

Derek A. Burrill

The Other Guy: Media Masculinity within the Margins

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The *Other Guy: Media Masculinity within the Margins* is a book about the media representations of a particular figuration of masculinity that portrays a transitional moment for men in the U.S. The other guy, for Burrill, is a man at odds with the regressive and traditional masculinity of post-WWII America, “constantly strategizing ways to circumvent, and deny [those] masculine behavior and mores” (2) represented in the alpha male and the tough guy. While fuddled and flummoxed in the face of the social, economic and ideological changes American society has undergone in the last couple of decades, this man is constantly scrutinizing new ways of performing his masculinity. At the same time he avoids a total rejection of, or disengagement from, those forms of masculinity that he is at odds with. Through his analysis of various Hollywood movies, television shows and other popular culture products, Burrill provides a comprehensive account of other guy representations in the U.S. media allowing him to comment on the real-world other guys and their experiences.

As Burrill demonstrates, the other guy is the new white, middle-class, and predominantly straight man who is in a state of a conscious but regretful decoupling with the structures of power setting his male privilege (5). His masculinity is a manifestation of a reactive performance that seeks “a workable spot on the stereotypical gamut strung between traditional masculinity and femininity” in response to a changing social, economic and cultural context (5). With increasing awareness on gender and sexual rights, along with rising numbers of

women in the labor-force providing the essential work skills necessary for a communications/service-based economy, men no longer hold the same privileges embodied by the alpha male of traditional masculinity in the post-war era (16). The improved statuses of women and awareness on women's and LGBTI rights in American society have altered the traditional male role. As Burrill states, "like women juggling work and family, the personal and the public, men too had to develop a performance of equity, balance and evolution" (16). It is within this transitional moment that Burrill finds the genesis of the other guy. According to him, the other guy is a *tactic*, as well as being a physicality who/which emerges within the circle of white middle-class masculinity in response to this changing environment. What the other guy stands for, within this framework, is "a difference within white masculinity", identified by his conscious attempt to be detached from a structure that he belongs (5). He is, however, conflicted in his attempt as his performance is shaped by two differing impulses. At once detaching himself from the structure which he -willingly or necessarily- maintains attachment too, avoiding absolute disengagement.

This complex and conflicting status of the other guy is well reflected in his relation to the media and to popular culture products. On this, Burrill details the other guy's *synaesthetic masculinity*, which refers to "a mélange of synaesthesia and aesthetics" highlighting the key position of the media and popular culture in the formation of this alternate masculinity (7). The somewhat bewildered other guy is surrounded by a "media phantasmagoria" where he is in a constant state of exposure to conflicting and confusing information about how to be, and act as, a man today (7). His masculinity is formed within the contestation of this *sensory information* he "receives in the form of aesthetic rules and trends, film and TV, videogames, and postmodern life in general" (13). Following this theoretical and conceptual framework, Burrill's analysis then addresses a number of media and popular culture products where the other guy's contested *synaesthetic masculinity* is represented, formed and constructed.

Burrill starts his analysis with a reading of the other guy in Hollywood and U.S. independent cinema where his particular focus is on the Mumblecore genre and the Judd Apatow films. Burrill sheds light on a common theme in these films (as well as in television) whereby the other guy displays insistent and conscious *immaturity* in the face of a world, which expects him *to grow up*. Often the other guy is positioned as oppositional to the *maturity* of the traditional male figure or indeed, the fathers. The other guy appears to be the new male figure resisting *growing up*, going through its tensions, and searching for strategies to adapt to a new world with his contested masculinity.

In the case of Mumblecore -which Burrill defines as another guy specific genre- this contestation is embodied in stories of ageing “boy-men” (38, 48-9). For the author, these films are “quintessentially about the life and times of the other guy” exploring his relations to women as well as his own body (39-40). In Mumblecore movies we find the other guy’s “static transition” – his transition from “man-child” to boy-adult - rather than a “growing up” tale in its more traditional form (39-40). He understands himself as a “boy-man” while simultaneously standing for “a sign of (often discontented) effort at making meaning of a changing world in which men have waning power” (48-49).

Aside from Mumblecore, Judd Apatow’s movies (for Burrill, “a genre unto themselves”) are also given particular focus in the book (56). Apatow movies not only reflect the *growing up* issues of the other guys, but also instruct those men in forming their new guy code (53-4). Apatow films such as *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), *Knocked Up* (2007), and *This Is 40* (2012) – named by Burrill names as the “Sperm Trilogy” – have central figures who “[seem] mystified about relationships, women, other men, sex, pregnancy, children and most importantly his status as a male at the start of the 21st century” (57). The other guys in these movies are in a state of self-reflection and, not unlike the films of the Duplass Brothers but in a different fashion, trying to make meaning out of the new setting of relations they find themselves in.

