

Slack cinema: Notes on genre and culture

by

Timothy J. Elliott

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Program of Study Committee:
Leland Poague, Major Professor
Gloria Betcher
Gregory D. Wilson

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

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Preface

I began this thesis due to a curiosity about Generation X brought on by my voracious appetite for record reviews. Since age sixteen or so, I would rely on the music magazines (and eventually websites) curated by members of Gen X for signals about what sorts of music I should listen to, what kinds of old albums were schlock and which would earn me a respectful nod from the record store clerk when I purchased them, and eventually what sorts of films were worthwhile. I sought the approval of these Generation X folks because my parents lacked the sort of pop culture awareness and more wide-spread appreciation of outré art that informed my own taste in records and culture that I had worked hard to develop through diligent reading of *Rolling Stone*.

Though I could generally relate to the ideas expressed in the record reviews, picking up on references to revered art-rock bands from the 1960s like the Velvet Underground alongside a number of mid-to-late 1980s/early 1990s indie rock heroes like The Jesus and Mary Chain and Sonic Youth, sometimes the distrusting and occasionally ironic stance taken by the critics towards new music baffled me. These critics found almost any music released after 1998 or so a pale imitation of true Gen X values, sounds, and priorities. Similarly, though I could relate to the protagonists in a number of seminal Generation X films, on occasion I felt a profound gap between the various characters' choices and world views and my own perspective. As my tastes matured in the early 2000s, Generation X-era filmmakers and sensibilities seemed to hold sway throughout mainstream cinema. I began writing this thesis in the hopes of better understanding Generation X through a study of its social history and films. (For the purpose of generational delineation, I will follow Chapman King in defining Generation X as those born between 1965 and 1977.)

My own prior relationship with several Gen X slack films, especially *Clerks* (1994) and *Mallrats* (1995), has at least partly inspired my own desire to better understand Gen X films. I came to college a devoted fan of all of Kevin Smith's work and left it a bit uncertain about the durability of boob jokes and comic-book themed soliloquies. Once I proposed this project, I began revisiting these films with the intent of discovering if the events on screen had retained that same degree of verisimilitude I can recall from watching them around 2002 or so or if my current feelings of sophistication would lead me to look down on films with jokes as juvenile as the ones that characterize the majority of Smith's work.

Even as a teenager, I found it easier to relate to works like Richard Linklater's loving reconstruction of the 1970s in *Dazed and Confused* (1993) than twenty-something films like *Reality Bites* (1994) and *Kicking and Screaming* (1995) because the Generation X reverence for the 1970s era had been passed down to me by some combination of album reviews, my dad's record collection, and classic rock/oldies stations. The real struggle in writing this thesis came in dealing with the Generation X representations of their own lifestyle in the mid 1990s, an era I have only the haziest of recollections about. These films featured many of the things I vaguely remembered about the 1990s, fashion trappings like flannel shirts, Vans sneakers, and shaggy goatees. But the thematic core of these films has proven much more difficult to elucidate to those who didn't directly experience the era. These films seem to focus on broad thematic and narrative tropes like romance or achieving independence, but the struggle came in finding the Gen X perspective as it manifests itself in slack film, something that seems far removed from my own experience as a member of Generation Y or an Echo Boomer.

Lee Poague, my major professor, directed me, after prolonged discussions, towards Rick Altman's book *Film/Genre*, an important piece in shaping the structure of this thesis. My major professor's input regarding Altman's work guided me towards considering the cultural impact of slack film in terms of the creation of a genre. The field of genre studies provided a more cohesive

framework in which to examine both the Generation X slack subculture and its cinematic manifestations. Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to discuss the construction of the slack film genre without totally neglecting my initial focus on the Generation X slack subculture that both inspired these films and provides their guiding aesthetic.

This thesis focuses on those films that attempted to cash in on slackers in cinema immediately following the success of Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991). Accordingly, in Chapter One I adduce *Slacker* as prologue to discussing aspects of slack style and its origins. In Chapter Two, I offer far more detailed discussions of Kevin Smith's *Clerks* and *Mallrats* in light of Lawrence Grossberg's concept of "everyday life," a paradigm that helps account for the progression of the Hollywood slacker from oppressed, indecisive store clerk to charming romantic lead. Finally, my last chapter discusses a range of slack-inspired films—*Empire Records* (1995), *Singles* (1992), *Reality Bites* (1994), and *Knocked-Up* (2007)—as a way of applying to slack cinema Rick Altman's theory of film genre and I offer some tentative conclusions about the future of slack film as a genre. I have excluded from consideration slack forebear films from the 1980s like John Hughes's *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) as well as films made during the 1990s that employ a slack aesthetic but feature Baby Boom-generation slackers, like the Coen Brothers' *The Big Lebowski* (1998). Though I initially chose to work on a small corpus of films because I wanted to examine the role slack film played in both spreading and showcasing slack culture, I understand now that some fifty-odd pages will not be enough space to examine every aspect of the complicated relationships between cinema and culture, especially as the majority of these films are so relatively recent. The tentative conclusions offered in my last chapter are therefore more suggestive than authoritative; however, these claims, developed via exploration of several exemplar slack films through a cultural studies lens, hopefully provide some insight into the progression of slack film from its origins as an attempt to represent Gen X culture on film to its present state as some manifestation of a genre.

Chapter 1

Slacker, Slack Style, and Slack Origins

Richard Linklater's *Slacker*

A poster for the failed “Edstock,” a music festival that also functioned as “a tribute to the famous talking horse” (Burnett), adorns the front door as the camera follows a slacker couple named Tura Santana Look-a-like (Heather West) and Co-op Guy (John Spath) into their dingy Austin, Texas Co-Op residence (Linklater, *Slacker* [screenplay] 49). The pair walk across the room as the camera’s focus, maintaining what the *Slacker* crew commentary calls a “consistent tone of documentary realism,” shifts to a character named Bush Basher (Ron Marks) who sits underneath a sketched portrait of Karl Marx, devises a conspiracy theory based on the poll numbers of the 1988 election, and dismisses what he views as the media’s assumption that Bush’s victory somehow constitutes a mandate from the people to govern them. As Bush Basher continues to critique Bush’s alleged mandate, a pair of younger looking slackers play what the script calls “the comb game” (Linklater, *Slacker* [screenplay] 49), a weirdly masochistic exercise in turn-taking where the object is to grab the comb off the back of an opponent’s hand and hit the opponent on the knuckles before the later can move his hand back. The comb game takes place near a table lined with Coke to-go cups and beer cans; the game continues with Bush Basher’s monologue in the background until one of the comb game combatants remarks that Paul has “split” and left behind a stack of numbered postcards. On their way to investigate, the slacker couple and one of the comb game players pass by an unnamed man sleeping with his head tucked into his arm, sprawled on the couch. When the threesome reach Paul’s room, they find an almost entirely empty space save for the postcards, which feature a series of pop culture images with pieces of a story typed up and pasted onto successive cards.

The pop culture artifacts like the Edstock poster and the postcards that feature images of firecrackers, Uncle Fester, and a depiction of a black child from the 1920s, combined with markers of intellectual snobbery like Karl Marx posters and Presidential conspiracy theories, serve as fair indicators of some of the priorities of the 1990s slack culture. The scene described above, from Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991), features a combination of political and pop culture obsessions that helped to define mid-to-late 1980s and early 1990s slack culture. *Slacker* presents a humorous, occasionally disturbing portrait of a lightly fictionalized slacker subculture fermenting in Austin, Texas circa 1991, full of quirky middle-aged folks, bohemians, slackers, and oddities. The typical political and pop culture pre-occupations of these folks can also be seen in Linklater's hilarious, pathetic, and somewhat bizarre portrait of the unseen character of Paul, a wannabe artiste.

Paul's tale details his own feeling of meaninglessness, a recognition of his status as a slacker who "views ... [his] own existence as marginal and pretty far from importance" (Linklater Commentary). Through the guise of an autobiographical character named Juan Apagato, Paul provides an account of his slack existence, distinguished by a rejection of formal education in favor of a life spent doing as little as necessary to pay his rent. Paul, through the character of Juan, also describes a typical slack day involving waking up at noon, seeing a matinee, watching sitcom re-runs and walking around until falling asleep at one or two a.m. (Linklater, *Slacker* [screenplay], 51-2). Paul's story of Juan hints at his loneliness and isolation from both his family and his roommates, capped with a debate about the merits of suicide that reaches the conclusion that "there's too much direct evidence against uniqueness" (Linklater [screenplay], 52). Bizarrely, the final postcard pairs an image of a firework that "Will Go Off on the Fourth" with Juan's plan to "return to the U.S. with a supply of homemade nuclear weapons" (Linklater[screenplay], 52). The pictorial sequence on the postcards draws on various decades of pop culture for inspiration and accompaniment for Paul's "lightly fictionalized autobiography" (Dunn 5). The images posses

only a tangential relationship to Paul's story, though the roommates, presumably Paul's only intended audience, seem more interested in playing recognize the pop culture image than appreciating Paul's attempt at a definitive fusion of prose and images.

While slackers with artistic ambitions feature prominently in *Slacker*, their artistic pursuits are often vaguely described and rarely even shown. For example, it's difficult to discern what sort of artistic pursuit the comb game players or even the man passed out on the couch are directly involved in. They seem content to amble through their twenties with as little effort as possible. The tension between artistic ambition and daily reality seems almost absent from their routine. *Slacker* occasionally presents a middle ground between passive incubation in front of television re-runs or immersion in the works of Nietzsche. For example, the film features characters named Scooby Doo Philosopher (R. Malice) and Papa Smurf (Mark Quirk) who devise theories about the allegories for modern society present in cartoons like *The Smurfs* and *Scooby-Doo*. These slackers funnel their creative energies towards viewing cartoons and then composing sophisticated polemics about them, circulating homemade and occasionally second-hand theories as though they were engaged in a White House debate about public policy issues. Similarly, a recent college grad named Conspiracy-A-Go-Go Author (John Slate) accosts a woman at a book store, discusses several of the existing tomes about the JFK assassination sitting on the store's shelves, and tries to convince her about the superiority of his forthcoming book on the same subject titled *Conspiracy-A-Go-Go*.

Linklater filmed *Slacker*, his full-length directorial debut, in his hometown of Austin, Texas in 1991. Though the film uses a script, it features a series of conversational vignettes that spotlight a variety of plausibly real-life slackers, ne'er-do-wells, and oddities played by Linklater, his friends, and local Austin actors. The film was a hit at its Cannes Film Festival debut and, despite its minimal operating budget, became a critical darling (Hanson 16). Whether the film, and the slackers it portrays, should be taken as definitive of the slacker sensibility is a question I

will ponder later, but it clearly served as an inspiration to numerous other filmmakers striving to capture some part of the slack experience on film. The film unquestionably encouraged directors like Kevin Smith (*Snowball Effect*) to establish their own variations on a slacker-inspired film within the confines of more typical fiction film genres, occasionally on a *Slacker*-style shoestring budget. Aside from inspiring neophyte filmmakers with its origin story if not its genre, *Slacker* also demonstrated to the studios the presence of critical and commercial markets for independent movies targeted towards Generation X. Though the early 1990s were famous for a variety of large budget action films, including box-office titans such as *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), *Die Hard 2* (1990), and *Lethal Weapon 3* (1992), *Slacker* demonstrated the emergence of an alternative outlet for Gen X creators and consumers whose ideology revolves around a staunch “refusal to value anything” (Hanson 68). The Gen X consumers’ response to Linklater’s film alerted the Hollywood hit-makers to the presence of a then untapped consumer market, a rising generation waiting for products that targeted their demographic.

