, Disney, while Apatow’s franchise releases are distributed by several studios and cable networks like HBO. The diversity of media channels turns Aptaow’s constellation of motion pictures into it’s own separate network: The Apatow Network.

If Apatow is an auteur, he is one that outstrips traditional notions of authorship, intentionality and expression, as it extends beyond the inner circle of films solely directed by Judd Apatow. The Apatow aesthetic stands for a whole media network that functions on multiple levels, sometimes even exceeding Apatow's direct contact. Often, he acts merely as a supervising "producer," overseeing such projects as *Pineapple Express*, *Superbad*, and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, which include many of the same characters from his trademark ensemble, but yet are directed by other filmmakers. Additionally, films like *I Love You, Man*, and *This Is The End*, (neither of which were written, directed or even produced by Judd Apatow) still carry the same stylistic preoccupations that mark his signature authorial style.

In this way, I look at Apatow's films as traditional auteuristic objects, but examine them through the lens of the 21st century media network and *timeless time*, which the Apatow aesthetic comes to represent. It is itself both an *effect* of the media network, and yet also *about* the complex relationality of contemporary network society. Whereas the plot of countless episodes of *Seinfeld* (i.e. *The Boyfriend* or *The Parking Garage*) could have never existed in the age of Smartphones, and Facebook, Apatow's narratives are specifically shaped around digital technology and the zeitgeist of the post-millennial Internet age. It is within this paradigm that the age based milestones associated with adulthood such as sex, marriage and parenthood are thrown into free-fall as traditional rituals of communication have partially been altered or in some cases replaced by social media networks, and virtual reality. Apatow very purposely features characters whose daily lives and personal growth are in constant flux, scattered amongst the temporal chaos of digital technology and media networks. So while we can understand the Apatow aesthetic as always extending beyond conventional objects such as films and television shows, my goal is to examine these objects *as* network media, along unconventional lines.

For example, Apatow's 2012 feature, *This is 40*, is constructed as a kind of sequel to *Knocked Up*, as the previously supporting characters Pete and Debbie (Paul Rudd and Leslie Mann) become the main protagonists in conflict. While Seth Rogen and Katherine Heigl don't appear in the film, the plot maintains the same thematic consistencies of Pete and Debbie's already complicated relationship, picking up five years later. The familiarity of Pete, Debbie and their two daughters carries over preexisting tensions and pleasures from *Knocked Up* accompanied by additional characters like Jason (played by Jason Segel) and Jodi (played by Charlene Yi) who both reappear, but in new roles that don't quite correlate to their roles in *Knocked Up*. So while audiences may be familiar with these characters, they are also susceptible to new pleasures and pains experienced through old characters in a new plot. This makes *Knocked Up* and *This is Forty* feel episodic, or like they are part of the same multi-episode series. Additionally, Chris O'Dowd (*Bridesmaids*) and Lena Dunham (*GIRLS*) also show up in minor roles in *This is 40*. Their appearance is significant as they demonstrate how Apatow's constantly revolving web of actors and ensemble casts shapes his particular brand as a formal comedy network.

Thus the Apatow aesthetic extends far into the realm of popular culture through an intermedia dialogue that incorporates social media sites like YouTube and Twitter where networked audiences interact with these actors, and actors communicate with each other. Apatow utilizes the emergence of social media networks to provide the audience with a sense of familiarity, as their awareness of the actor's off-screen persona adds to the effectiveness of the characters' collective dynamic on screen. The legacy of Apatow's short-lived series *Freaks and Geeks* lingers beneath the essence of this collective dynamic, as most of the show's main characters like James Franco, Seth Rogen, Jason Siegel, and Jay Baruchel have since become

regulars in his films. He also prefers to work with the same directors like Adam McKay (*Anchorman*, *Talladega Nights*, *Step Brothers*), Greg Mottola (*Superbad*) and Nicholas Stoller, whose two films *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, and *Get Him to the Greek* fit perfectly into Apatow's mesh of ambiguously crafted, not-quite sequels just like *Knocked Up* and *This is 40*. In interviews Apatow has explicitly stated that the use of this same ensemble is done intentionally to invoke feelings of familiarity with the actors, so as to pretend that movies like *Knocked Up* and *Pineapple Express* are essentially just "more elaborate episodes of *Freaks and Geeks*," Additionally, Apatow insists on using the same crew of casting directors, costume designers, production managers, and sound & editing coordinators, (aptly referred to as "Apatown") further solidifying the formal structure that is the Apatow Network.

Additionally, the presence of Apatow's wife, actress Leslie Mann and their two daughters Maude and Iris, further obscures the line between reality and fiction at two separate levels. As a semi-sequel to *Knocked Up*, *This is 40* follows a particular linear timeline and audiences are able to visibly notice the developmental progress of Paul Rudd, Leslie Mann, and Maude and Iris Apatow, who have aged significantly in the five years between both movies. Apatow even makes Maude's struggle with puberty, one of the main sources of anxiety and pleasure at the heart of *This is 40*. Similarly, *This Is The End* plays into this same dynamic as all of the film's actors play parodied versions of themselves as Hollywood actors. The suspension of disbelief is disrupted by the audience's outside knowledge of the ensemble as a real-life social network. Actors like Seth Rogen, James Franco and even Apatow himself are notably active on social media sites where they give followers an almost behind-the-scenes look at their personal lives and interactions.

