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Still Hungover: Todd Phillips and Rape Culture

Terri Carney

As a textual critic who came of age in the '90s, it is difficult for me to talk about authorial intention. Indeed, most academics today tell their students to avoid declaring the "message" of a text, encouraging them instead to respect the multivalence of meaning, the slipperiness of poetic discourse, and the freedom of the author to engage discursive play without being pinned down by an absolute interpretation. But I confess that, despite my training, and after having watched **The Hangover** and read all over the Internet about it, I can't help but wonder if director Todd Phillips is a misogynistic asshole.¹ Or maybe he is just a film director trying to make money by selling a film that denigrates women and celebrates a retrograde version of masculinity. When you live in a culture of rape, either way, it doesn't really matter.

There are other cases where the textual critic is compelled to peek under the magical cloak of artistic freedom and take a long, biographical gaze at the author. Take the case of Roman Polanski, a prolific and lauded filmmaker who is a convicted child rapist — his case still seethes with unresolved controversy. What these cases do is force us to think about the ways our consumption of art, film, and books actually create and perpetuate misogynistic cultural norms that many of us find repulsive. So, at the very least, we need to collectively examine our own complicity with a culture that loves **The Hangover**, a movie that likes its women stripping, breastfeeding, or waiting at the altar. A movie that made more money than any other R-rated comedy in history, one that, according to Phillips, is "a **Memento** for retarded guys."

The Hangover is the story of four friends on a bachelor party binge in Las Vegas who wind up taking the date rape drug ("roofies"), which propels them on a long night of unlikely adventures and almost prevents the groom from making it home for the wedding. The film opens with three of the men (sans groom) passed out in a Vegas hotel room, who awaken, hungover, to

¹ ["The Hangover's' Todd Phillips: Living in an R-Rated World"](http://www.blackbookmag.com/article/the-hangovers-todd-phillips-on-living-in-an-r-rated-world/7989) by Ben Barna.

(<http://www.blackbookmag.com/article/the-hangovers-todd-phillips-on-living-in-an-r-rated-world/7989>)

June 4, 2009. blackbookmag.com [interview, "I think Bradley, for the first time in a movie, really looks like a man. And I also always felt like he's like a boy in other movies, because he's kind of playing the spineless, put-upon asshole in the movie. Here he really takes the stage, and he runs shit, and he's really alpha male. His comedy comes from an alpha male who keeps fucking up."

Q: "A friend of mine saw the movie, and he called it repulsively misogynistic and cited the two female characters as a "ball-cutting bitch and a hooker." How would you respond to him?

A: "The Hangover is the Hangover."

Q: "I'm going to tell him this, by the way."

A: "He's probably smarter than me. But what do you mean, repulsively misogynistic? That's the character! Are you saying that there aren't characters like that in the world, that there aren't women like that? That's who we chose to make the movie about. . . . It does not pretend to be a movie about wonderful women and wonderful men. It's a movie about fucked up shit. Talk about being a ball-cutter, have your friend get some fucking balls. It's so hard to defend because there is no defense. That's the movie."

a baby in the closet, a tiger in the bathroom, and the mystery of "what happened" to structure the remaining plot.

I am normally happy to see men working out new constellations of masculinity in their bromance genre, what others call "dick flicks."² I loved **Sideways** for that, as I felt it portrayed a model of male friendship that was warm and playful, dare I say "girly," without emasculating main characters. I am picturing the blond guy from **Wings** hugging goofy Paul Giamatti on the hotel bed, like two puppies.³ But there is no excuse for what others have called the "bro-magnon" film **The Hangover**, which unapologetically and even aggressively defends the model of masculinity that poo-poo's date rape as some feminazi invention to further harass those poor, horny, entitled men.⁴ Indeed, **The Hangover** makes a joke out of date rape by compelling us to laugh at the madcap antics of men on roofies, at the cameo appearance of convicted rapist Mike Tyson, and at the cardboard women characters as shrews, sluts, and sirens.⁵ A symbolic dismissal of date rape through calculated, cheap laughs clears the way for Phillips' bottomless nostalgia for sharply defined gender roles.⁶

There are many films that strive to recapture the physically imposing, desire-driven, aggressive man who is brought into focus when surrounded by subservient, slutty, bitchy, or idealized women who satellite around him and his gravitas. **The Hangover** foregrounds and laments the perceived emasculation of said macho man, by the routinized, mundane world of work, kitchen countertops, and family; Phillips' modern-day heroes are nostalgic for a time of mythical heroics, where men went on odysseys to fight wild beasts and foreign menaces, always anchored by an adoring, self-abnegating Penelope, who kept the hearth fire burning in her white toga — er, wedding dress.