The 1990s zeitgeist that *Slacker* helped unveil focused on an alternative approach to American values based largely on a rejection of the crusty American corporate establishment the Boomers had already rejected, as well as a total rejection of the sense of generational unity, empowerment, and hipness that characterized the Boomers’ own response to the establishment. This youthful revolt against the preceding generation appeared in early 1990s punk and grunge as well as the burgeoning torrent of slack-influenced films released by major Hollywood studios over the course of the next five years. Generation X “grew up in the aftermath of ... [the] beautiful but unrealized dream” (Hanson 9) that was 1960s counterculture. The same factors that helped squelch the hippies and establish a tone of “ambiguity and violence” for the country—“Vietnam, Watergate, and civil rights conflicts”—forged a “confusing social climate” (Hanson 9). These rather negative large scale historical events, combined with the rising “women’s movement[,] ... the ongoing sexual revolution and an astronomical rise in the divorce rates,” led

Gen X to reject Boomer values and forge “a new morality” (Hanson 9) that was skeptical of most institutions. This ambivalent generation found itself in demand as the Boomers, notorious for viewing themselves as the youth of America, were forced to confront their own relatively advanced age and impending respectability. The relative mainstream success of *Slacker* as well as the previously underground grunge music scene established newfound outlets of expression for “expensively educated” slackers to use their “encyclopedic brains” to create art that stood a chance of making money (Gordinier 26-7).

Linklater, in line with the typically individualistic slack ethos, claims on his 2006 *Dazed and Confused* commentary track that his attempts to capture his high school years in *Dazed and Confused* (1993) should be seen as a depiction of his own particular experiences growing up in a small town in Texas rather than universalized towards a generational ideal. *Slacker*'s commercial success and critical reception function as testaments to the popularity of slack culture, and though Linklater most likely hoped he had created an “ageless rejection of the societal pressure to work in traditional ways” (Lutz 289), that hope cannot trump the Tom Lutz argument that the film represents Gen X's “work ethic, beliefs, feelings and ideas to a culture disgusted with its own excess and worried about its own millennial future” (289). For critics like Lutz, *Slacker* demonstrates the chosen aimlessness of Gen X as a fundamental rejection of Boomer values like group identity and capitalistic success. What Lutz supposes is Linklater's fantasy of a film of ageless rejection is arguably an instance of what Rick Altman, in *Film/Genre*, calls “lateral communication” (162). Lateral communication for Altman involves “exchanges between viewers of the same film or fans of the same genre” (*Film* 162). The concept of lateral communication lends credence to Lutz's claims that the film acts as a generational marker because Linklater presents common elements of slack culture to the audience, and, as Altman describes it, audience members communicate with each other and collectively, perhaps even against the director's wishes, decide that *Slacker* embodies certain significant aspects of their mutual generational

experience. I evoke Altman here because he provides a sophisticated model of film genre study that accounts for both generic stability and generic development, to which model I will return to elaborate on the genesis of what I will call the slack film.

Slack Subculture Style

Slack films, for my purposes in this piece, target Generation X through a series of slack-based appeals that cultivate a certain look, sound, and attitude and thus present what Dick Hebdige would call a distinct slack subculture. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Hebdige claims that the music and dress of any subculture function as the “expressible forms and rituals of those subordinate groups ... who are alternately dismissed, denounced, and canonized” (2). In short, slack attitudes and style are “pregnant with significance” (Hebdige 18) and act as “symbolic forms of resistance” (Hebdige 80). Such forms may seem ephemeral. An advantage of Altman’s theory of film genre is its ability to explain how at least some forms achieve “canonical” status where others do not. According to Altman, genres often oscillate between the “creation of a new cycle” of films that attempt to capture the zeitgeist through various settings, plots, and genres and the eventual “consolidation” of those types lucky enough to become self-sustaining genres (*Film* 65). A main goal of this thesis is to investigate the role of the slack aesthetic as it relates to film genres.

According to Altman, genres should not be thought of as

post facto categories ... but [as] part of the constant category-splitting/category-creating dialectic that constitutes the history of types and terminology. Instead of imaging this process in terms of static classification, we might want to see ... it in terms of regular alternation between an expansive principle—the creation of new cycles—and a principle of contraction—the consolidation of a genre. (*Film* 65)

Genres rarely arrive in a readily dissectible pattern. Often it takes years for a particular style of film to become “defined by the industry and recognized by a mass audience” (Altman, *Film 16*). Altman provides a helpful frame for investigating the ways genres form, evolve, and ultimately coalesce to forge the standardized set of expectations that accompany genres. He argues that any genre arises from the collision of a “common topic” and a similar “treatment” (*Film 23*) of the topic. In essence, a corpus of films that will form a genre arise because the “subject and structure” “coincide” (Altman, *Film 24*) in numerous films and give a genre its fundamental characteristics. Genres are useful because they ultimately “guarantee a style, a particular atmosphere and a well-known set of attitudes” (Altman, *Film 25*) that guide the audience towards certain kinds of films. Altman’s most useful distinction comes through his discussion of the two ways genres can function, either as nouns or adjectives. The way Altman differentiates between a film genre as a noun (a more stable unit replete with a standard set of genre trappings, like a romance) or as an adjective (film noir began as an adjectival descriptor for a series of American and French crime dramas that added a bleak and world-weary element to the genre of gangster and private eye films and has since become a full-fledged genre) helps spotlight the transition of a film genre from a simple adjective that influences the outlook or setting of an already established genre towards establishing the outlines of its own separate genre replete with typical expectations and trappings (*Film 53*).

Slack Origins

While slack film images of 1990s rebellious dress, behavior, and even body piercing certainly cannot entirely capture the cultural rebellion of the slack movement, they can be seen as symptomatic of the slack culture’s specific oppositional approach, as raw material that can be measured against the cultural values and mores of the era that receives these depicted moments. One of the strengths of the slack subculture was its powerful evocation of a particular time

period, a sense that the movement's fashion and oppositional politics acted as a "report from the front lines of youth culture" (Lutz 286). These various outward signs of slack resistance featured in the films might be misread as time-specific signifiers, "bric-a-brac" like "hair and fashion...automobiles and music (including dance crazes)" (Jameson 222). This thesis argues that slack films should not be lumped in with toothless nostalgia films that act as "celebrations of an imaginary style of a real past" and thereby show a rejection of "contemporary raw material" (85). Instead, 1990s slacker films might best be viewed as a Rorschach test of the era as it unfolded, documenting the slacker culture in progress, a particular strain of subculture that evolved over the course of the late 1980s. Whether 1990s slacker films simply act as codified reinterpretations of familiar tales of pop music and romance that "flirt with the hip while washing it away with waves of ridicule and plot reversals" (Lutz 258) becomes an essential question if the viewer concerns him or herself with the authenticity of the expressions of slack subculture in the burgeoning adjectival genre of slack film. These films were produced as the culture spread beyond coffee houses and dive bars and helped create the zeitgeist of the 1990s counterculture, processing the historical raw material Jameson prizes into time capsules of 1990s slacker notions broadcast directly from the era rather than self-aware, after-the-fact attempts to recreate a certain time and place. This lack of self-awareness, from the soundtrack to the fashion to the dialogue, helps form something more than a simple historical account of the early 1990s. The essential trappings of each of these films do more than simply recreate past notions; they help codify the crossover successes of certain aspects of the slacker movement into a robust, lived-in era of American culture, one that is swiftly being revived through a series of "trend pieces," "'90's reprogramming," and "boy band reunions" (Grant).

The simple revival of 1990s tropes, instances of the nostalgic emptiness that makes Jameson cringe, does not by itself warrant a re-visitation of prominent slack films. In this thesis, I hope to examine cinematic depictions of slack culture, to analyze their success in bringing

portions of slack culture to a mainstream audience via the multiplex, and thereby use its tropes to construct a genre that persists today, in part because it evokes earlier aesthetic or subcultural traditions and then situates these traditions within the slack subculture. The fashions and soundtracks may have changed, but the plots and the notions of the thwarted artiste, the modern do-nothing lay-about, and the bohemian nonworker have a long history in American and European culture. Most slack films owe something of a debt to Linklater for opening the mainstream to a burgeoning Gen X market. Without *Slacker*, much of 1990s cinema would conceivably act as simple *American Graffiti* (1973) rip-offs that feature nothing but tired plots, clichéd slang, flannel shirts, and grunge music to suggest a period rather than distinctly mark an era.

I propose that the films made in the wake of *Slacker* by largely Generation X filmmakers function in a less self-conscious but undoubtedly more memorable way because, while unquestionably focused on portraying youth culture, these films were inspired by the directors' and screenwriters' "everyday lives." Rather than relying on some vanilla version of the recent past, the sort of outlook pre-approved by focus groups, taste makers, and oldies stations, a tactic deployed by George Lucas's *American Graffiti* and Lawrence Kasdan's *The Big Chill* (1983), films that depict the rising Boomer generation in a backwards looking fashion, slack films depict the Generation X culture as it reaches its zenith. John Hughes didn't set out to make *16 Candles* (1984) as a 1980s period piece but instead to create a thoroughly modern film that incorporated the music, ideals, and struggles of teens from the era. The architects of slack cinema succeeded because they made similarly honest attempts to capture the slack subculture of the later 1980s and early 1990s. While there are undeniably slack film predecessors, including Hughes's own *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), these films often feature the slacker as the anti-hero or the exception to the social rules that bind all of the other characters. In contrast, the 1990s slack film movement starred slackers as the standard, the everyman or everywoman worthy of the audiences' pity and

empathy, not simply their admiration. The slack era of film persists largely due to the influence of these early 1990s titans of independent cinema. A brief examination of the cultural, political, and social changes in the United States, from the Boomers to Generation X, helps provide a frame for the development of the nascent slack subculture on screen. The advent of consumerism, the increasing pre-eminence of city life, and the impact of major social upheavals from the 1970s helped inform the perspective of Generation X as well as the economic and social realities of their daily lives.

Lawrence Grossberg presents a compelling examination of the economic and cultural realities of “people’s relations to popular culture” through his concept of the “rock formation” (132). The rock formation is a paradigm for considering the “‘mainstream’ of American popular culture” including the luxuries of free time and self-determination that constitute a person’s “everyday life” (Grossberg 133). The concept of “everyday life” presents a way to analyze the “luxury,” “pleasure, and comfort [present in] the stability of repetitiveness” (Grossberg 149) that consistent free time afforded to many Americans in the wake of the post-World War II economic boom. Americans could use this free time to better themselves outside of the workplace, devoting more time to reading, hobbies, dining out, and socializing. The most important part of “everyday life” for Grossberg is that this unrestricted free time, and the various interests it promoted, led to the formation of a shared American popular culture or “rock culture.”