Regarding television, Burrill's analysis focuses particularly on the sitcom, which usually takes men's relations to each other as an essential theme for its satire (81-2). In this section Burrill provides a detailed reading of the shows *Last Man Standing*, *Man Up!*, *Men At Work* and *Modern Family*, all of which include a contestation for other guy masculinities in different ways and degrees. *Last Man Standing* centers on a traditional male figure, Mike, a father and a husband who is portrayed as a *victim* of "a changing world that won't accommodate his traditional and true American ideals" anymore (86). The other guy in the show, represented by a young white man in his early 20s, is subordinated to Mike's regressive masculinity in a way that facilitates Mike's attack on anything at odds with his traditional values.

Different from *Last Man Standing* is *Man Up!* which centers on three other guys who are not man enough but at most "man-ish" (89). The show presents their boyhood in the form of a regressive immaturity implying a need for these men to grow up, or "man up", in order to overcome their troubles in their relations to women and life in general. Another other guy series Burrill analyses is *Men at Work* where we are privy to the stories of a group of young, straight male professionals and their relations to women and other men (93). What the author finds particularly in *Men at Work* is the "portrayal of turmoil within the male identity between generations". This is represented in the relationship between one protagonist and his boss, who also happens to be his future father-in-law (93). The other guy masculinity, in this context, is contested via the older generation's discontent over the new male's supposed lack (93). *Men at Work* ultimately presents the other guys as "downright decent" men, while at the same time presenting those figures as *victims* of their circumstances (96-7). The show in this sense reproduces another version of "white, middle-class male victimhood" - this time embodied in the other guy's masculinity (96-7).

The final show analyzed by Burrill is *Modern Family*, which stands distinct from the others via its progressive approach to difference, although confined with an emphasis on "togetherness" (100-1). The show is identified by its diverse characters and their relations to each

other where masculinity is “configured as processes of trial and error” (102). Positioning the new white middle-class male (with both straight and gay representations) in a constant state of contestation over his masculinity, the show allows a rich content reflecting the other guy’s conflicts and confusions in his rejection of the traditional.

Following his other guy readings in film and television, Burrill’s analysis focuses on the representations of the other guy’s body in a number of settings including advertisements, popular music, and reality television. This discussion centers on the changing consumption patterns for men and their implications on the other guy’s body. To put in a wider sense, today men are targeted by the marketing of various products including those that have traditionally been approached as feminine and women-only (109). The crucial component of these changing consumption patterns is strongly related to the changes in men’s relations to, and perception of, their own bodies. In this new setting beauty products for men, for example, are no longer understood in relation to “vanity, feminity or gayness” but “as an extension of [male] power” (108). In regard to this point Burrill refers to the genesis of a new type of guy in the last decade, that is the *metrosexual*, who emerged as “a rejection of the Alpha male, the Beta, and the outlier, or Omega male” (114).

The *metrosexual* male, according to Burrill, came out of a process identified by an “over-focus on the building of the body, while couching it amongst the competing lifestyle categories of health, fashion, music, dating, etc., and with the rise of violent interactive media” (114). This is also the very same framework wherein we find the formation of the other guy’s synaesthetic masculinity. As Burrill states, he stands for “an amalgamation of different male power positions and hierarchies, and the myriad body expectations and rules imposed on all men” (114). Following this line of approach then, the author finally traces the ways the other guy’s body is represented, contested, and constructed in a number of popular culture products including that of the reality show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, the satire of the comedy group *the Lonely Island*, and a number of videogames.

Overall, *The Other Guy: Media Masculinity within the Margins* provides an insightful analysis on the alternative white middle-class male representations in the U.S. media. The book is based on an extensive reading of a variety of popular culture products establishing modern media masculinity today. It is important that Burrill's analysis provides a politically progressive alternative in his reading of the men-in-crisis. Throughout the book Burrill deliberately avoids relying on a discourse that *victimizes* the other guy while presenting his crisis, tensions and confusions in the face of his changing circumstances. I would, therefore, recommend Burrill's work to any reader interested in the intersections of gender, sexuality and popular culture, and in having an alternative reading of the modern male's crisis.

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