² Johns, Kevin. "[Homophobia, Misogyny, and Masculinity in Contemporary Comedy](http://www.culturemagazine.ca/cinema/homophobia_misogyny_and_masculinity_in_contemporary_comedy.html)" Thursday, 16 July 2009 (http://www.culturemagazine.ca/cinema/homophobia_misogyny_and_masculinity_in_contemporary_comedy.html)

[homophobic humor, argues that the metrosexual man of the '90s is not prepared for the conservative post-9/11 2000s, confusion of what it means to be a man in 21st century.

³ I had not seen **Hangover Part II** when I wrote this essay, so I did not know Paul Giamatti was going to appear in the film.

⁴ Metacritic.com gives **The Hangover** a score of 73/100. Of the many critics on the list, Richard Corliss of *Time* gives the most scathing review and scores it a 50: "Even Galifianakis's pervy charm, and a deeply weird cameo by Mike Tyson, can't save **The Hangover**. Whatever the other critics say, this is a bromance so primitive it's practically Bro-Magnon."

⁵ "The lazy Misogyny of the Hangover" July 24, 2009. In a post by Anton (The Culture Count: Film), he reads **The Hangover** as "presenting women as warm-hearted whores, nut-cracking bitches, or spectacular-looking dum dums."

⁶ Todd Phillips often waxes poetic about male friendships since he was raised by women, and creates a protected space in which the dismantled patriarchy of old is allowed to once again flourish under the veneer of progressive and cutting-edge bromance.

Before succumbing to the role of father and husband, to mini-patriarch in the minivan, the four men embark on a bachelor party trip to Las Vegas: their symbolic odyssey.⁷ And isn't the groom the sacrifice to the masculinity gods in exchange for another night of reckless decadence? After all, Doug is somewhat feminized as the damsel in distress, stranded up on the tower, overlooking the city of sin, on a virgin white mattress, far removed from the debauchery below, purified by the sun and dry climate, ready to be turned over at the altar. Is his passage into the scripted, empty life of stultifying domesticity the sacrifice that allows for the return to the epic hero even if only for a night? Answering yes to any of these questions reveals a clear longing for a time when men were men, and women's oppression was as natural and sunny as a martini after work and a pretty face.

The Hangover is also the story of four guys who take roofies by mistake and end up in a hotel room with Mike Tyson. When seen from this angle, the film begs for an allegorical reading, one that might hold a larger message about date rape. Tyson's cameo brings a real-life weight to the issue, as the residue of his previous actions follow his character into the fictional world of the film. In 2003, Tyson, who has always maintained his innocence of raping teen beauty queen Desiree Washington, expressed his regret over the incident: "I just hate [Washington's] guts. She put me in that state, where I don't know. I really wish I did now. But now I really do want to rape her and her fucking mama."⁸

It is important to note that Tyson participated in the Golden Globe win for the movie and sat with the actors and Todd Phillips at the ceremony in January 2010. I was surprised to not find more public outrage on Hollywood's celebration of Tyson, which made me extremely grateful to find Emma's Mixtape blog entry on the movie, which reminds us that Tyson's date rape incident was not some she-said/he-said case but rather "a terrifying attack on a seventeen year old girl who barricaded herself in the bathroom to escape him, until he punched his way through. The conviction on brutal forensic evidence concerning the internal injuries he left her with. Mike Tyson is a convicted rapist, a convicted wife beater, a vicious and violent abuser of women, and