Thus, the boundaries between Apatow's diegesis and the real world begin to dissolve within a self reflexive media hierarchy. Constant overlapping between Apatow's formal network

and other major communication networks (television, social media, Internet websites, film studios, etc.) reveal the dynamic role that media and mediation play in shaping the textures of human development in the 21st century. The growth of his career and expansion of his media empire are a direct result of the ever-evolving media landscape during 1990's and 2000's.

Circle Two: Developmental Comedy and Intentional Ambiguous Mediation

Starting with his directorial debut in *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, (2005) there are certain thematic consistencies that make him readable as a traditional auteur. As a director, he's managed to establish a unique visual style of his own through long, fixed camera shots, which force audiences to have visceral reactions to the anxieties and discomfort built around the camaraderie of (or lack there of) his recurring ensemble of characters. By avoiding sweeping camera movements and quick takes, Apatow compels his audience to fully absorb the tensions and/or pleasures of 21st century social life. His static cinematography captures characters reacting to each other within the frame through alternating glances that recreate the psychology of realistic conversation. He relies heavily on improvisational dialogue, most visibly in scenes of friends gathered together, where the playful back-and-forth dynamic of the group-pack has become a signature of Apatow's particular brand of developmental comedy.

The flexible spontaneity of jokes, references and observations produced during these conversations is reminiscent of certain comedic traditions from decades past. Apatow's artistic sensibilities are tied to a certain lineage of neurotic Jewish-American comedy pioneered by Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, and Jerry Seinfeld, among others. Yet, his particular brand of what I shall call "developmental comedy" combines observational humor, irony and self-parody to deal with unsettled lifespans along with the humiliation and insecurity of hypermediation in the 21st century. Like Jerry Seinfeld before him, Apatow's developmental comedy is built on a playful formula of situational comedy and the ensemble cast framed in a post-joke narrative where

humor is used to alleviate “tensions between the ethical norms of middle-class life and the reckless fantasies that swirl beneath the surface,” as Richard Brody explains. Apatow steers this tradition of Jewish-American comedy in new directions centered around the ambiguity of a 21st century developmental lifespan that doesn’t always reach full maturity. The hysteria of his narratives don’t merely depend on the conventional set-up/punch-line format of the sitcom, although there are plenty of them to go around. Rather, pleasure builds from the continuity of each characters struggle against the conventions of adulthood, and the looming threats of failure, which manifest into playful transgressions, constantly resisting resolution.

Whereas the popular ethos of his comedic predecessors like Harold Ramis and films like *Animal House* was to not grow up and to resist adulthood, Apatow’s films like *This Is 40* seem to insist upon a redefinition of adulthood. One that may not come to fruition (in the traditional sense) even by age 40. Yet, unlike *Animal House* (1978) and *Stripes* (1981), which are built on counterculture rebellion and the rejection of traditional authority structures like the military, Apatow figures growing up as a shared and persistent source of anxiety that is impossible to simply overcome. In fact, more often than not, his films favor a sort of messy ambiguity that rejects the clear, top-down resolutions seen in comedy films of the 1980’s. Instead, Apatow wallows in the neurosis of neoliberal capitalism, as his characters are developmentally burdened with the arrhythmia of *timeless time* and 21st century media networks.

For Apatow, the temporal disruptions of everyday life become a source of gratification as his characters transgress the common trajectory that has traditionally led to developmental maturity. His narratives stem from the paradoxical collapse of middle-class stability and a declining standard of living in the 21st century, where the gradual forces of neoliberal capitalism and digital technology have restructured social life and personal relationships around media

networks. The key to his success is this purposeful blend of lowbrow humor with dramatic emotional themes that reach deeper than the shallow surface of “dick jokes” and gross-out motifs that are normally associated with the Bromance Comedy genre. While his films do contain plenty of gross out moments and flashes of bodily urges, these instances only reiterate the insecurities of developmental stagnation, and the sexual, psychological, social and economic side effects that often occur as a result.

His character-driven “Dramedies” reconsider the myth of mid-century heteronormative futurism or imperative of male/female procreation, by capturing the complexities of traditional linear milestones associated with adulthood. Apatow’s characters don’t always experience common rites of passage such as losing virginity, marriage, parenthood, and securing a career, according to conventional time-lines of the past. His films show us how to either struggle against or fail to achieve the expectations of these conventional linear trajectories in the age of the Internet and digital media culture. Apatow’s titles themselves like *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, *This is 40*, *This is the End*, and *Girls*, point to the collapse or “arrhythmia” of age-based social practices normally associated with the achievement of a secure mid-century adulthood built around marriage, parenthood and a stable full-time career.

