



Boy-Flick: Gender Sideways in the Genre Highway (Alexander Payne's *Sideways* and the Age of Bromance)

Películas para chicos: Alexander Payne entre los
"caminos" del género (a propósito de *Entre copas* y la
Época del 'Bromance')

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Abstract

I intend to reflect on the construction of masculinity and the homo-erotic drive in the film *Sideways* (2004) by Alexander Payne. The film illustrates with due complexity the dialogue between normative dispositions and libidinal motilities, taking the meaning of relating to other levels of textuality. These alluded new levels push what is most often understood by masculine heterosexual friendship. To better articulate the reading of this text, it will also be important to read the intertextual dimension to the film, since nowadays the bromantic comedy paradigm has become hegemonic, with widely-viewed films such as *I Love You Man* to support the case. However, few of them take the construction of masculinity and sexuality to the "sideway" places as it so happens with Payne's film, where rigid and hetero-normative classifications fall short to account for the density and textual economy of this friendship. In order to address the subject, a bromantic comedy genealogy will be proposed, that takes into consideration both cinema and other media; this will in turn shed some light on the film's dialogic complexity. Lastly, psychoanalysis and gender studies will help read the "not so straight story" to the story.

Palabras clave:

Estudios de Masculinidad, Teoría Queer, Cine Estadounidense Contemporáneo, "Bromance Comedy".

Resumen

Me propongo leer la construcción de la masculinidad y la pulsión homoerótica en el filme *Sideways* (*Entre copas*, 2004) de Alexander Payne. El filme demuestra el complejo diálogo que existe entre disposiciones normativas y motilidades libidinales. Lleva pues el sentido del "relacionamiento" –del vínculo– a otros niveles de textuality, poniendo en entredicho lo que generalmente se entiende como amistad masculina heterosexual. Para exponer dicha lectura, se tendrá en cuenta la intertextualidad del film, con el paradigma hegemónico del "bromance comedy" en cabeza, paradigma hartamente divulgado por medio de filmes taquilleros como *I Love You Man*. Sin embargo, pocos filmes de dicho paradigma sondean en las construcciones de masculinidad y sexualidad justamente en sus lugares "aparte" o "marginales" –"sideways"– como en el filme de Payne, donde categorías rígidas heteronormativas no pueden dar entera cuenta de la densidad y economía textual de esta amistad. Abonarán a dicha lectura acercamientos desde la teoría queer y psicoanalítica, además de una genealogía de la "bromance comedy", para mejor descuadrar esta en absoluto cuadrada amistad.

Keywords:

Masculinity Studies, Queer Theory, Contemporary Cinema in the United States, Bromance Comedy.

Most often alternative film-making is read as positing a counter-discourse to hegemonic film representation. In the present transnational and digital world, this theoretical strategy is becoming increasingly difficult, if not dishonest. When it comes to North-American (U.S.) contemporary cinema, this is even more so, since many production houses are as much interested in art-house as in commercial cinema. One gives prestige; the other generates finances, as is often adduced, and both poles tend to be seen as somewhat related.

This is partly the reason why the new cinema in the United States, starting as is commonplace from the nineties on, disregards certain *either/or* modernist criteria, this is to say, the *either* avant-garde *or* commercial predicament, and engages in *both/and* entrepreneurial and aesthetic practices. As we well know, these practices can then translate to *both* national *and* internationally funded, entrepreneur-wise; *or, both* formalist *and* realist, aesthetic-wise. (In Latin America, this practice also includes: *both* state *and* privately funded.) All in all, I will discuss my object of study in the light of hegemonic practices in cinema nowadays, from a semiotic and political point of view. My object of study is the film *Sideways* (2004) by Greek-American director Alexander Payne, and I intend to reflect on the construction of masculinity, male friendship, and the homo-erotic drive in this film within the current North American industry paradigm, the bromance comedy.

It will be argued that the film *Sideways* illustrates with due complexity the dialogue between normative dispositions and libidinal motilities within the representation of male friendship, taking the meaning of *relating* to other levels of textuality. These alluded new levels push what is most often understood by masculine –heterosexual?– friendship. In order to purport such reading, critics Allison Wilmore and Matt Singer (2009) initial theorization on the film will be most useful. For him, the representation of male friendship in North American cinema has not been one and the same (Wilmore & Singer, 2009). Starting with more interesting treatments of the male friendship theme with the sixties' buddy film, such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) by George Roy Hill, the homo-erotic and complex was most often present in this genre. Other similar treatments followed, with Coppola's and Scorsese's well-known classic film efforts in the seventies.