While the Baby Boomers were the first generation to make full use of this extra free time to develop an extensive popular culture environment, Grossberg argues that the parents of Boomers, the Silent Generation, had already begun to experience the way “capitalism destroys the possibility of any such [oppositional] style by commodifying every instance of life” (Grossberg 149) because, despite “a growing number of images of youth in trouble,” the “dominant images of youth culture ... [from the 1950s were sanitized concepts like] the bunny hop, hoola hoops, crew cuts, ... and Brylcreem” (Grossberg 144). While a segment of the

Boomers, spurred on by their negative experiences with the current system or their growing social awareness, attempted to challenge authority through their music, dress, and oppositional politics—all concepts that would soon be easily commodified and even marketed back to them—a significantly larger portion of the population grew up with and eventually settled into the pop-culture centered world of “everyday life,” an existence Grossberg argues remained mostly “removed from economic or political concerns” (143). The larger historical forces that helped shape the rock formation, according to Grossberg, can be seen through three prominent influences: the Baby Boom; the conflict between “apocalyptic post-modern” ideology and “middle class and working class white ideology,” seen most clearly in the hippy movement; and the “compromises and contradictions” (Grossberg 134) inherent in the post-World War II American cultural experience.

Grossberg argues that these three factors work together to create the basic cultural and political opinions and resources that prompted the slack sense of disassociation from an undoubtedly moneyed society. After World War II, capital, labor, and the underclass united against the external threat of communism through a series of “competing but basically compatible interests” within the capitalist system that prioritized increasing productivity in most business sectors in the face of a possible Russian attack and relied on the occasional “state mediation” (Grossberg 140) to smooth over internal conflict. The concept of “production spurred by government spending” became a new “paradigm for economic prosperity” that also “inflated consumer spending” (Jezer 124). Notions of “moderation and thrift” seemed outdated as Americans faced a “seemingly unending postwar boom” (Jezer 125). The shift in Americans’ perceptions of their economic possibilities also altered American social expectations and aspirations.

The family from 1945 to 1960 became an increasingly isolated “consuming unit” “stripped ... of its historical continuity” (Jezer 220) as the concept of an extended family swung

out of vogue and the largely self-sustaining nuclear family of mother, father, and children became the social norm. The pressure to form an independent nuclear family left many new couples in new cities or new suburban neighborhoods “vulnerable” to the pressures of an increasingly pervasive isolationist consumer culture that favored an “exaggerated sense of privacy” and stressed “mobility as a rule” (Jezer 220). For many adults in post-World War II society, simply providing for their immediate families and investing in domestic goods helped “reproduce a traditional American isolationism at the level of family life” (Grossberg 143). The Depression-era generation displayed typical American “quietism and conservatism” (Grossberg 143) in their struggles towards the social respectability that they felt should accompany their newfound economic prosperity with an emphasis on ensuring social mobility for their children within this seemingly endless economic boom (142).

The Baby Boomers, the children of the Depression era children, inherited a favorable economic situation, a result of “radically unstable prosperity, built on a continued war economy” (Grossberg 138). This economic situation produced a generation, according to Grossberg, largely “uninterested in social or political issues” and “motivated only by a desire for security” (143). This disengaged lifestyle crafted by the majority of Boomers placed a high value on the mundane, leisure-time based acts of “everyday life.” Though the thought of “normal life [in the business world] ... is utterly appalling” to most members of the slack generation, they unquestionably benefited from the relative strength of the US economy and extended the post-World War II insular orientation to its logical conclusion, a completely self-enclosed space for artistic expression where they can indulge in various forms of “pseudo intellectual posturing” (Dunn 74) about both highbrow and “refreshingly lowbrow” (Dunn 75) subjects.

Often viewing themselves, and perhaps their close friends, as examples of “unrecognized genius” (Dunn 87), members of the 1990s slacker subculture remained disinterested in and displayed occasional hostility towards the political and social realities of the day in favor of a

self-stimulating world of minimum-wage jobs that require only fractional attention and effort and maximized free time to create an immersive “everyday life” far removed from work and largely preoccupied with high-culture aspirations such as graduate school, filmmaking, or a career in music. Indeed, one major difference between the slackers and the Boomers arises as a result of the slackers’ “refusal to be categorized,” which arose in direct response to the “Baby Boomer’s undying love for the concept of group identity” (Dunn 7). In short, slackers viewed each of their attempts to become “a cynical destitute genius” as a wholly unique and singular gesture (Dunn xi).

Many of the practices, priorities, and affectations that accrued cultural capital within the slack community can be traced to the practices of nineteenth century bohemians, perhaps the first modern counterculture. Lutz looks to French writer Henri Murger’s *Scenes*, written in the 1830s, as a typical account of bohemians who “reject bourgeois success and propriety for a life of aesthetic and romantic pleasure” (136). The bohemians featured in Murger’s work often exhibited “an aura of tragedy” (Lutz 136) that distinguishes them by virtue of the relatively foolhardy nature of their artistic pursuits from those who simply refuse to work; however, bohemians came to stand out due to “their lack of money and interest in work” as much as for their artistic pretensions (Lutz 136). The 1850s saw the rise of the *Saturday Press*, perhaps America’s first counterculture if not anti-political newspaper “arguing for a pure individualism, and against all social complaints” (Lutz 137). This bohemian lifestyle that prioritizes success in art over achievements within mainstream society became rampant by the 1920s, spreading to become “an aspect of life even in the smallest cities in the country” (Lutz 140).

The distinction between bohemians and slackers should in no way be seen as categorical, but rather invokes some of the various ingredients that mix together to create the eventual slack paradigm. The various bohemian or “counterculture ... [impulses] dedicated to art instead of work, to ideas instead of material comforts, to principled hedonism instead of conventional

success” (Lutz 213) can often co-exist, blending certain aspects of slacking and achieving in a counterculturally approved fashion. According to Dunn in 1994, the “slack sensibility is part old-fashioned bohemianism and part *fin de siècle* exhaustion placed against the backdrop of a crappy recession and intolerable suburban irony” (6). I chose to pursue this project largely because the pre-conditions for slackers, invoked in Grossberg's concept of “everyday life,” remain intact, as do global recession and the ever-expanding suburbs. I find the attempts to present slack culture via film to a larger audience to be especially productive as a way to spotlight early 1990s culture's efforts to portray the bohemian aspects of slack life dedicated to the “cultivation of the inner-landscape” via a “non-degree post-bac program of your own devising” (Dunn 7).

While there remain certain ground rules to living in the slacker subculture, as Sarah Dunn humorously demonstrates in her lists of Deep Questions to Ponder at a Café (59) and Ideal Slacker Day Jobs (23-4), most slackers feel empowered by their own individual pursuit of some higher, if vaguely defined, artistic ideal. This general desire to find artistic success outside of the typical constraints of the mainstream establishment can sometimes function as an overload of “everyday life.” Far removed from worries about a career or family, and sometimes even about paying the rent, the slackers spend copious amounts of time dedicated to their individualized pursuits, perhaps never fully grasping either the futility of seeking recognition for their purposely difficult art or their position as the most recent in a long line of overeducated and socially disinterested slackers. The slack subculture, then, expressed itself in the late '80s with a particular gusto, creating a strain of slack culture that has remained viable in certain manifestations from the mid-to-late 1980s until 1997, though some vestiges of slack culture, like a preference for 1970s fashion and a reverence for Nirvana's *Nevermind*, remain a part of the American pop culture landscape up to the present day. Filmic attempts to represent the culture have created new slang, new trends, and, most importantly, altered the way that youth subcultures are perceived on film. Because the films this thesis centers on remain preoccupied with manifestations of Grossberg's

middle-class centric “everyday life,” an examination of these filmic representations of slacker culture will illuminate aspects of this lifestyle and subculture within American life that account for the relative durability of certain elements of the current slack paradigm.

Chapter 2

Clerks, Mallrats, and Grossberg's "Everyday Life"

Clerks (1994) and *Mallrats* (1995), Kevin Smith's seminal odes to the slacker lifestyle, helped ferry the rising slack culture of 1990s America to the mainstream. Smith's first two films cut out many of the bohemian appeals present in Linklater's opus to slackdom and replaced them with an everyman sense of desolation. While Linklater spent a fair amount of time bumming around Austin, Texas before completing *Slacker*, his first serious attempt at a feature film, Smith dropped out of film school, pawned his comic book collection, maxed out his credit cards, and borrowed money from friends in his rush to shoot *Clerks* (*Snowball Effect*). Smith was unquestionably motivated by *Slacker* but filtered the slack sensibility into more conventional plots and characters. Instead of Linklater's seemingly oblivious artiste characters, Smith chose to depict struggling, self-aware slackers and their largely failed rebellions against social norms that have placed them on the economic and artistic margins. Though Smith's geeky slackers are more easily identifiable as losers than bohemians, the director's efforts to inject slack ethos into the teen lower-middle class world of mindless minimum-wage jobs and existential angst contrast nicely with Linklater's sprawling fictional Austin where seemingly every character, despite equally pedestrian day jobs as clerks and baristas, pursues a higher calling in a band, as an artist, or even an "anti-art artist." Smith's everyman interpretation of the slacker zeitgeist, demonstrated in his young-adult sex comedies, helped define the slack aesthetic at its most humorous and amiable. Examination of the changes from the independently financed *Clerks* to the studio funded *Mallrats* provides a useful overview of the ways slack culture funneled through Hollywood and ultimately became integrated into the mainstream of American cinema.

The gradual commodification of the slacker ethos carries with it some undeniable cultural baggage, as slack became a 1990s fad, informing the sensibilities of other genres of movies that wouldn't be considered slack otherwise. This infusion of new or timely ideas or concepts into more traditional styles of films is a tactic that Rick Altman describes as a "generic label" (*Film* 53). For example, at the turn of the twentieth century, an adjectival term like "Western" would appear as a descriptive label or an "add-on" to well-established noun genres like comedy or adventure, creating combinations like "Western Comedy" or "Western Adventure" (Altman, *Film* 52). The "Western" adjective in Western Comedies alerted the audience that the film would feature a frontier setting, a saloon, and probably a duel with pistols at high noon, yet a Western Comedy also retained the sense of humor, adventure, and romantic pairings that form the core elements of comedy. If this blend of adjective and noun genre proved popular, as was the case with the Western, the adjectival genre may soon become its own stand-alone genre. Altman specifies that a genre becomes a noun when studios "abandon the add-on approach" (*Film* 53) of mixing something like a "Western" theme with a variety of pre-existing genres and establish the "standardized" (*Film* 53) mix of material and plot that will define this nascent noun genre. To establish the Western noun genre, studios combined the aforementioned "Western material" like the frontier, saloons, and duels with "melodramatic plots and [stock] characters ... [like] villains, endangered woman, law-abiding young men" (Altman, *Film* 53). The final step in making a genre a noun comes from the viewing public who must "self-consciously or not ... become so aware of the structure binding disparate films into a single generic category that the process of viewing would always be filtered through the type concept" (Altman, *Film* 53). In essence, the audience develops a separate sense of stand-alone genre expectations for the Western, independent of any other genre.

Smith helped position "slack" as a viable adjective that could blend with a variety of comedies to create hybrid genres like "slack romantic comedy" or "slack parody comedy." While

Smith's films may certainly depict 1990s style and could be read as mere tokens of the slack era, they also worked within their time to help make certain films more of the period via an infusion of the slack aesthetic, *Clerks* especially functioning as a harbinger of the post-*Slacker* flourishing of slack inflected fiction films. Following some three and four years after *Slacker*, respectively, Smith's films remain noteworthy due to their attempts to depict unimpressively slack hetero white guys in all of their slacker glory.