During the Golden Age of his career after the release of *The 40 Year Old Virgin* in 2005, critics and scholars were mostly resistant, and deployed this heteronormative developmental rhetoric to critique his work. Still, since then, however, pop culture writers, scholars and social scientists have all begun to acknowledge that the destabilization of adulthood may in fact be real, and not merely just a fantasy played out in Apatow’s films and other popular media. Thus, Apatow’s developmental comedy becomes even more compelling, as we are able to witness a metaphorical death of heteronormative adulthood, without feeling the need to grieve over its

loss, but rather, to embrace its chaos, and even laugh at the overwhelming force of uncertainty that accompanies such unprecedented circumstances.

The 40 Year Old Virgin, Apatow's feature directorial debut is perhaps the most dynamic illustration of post-millennial social arrhythmia, built on Castells *timeless time*. Even the title is a paradox that instantly commands attention to the inability to achieve the fundamental act of adulthood: having sex or performing the more initiatory rite-of- passage of "losing one's virginity." While the struggle to lose one's virginity has been a popular topic in comedic films of the last thirty years like *Porky's* (1981), *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *Cruel Intentions* (1999), and *American Pie* (1999), all these movies revolve around teenagers who usually achieve this task before their 20th birthday. "The 40 Year Old Virgin" title immediately positions Andy, the film's protagonist played by Steve Carrell, in conflict with chronological adulthood, as it suggests that he has yet to achieve this most basic milestone of developmental maturity. Apatow masterfully exploits the title's implications by presenting Andy with certain adult characteristics, challenging audiences to decide for themselves if Andy is in fact an adult or not.

The opening montage sets the tone for this recurring conflict, as an establishing shot of a suburban apartment complex introduces us to Andy who lies awake in bed right as his alarm clock goes off at 7:00 am. The first three shots of the film indicate that Andy lives independently in his own apartment, while the focus on the alarm clock signals an emphasis on employment and the responsibility of getting to work on time. Together with a close-up of Steve Carrell, who is clearly at least 40 years old, these introductory shots seem to indicate that Andy is seemingly an adult with adult-like responsibilities. Meanwhile just as the viewer is about to accept Andy as a typical grown-up, Apatow cuts to a high angle shot of Andy's bedroom filled with science-fiction posters and an overwhelmingly large alien spaceship cut-out on the wall above his bed.

His furniture appears to be pieced together in small wooden cubbies, very much like a child's bed set, as action figures and trophies are displayed standing side by side. The juxtaposition of these contrasting shots creates an ambiguous image of Andy, solidified by the title "The 40 Year Old Virgin" which appears at the bottom of the screen just as Joe Walsh sings the line "I can't help the feeling that I'm living a life of illusion," from the opening song of the soundtrack.

This happens consistently throughout the movie to reiterate Andy's ambiguity as an adult. He has a steady job at an electronics store and even receives a promotion at one point, yet he doesn't own a car, and rides a bicycle to work instead. He begins a relationship with Trish (played by Catherine Keener) but hides his extensive collection of action figures from her at first because he's afraid she'll consider him immature. Yet he's reluctant to discard them and at one point even argues that he's "had them since he was six years old." Through these series of contradictions, Apatow challenges the notion of a naturalized adulthood by ironically contrasting Andy's independence, with his continued attachment to childhood objects.

This ambiguous conflict is at the heart of the Apatow aesthetic, as viewers are repeatedly exposed to this same dilemma in several of his other films. I would even argue that this intentional ambiguity is the main locus of playful humor within the Apatow brand. For example, *Step Brothers* starring Will Ferrel and John C. Reilly (and produced by Apatow) is built precisely on the conspiratorial irony of two forty year old step brothers both acting and behaving like children. It's obvious that Ferrel and Reilly are both adults by their mere age and appearance, yet they show no indication of adulthood or developmental maturity in their behavior. They're both unemployed. They both live at home. They're both unmarried and seemingly single, and at one point during a sequence between Reilly and Katherine Hahn, Reilly is forced to have sex with Hahn in a restaurant bathroom almost against his will. The hysterical exchange is underscored by

the revelation that Reily had been a virgin up to that point, which is never acknowledged despite its compelling implications. The audience is once again torn between the main characters' age and conventional adult-like appearance, and their outrageously child-like behavior. It is unclear whether or not we can call Ferrel and Reily adults for certain, which is exactly what Apatow strives for in order to demonstrate the anxious plasticity of 21st century developmental patterns.