⁷ [I ask Cooper about the scene.](http://www.details.com/celebrities-entertainment/cover-stars/200905/bradley-cooper-from-wedding-crashers-talks-the-hangover?currentPage=4) (http://www.details.com/celebrities-entertainment/cover-stars/200905/bradley-cooper-from-wedding-crashers-talks-the-hangover?currentPage=4) "Yeah, my character says the most horrid things in the movie," he says. "And I thought, The last scene, I gotta have my kid with me. He's got to be asleep on my shoulder when we're looking at photographs." It's an everyday gesture, but it makes Phil retroactively likable — the kind of guy you wouldn't mind seeing in a sequel, in fact. "I know those guys," Cooper says. "My uncle's a Phil. He talks this game. You know, he's Italian. It's eating, fucking, shitting. That's my childhood. That's all people talked about. But the way those men handle the children — it's just amazing. They pick them up like a chef handling a piece of poultry, but it's with utter love and care and dominion. It breaks my heart. I thought, I want to be that. You get up, brush your teeth, your kid's on your fucking shoulder. Don't make a big deal about it. Then, when my kid's asleep, I'm drinking a beer, talking about somebody banging chicks in Vegas. You know what I mean?"

⁸ <http://www.nndb.com/people/257/000023188/>

the fact that a Hollywood audience applauded him last night makes me feel ashamed to be part of this community."⁹

But the verdict on date rape in **The Hangover** is not the one Tyson heard in court. Indeed, the adventures of the four friends with roofies reveal the following: roofies don't make you tired and passive — they actually bring out a truer version of your real personality, and what happens to people on roofies is simply unbridled fun. Near the end of the film, when the three groomsmen realize that they had locked Doug on the roof with his mattress earlier in the evening, they immediately recognize the action as logical: as kids at camp they pulled a similar stunt with a mattress, demonstrating the consistency of personality on roofies. By extension, we see that taking roofies merely enhances your personality and your desires, and your adventures will be intense, yes, but also your own.

One thing that Phillips does well in **The Hangover** is to inscribe the trope of passive acceptance, of the apathy and disconnect that permit us to wade through a quagmire of demeaning and violent messages in our everyday lives without coming undone. As in the case of Tyson's cameo, the trope plays across the fiction/reality line, forcing viewers to acknowledge their own complicity in the dynamic. The scene in the movie that best stages this tableau is when the wedding singer, Dan Finnerty, gyrates with dancing wedding guests while singing the lyrics to 50 Cent's "Candy Shop."¹⁰ Dan's ballad-like style coupled with the slow-dancing, well-dressed crowd provides a jolting juxtaposition to the raw lyrics of the song, which basically chronicles the details of getting a blowjob. "Let me take you to the Candy shop where you can lick my lollipop." Dan becomes increasingly aggressive with his gestures and ends up bumping and grinding the backside of an unsuspecting older woman to the line "back that thing up." Onlookers' confused and even consternated facial expressions momentarily register an awareness of the ironic moment, and even discomfort with the overly sexualized performance, but nobody actually *does* anything about it. Even the newlyweds continue to dance happily to the song. This scene reveals how male-centered narratives that position women as objects flow in the background of all of our lives, like muzak, even at sacred events like weddings. It reminds us that marriage is intimately connected to misogyny and the throbbing pulse of macho license to play and desire at all costs. Finally, it inscribes our amazing and sustained passive acceptance of such background music on the soundtrack of our collective lives.

Perhaps the most memorable and controversial scene in **The Hangover** is when Alan pretend masturbates the six-month old baby, poolside, saying "look, he's jacking his little

⁹ [Emma's Mixtape: The Real Hangover](http://emmaforrest.blogspot.com/2010/01/real-hangover.html), Monday, Jan. 18, 2010. (<http://emmaforrest.blogspot.com/2010/01/real-hangover.html>)

¹⁰ [Lyrics to Candy Shop by 50 Cent \(http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/candy-shop-ft-olivia-lyrics-50-cent/42f157e9edc0bd8848256f89000809c3\)](http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/candy-shop-ft-olivia-lyrics-50-cent/42f157e9edc0bd8848256f89000809c3)