Clerks, in particular, distinguishes itself with reliable sense of every-dude defeatism. A sense of suburban slack malaise that privileges Grossberg's "everyday life" of pop culture immersion over a diligent work ethic seems omnipresent in the film, regardless of the numerous zany plot twists Smith throws into the mix. The importance of "everyday life" seems inextricably linked to Smith's unconventional filmic landscape where timid nerds act, not simply as comic-relief sidekicks, but as the stars of the film and seem to succeed or fail on their own marginal terms. *Clerks* did not single handedly produce a cinematic shift towards films featuring every-person slackers, but Smith's early films do provide a bizarre sense of pathetic escapism that allows the audience to favorably relate to the slack characters' failings and lives even as we, and several of the supporting characters, see easy ways for the clerks to escape their own circumstances. Smith's work hardly counts as cinéma vérité but instead allows folks to see a cartoon version of New Jersey slacker life where "everyday life" pop culture events like hockey games and video rentals share screen time with dramatic occurrences like crazy egg-counting gas station customers and inadvertent necrophilia. The plausibility of Smith's narrative world remains worth discussing, even when it features a fake mall or a small town gas station. There are few situations in Smith's early work that could not be encountered in real life. Perhaps some of the exaggerated characters and overly witty dialogue occasionally reduce the verisimilitude of Smith's first two films, but they mostly feature characters preoccupied with "everyday life" who

use their free time to view hermaphrodite porn, discuss the political implications of *Star Wars*, and wait to get off work so they can play street hockey.

Clerks

The cult audience built around Smith's nerd-friendly, dialogue-heavy and occasionally romantic portrayal of "everyday life" should be seen as only part of a larger slack subculture, a group that preferred to live in its own "self-contained realm" rather than see its stars receive attention from mainstream record labels, film studios, book publishers, and, worst of all, MTV (Gordinier 24). *Clerks* differs from *Mallrats* in terms of the drab economic and philosophic realities of the film and the role of the witty sidekick, long a Smith film staple. These differences, played out within the films' shared plot premise of recent high school grads bumming around New Jersey, help highlight the changing depiction of the slacker in early 1990s cinema. Dante (Brian O'Halloran) and Randall (Jeff Anderson), the primary desk jockeys in *Clerks*, are both twenty-two and, in Randall's words, "overcompensate for having what's basically a monkey's job" through expressions of superiority. Dante, the more affable of the pair, refers to the patrons of the Quik Stop where he works as "customers" to their face and as "some moron" or even as "backward-ass fucks" after the customers depart the store. Randall, the snide clerk at the neighboring video store, behaves in a far more aggressive and stand-offish manner, spitting water in the face of customers, ordering explicitly titled porn films in front of a woman and her child, ignoring questions about the films at his store, and even showing a porn magazine to a customer he knows will be offended. Neither enjoys his job, but the duo's wildly different coping strategies help demonstrate each clerk's perspective on their minimum wage-earning existence. Dante's two-faced perspective about the customers, a result of burying his stewing distaste in shallow politesse, stems from his own indecisive, conflicted state of mind. Dante remains afraid to, in Randall's words, "initiate change," by going back to college or finally deciding whether he

should remain with Veronica (Marilyn Ghigliotti), his steady but not ideal current girlfriend, or reunite with Caitlin (Lisa Spoonhauer), his consistently unfaithful ex-girlfriend. Randall also hates his job, but he seems content because, even though he, as he puts it, “works badly,” at least he doesn’t have any delusions about the drudgery that pays his salary, gets to take out his accumulated distaste on the customers, and claims to be “satisfied with ... [his] situation for now.”

The drudgery that consumes the main characters’ lives comes largely from their places of business, the adjoining Quik Stop and RST Video, locales that act as characters themselves throughout the film. The racks of Slim Jims, the cigarette packs above the counter, and the rows and rows of convenience foods shot in oppressive black and white, all stand as signifiers of the self-selected prison that entraps Randall and Dante. Even after the two clerks square off in a fistfight, attacking one another with loaves of bread and with Slim Jims in the film’s climax, they must join forces to clean the store after the scuffle. The store consumes Dante to the degree that he comes in on his day off, even when bemoaning he’s “not even supposed to be here today.” As Randall points out, Dante does close the store for a hockey game and also for a funeral, but in both instances the crowds quickly flow back to the Quik Stop and demand service, hampering Dante’s attempts to abuse his power. Though Smith placed Dante in the store because the movie, with its shoestring budget, could only afford one primary set, the store and its demanding, bizarre customers establish the basic social expectations of convenience store clerks in an almost shorthand fashion. Despite Randall’s claim that “title ... [should not] dictate ... behavior,” the two remain clerks and must address their customers throughout the entire film. Even Randall’s attempts to clerk poorly through incredibly rude behavior cannot entirely cancel out the fact that the clerk’s occupation, however simple and service based, demands interaction with customers.

Since the important events of *Clerks* revolve around Dante and Randall, the remainder of the cast, aside from Veronica and Caitlin, appear through a series of brief cameos. Due to

budgetary constraints, many cast members played numerous anonymous, annoying, or strange customers. These characters, given names like “Willam the Idiot Manchild” and “Low I.Q. Video Customer” in the script, serve two purposes. First, they accentuate the hellish nature of Dante’s workplace through their bizarre behavior, including rifling through cartons to find a perfect dozen of eggs, looking through the entire milk selection to find the latest expiration date, or asking to open a new roll of the soft toilet paper from the store’s shelves to use in the bathroom. In contrast, the few relatively benign customers serve as targets for Randall’s scorn when they attempt to start up a modest discussion. Smith emphasizes the flavor of these interactions through a series of fast cut montages that demonstrate the stupidity of certain customers. In these montages, customers are shown on camera for about thirty seconds each, asking questions like “Do you sell hubcaps for a ’72 Pinto hatchback,” “How much do these cost” while standing in front of a sign that reads “All items on Sale for 99 cents,” or “Do you have that one [film] with that guy who was in that movie that was out last year?” These montages demonstrate why Randall looks down upon the customers who he assumes are not only dumb, but also culturally inferior because they will inevitably go for the what he calls “the most intellectually devoid movies on the racks,” films like *Navy Seals* (1990). While there may be, as Randall says to an angry customer, “nothing more exhilarating than pointing out the shortcomings of others,” the clerks spend a fair amount of the film interacting with their customers nonetheless. These odd interactions with strange customers, like the man who gets his hand stuck in the Pringles can or the woman who gets a lot of satisfaction from her job “manually masturbating caged animals for artificial insemination,” help build towards Randall’s final conclusion, that if the pair are “so fucking advanced, what are we doing working here?” This final expression of the clerks’ shared inferiority to their twenty-two year old peers with college degrees, a recognition of their relative lack, shows unexpected progress in the direction of empathy. Throughout the course of the movie the pair refuses to cultivate any sort of universal sympathy for their customers or even resolve Dante’s rather mixed

love life, but instead start to humbly recognize the relationship of their own lives to those of the others they meet. The pair begins to see the importance of transcending the mundane trappings of their clerking existence through an increased awareness of their own limited station, rather than simply reveling in the lacks of others through a series of black comic moments.

Mallrats

In contrast, *Mallrats*, following in the tradition of teen sex comedies, underplays the economic drudgery and interaction with society at large in *Clerks* in favor of a tight cast of interrelated characters, light parodies of consumerism, and a heavy emphasis on the love lives of its quirky central characters, nicely skirting the economic realities plaguing its slacker characters in favor of a more universal story of romantic entanglements. In contrast to the amateur actor leads and the sprawling cast of deranged supporting characters played by Smith's hometown friends featured in *Clerks*, *Mallrats* stars a smaller cast of professional actors in a series of interrelated roles. Brody (Jason Lee), one of the film's lead slackers, comes to the Eden Prairie Mall for comics and free Coke in his miniscule free sample cup; Willam (Ethan Suplee) comes every day for a week to see the boat on the Magic Eye posters at one of the kiosks, and Tricia (Renee Humphrey) sits in the food court trolling for men to help her complete her book on "the sex drive of the 1990's Male titled *BoredGASM*." Though it's unclear why Jay (Jason Mewes) and Silent Bob (Kevin Smith), the lone carryovers from *Clerks*, chose to hangout in the mall on this particular occasion, they seem to act as floating ne'er-do-wells that menace a variety of locales. All of these characters know one another by name and seem comfortable engaging in a kind of slack verbal combat, a social battle of relative equals with one trying to weave a more outlandish slack existence than the other, or perhaps even joining forces to do nothing together. The community at the mall should not be confused with a utopian social order, though the exchange of pleasantries and names, and the discussion of topics of mutual interest, usually with

Brody serving as the gateway between the audience and the supporting characters, suggests a far more intertwined social environment than anything present in the anonymous customer service world of *Clerks*. *Mallrats* features an intricate social environment that allows Smith to employ these various characters in his large-scale conclusion, each one serving as a cog in the machine that eventually reunites Brandi (Claire Forlani) and T.S. (Jeremy London), and Brody and Renee (Shannen Doherty), the two major couples of the film.

In *Mallrats*, Smith deemphasizes the spastic one-off feel of most of his bizarre convenience store customers in favor of the more sedentary, reappearing characters who haunt the local New Jersey Mall. Many characters, like Tricia and Willam, appear often enough throughout the film to occupy a liminal space between quirky bit part caricature and supporting character. The supporting characters and leads work off one another in various combinations to form a sort of loose coalition of mutually-sustaining slackers highlighted by various inter-group conversations mostly focused on the fallout of the break ups of Brandi and T.S. and, to a lesser extent, Brody and Renee. Since T.S. and Brody have both been dumped, the film follows the pair along in their shared commiseration. Gwen (Joey Lauren Adams), T.S.'s ex-girlfriend, spends most of her screen time with straightman T.S. and with Brody, but then goes to chat with Brandi and suggest that T.S. still wants to date her. Similarly, Jay and Silent Bob interact with Brody, arch villain security guard LaFours (Sven-Ole Thorsen) and Tricia. Each of these interactions, more than simply proving that the characters have a pre-existing relationship, serves to forward the plot of the film. Gwen tells Brandi that T.S. still loves her, Jay and Bob get their marching orders from Brody, and Tricia tells Brody about the damning sex tape she filmed with the villainous Shannon Hamilton (Ben Affleck) as part of her research. Each of these interactions helps build towards the cheesy game show ending that relies on the vast majority of the supporting/bit players to reach a satisfying conclusion. The tighter sense of place and relationships present in *Mallrats* allows Smith to get away with gags like Brody complaining that

the Easter Bunny beat him up. In *Clerks*, this might have been a one-off joke, but in *Mallrats* the next scene shows Bob and Jay beating up the Easter Bunny as a sign of solidarity. The Eden Prairie Mall serves as a meeting place for people with a “shopping agenda” as well as the various miscreants or “loser fucking mallrat kids” who, in mall store manager Shannon Hamilton’s disparaging words, “hang out all day, [and] act like..[they] fuckin’ live here.”

The communal vibe of the mall demonstrates that the commercial center cannot completely eclipse the Quik Stop as a source of oppression, but in choosing to patronize not a mall, but, as Brody reverently contends, “The Mall,” the characters have slightly repurposed this commercial temple into a place where they can experience an odd sense of escape simply by arriving with what Tricia describes as “no agenda as per usual.” Certain landmarks of the mall, like the food court or the cookie stand, serve as reminders of the commercial topography of the ever-changing mall that relies on “reinvented” commercial spaces like the fish restaurant that becomes a tanning salon or the fashion store that, according to a deleted scene, “used to be a Duran Duran themed burger joint called ‘Hungry Like the Wolf.’” A shared knowledge of the mall’s layout allows Brody to casually inform the fleeing Jay that his pursuer “must be halfway to By-Me-Toys by now.” Similarly, Brody knows that the “Easter Bunny Court is on the east end of the mall and has been up since two days after Christmas” and becomes outraged that no one told him of the impending game show in what he views as his mall, a place where he claims, in one of the deleted scenes, to function as one of the few “constant[s] in this consumer mecca.” The film’s frequent discussions about the Eden Prairie Mall’s layout and significance act as a platform for Smith’s skeptical Gen X perspective on consumerism.