Similarly, in *Bridesmaids* (produced by Apatow and directed by Paul Feig, co-creator of *Freaks and Geeks*) protagonist Annie, played by Kristen Wiig is positioned with the same ambiguity, as she also fails to meet the criteria that has traditionally represented the achievement of 20th century adulthood. She loses her job and is forced to move back in with her mother, signaling an inability to maintain her own independence. More importantly, despite being in her late 30's, she is unmarried, which becomes the film's main conflict as her best friend Lillian (played by Maya Rudolph) is in the midst of planning her own wedding. Annie and Lillian have been best friends since childhood and the reality of Lillian's upcoming marriage becomes a source of anxiety for Annie. Again, Annie dreads Lillian's wedding as it symbolizes the detachment of the pair's childhood bond, which appears to be the crux of Annie's happiness. Her inability to achieve traditional adulthood rests on her reluctance to move beyond the objects that link her back to childhood. Meanwhile, most audiences would agree that she is still somewhat coded as an adult throughout the movie, despite these disruptions in her developmental path to full adulthood.

In *Knocked Up*, Apatow's next directorial release following *Virgin*, we are persuaded to make similar judgments about protagonist Ben Stone, played by Seth Rogen. The opening scenes of *Knocked Up* function in the same way as the intro to *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, in that they lead us to perceive Ben's character as ambiguously immature and at odds with his adult-like physical

appearance. The opening montage of *Knocked Up* is in some ways identical to *The 40 Year Old Virgin*. An establishing shot of a suburban house, with multiple cars parked in the driveway indicates to us that the protagonist lives independently from his parents as we are brought in to a backyard where Rogen and a group of friends horse around like a group of children. They play fight with boxing gloves, pretend swords and pugil sticks, as they smoke pot and battle gladiator style over a swimming pool. While the group is physically mature, some even sporting facial hair and large builds, their playful behavior is purposely hyperbolic and excessively juvenile, as the montage is accompanied by the song *Shimmy Shimmy Ya*, a chaotic and vulgar track by 'Ol Dirty Bastard of the Wu Tang Clan, a famously rowdy group of hip hop artists. Apatow intentionally invokes images of this type of wild, unfettered behavior in order to juxtapose them against the proceeding scenes that introduce us to our other protagonist, Allison Scott, played by Katherine Heigl. Much like *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, we first see Allison waking up to the sound of an alarm clock which again represents the imperative to get to work on time. It becomes clear that Allison lives in a guest house belonging to her sister Debbie (Leslie Mann) and sister's husband Pete (Paul Rudd).

It is no accident that Apatow also includes a shot of Pete and Debbie being woken up by their two young children, as if to immediately link Allison to the responsibilities of Pete and Debbie as parents and as married couple. In this way, Allison appears more adult-like even though she doesn't quite live independently on her own (it's never clear if she pays rent to her sister or not). She drives her two nieces to school, acting as a stand-in parent for her sister, which reinforces her adult-like tendencies. She is ambitious and focused on her job at the E! network, where early on in the film she is promoted to news anchor. The magnitude of her promotion and somewhat elite status of her role as news anchor for a major cable network like E! persuades us

to believe Allison is an adult. However, she is still infantilized by her producers at the E! network, further complicating the distinction between childhood and adulthood. The contrast between Ben and Allison rests on Ben's ambivalence towards conventional adulthood and Allison's disdain for Ben's ambivalence. Once they decide to keep the baby, and establish themselves as a couple, Allison quickly becomes almost like Ben's mother, policing Ben's recreational activities and at one point scolding him for having a samurai sword and bong that she finds in his apartment. Meanwhile from Ben's perspective, these objects that Allison (and most people) associate with immaturity, are simply objects of pleasure that he still enjoys. Just as Andy is reluctant to get rid of his action figures in *Virgin*, Ben questions the imperative of letting go of objects from his past. Yet, Allison's (Heigl) is also filled with the uncertainty inevitable parenthood.

Apatow's ambiguous treatment of these characters is a reflection of the real life struggle that both men and women face in contemporary 21st century society. He demonstrates that although men and women may be of a certain age, they still maintain characteristics and behaviors from childhood. Some, like Andy from *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, and the protagonists of *Step Brothers* consciously choose to retain these traits while others, like Hannah in *GIRLS*, are restrained by the social and economic realities of neoliberalism.

Circle Three: Transformations of the Nuclear Family, Parenthood, and Reproduction

Another pillar of Apatow's developmental comedy is built around the general de-emphasis of the nuclear family. The Apatow aesthetic is jam packed with *arrhythmias*, which indicate a breaking down of "the relationship between social condition and biological stages at the roots of the life-cycle," as Castells explains. In *This Is 40*, for example, Pete and Debbie appear to have achieved all the milestones of conventional adulthood; they're married, they're parents, they're both employed, they own their own home and they've reached the age of 40, (the symbolic age of adulthood). Nonetheless, they are plagued by the chaos of an unraveling lifecycle facilitated by the forces of neoliberalism, electronic networks, digitization, and biomedical technologies. These forces, according to Castells, have enabled a "transformation of the family," and a "substantial modification of the time and forms for mothering and fathering in the lifecycle." More importantly, he points out, "new reproductive technologies and new cultural models make it possible to disassociate age and biological condition from reproduction and from parenthood."