In the late seventies and all throughout the eighties the buddy film did suffer some backlash, according to the critic. The homo-erotic was then mitigated or repressed, and more emphasis was placed on the *quest* between the male friends, whether it be finding the girl

or getting the job done, or both. The emphasis was on the *side-by-side* and not on the *face-to-face*. (Its correlative became, one is tempted to add to Wilmore and Singer (2009) interesting hypothesis, the inversely proportional increase of the normative aspect in the heterosexual erotic relationship, which in turn became more *face-to-face* and less *side-by-side*.) Going back to the buddy film representation of male-to-male relationships, the side-by-sideness was a characteristic of the genre in the beginning, but according to Wilmore and Singer (2009) it got pronounced. A commercially successful example discussed by the critic is *Animal House* (1978) by John Landis, among others.

Interestingly enough, it was towards this time that the complexity of male friendship was displaced to other genres than the buddy film, such as the romantic comedy, although relegated sometimes to a secondary plot (Wilmore & Singer, 2009). It is with certain precursor films in the nineties that male friendship, above all male heterosexual friendship, gets to be treated again with its share of complexity as the main plot of the film, taking it even to much further places than before. This is to say, the object of the plot is not anymore the adventure to engage in by the male protagonists, but the friendship itself, or how it gets tested and redefined. This is the birth of the bromance comedy, a comedy whose main plot generally revolves around the friendship itself of two or more heterosexual men.

Some precursors to the genre, and constitutive examples, would be: *Clerks* (1994) by Kevin Smith and *Swingers* (1996) by Doug Liman. In what is now commonplace, both lead the way to the many American Judd Apatow and British Wright and Pegg produced films later on, let alone *I Love You Man* (2009) by John Hamburg, the film that best defines the genre for many critics. It is important to add that even though the precursor for the present bromance comedy genre is the sixties buddy film, many previous genres prefigure it, such as male bonding in Westerns, screwball comedies, and gangster and war films in the U.S. Even more important than that, it is to be assumed that many, if not all, countries with an established cinema industry have their own precursors of a complex treatment of male friendship, and not just the U.S.. The afore-mentioned genealogy is pertinent to this country. I know for a fact that Mexican cinema has its own bromantic tradition, with films such as *A.T.M.: a toda máquina* (1951) and *Dos tipos de cuidado* (1952) by Ismael Rodríguez to reckon with.

According to Alison Wilmore and Matt Singer (2009), another characteristic of these comedies is that

the 'discovery' of the homo-erotic drive is not part of the main plot, but one more aspect of the relationship between male friends. Sex in general is seen not only as gratifying, but dangerous and complicated as well: sex is then not the ultimate subversion, as in the sixties' filmography, but that which in itself gets subverted. This is partly the reason why the friendship theme in these films sheds some light on other ways of relating beyond the hetero-normative, or the conjugal-reproductive, paradigm. In the film's diegesis, the friendship in question usually gets to experience the face-to-face, true, but it is not with the exclusion of the side-by-sideness experienced by the equally represented heterosexual erotic relationship. From a Lacanian perspective, one could say that these other ways of relating –or should we say of *trans-relating?*– further illuminate the residual or surplus aspect of relating in general, or 'tarrying with the real' as we will see, beyond the unifying and alienating envelopments of the imaginary. These films purport not sex but friendship as the new real. This is to say, friendship as that which most offers resistance to –or is unable to be totally subsumed in– the hetero-normative imaginary.

As will be discussed further on, by 'friendship' I mean something much more complex than the relationship itself. It is friendship as signifier and metaphor, which includes the relating of people in the film as much as the 'mise-en-relation' of objects-signs, instances of cinematic language, and even the production of meaning or signification, in a non-conjugal, non-reproductive, mode, to further elaborate the Deleuze and Guattari's anti-Oedipal metaphors, as will be explained further into the essay (Deleuze & Guattari, 1995). By friendship I mean here a residual-sided mode of *relatingness*, which is what predominates in some of the more interesting films of this genre, as is the case of *Sideways*.