Though Smith remains firmly rooted in the popular culture tradition, eschewing some of the bohemian strains of slacker culture present in other ’90s films, *Mallrats* seems fully self-aware of its position as an unmistakably commercial film that still hopes to mock mainstream consumer culture. The titles of various stores in Smith’s fictional mall (“Popular Girl” and

“Fashionable Male” for the clothing stores and “Burning Flesh” for a tan salon) suggest the shallowness of consumer culture. While not quite a direct satire of the Gap or other similar brand-name stores, Smith’s title parodies, coupled with the demeanor of the insensitive, misogynistic Shannon Hamilton, hint at the status war being waged by actual customers of the mall. In contrast to the up-to-date and visually appealing new malls of the period, Smith’s Eden Prairie Mall is fading. The Eden Prairie Mall features bland store interiors and largely jokey store names; even the stores Renee visits looking for fashionable clothes contain mostly drab merchandise in the background. Smith’s presumed disinterest in consumer culture outside of the latest films, comics, and videogames dulls down even a trip to the lingerie store, which becomes an uninteresting exercise aside from a few cheap jokes involving Brody wearing women’s underwear. The interiors of the stores, then, remind people that no matter the brand name, the contents remain simply material goods. Whatever trendy garment Renee buys, and she does switch costumes numerous times during the film, ultimately fails to alter her character. Even major commercial events—like the “two major comic book labels ... crossing over characters, [and] selling two editions of the same book in varied-ink chromium covers”—pale compared to the relatively difficult task of finding someone to care about you, as comics maestro Stan Lee suggests in a cameo.

In a commentary track, Smith discusses how the half-empty Eden Prairie Mall in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, the basic setting for the film, allowed him to add in his own stores with titles like “The Fashionable Male” to the dying mall’s then vacant store-fronts, but even the real life stores, like the generic looking coffee shop featured behind Willam and adorned with Easter decorations, contain a hint of mid-’90s drudgery in their bland white and pearl color schemes that cannot be enlivened even by their neon signs. Even the spots that Brody condescendingly deems worthy of patronage, the bustling comic shop named “Comic Toast” and the cookie stand titled “Time for Cookies,” seem like boring places for exchange rather than destinations in and of

themselves. If the mall seems such a dreary place, Brody's passionate exclamation of "I love the smell of commerce in the morning" upon entering must come largely from the sense of freedom the mall bestows via the numerous if slight diversions it provides. In this particular mall, Smith depicts shopping as a recreational activity rather than an exercise in crass capitalism. Brody ambles to the comic shop whose wares seem as impermanent and finally ineffectual as the cookies Brody and T.S. consume; shopping becomes a routine of anticipation, consumption, and return without significant bearings on the characters. Even the white and red monstrosity that is the jumbo sized "dirt mall" flea market with its "good people, great buys, [and] earthy aromas," seems far more important to Brody than the Eden Prairie Mall due to the fact that the vendors "know ... [him] here." The dirt mall may function as a more salvageable entity, a space where unforced human interaction accompanies commerce, especially in the person of topless fortuneteller Ms. Ivana. Ivana gives the two leads life advice, admittedly for a fee, and her false-third-nipple-enhanced hucksterism seems (shall we say) over the top to the point of seeming harmless. If a customer pays her a standard fee of \$58.60, she provides a fair amount of usable advice. Putting a name to a merchant, even one who essentially sells advice, helps the commercial process immensely. Inside the dirt mall, Brody and a vendor named Walt exchange greetings by name, and Brody also feels free to critique a vendor, telling her that she should have boards supporting her comics. The positive and negative sides of interaction, the chance to talk with (and sometimes critique) vendors, seems lacking in the Eden Prairie Mall, full of Smith's cookie-cutter stores, anonymous clerks, tyrannical managers, and blindly obedient security guards.

Kevin Smith and Grossberg's "Everyday Life"

Smith focuses on the interaction between the characters and the possible soul-slaying commerce of the mall to the detriment of actually developing the daily lives of his characters. While Brody admits that he subsists on visits to the "blood bank" and "sperm bank" during a

deleted scene, the audience in the final cut establishes Brody as a slacker based largely on his sizable comic book collection, his unkempt hair, and the fact that he still lives with his parents. Without any significant ties to the drudgery of minimum-wage work present in *Clerks*, Brody seems to exist largely as a rootless delivery mechanism for Smith's comic book and commerce-themed jokes rather than as a fully realized character. Jason Lee's frequent smiles help portray Brody, like Randall, as a mirthful slacker, but the film's depiction of the character seems overly sanitized, lacking the drudgery that accompanies a believably slack existence. Brody, so long as his girlfriend tolerates him, doesn't seem to have any desire to hold a job and seems joyfully invested in his Sega videogames and his comic collection. The other characters in *Mallrats* function in a similarly thin way, moving the plot forward with quirks and plot points rather than providing insight into the Grossberg's politics of "everyday life." Though Brody claims that Renee dumped him for being too much of a slacker, the audience never clearly sees how Renee earns a living either. Similarly, the final cut of the film obscures the daily occupations of T.S. and Brandy.

While the original opening scene in *Mallrats* featured both Brandi and T.S. involved in their college, the fictional Monmouth State University, the final cut of the film largely ignores the respective employment and education statuses of its leads. T.S., the quintessential straight man, does not receive much in the way of character development in any cut of the film. In the original screenplay, he was a contestant on a game show and went to Seton Hall; in a deleted scene, part of an alternate opening to the film, he gains a sketchy identity from the George Washington-esque colonial uniform he dons as part of the school musical. Brandi, by contrast, needs some sort of development to make it clear why T.S. wants to reconcile with her. Without an interesting slack sidekick, or any other characters to play off save the blank slate that is T.S., Brandi suffers from a severe lack of screen time and personality traits. She uses a telescope in the deleted opening sequence and seems scholarly wearing her glasses, but without this foundation she becomes much

like every other vapid starlet cast as the Manic Pixie Dream Girl, a “bubbly, shallow cinematic creature” (Bowman et al.) there to serve as the end goal of the protagonist’s desires and little else. Renee, as played by Shannen Doherty, avoids seeming similarly shallow by virtue of the sharp degree of wit she exhibits in her infrequent appearances.

Shannon Hamilton acts as a clear anti-slacker, equating respect for mall participants with a purchasing agenda, a sort of anti-slack mindset that Smith equates with the members of his generation who have fully embraced the Boomer values of consumerism, professionalism, and group cohesion. Hamilton defines himself through his lack of social grace, his perverse attempts to “screw ... [girls] someplace very uncomfortable,” and his job as a manager of a clothing store that sells business clothing, dubbed the “Fashionable Male,” designed to help yuppie-leaning mall goers dress in a socially acceptable up-to-date fashion. Hamilton and Mr. Svening, Brandi’s nefarious father (Michael Rooker), are the two noticeable villains of *Mallrats* and use the mall as a space for enhancing their reputation through sales of clothes or television shows (as Svening attempts to do with his awful game show titled “Truth or Date”). Svening and Hamilton seem far removed from the communal ethos of the mall as a gathering place for honest shoppers, layabouts like Jay and Silent Bob, and even perpetual abusers of mall courtesy like Brody with his constant requests for refills in his sample cup. Brody’s ability to focus the community of the mall against both of these perceived threats further suggests the importance of the people over the place. Brody and company strive to reinscribe the concept of a mall into a gather space for outcasts rather than a showcase for dating shows or fashionable clothing. Tellingly, the outcasts, not anyone directly affiliated with the mall, manage to thwart the plans of businessmen like Svening and “pillars of the shopping community” like Hamilton who prize commerce and agendas of any kind over the ability to enjoy a quiet day at the mall.

The shallow romantic plot, built around a series of characters without much context save that they recently dated one another and want to reunite, on some level dominates the film.

Brody and T.S.'s amorous aspirations lead the pair to the mall, force them to flee to the dirt mall, and eventually empower them to disrupt "Truth or Date." Unlike *Clerks*, where the characters have to stay and clean up their store after the conclusion of Dante's romantic drama, *Mallrats* spotlights the destruction as T.S. and Brody crash the game show, but the film quickly cuts to a summary montage immediately after the two principle couples reunite. Despite the clear romantic focus of the film, the four seemingly aimless romantic leads need each other in a way that's not entirely clear to the audience. Since each of the four leads seems like a slacker with only background indications of gainful employment or education, *Mallrats* engages in an even more complete embrace of the a-political "everyday life" described by Grossberg. However, in this world of relatively infinite free time where work is secondary, Smith's characters decide to visit the mall and scheme to reunite with a significant other. T.S. and Brody don't necessarily abuse the overly generous segment of "everyday life" they've been given, but instead seem to remain preoccupied with distinctively un-bohemian universal human concerns of love and recreational commerce. The bohemian trappings that often accompanied 1990s slack culture in real life, and even on film, get reduced to a series of comic book jokes. Smith returned to the world of slackers in *Chasing Amy*, his 1997 follow up to *Mallrats*, which features some of the same actors playing slacker comic book creators; however, the shift from slacker as socially disengaged, philosophically dull malcontent to tortured artiste suggests a shift in Smith's filmmaking targeted towards a mainstream audience more interested in dramatic plot twists and exaggerated bi-sexual love stories with a slack flavor than in the politics of the daily humdrum interactions of characters more representative of the actual Gen X slack subculture. The tension between Smith's original impulses for his follow-up to *Clerks*, which he pitched to execs as "*Clerks* in a mall" (*View Askew's Look Back at Mallrats*), and the studio's decisions with regards to cast, the final cut of the film, and marketing worked together to present a more consumer-friendly version of the

slacker bereft of a large portion of the economic and personal frustration that helped build the fan base for *Clerks*.

Chapter 3

Empire Records, Singles, Reality Bites, Knocked Up, and the Parameters of the Slack Film Genre

The de-emphasis of the “everyday life” aspects in the final third of *Mallrats*, best evidenced in the film’s focus on the too convenient reconciliation of its romantic principle characters, suggests that the slack aesthetic may not function as a noun genre in its own right. While the slack subculture may perhaps be too fluid and time specific to fully coalesce into a noun genre in *Mallrats*, this chapter will offer a survey of several films that feature the slack subculture of the mid-1990s in hopes of providing a more complete investigation of slack film’s status as a noun or adjectival genre. While investigating these several films, I plan to highlight the larger formal genre of each of the chosen films and suggest the slack subcultural trappings present in each film. At the conclusion of this chapter, I will bring together these various slack film features to create a series of descriptors that can hopefully be viewed as the definitive traits of slack film. Once I have grouped and critiqued these traits, I will venture my own tentative opinions regarding whether slack film will remain a fluid adjective capable of creating new strains of slack-influenced films or whether the category has become its own genre with its own set of expectations for plot, style, and focus.