In *This is 40*, Apatow challenges traditional notions of parenthood and reproduction within the entire lifespan spectrum. Pete and Debbie's parents are both divorced and remarried with young children, illustrating the emergence of unconventional genetic structures (including the phenomenon of 40 yr olds with infant step-siblings.) Pete and Debbie become alienated from both their parents in different ways. These unusual transformations of the family reveal shifting attitudes towards the importance of the traditional nuclear familial bond in the 21st century,

where the majority of marriages end up dissolving. So, it is no surprise that marriages tend to end in divorce within Apatow's movies as well. Both Pete and Debbie, along with Ben and Allison from *Knocked Up*, Trish (Catherine Keener) from *The 40 Year Old Virgin* and Annie (Kristen Wiig) from *Bridesmaids* are all either divorced or children of divorce. While it would seem as though Apatow may be pointing to the very tangible increase in US divorce rates that have doubled from 1970-2010, I argue that his treatment of divorce is more complicated and should not simply be perceived through flat pessimism. Rather, his emphasis on divorce, particularly in *This Is Forty* reflects the emergence of new relationalities amongst members within a nuclear family. Divorce functions to abstract the centrality of the nuclear family, in favor of radically new hereditary associations between mother, father, children and beyond. Thus for Apatow, divorce gives way to new interpersonal relationships that have only become possible in recent history with the introduction of reproductive technologies.

For example, Pete's father Larry (played brilliantly by Albert Brooks) has remarried at the age of 60, to a woman who has recently given birth to three triplets through In vitro fertilization. The use of in vitro fertilization, a fairly new reproductive technology, reiterates a disassociation of age and biological condition, which Apatow uses to demonstrate the possibilities of defying the traditional life-cycle in the 21st century. These realities give way to a topsy-turvy familial dynamic, and become a source of anxiety for Pete. Despite Debbie's blatant disapproval, Pete is constantly lending money to his 60 year old father, who is broke, essentially unemployed and now a father to three young boys.

In one particularly hysterical scene, Pete arrives at Larry's house intending to cut his father off financially. Immediately, Apatow disrupts Pete's plan through Larry's stereotypical Jewish guilt, and subsequent admission that Pete's mother had originally wanted to abort him

and would have done so if Larry hadn't stopped her. While Pete tries to remain firm, three blonde-headed triplets burst into the room, which enables Larry to counter Pete's stubbornness by redirecting attention to Pete's new baby step-brothers. Yet despite Pete's sympathy for Larry's situation, Pete scolds his father at once point asking, "Why would you have three kids anyway? I mean you're 60 years old, you had no money?" to which Larry replies, "Because Claire wanted a baby. If we didn't at least try she would have left me," and then continues in his brilliant disconnected tone, "She was 45 years old, nobody thought it would take. The doctor, when we were doing in vitro was winking at me like '*don't worry, don't worry.*' He ironically finishes, "We were very unlucky, and now we have these three beautiful children."

The appearance of advanced reproductive technologies like in vitro fertilization enable the characters to tinker with their biological clocks, resulting in drastically new developmental realities or what Castells describes as "the final blurring of the biological foundation of the life-cycle concept."⁷ As he explains, the increasing gap between social institutions and reproductive practices has resulted in

"Sixty-year-old parents of infants; children of different marriages enjoying brothers and sisters 30 years older with no intermediate age groups; men and women deciding to procreate, with or without coupling, at whatever age; grandmothers giving birth to the baby originated in her daughter's egg and posthumous babies."⁸

Castells scenarios eerily foreshadow the social and biological arrhythmias of Apatow's developmental formula. Brooks' ironic consideration of his triplets as a result of apparent bad luck from a successful in vitro procedure highlights one of the many situational conflicts

⁷ Castells, *Network Society*, pg. 311.

⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 312.

regarding modern parenting and reproduction present in Apatow's films. Brooks' bitter humor and cynical delivery is hysterically biting. His lack of care and responsibility towards the triplets demonstrates Larry's inability and unwillingness to fulfill the paternal role that has been burdened upon him once again. The relationship between Pete and Larry appears backwards, as Larry the father is more irresponsible and less successful than his son, creating a particularly amusing dynamic that functions in multiple ways. First, it further shows the unraveling of the chronological lifespan, as Larry appears unstable even at 60, the symbolic age of retirement. Not only is Larry's retirement financially unattainable, his new marriage and the birth of his "test-tube" triplets seems to ironically counteract his developmental maturity. Brooks' lack of sentimentality towards familial relationships is characteristic of many if not all of Apatow's films. Larry's indifferent attitude towards his young children, presents an alternative view on modern parenting that pokes fun at the imperative of heteronormative futurism.

Apatow uses these new alternative trajectories to drive his plots forward. In another equally awkward scene in *This is Forty* at Pete's birthday party, Debbie introduces her daughters to their grandfather (played by John Lithgow) which hilariously creates confusion as Sadie asks, "Is this your father?" Debbie stutters and replies, "Yes he's my biological father," to which Charlotte sarcastically responds, "So he's our grandfather?"