Suffice it to say for now, though, that to offer resistance to the hetero-normative imaginary is not to escape it. This imaginary is very much present in the psyche and societal symbolics, as much as in said genre's narrative. In queer theory, hetero-normativity presupposes the pronouncement of the heterosexual privileges and of the conjugal and reproductive within society and cultural production. However, to offer resistance to it does not mean to evade it fully, for hetero-normativity marks the very fiber of the signification production, as exemplified in the Lacanian Law, and thereby in cultural and societal *limits*.

When we mentioned before that in the bromance comedy, or new buddy film, friendship is the new *real*, we intend to fully explore the Lacanian connotation of the term. As a category that pinpoints the not-fully to-

talized or symbolized within reality, the real is fragment- and partial object-oriented. In the bromance comedy, male friendship is therefore the new real since it is that which pushes forward a residual signifying economy in the narrative that, when fully elaborated and less mediated by formulaic or commercial concerns, it translates to a similar cinematic language at odds with hetero-normativity and logo-centrism: a non-fusionary, non-familiarist, cinematic language, a language of desiring machines (Deleuze & Guattari, 1995), a language not of real friendship but of the real in friendship. *Sideways* is a good example of this discussion, as we will see. One could say that the film is queer not because of the male relationship explored, but for something deeper than that: for the textual-cinematic aspect propounded, for its queer semiotics.

Being a fairly commercially-successful film, *Sideways* diegesis is well-known. Two male heterosexual friends, Miles and Jack, embark from San Diego and Los Angeles to Santa Barbara County to celebrate the latter's last week of being single before his wedding. They intended to bond on the given week, aided by the gorgeous wine scenario and culture of Santa Barbara. One a depressed middle school English teacher and the other a livelier if infantile washed-out TV and radio actor, much of the film's action and comedy comes from the expected character frictions, not to mention different expectations for their little vacation time together. However, opportunities for healing his very painful divorce come up for Miles as a new relationship arises in the scenario, while for Jack, after a couple of trifles, marriage awaits him.

For the film's analysis from a queer theory perspective, I will focus on three instances: the title, an episodic sequence, and a scene towards the end. Starting with the first analysis category, one must reckon that the film's title alludes to the residual interplay engrained in its very discursivity. *Sideways* denotes the streets or ways that stem from the main street or highway, ways that could turn out to be a long way to get to the destination, or even a short-cut. Sideways are unpredictable. For this very reason, 'sideways' connotes as well the many detours of life to be taken, for good or bad, with no foreseen results. It is therefore part of the very film to dramatize the empty signifying space of the 'sideways', the pure possibility. But to dramatize does not comprehend here only the action of the film; it suggests as well that which partakes of the very fabric of cinematic language.

In the film, although most events 'happen' in/through the sideways, they can only happen by what

the characters are willing to 'highway'. *Sideways* are what gets one from or to 'place'; the highway is the traveling, or even the fixed referent, itself: the highway is there, reliable. Each one, sideways and highway, is present in the other by its very absence. To further elaborate a metaphor of importance, the title refers to the be-friended, not the romanced, aspect to life in the film. Nothing can be expected to make sense fully, because the film's discourse resists any metaphysical, or logocentric, certainty. However, the conjugal, hetero-normative, paradigm exists as a point of reference by which characters compare themselves: marriage, kids, professional success and stability. It is only that the film's 'big' look at these signifiers places them in a narrative context, to be sure, but partially empties them of any transcendental meaning. Characters get married but it doesn't mean that much; others get divorced and it means a lot. Characters get hurt, but they are unrepentant; others get hurt, and they barely heal. It is almost as if characters are entrenched in life's many sideways, but they measure themselves in the light of some ideals –many of them normative, many of them ridiculous–, but its effect is many times half-empty. That which could kill you, it turns out it does not; that which looked joyous and inoffensive, it turns out it attacks back; that something could be sex, or conjugality, among others.

Two more cinematic sintagms deserve attention. One is an episodic sequence, which in turn represents others very similar in nature throughout the film. The day after Miles and Jack reached their destination and check-in a hotel, they meet two women, who in turn invite them over for dinner. Maya and Stephanie turn out to be very sane people, who are willing to offer a relationship to two not very sane men: Miles unable to make peace with his two-year ago divorce; Jack very much into marrying his fiancée, Christine, but still open for a fling, without disclosing his wedding plans to Stephanie. Everything about Miles, the main character, pinpoints to his inability to let go of the past: he carries with him the manuscript for his hopefully to be published first novel, which seems to weigh considerably, and must confess that its title is telling: *The Day After Yesterday*. Not today, but the day after yesterday: the past is so present in his life that 'today' does not happen, as of yet.