Empire Records

The basic genre of *Empire Records* (1995), a teen drama/comedy with slight overtones of a workplace comedy (Lichman), is less important for our study than the slack trappings that accompany director Allan Moyle’s tale of teen angst. The basic plot of *Empire Records* involves

the impending purchase of the titular records store by corporate chain Music Town. Store manager Joe (Anthony LaPaglia) had saved up enough money to make a down payment on the store, which (as a partner) he will continue to run as an independent business. Lucas (Rory Cochrane), Joe's protégé, discovers the impending sale in the form of a franchise agreement form and, unaware of Joe's plan, gambles away some nine thousand dollars of store receipts in Atlantic City in a desperate attempt to save the store and his friends' jobs. The film takes place largely over the course of the next day after each employee has found out about the impending purchase and Lucas's well-intentioned but ultimately disastrous decision. The threat of the sale helps drive the plot as the current Empire Records employees would be unqualified to work for Music Town by virtue of their noticeable piercings and tattoos, fondness for provocative dress, or simple unreliability; accordingly, the employees must earn a total of nine thousand dollars over the course of the day or risk losing their jobs and their beloved store. Though the slack aesthetic informs the film, its basic plot could have been made in 1960 or 2011. The very universality of the basic plot comes through clearest in director Moyle's resolution of the plot dilemma. Moyle has the group of slackers hold a benefit concert to save the store, a very common narrative trope in film. Yet the film's style and the way Moyle and screenwriter Carol Heikkinen present the teen issues of the 1990s serve as useful exemplars of several traits of '90s slack film despite the conventional plot.

Empire mimics *Mallrats* through its combination of romance and consumerism, but features a much more faithful representation of 1990s slack subculture style. Though Smith had a professional costume designer, Dana Allyson, on the set of *Mallrats*, the director's sense of everyday fashion dictates the way his characters appear in the film. Smith's own predilection for goofy t-shirts and non-descript blazers and flannel for his male characters and the plain dresses worn by most of the female characters suggests only a slight tinge of '90s style. Smith relied largely on the various stores and trappings of the mall to convey a sense of the 1990s. In contrast,

the Empire Records store features a neon sign indicating that it was founded in 1959 and so Susan Lyall, the costume designer for *Empire Records*, had to provide the film's principle characters with a fashion sense that clearly marked them as very 1990s within the relatively aged Empire Records building.

Due to Lyall's period-appropriate costume design, *Empire Records* acts as a fruitful avenue to examine the influences of slack subculture on 1990s film fashion. The slack-influenced youths in *Empire Records* wear old cardigans and sports jerseys, mixing these vintage pieces of clothing with the shredded jeans and long hair that mark the era. The influence of 1970s-era fashion reflects the era the characters grew up in without slavishly reproducing the era. For example, Corey (Liv Tyler) mixes a 1970s-inspired plaid skirt with 1990s grunge combat boots on the film's promotional poster. The promotional poster features all of the young stars of the film in unmistakably 1990s fashion, from the navel baring tops worn by Corey and Gina (Renee Zellweger) to the vintage Puma shoes worn by Mark (Ethan Embry) and Lucas to the baggy pants and shaved head of Debra (Robin Tunney). The navel-baring short shirt arose from the mid 1990s forward, hitting its zenith when a then teenage Brittany Spears sported the look in her "...Baby One More Time" video (1999). The bare midriff, and the occasional belly button piercing that accompanied it, served as a clear sign of a girl's youth, fitness, and sex appeal in the 1990s. The vintage Pumas indicate not only a familiarity with the brand's 1970s hey-day as an athletic shoe but also suggest the slight irony of largely inactive slackers wearing athletic footwear for comfort, despite the shoe's intended purpose, to provide ankle support for professional basketball and soccer players. Lastly, Debra's shaved head, baggy pants, and tattoos serve as reminders of the shifting gender norms of the 1990s. Despite these traditionally unfeminine traits, Deb dates musician Berko (Coyote Shivers) and the film does little to comment on the rebellious nature of her seemingly subversive style, save to suggest that she would have trouble finding work at a different record store that might frown on her untraditional appearance. In addition, Mark, AJ

(Johnny Whitworth), and Joe all have longer hair than most movie stars of the era. Though hair length seemed to be a bigger indication of political radicalism in the 1960s than the 1990s, the slightly overgrown shag haircut gained a fair amount of prominence in the 1990s, a tribute to the shifting gender expectations about appearance and gender performance. The combination of 1970s vintage style with various contemporary accents or reinterpretations appears in most slack film. The exact manifestation of the style will unquestionably vary from film to film, but the basic reverence for 1970s fashion combined with the present trends towards both skin-baring and baggy clothing for women and longer hair and various combinations of the athletic and the casual for men will appear in characters' wardrobes in most slack films. *Empire Records*, in addition to featuring slack fashion, also demonstrates the way the slack aesthetic can alter a fairly standard drama/comedy film narrative through its uniquely 1990s presentation of teen problems.

The film features universal teen problems like unrequited love and ambitions but associates them with very 1990s style to establish its core characters as multi-dimensional individuals who deal with complicated issues like women's intelligence in the work place and academia as well as teen suicide. These issues arise in Moyle's focus on the drug-addicted Corey and the rebellious Deb. The film shows Corey, the most classically beautiful *Empire* employee, putting white, breath mint-like pills in her mouth a few times throughout the first two-thirds of the film. The audience learns of the actual nature of the pills when Gina reveals to the entire cast that Corey is addicted to speed. The speed has helped Corey deal with her clear lack of self-confidence and allowed her to focus enough on her studies that she gets into Harvard. Corey hides the pills in a compartment beneath her lip-stick tube and bursts into tears when Gina reveals the nature of these seemingly innocuous pills. The importance of depicting Corey's addiction lies largely in the fact that academic achievement, especially by female characters, is rarely treated with such candor on film. Corey has a drug problem because she doesn't feel confident about her own abilities, her own existence in the world. She doesn't reject academia as most typical

slackers do, but her young age seems to suggest that she's a slacker-in-training, not entirely comfortable with her station in the world, and seeking outlets for her frustration with academia and her inability to be "brave like [the brash] Gina" in the face of a serious drug addiction.

It's undeniably a bit melodramatic for Corey to use speed rather than something more socially acceptable like caffeine as her academic enhancer, but the outing of a typical film dream girl like Corey (as depicted by Tyler, the daughter of a rock star and a Playmate) as a fearful but academically successful addict amongst a world of middle, lower-middle, and lower class clerks helps add a degree of depth to the typical teen-problem story. The specific nature of these issues, stemming from the character's feelings of insecurity as a 1990s woman striving for academic success in an environment where women are more openly welcome but not necessarily on equal terms with their male counterparts, helps distinguish the film and suggests that slack film as a genre can in part depict the effects of complicated social issues within the context of a character arc. Deb functions as an unquestionably more typical troubled teen, yet her troubles and the nature of the film's response to them help reinforce the notion that slack films can both spotlight and to a degree deal with timely social problems. Corey's decision to hide her addiction, as unorthodox as it may be to burden the beauty of the film with an addiction, seems in line with typical teen problem films where the unhappy teen shelters his or her problems from the world at large. Deb, by contrast, seems to want to share her issues with anyone who'll listen.

Deb's rebellious features, her shaved head and bandaged suicide wounds, are treated as problematic but not necessarily character defining. Deb's attempts to draw attention to herself belie a sense of self-importance but also of showmanship present in 1990s slack subculture. Deb draws attention to herself by shaving her head with clippers at work, after walking in with a typical short female hairstyle. This desire to push the fashion template may not be incredibly new, but shaved heads for females remain a taboo in large segments of American society. Hebdige would view Deb's decision as an act of resistance that "directs attention to itself; it gives itself to

be read” (101) as a clear rejection of middle class values. Deb’s decision to shave her head along with her frequent demonstrations of her bandaged wrists and eventual tearful proclamation that she used “a Lady Bic[, a] pink plastic razor with daises on it and a moisturizing strip” to try and kill herself the night before are public rejections of mainstream society but also self-assertions. Deb, the film too by extension, remains unafraid not only to share but also to publicize the sometimes ugly tendencies of young people who have decided to live on the margins of society. *Empire Records*, then, suggests that slack films may focus on a variety of social problems and time period-specific attitudes within the context of a single character while attempting to flesh out each character’s motivations within the conventional plot of the film.

Corey clearly has to function as the object of AJ’s affection, Gina’s jealousy, and, in a decidedly slack spin on the flawed leading lady, the audience’s sympathy as she struggles to achieve academic and economic success in a world full of potential accomplishments but also one with a very clear glass ceiling. By contrast, Deb largely functions as the social misanthrope. She receives largely negative attention but also enough screen time for the audience to see that she has both a biting wit and a desire to share her own insecure outlook on life where the “only thing ... different [from one day to another] ... was something else making ... [her] feel shitty.” This desire to share her perspective leads her to show her wounds from her suicide attempt of the night before during a mock funeral designed to help her recover. While the Empire staff listens to Corey’s problem and consoles the recently outed addict in private, Deb receives a more public platform to turn the focus solely on her own disenfranchisement.

Deb selects the music for the ceremony and when the conversation turns to other people says, “Aren’t we supposed to be talking about me?” While the rest of the cast eventually reveals their own shortcomings during Deb’s mock funeral in an attempt to get Deb to discuss the particularities of her experience and thereby integrate Deb back into the Empire Records community, her incredibly disassociated attitude and her public self-promotion help spotlight the

tendency of slack films to sometimes pair interior dissatisfaction with outward expressions of contempt in dress or action. The public nature of slack style, a mix and match fashion free-for-all, also seems to suggest a similar avenue for self-expression and self-determination that, while more socially acceptable, can be just as aggrandizing and public as a shaved head. While it could certainly be argued that *Empire* brings up teen suicide only to lightly dismiss it as an attention-grabbing device, *Empire* treats Deb with such empathy and humor that it seems more likely the film was making an attempt to portray the character's feelings of private disenfranchisement and public anger using an extreme example that integrated teen suicide, a topically 1990s concept, alongside the slack tendency to publically convey dissatisfaction via fashion and lifestyle choices.

Singles

Cameron Crowe's romantic drama *Singles* (1992) features the emerging, heavy grunge Seattle sound in its aesthetic, in its characters, and in its soundtrack. The film's numerous principle characters are all involved in the Seattle music scene in one form or another. Cliff Poncier (Matt Dillon) fronts the struggling grunge band Citizen Dick, his sometime girlfriend Janet Livermore (Bridget Fonda) attends Cliff's shows and rehearsals, and love interests Steve Dunne (Campbell Scott) and Linda Powell (Kyra Sedgwick) meet at one of the grunge concerts they both attend. The film spotlights the grunge scene through performances by various grunge bands like Soundgarden and Alice in Chains in concert during the film and on the soundtrack and could be considered a musical, a concept I will return to below. The basic plot of the film centers around the various romantic pursuits of a group of friends who live in the same apartment complex. Cliff plays in his band and works numerous jobs to pay his rent. Cliff has what he thinks is a casual relationship with his neighbor Janet. Janet doesn't understand that Cliff dates other girls, and she contemplates having breast enlargement surgery to be more Cliff's type until eventually breaking up with Cliff when she finally realizes that he has other girlfriends. Steve,

who lives in the same building with Cliff and Janet, dates Linda for the majority of the film and they agree to get married once Linda becomes pregnant. The upwardly mobile pair associate themselves with the Seattle music scene more as concert-goers than creators, though their jobs (Steve works for the Department of Transportation and Linda works for the Seattle Environmental Council) suggest they are motivated but socially responsible, more yuppies with a conscience than the typical slack film leading couple.