The scene skillfully demonstrates a transformation of the traditional nuclear family, as one grandfather Oliver (Lithgow) is totally detached from Pete and Debbie's children, and the other grandfather Larry (Brooks) consciously lacks interest in fulfilling the conventional role of the elder patriarch. Yet, both grandfathers also have children close in age or even younger than Charlotte and Sadie. The chaotic dynamic between all related characters provides a hysterical

portrait of modern family life, and introduces new sensibilities towards the imperative of parenthood.

Debbie's father Oliver is remarried with two young children making her seem almost like the bastard child of a failed marriage. During an awkward scene where the two meet for lunch, Oliver proudly shows Debbie pictures of his young son and daughter. Apatow frames the conversation in a such a way that the viewer sympathizes with Debbie who is detached from her father's life. Oliver unknowingly brags about the accomplishments of his children without acknowledging that Debbie is also in fact his biological daughter. Pete and Debbie's relationships with both their parents as well as their own children are dysfunctional, and the dysfunction stems from these abnormal developmental patterns, characteristic of Castells social arrhythmia. Yet, it is important to note that I do not mean for the term "dysfunctional" to imply any negative judgment towards these relationships. They are merely "dysfunctional" in the context of 20th century notions of heteronormativity.

While the narrative closure of these films may still subscribe to traditional patriarchal heteronormativity, it is precisely these instances of dysfunction that afford us openings where radically new familial and social structures enable new meanings to arise in response to the crumbling of the traditional developmental lifespan. The emphasis on reproductive technologies, and topsy-turvy familial structures register the oppressive economic limitations of neoliberalism while also highlighting the possibilities for new social dynamics along the way.

Circle Four: Beyond Bromance: Queer Temporalities, Conspiratorial Homosocialty, and The Timeless Time Machine

The instinct of researchers and social scientists like Jeffrey Arnett is to always approach sociobiological evolutions of change in terms of a 20th century empiricism that then casts phenomena such as the decline in marriage as inherently negative. Apatow's reputation as the "King of the Bromance,"⁹ misleads scholars to automatically associate his work with the regressive implications of the Bromance label, often limiting critical examinations of his movies to the narrow confines of the traditional Hollywood Romantic Comedy. Instead, Apatow's real significance lies in his ability to help formulate new understandings of homosexuality and radically different approaches that disrupt traditional notions of heteronormativity. While several critics have accused his films of excluding women, and promoting "underlying feelings of homophobic disgust" towards homosexuality,¹⁰ we can cross-examine the validity of such critiques by appealing to the work of Eve Sedgwick, well-known Queer theorist and co-founder of the Queer Studies discipline.

In the context of her famous book on homosocial desire, where male bonding is accompanied by "intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality," homosociality operates as a mechanism used to reinforce a "structural patriarchy built around obligatory heterosexuality."¹¹ In fact, Sedgwick claims that homophobia is not only necessary, but also

⁹ Walker, Tim. "King of Bromance: Judd Apatow." *The Independent*, August 19, 2009.

¹⁰ Aisenberg, Joseph. "Here Come the Bromides Living in the Era of the Bromantic Comedy ." *Bright Lights Film Journal* 65 (2009).

¹¹ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia

required in such patriarchal structures, which might explain why Apatow's so-called *Bromances* so easily attract accusations of homophobia and misogyny from cultural critics and movie reviewers. Still, it's important to note that towards the end of her life, Sedgwick herself, had grown weary of these types of negative attacks, which only produced what she called *paranoid readings* or "depressive readings of cultural texts marked by hatred, envy, and anxiety... which reveal not how homosexuality works, but how homophobia and heterosexism work." Rather, Sedgwick advocates moving away from the paranoid readings to instead, focus on finding what she calls "reparative readings," to "repair" or assemble new constellations of possible meanings "into something like a new *whole*," which she emphasizes, "is not necessarily like any *preexisting whole*." ¹² For Sedgwick, reparative readings encourage "positive textual interpretations," that seek to expand interdisciplinary boundaries and mobilize new scholarly discourse, rather than merely attacking and negating texts based on "a hermeneutics of suspicion."¹³

This tendency towards "suspicion, occurs just as much in popular culture as it does in academic scholarship. Film critics like David Denby condemn Apatow's treatment of women, claiming that films like *Knocked Up* "reduce the role of women to vehicles," with their only real function being, "to make the men grow up."¹⁴ In a 2007 review for the *New Yorker* titled, "A Fine Romance: The New Comedy of the Sexes" Denby claims *Knocked Up* to be the most recent manifestation of what he calls "slacker/striver romances", or films centered around "the struggle

University Press, 3 1985.

¹² Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You."