His idealization of things past might be the reason why he particularly loves the Pinot Noir grape, to the exclusion of Merlot: Pinot Noir, he tells Maya on the first night the group dates, is not a 'survivor'; it is 'delicate', and it needs 'nurturing', whereas Merlot can grow anywhere. Maya, on the other hand, is all about change,

and is fond of wine and studying for a degree in horticulture, because wine is for her a 'living thing', and it 'evolves' and gains 'complexity' through time; a bottle of wine that one opens today is not the same as yesterday, and the people involved in the making of the wine might not be alive today. Again, Maya is offering Miles the 'big picture' of things, exactly what he lacks at this point in the film. Interestingly enough, it is here that Miles reveals Maya that he owns a 1961 *Cheval Blanc* bottle of wine, waiting for the right moment and person to drink it with. Maya responds that what is he waiting for; drinking the bottle of wine is 'the special occasion'. Psychoanalytically speaking, Miles' dark idealization of the past could be read as the interplay between the phantasy, the imaginary, and the death drive. An idealization of the maternal body, which could be embedded in the phantasy site, splitted as *iti si* by definition, with the grapes representing the partial and 'good' object, combined with the yuppie imaginary of the good life (Van-neman, 2005; Nystrom, 2005), let alone an un-checked death drive, all contributing to his ever self-boicoting and self-destructive patterns, with no small amount of alcoholism. It is experience and Maya's influence that allow the non-identical real to answer back, and produce the much-needed psychic space, sense of rest, and awareness of possibility.

The day after this encounter, Jack, who is not doing bad himself with the current date, tells him that he is not playing golf with Miles but that he is going to spend time with Stephanie. Immediately afterwards, what is sometimes called a 'montage sequence' but is more precisely an 'episodic sequence', comes up. This is to say, Miles is represented doing menial things and solitary activities, like cutting his nails in the balcony, having breakfast in the hotel, and buying a porn magazine. This suggestive combination of montage and mise-en-scene happens on more than one occasion, with episodic sequences describing the passage of time in the vineyards, whether it be when having a good time between both friends or with the group, resembling at times the California version of a French film, 'déjeuner sur l'herbe'. It is almost as if the film pursues to recreate an atmosphere where infra-signs or the usually edited minute situations be-friended and were put in sequence now to give a sense of space and non-narrativity to the narrative. Nothing is left out in this queering, flexing, of time and space.

The last sintagm to be discussed for its pertinence is the scene where Miles finally drinks his much-treasured bottle of wine. It does not happen on the ex-

pected 'special occasion'. After a couple of misadventures, Miles and Jack are back from Santa Barbara, and on time for the latter's wedding. The wedding being over, Miles bumps into Victoria, his former wife, who attended the wedding and is now 'victoriously' married and expecting. The interaction, though brief, is crushing for Miles, and contrary to what is expected, he leaves the reception to go home, get the 'bottle of wine waiting for the special occasion', and drinks it discretely while eating in a fast-food place. No special décor, in the worst possible moment, and very much by himself, drinks it, quite serenely and on no binge mood. It is a brief scene, but reveals something with semiotic significance to the narrative: the ordinary experience queered, put in relationship, to extraordinary narrative indicators. Not fused, or narrativized; just happening at the same time, or one after the other, ever so minutely.

All in all, *Sideways* is a film that thematizes male heterosexual friendship like many bromance comedies nowadays. However, it goes beyond the friendship thematics to incorporate a formal language that, in honor to the theme, reflects the 'sidewayed', queered, astray, non-straight, path of the real in friendship, not an idealized version of reality. It is not just that by focusing on friendship the hetero-normative paradigm of conjugality and marriage looks small in comparison. It is rather that the friendship metaphor serves as a pretext to explore a cinematographic and political language of the real through life: loss, betrayal, death, are seen for what they are, plus for something else that remains imprecise, that something more, the excedent of real difference, that brings forth the possibility of a new beginning. Not an absolute beginning; the past leaves its marks and the future is uncertain, but enough to knock at a new door, as in the end of the film, to see what happens.

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