The film functions as an atypical musical by virtue of the heavy interconnections between characters and the music presented through live band performances, the film's score, and the incidental music recordings played by the characters themselves. The film must be categorized as an atypical musical because its cast does not sing or dance, two hallmarks of the genre. The film does feature a fair amount of music from the Seattle music clubs that the film's characters visit. The live bands inspire some dancing in the film, done by Linda and her friend Debbie Hunt (Sheila Kelley). The pair jump around to the loud guitar riffs without much choreography, a distant relation to the sort of coupling by dancing Altman argues constitutes one of the core aspect of the musical. Despite the lack of couples dancing, the music scene seems to be a way of uniting a variety of characters who act as audience stand-ins. Though the film may not feature a screen "covered ... with couples" (Altman, *Musical* 37), the live music performances present an integral communal force that eventually introduces Steve and Linda to one another. While the live performances bond the characters together in a more communal fashion, the film's score helps introduce the recurring theme of romance.

The film's score consists largely of pop songs curated by music supervisor Danny Bramson in addition to a few new songs written and performed by musician Paul Westerberg (of the Replacements). The film begins with a Westerberg song titled "Waiting for Somebody," which features the hook "All my life/ahha ha/waiting for somebody to come and take my hand." While some of the Seattle music scene dealt with a variety of darker Gen X themes including

alienation, disapproval, and angst, Bramson and Westerberg provide the sort of upbeat, romantic music necessary to score this contemporary musical. Westerberg, a songwriter known for his songs about alienation and young love, provides a sense of excited longing in “Waiting for Somebody” that seems provoked by the thought of a chance meeting with a potential partner. The song echoes the film’s thematic emphasis on both the characters’ desire to achieve some ideal version of love and the nervous reservations that accompany their search. The “A-haa-haa” section of the “All My Life” chorus recurs when Janet dumps Cliff, suggesting that romantic anticipation or longing doesn’t mean settling for a less than compatible mate.

Incidental music, music played by the characters rather than juxtaposed over a scene, plays a significant role in Steve and Linda’s courtship and in many slack films. On one of their first dates, the characters play several records by the Clash, Jimi Hendrix, and Sly and the Family Stone on Steve’s stereo. Steve’s records may not fully substitute for typical duet passages “usually reserved for moments of maximum tension or exultation” (Altman, *Musical* 37), but the couple’s mutual appreciation for Hendrix’s “May This Be Love” as they sit quietly serves as a definite bonding moment that forecasts their eventual sexual encounter later in the evening. Hendrix’s mellow lyrics about his “Rainbow/calling me through the seas of my waterfall” seem to calm the couple and underscore the importance of finding one’s own space to the hesitant couple who’ve just exchanged tales of their past failed romances. A relationship between the music that plays in a scene and the characters’ emotions is also apparent when Linda mentions her boring ex-boyfriend Andy. The Cult’s more commercial and unrealistically romantic “She Sells Sanctuary” plays at a party in a surreally shot flashback to the couple’s first meeting at a safe-sex themed party in college and suggests that Linda and Andy, in contrast to the humble emotions evoked by the mellow, inviting Hendrix song, are more interested in pursuing a version of romance that, despite singer Ian Astbury’s dramatic delivery of the song’s lyrics, stresses comfort (“I’m sure in her you’ll find/the sanctuary”) over passionate, complex, and individualistic

feelings. The use of music cues to convey a character's mood or personality functions as a common trope in slack film. In *Mallrats*, Jay and Silent Bob play air guitars as Smith loops in a heavy metal guitar that suggests the duo's slightly misguided anger. A trashy woman who appears right as the Empire Records store closes begs Lucas to play her some Prince, a request that associates the woman with the artist's strong sense of sexuality and strange quirks. *Reality Bites* (see below) features a man wooing a woman by discussing the romantic nature of Peter Frampton's "Baby I Love Your Way" as they sit in the car listening to the tune, another demonstration of the close bond between music (both juxtaposed and incidental) and the characters' personalities and feelings. Aside from the music cues that help classify *Singles* as a contemporary musical, the film also employs another standard of the musical, a heavy focus on the romantic interactions of its lead characters.

Singles can be seen as a musical according to Altman's definition in part because it shares the musical's generic guiding aesthetic principle, which posits that "the natural state of the adult human being is in the arms of an adult human being of the opposite sex" (*Musical* 32). Even in the opening scenes of the film before principle leads Steve and Linda encounter each other, the audience should "see the eventual lovers as a couple, even when they aren't together, even before they have met" (Altman, *Musical* 28). Linda and Steve appear after the opening montage in a pair of back to back scenes that unite them in their shared sense of romantic disappointment and subsequent refusal to seriously consider another relationship. Linda, while excited to have her "own place" complete with a garage door opener, still seems a bit naïve. The audience witnesses Linda's brief courtship with a Spanish exchange student who claims he has to return to Spain in two weeks. She wishes him goodbye at the end of the two week period only to find him using a similar pick-up line on a girl in a bar several days after his supposed departure. After Linda's disaster, Steve spins a similarly distraught story about breaking up with a girl because they weren't "right for each other" and bemoans the complicated series of interactions that led the girl

he just broke up with to start dating a friend of his who is also dating another of Steve's ex-girlfriends on the side. Steve pines for a simple romantic relationship and claims that things hadn't been simple since his father left him at age eight with the parting advice that Steve should "Have fun. Stay single." The pair's romantic failings seem to suggest that neither has found a suitable mate. They are joined by their mutual refusal to quickly embrace another romance. Steve claims he will focus on work for the next three years as "work is the only thing ... [he] has complete control over." Linda gave the Spanish exchange student her garage door opener as a parting gift, but buys a new opener and claims she'll "never lose it again." Clearly both characters have experienced romantic disappointment, but the way director Cameron Crowe juxtaposes their shared tales of disappointment and subsequent refusal to love again helps depict the pair as a potential couple.

Crowe uses a sense of "parallelism between paired scenes" (Altman, *Musical* 29) through a set of solo shots that Altman argues "long to be paired" (35). Steve and Linda both directly address the camera in the film's two character-focused sequences that help portray the characters' sense of their own individual style, which allows Altman to draw upon the actors' natural tendencies to "reinforce the film's fundamental sexual dichotomy" (*Musical* 44) between the male and female perspectives on romance. Linda seems eager but fragile, excited to be on her own but more than a little uncertain about her future. Sedgwick infuses the character of Linda with her warm smile and a sense of boisterous eagerness, while Scott portrays Steve as a straight-laced, sarcastic guy who conveys a variety of emotions without changing the pitch of his voice. In a case of Crowe "submerging the similarities beneath a veneer of difference" (Altman, *Musical* 29), in these opening scenes Steve seems a bit world weary, resigned to maintain a stringent focus solely on his work life and bitter about the complications he thinks always accompany romance, and Linda, while similarly disappointed, cries, buys a new garage door opener, and seems content to go dancing with her female friends and ignore romance in a less overt way. However, Crowe

“keep[s] the idea of a couple foremost in the audience’s mind” (Altman, *Musical* 44) through a set of paired shots and character introductions by way of vignette or direct address.

While the romantic focus and the personal style help present the film as a musical without the cast actually singing, the slack subculture present within the film also alters the traditional “marriage which resolves the primary (sexual) dichotomy” (Altman, *Musical* 50) in most musicals. Linda rejects Steve on at least two occasions before the pair begin to date, but the real deviation occurs in the couple’s shared uncertainty about marriage. The subject comes up as a result of Linda’s unexpected pregnancy, a believable plot device that certainly increases the strain on the two characters’ relationship. A crucial scene shows the newly engaged couple questioning if they should remain engaged after they witness an undisciplined child whining in a movie theater. Though the pair eventually say “Yes” (with looks of uncertainty on their faces), the fact that they want to reconsider their new engagement, or even break it off and decide to be just friends as they do towards the end of the film, suggests the slack sensibility’s profound distrust of permanent institutions like marriage despite the audiences’ understanding that the pair belong together.

The slack film aspect of *Singles* comes through most clearly in the deliberation the two principle romantic leads experience between their first meeting and their eventual reunion. After the couple loses their unborn child in a car crash, Linda goes on a trip to Alaska and reunites with her college boyfriend Andy, who is not a good fit for her, despite her claim that with Andy she can feel “like being alone, together.” The look on Sedgwick’s face when she replies “Love you too” to Andy conveys the emptiness of her all too settled life with an imperfect mate. Again, the will-they, won’t-they tension between Linda and Steve doesn’t necessarily mark the film as slack so much as the pained deliberations about the possibility of a sustained romance as well as the significant detours both characters take before finally deciding to be together. The film undeniably contains a number of plot devices designed to push the characters together and

occasionally drive them apart, but a fair amount of the difficulty that precedes the couple's seemingly inevitable reunion seems self-inflicted. The pair wonder aloud together and separately about the possibility of a sustained love in a decidedly slack turn that colors the film's eventual reconciliation in a way that reflects slack subculture distrust of institutions, even those that function to unite two people.

Reality Bites

Reality Bites (1994), a coming of age dramatic comedy, focuses on Lelaina Pierce (Winona Ryder), Troy Dyer (Ethan Hawke), Vickie Miner (Janeane Garofalo), and Sammy Gray (Steve Zahn), a group of recent college-graduate friends and their attempts to find fulfilling careers. Lelaina is a budding documentary filmmaker who strikes up a relationship with television executive Michael Grates (Ben Stiller) and must eventually choose between dating Michael and dating Troy, the jobless, aimless musician. The film also details Lelaina's artistic journey as Michael presents some of her footage to In Your Face TV, a clear parody of MTV, and she must decide between artistic integrity and commercial success. Lelaina shares an apartment with Vickie, who works unhappily at the Gap during the day and tries to remain a part of the slack subculture during her off time. The film also portrays Sammy's struggles to share his homosexual lifestyle with his disapproving mother.

Lelaina attempts to find a fulfilling career as a documentary filmmaker but discovers that she must alter her artistic expressions so they meet commercial expectations. Lelaina's original, documentary-style interview footage starred Troy, Sammy, and Vickie in frank, sometimes intimate discussions before, during, and after the characters experienced serious life issues, like Sammy's coming out to his mom or Vickie's Aids scare. Micheal turns Lelaina's sociological, confessional documentary footage over to editors at In Your Face TV who give the raw footage a mainstream makeover designed to target the network's young audience. Lelaina's work gets

reduced to a Real-World-esque series of jump cuts and tacky neon graphics that present all twenty-somethings' personal struggles as simple, sometimes humorous issues that could be cured by pizza. "Reality Bites," the name given to Lelaina's work by In Your Face TV, concludes with a montage of each cast member saying "pizza" in different tones of voice, immediately followed by a blatant Pizza Hut ad featuring all of the cast members' faces. Slack films not only privilege the purity of art (art for arts' sake) but also cast a knowing glance at the various ways art can be easily commodified and repackaged for a slacker-era audience. The possibility of altering art for mass consumption, or selling out, implies that the very art a bohemian slacker creates, sometimes with only slight alterations, may actually have worth to a segment of mainstream society. Slack film may typically feature as-yet undiscovered or amateur artistes, but even the occasionally successful artist in slack films will invariably feel the tension between artistic success and commercial reward, as befits a generation skeptical of all large power structures and claims of unifying ideology.