Sample lines in the lyric include: " You can have it your way, how do you want it / You gon' back that thing up or should i push up on it"; " I'm tryin to explain baby the best way I can / I melt in your mouth girl, not in your hands (ha ha)"; " I'll let you lick the lollipop / Go 'head girl, don't you stop / Keep going 'til you hit the spot (whoa)."

weenus." How does a film director get permission to jack off an infant, you ask?¹¹ Well, apparently Zach Galifianakis did the stunt as a joke on a baby doll they used for rehearsal, and when Todd Phillips saw it, he immediately wanted to include it in the film. Even Galifianakis thought this was too much to do on an actual human baby, but Phillips waited for the mother of the infant to leave the room and convinced the father to give him permission. The mother found out soon after and was "screaming" at the father because, according to Phillips, she wasn't very "cool." Here, the actor's and the father's passive acceptance of the director's inappropriate command to use the infant baby is mirrored in the wedding-goers' looks at Dan Finnerty's aggressive and misogynistic lyrics — there was clear disapproval but no action and no consequences. If the mother was screaming at the father after they filmed the scene, why didn't she stop the scene from being included in the final version? The dominant prevailed.

And this is why, after viewing **The Hangover** with my husband in his man-cave, we both felt hungover: like the wedding-goers, Zach Galifianakis, and the parents of that poor baby, we realized we are part of the problem. Just another layer in the *mise-en-abyme* of complicit inaction, we the viewers, the consumers of this cultural text, go along with the jokes in the hopes that Todd Phillips and his entourage think we are "cool." Well, at the very least I don't give a shit what Todd Phillips thinks of me, so maybe that's a first step at action. Hopefully this review is a second.

In less than a month, **The Hangover Part II** will be released. I have kept up enough with trailers and interviews to know the following: 1) it is set in Thailand, a geographical symbol for sex trafficking; 2) Todd Phillips wanted Mel Gibson for a cameo but could not get the support of cast and crew, so Mel, who has recently earned a reputation as an unbalanced, wife-beating racist, was cut; and 3) the character Stu is now the groom-to-be, and his budding relationship with Heather Graham's character at the end of **The Hangover** is now known as his ill-fated, brief

¹¹ [How Phillips got permission to pretend masturbate a six-month old](http://www.latinoreview.com/news/interview-todd-phillips-on-the-hangover-as-hangover-week-continues-7054)

(<http://www.latinoreview.com/news/interview-todd-phillips-on-the-hangover-as-hangover-week-continues-7054>): [I knew there was one parent who, the dad is a huge 'Old School' fan. The mom is not that cool, but the dad is and they have twins. So I spoke to the dad. I said, 'Hey, man, listen.' I go, 'We want to do this thing. It's going to be really funny. Zach's going to jerk off the baby.' The dad laughed and said, 'Can't do it.' He goes, 'She'll never allow it.' I go, 'Here's the thing, man. We're going to do it when she's with the other baby.' They had twins so she was up in the room. I said, 'So why don't you do the morning shift tomorrow and we'll just get this done.' He's like, 'I have to talk to her.' I go, 'Don't talk to her.' I go, 'You like "Old School", right?' He goes, 'I love it.' I go, 'It's going to be like one of those moments, man. Lets just do this. Alright?' He was a great guy and he was like, 'Alright.' So we cut to us and we're filming it and she's not supposed to be down and we're on take four and I get really consumed with little things sometimes, and like, it was like, 'No, his face is wrong. He doesn't look like he's enjoying it. He has to look like he's enjoying it.' All of a sudden I look over and I see the woman coming down early with her other baby. I'm like, 'Oh, my God, here comes the wife.' I pretended like I didn't see her. I look over while we're shooting it and she's screaming at her husband. Her whole thing about it is that she doesn't want her friends to think that they put the baby in a bad position.]

marriage to a "whore" in **The Hangover Part II**, where he winds up with a Tyson-like tattoo on his face.¹²

In a culture where we have frat boys at Yale chanting "No means yes, yes means anal," where business ethics professors hire strippers to give lap dances to their students, where Republicans want to redefine rape in ways that eerily echo **The Hangover's** tongue-in-cheek treatment of date rape, and where cheerleaders are forced to cheer for their athlete rapists, perhaps it is time for all of us to think more carefully about how we are complicit with the circulation of misogynistic narratives, which flow freely under the veil of harmless escapism as comedy, art, and entertainment.¹³ My third action: I will not pay to see **The Hangover Part II**.