¹³ Sedgwick quoting French philosopher Paul Ricoeur

¹⁴ Denby, David. "A Fine Romance: The New Comedy of the Sexes." *The New Yorker*, July 23, 2007.

between male infantilism and female ambition.”¹⁵ While “male infantilism” may undeniably be a cornerstone of the Apatow aesthetic, I suggest that Denby’s awkward *Slacker/Striver* binary, merely reinforces the exclusion of women, instead of choosing to see the totality of Apatow’s characters, male and female together in the same boat, as differently implicated in Castells’ *social arrhythmia* and *timeless time*.

Film scholar Tamar Jeffers MacDonald pursues a similarly narrow critique, choosing to include Apatow in her assessment of “Homme-Coms,” a term she uses to describe films that, “shift the narrative focus from female to male protagonist, and which are targeted towards male audiences.”¹⁶ For MacDonald, whose research focuses mostly on the traditional Hollywood Rom-Com, Apatow too easily appears to be a hybrid between the “gross-out” comedies of the late 1970’s and 1980’s (*Animal House*, *Porky’s*) and “Chick-Flicks” of the 1980’s and 1990’s (*Sleepless in Seattle*, *You’ve Got Mail*). Meanwhile, MacDonald’s critique runs the same risk of reinforcing patriarchy through paranoia as Denby’s *Slacker/Striver*. MacDonald insists that *Homme-Coms*:

Prioritize the importance of bodily drives and desires, and assume men want sex, and women withhold it from them, urging them to grow up and settle down.... This is what will happen, if we assign interest in sexual topics solely to men and thus exile the body and its urges and emissions to a sub-genre only meant for male audiences.¹⁷

However, she is equally guilty of “assigning interest in sexual topics solely to men” by establishing a separate scholarly film genre solely for male-centered *gross-out* comedies. While the term *Homme-Com* merely reinforces the cliché that “assumes men want sex, and women

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ MacDonald, Tamar Jeffers. “Homme-com: Engendering Change in Contemporary Romantic Comedy.” *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*

¹⁷ Ibid.

withhold it from them,” I argue that Apatow’s females engage contemporary sexuality in ways that are equal to, or even more promiscuous than the men. Apatow’s latest box office release *Trainwreck* (2015) starring Amy Schumer is yet his most recent example.

More than just a film director, Judd Apatow is also a cultural critic who answers Sedgwick’s calls for reparative readings better than any researcher or social scientist like Jeffery Arnett. Apatow is empathetic, and inherently positive towards redemption with “reparative” on screen moments, that can help us sort through the multiple ambiguities of post-millennial media networks, sexuality, and gender performativity. Instead of dismissing Apatow’s explicit queerness as a mere symptom of the modern crisis in white middle-class masculinity, I argue that “crisis” is also partially alleviated by the ironic embrace of his blatant homosociality. Our understanding of homosexuality begins to expand beyond its 20th century confines, while new readings of Apatow’s homosociality surface, which are radically humanistic and, as Sedgwick says, “not necessarily like any preexisting whole.”¹⁸ These kinds of reparative readings may bring us closer to understanding “how homosexuality works,” in the 21st century, instead of recycling the same old paranoid clichés, which merely reinforce “how homophobia and heterosexism work.”¹⁹ Furthermore, we must consider the multiple functions of Apatow’s overt displays of queer male bonding, particularly those instances that prioritize the homosocial pack (or group of friends) as the primary source of personal security and individual care in place of romantic love and the nuclear family. From here, Apatow’s queerness, (often playfully) deconstructs adulthood and challenges the imperative of heteronormative futurism. Providing the spectator instead, with alternative trajectories of lived experience, along with all the pleasures and pains that emerge within the arrhythmia of contemporary network society.

¹⁸ Sedgwick, *Paranoid Readings and Reparative Readings*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Fortunately, there are some scholars, like Michael DeAngelis, who recognize the witch-hunt atmosphere surrounding “Bromance Comedy,” but have yet to jump on the band wagon. DeAngelis 2015 volume of essays titled *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships In Film and Television* explores the newly crafted Bromance genre, specifically it’s function in contemporary film and television culture. DeAngelis’ own chapter “Queer Futurity in Superbad” searches for broader meanings in one of Apatow’s most openly homosocial films. Upon exploring Superbad, DeAngelis recognizes all the usual instances of conspiratorial queerness at the representational level. The fact that each male protagonist is heterosexual is irrelevant, or more so, not as important as how different scenarios challenge, question or even sometimes defy their heterosexuality, as in the scene from *I Love You, Man*, where Paul Rudd shares a 10 second tongue-filled onscreen kiss with Thomas Lennon, whose character is openly gay. The kiss is loud enough so that viewers can hear the two men’s tongues and lips smack together, and while heterosexual male audience members used to almost usually cringe during blatant displays of homoeroticism, today’s audiences simply laugh and draw pleasure from the circumstances. Similarly, in *Superbad*, the two protagonists proclaim their love for one another as they fall asleep side by side in the same sleeping bag. Other times playful instances of this particular type of queerness pop up in individual scenes usually at the sake of the protagonists’ primary heteronormative relationship. The constant reciprocation between Apatow’s ironic homoeroticism and disorienting queer temporalities creates a new cinematic space where previously uncharted social relationships and alternative attitudes regarding love, sex, marriage, work, and aging are flaunted triumphantly.