Reality Bites also discusses the uncertainty about long-term relationships that characterize certain slack films in a more personal way than in *Singles*, placing a greater emphasis on the damage done by Boomer parents. While *Singles* focuses on the courtship process, *Reality Bites* presents a more character-driven perspective on relationships because the film traces the principle characters' various childhood experiences as a method of specifying their current romantic outlooks. Lelaina finds herself in a love triangle with the gifted but disinterested uberslacker Troy and with Michael, the somewhat hip but thoroughly corporate twenty-something; this triangle is the most obvious manifestation of the various choices between respectability and artistry Lelaina faces throughout the film. Lelaina's own personal experiences with her parents' failed relationships help dictate the tone of the film. Lelaina's mother has remarried, to a younger simpleton whom she treats like her son, and her father has married a pushy younger woman; the two rival couples appear together only once in the film, but the

dissonance between the two pairs seems to suggest that Lelaina remains affected by the struggles of her childhood. Lelaina later admits she held the family together after her father left for his current wife, leaving a suicidal mother and an alcoholic middle school daughter in his wake. Lelaina had experienced the brunt of several negative 1970s social trends, including a more prominent “emphasis of parents on self-fulfillment,” which closely correlated with “the [rising] divorce rate, the decline in parental concern[,] ... and the economic conditions in which many [single-parent] young families were forced to exist” (Chapman King 25-6). These realities, mentioned largely during Lelaina’s videos, help frame the film’s central conflict regarding Lelaina’s hopes to forge a lasting relationship.

The two romantic male leads, Troy and Michael, present their own baggage and motivations to suggest that, in line with Ethan Hawke’s suggestion on a DVD retrospective, the film’s avoids “caricatures” and suggests that no romantic partner can ever be perfect. Troy’s lifestyle of living on couches, working as a clerk, and playing in a band would make him a good fit in a variety of slack films, perhaps as a more rebellious T.S. from *Mallrats* or a less dim-witted Cliff from *Singles*. In contrast to those relatively one-dimensional portraits, Troy acts as a fully realized character, capable of expressing his love in odd and not entirely predictable ways. Like Lelaina, Troy behaves as a product of his disjointed family life; his parents broke up long ago. Troy taunts Lelaina by holding her close and telling her he loves her and then snickering and telling her that a relationship between the two will never be a legitimate possibility. When Lelaina begins to date Michael, Troy refuses to admit his growing love for her and instead teases her about dating Michael. After Lelaina comes home from a date with Michael, which ended with a backseat tryst observed by Troy, Troy claims he has been reading his book in a dark apartment and teases that he’s “picking up some very strange vibes. They’re of the I-just-got-laid variety.” Troy’s sense of humor and his preference for dating pretty but emotionally distant rock groupies

function as defense mechanisms. Troy needs a traumatic event like his father's slow deterioration from cancer to awaken him to the temporary nature of life.

Michael, by contrast, seems emotionally mature but also a bit shallow. He's an example of a young urban professional or yuppie, very invested in his job and in fashionable suits and cars. Michael claims he is Jewish, but is non-practicing and seems a bit out of touch with what might actually appeal to the young people watching the programming on In Your Face TV. Michael understands the basics of going on dates at nice restaurants and showing an interest in Lelaina's work, but he doesn't quite seem a good fit for Lelaina's group of friends. He's a bit too stiff to actually be cool. He can discuss sitcoms with Troy and Lelaina's other roommates and still sound like he's holding a board meeting. The film seems to favor the more measured, fearful, and self-aware approach of Troy and Lelaina, by contrast with Michael's unreflective approach to relationships. Fears about long-term relationships founded on the legitimately frightening precedents of divorce and romantic disinterest may serve as credible issues to slack members of Generation X but may not be so worrisome to more affluent or business-minded members of the generation who seem happy to duplicate their parents' domestic lifestyle. *Reality Bites* thus ushers into the slack film genre the very real possibility of failed romantic relationships, as well as the analysis, uncertainty, and occasional retreats that accompany the courtship process.

Knocked Up

The influence of slack on a variety of film genres continues into the twenty-first century, especially in the work of director and producer Judd Apatow whose films frequently feature slack leads. *Knocked Up* (2007) functions as a romantic comedy that follows the generic tradition of a mismatched man and woman who should learn from each other. In this case, Ben (Seth Rogen), a "slovenly hipster," needs to "shape up" and Allison (Katherine Heigl), a "straight arrow," might learn to "loosen up" (Denby 1). David Denby argues that *Knocked Up* differs from the classic

romantic comedy tradition because it focuses on the “dissolution of a male pack” (4) of affable slackers rather than on the typical romantic comedy attempt to “civilize desire” in a way that “transforms lust into play and ritual” (2). The group of slackers spends the first half of the film engaging in a variety of typically slack, pop culture-informed pursuits with a stoner edge—jousting over a swimming pool like they are American Gladiators, challenging one group member to grow his hair for a year, using marijuana through a gas mask and working on their own film-nudity website called *Flesh of the Stars*. Apatow clearly demonstrates affection for his slackers without much consideration for what the slackers actually do to pay their rent. When Ben gets a job as a software developer, one of the first steps towards breaking up the pack, the film only briefly suggests that he might actually enjoy his job through a few shots of his cubicle and the sun shining in.

The slack aesthetic comes through most clearly in the pack’s house, full of pop culture detritus like film posters, Darth Vader Masks, and ninja Sais, and the emphasis on quirky characters over daily lives certainly suggests that the film could join *Mallrats* in the Slack Movie Pantheon, yet the film adds a few new ingredients to its polygeneric stew. The trait that seems to distinguish Apatow’s films from other slack entries is the sense that the lead slack characters, while interesting, are fundamentally social misfits. Kevin Smith never seems to suggest that even his degenerate pot dealers are unworthy of love and audience sympathy, to the extent that he wrote a spin-off film to underscore their cinematic worth, 2001’s *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*. In contrast, Apatow claims on his film’s audio commentary that he wrote a film where the nerd gets the girl and admits that he “always feels like ... [he’s] going on a first date” when he goes out with his own wife, signs both of his own social insecurity and of his desire for a more nerd-friendly existence. Apatow’s plot arc in *Knocked Up* may not differ much from Smith’s, but the tone of the directors’ films seems substantially different. Smith never has the audience question why the lead is worthy of the girl, whereas Apatow seems intent on posing that question quite

often. The downside to the pack's pop culture obsession seems to be a severely stunted sense of social development and narrative inspiration. The slack aesthetic melds with the defeatism of socially mandated loserdom, which creates Apatow's singularly believable and depressing spin on the slack aesthetic.

Apatow clearly seems to relate to the posse, but several mishaps involving Allison's career-gal worldview and the entire slack pack's lack of foresight, sensitivity, and ambition seem to highlight the danger of the slack aesthetic in this film. When Ben moves out of the slack house, most of the audience probably feels little more than relief. The crew's allegedly in-development website turns out to be an idea already in use by a site titled *Mr. Skin* robbing the crew of their single aspiration. The audience sees the pack's recreational pursuits, sound tracked with pop songs like the Wu Tang Clan's "Protect Ya Neck," but also their collective lack of aspiration when the site fails and nothing seems to change for the group. Though the rest of the group remains fairly anonymous, content to drop memorable one-liners and essentially banter with Ben, they don't seem to have any other defining traits. They appear as stock slackers in their early to mid twenties without much back story and their juvenile outlook seems something for Ben to transcend rather than a defining trait that might help him find a more successful life. Aside from altering the slack aesthetic to highlight the pleasantly directionless nature of certain slackers, Apatow also creates a shift in the genre of the romantic comedy, incorporating slack elements not only to accurately depict his pack of slackers but also to forward the plot of the film.

The Parameters of the Slack Film Genre

The slack genre features a variety of tropes that give the genre its distinctive flavor. Slack film utilizes several time-specific markers for both fashion and music, now dated items like the fusion of 1970s fashion and industrial/grunge fashion from *Empire* or the heavy grunge sounds from *Singles*. Other distinguishing features of the genre that aren't as directly tied to the pop

cultural sensibilities of genre include rebellious styles of dressing, a suspicion of larger institutions, an emphasis on teen/young adult personal problems, sometimes spurred by their own tumultuous home lives, a reluctance to engage in serious relationships, and a reflexivity that leads the films' stars to be provocative in an attention-grabbing way and also reflective to the point of inaction. The time-specific markers like combat boots and alt rock soundtracks make the initial argument that slack film could be viewed nominally, as a genre with its own set of plot rules and stylistic expectations grounded in the 1990s milieu of its genesis. If slack is a noun genre, then it has solidified into a routine, a set of expectations that mark the subsequent films that return to these parameters of plot and style as period pieces.

I think it is more accurate, however, to say slack film acts more as an adjectival genre, given the sheer number of slack-influenced films that use at least most of the genre's trappings, from the workplace comedy *Office Space* (1999), to the comedy-cum-surrealist-murder-mystery *The Big Lebowski* (1998), and the recent 1980s-set *Adventure Land* (2009). *Office Space* stars a staff of disaffected workers who make a show of their own displeasure by admitting their own inferiorities and laziness to the review board and destroying the oppressing fax machine, both clear signs of the sort of attention grabbing, self-reflexive acts that demonstrate the staff's displeasure to any and all on lookers. While the advanced age of the Dude, the humble star of *The Big Lebowski*, may disqualify in terms of the youthful protagonist criteria I have established, the film unquestionably features rebellious dress, a disinterest in serious relationships, and a strained relationship with art of any kind. These examples suggest that slack may function in a fluid fashion, influencing films from a variety of noun genres and eras. Films set earlier than 1990, such as the 1980s-set *Adventure Land*, can feature very few of the 1990s trappings of fashion and music but may feature almost all of the other slack genre characteristics such as disaffected leads, fears of relationships, and attention grabbing self-reflexive characters.

Though *Knocked Up* contains a heavy slack influence, it should still be seen as a romantic comedy. Anytime Allison appears, despite any attempt to blend into Ben's slack world, it only serves to remind the viewer that she comes from a more glitzy world. She works for *E!* and seems like someone who would never date Ben except for some zany extenuating circumstances. Though the particular circumstances of the film (an unplanned pregnancy) are in the realm of possibility for the genre, Denby argues that the baby "rather than desire" for a better life "pulls the young man...into civilization" (5). For Denby, romantic comedies feature happy endings, and *Knocked Up* certainly has that, but the traditional romantic comedy ending is pursued "with an urgency that is as much moral as sentimental" (2). Ben learns several lessons throughout the film, and by Apatow's commentary-track admission, realizes he loves Allison, but takes more than half of the movie to take the actions that will actually help him win her over. In his accompanying commentary, Apatow claims he tried to stage the film as a series of domestic exchanges as befits both his experiences as a husband and as the director and producer of two television shows. These domestic vignettes help take some of the boy meets/loses/regains girl luster off of the film as Ben and Allison share a substantial amount of the film's 127 minute run time on the screen together. The film, like *Slacker*, slinks towards its inevitable conclusion in its last third's extensive focus on Ben's friends and his slow realization that he needs to change. The slack influence affects the film's narrative focus and driving plot points, creating what Denby describes as a "brave and uncertain new direction" (2) for romantic comedies as a result. The shift in the film's plot as a result of the slack aesthetic speaks to the power of slack as an adjectival genre that will continue to influence the narrative and aesthetic style of future noun genre comedies like teen comedies, romantic comedies, and even workplace comedies rather than simply designate a passé noun genre that emphasizes disposable genre trappings like fashion and music. Whether subsequent instances of slack film will result someday in a substantive genre remains in question and therefore happily uncertain. It may even be a slack ambition to remain

adjectival, to avoid the nominalization that would make slack cinema an upstanding member of the genre club.

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