Post-script, July 10, 2011:

Tonight I relented and saw **The Hangover Part II**. I didn't pay for it: My friend Tamara had a movie gift card and generously invited me so I could finish this essay. For sitting through this film with me, I owe her and my husband Brian more than words can say.

The only interesting element in this movie is the film noir-ish feel created after Chow's heart stops beating from that big snort of coke. Yes, the stakes are higher in **Part II**, and the world is more dangerous and cruel, as if the characters had broken through the "life's a party" mantra of the original **Hangover** and hit some dark shit on the existential side. I appreciate that sort of thing, which is why I was disappointed that this wasn't developed in any way at all, other than the mention of the guys screaming in the Buddhist monastery questions about "love, marriage and the meaning of life" and Stu's self-reflective declaration "I have a demon in me!" I guess it's hard to do any serious soul-searching when you have to work around scenes with a monkey in a Rolling Stones vest and Ken Jeong jumping out of an ice machine. Sticking strictly to the formula of the first **Hangover** made it impossible to do anything truly interesting in this film, like actually develop a character.

Women characters are still barely human in this film, like a long line of paper dolls hanging in the background as adornment for the featured masculinity. Stu's two exes are referred to as "the cunt" and "the whore." Even the woman infant, Phil's daughter in the film, who is in her car seat at the IHop when her father (pink diaper bag over his shoulder) shouts at Stu, "Take Vegas out of the equation and you would have married a *cunt*." I guess he is confident that this infant girl will never be a "cunt"? How he/we reconcile his treatment of adult women with his cutesy, fashionable fatherhood is a serious question that should follow all of us home after

¹² In **The Hangover Part II**, Tyson-like tattoo causes controversy (<http://www.chicagonow.com/ex-posts-facto/2011/05/hangover-2-hang-up-mike-tyson-tattoo-artist-sues-warner-bros-to-stop-release-of-movie/>).

¹³ [Yale frat boys](http://www.salon.com/2010/10/15/yale_fraternity_pledges_chant_about_rape/) (http://www.salon.com/2010/10/15/yale_fraternity_pledges_chant_about_rape/) [Cheerleader rape story](http://jezebel.com/5798160/cheerleader-who-wouldnt-cheer-rape-loses-supreme-court-bid) (<http://jezebel.com/5798160/cheerleader-who-wouldnt-cheer-rape-loses-supreme-court-bid>) [Business professor and strippers](http://nation.foxnews.com/campus/2011/04/12/professor-has-strippers-give-students-lap-dances-business-ethics-class) (<http://nation.foxnews.com/campus/2011/04/12/professor-has-strippers-give-students-lap-dances-business-ethics-class>)

running from the theater. I should also mention that **Hangover Part II** does a good job of going beyond a standard misogyny to include racism and homophobia as featured themes.¹⁴

Finally, I found it intriguing that Ang Lee's son Mason landed a main role in this film. Could it be merely a coincidence that the latest member of the Wolfpack happens to be the son of the director of **Brokeback Mountain**, a film that took the quintessential figure of American masculinity, the cowboy, and queered him? Perhaps Todd Phillips saw a chance to right that wrong by toughening up the young Lee with a night of uninhibited, drug-induced debauchery, which, according to Phillips' filmography, is the gateway to reconnection with some primal, old-school masculinity. At the end of the film, when the four guys are speeding towards the seaside wedding in a boat named *Perfect Life*, Teddy tells Stu "It's funny, I can't remember anything. But when I woke up I was kinda happy." And this from a kid who just lost his ring finger. Guess he won't have to worry about wearing a wedding band any time soon.

¹⁴ See Stephen Himes's excellent study of racism in [this film](http://www.moviedayatthecourt.com/?p=1440) (<http://www.moviedayatthecourt.com/?p=1440>)