Take for instance the double dinner date scene in *Knocked Up*. Ben, Allison, Pete & Debbie are restaurant having drinks when all of a sudden Pete blurts out, “Isn’t it weird though

when you have a kid, and all your dreams and hopes just go right out the window?” Pete’s timing delivery . Ben lays out a hysterical rhetorical scenario underscored with a firm sense of regret.

He asks Allison,

“Honestly, if Doc Brown screeched up in front of you in the DeLorean, opened the door and was like ‘Hey Allison, C’mon I got the car here what do you want to do?’ No part of your brain would’ve been like “you know what maybe we’ll go back to the night, and I would *maybe* put a condom on Ben’s dick,” You never got that flash?”

Allison bitterly responds, “No, and I don’t know what you’re talking about,” and rolls her eyes in disgust. The tension between partners and between the two men and women is obvious. Yet Ben’s *Back to the Future* reference reinforces the homosocial bond between Ben and Pete, as Pete then blurts out “Where we’re going, we don’t need roads,” affirming that he understands Ben’s logic and appreciates the context of the reference, claiming “It’s the Time Machine image, everybody has the Time Machine Image,” further maddening the two sisters. Sensing the presence of the close bond between Ben and Pete, Debbie angrily suggests out loud,

“Hey I have a really good idea, why don’t the two of you get into your time machine, go back in time and fuck each other?” While Debbie is clearly kidding around, her acknowledgement of Ben and Pete’s kinship sets up yet another instance where the overtly heterosexual ensemble of Apatow’s lead characters love to straddle the hetero/homo fence, intentionally flip-flopping back-and-forth between an intentionally unapologetic queerness and the much safer heteronormativity. Pete looks at Ben and responds, “Who needs a time-machine?” to which Ben holds up his cocktail and proclaims “This is my time machine.” Feeding off Ben, Pete looks back at him and replies in a sarcastically seductive voice “I’m gonna throw you in my DeLorean and gun it to 88,” to which Ben laughingly grunts “VRROOOOMMM!”

mimicking the sound of a time machine engine as he takes another sip of his drink. A certain pleasure derives from this homosocial affection as Ben overtly appreciates Pete's sense of humor despite Debbie's disapproval. Ben smiles at Pete and says, "You are a funny motherfucker, man," and then quickly turns to Debbie and asks, "how can you fight with him? Look at his face, I just want to kiss it...I think he's cute," to which Pete snaps back, "I like the way you move." The scene could've ended right then and Rudd and Rogen's final exchange would have driven home the comedic value of the scene sufficiently enough to execute the final punch-line that would have evoked laughter as the logical reaction to the on-screen action. But the camera cuts to Allison and Debbie one final time, capturing both women speechless and even dumbfounded by the blatant insensitivity exhibited by the two men. We're left with the sense that Ben and Pete would gladly get back into Doc Brown's time machine if such an opportunity were to present itself, even if it meant that they had to fuck each other. It's not that they're serious about wanting to have sex with each other, but they have no problem verbalizing the fact that they would, thus using homoeroticism as a conspiracy in order to band together and escape the dinner table, which, in a way, represents the illusion of heteronormative futurism. This distinct, intentionally blurred line between homosocial/homosexual becomes the most noticeable dynamic within Apatow's oeuvre, as it enables us to analyze the homosocial pack in several rapidly evolving social, biological and economic patterns. We can use the image of the time machine as a way to rhetorically tie together each radiating circle of the Apatow Aesthetic within the context of *timeless time*.

Epilogue

The dissolution of heteronormative adulthood is a just one of the many consequences of neoliberal capitalism that plagues individuals living in the 21st century. I'm not suggesting that the solutions to these social, political, and economic inequalities can be found in the narrative closure of Apatow's films. However, there is a definite significance in the radically new openings that occur along the way. The intersection of these concentric circles relies on the transformative nature of timeless time, which creates "a forever universe, not self-expanding but self-maintaining, not cyclical but random, not recursive by incursive, as Manuel Castells proclaims.

Thus meaning and structure is shaped by the Apatow aesthetic within this "forever universe." By queering the relationship between the present, past, and future, the Apatow aesthetic introduces a new temporality that isn't measured by chronological age, or even the mechanical clock time of the industrial age. Despite the optimistic implications of Apatow's narratives, the standard of living for most Americans continues to decline. Despite the many evocations of pleasure and new possibilities for personal care, the reality of dwindling wages, rising healthcare costs and a scarcity of full-time employment places limits on the inherent promises of the Apatow aesthetic. Still, the Apatow aesthetic points us in the right direction, as the only way to solve these problems is to first acknowledge that they exist.

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