

# WHATEVER HAPPENED TO NEW AMERICAN COMEDY?

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## INTRODUCTION

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By the end of the decade of the 2000s, certain trends in contemporary American comedy had been clearly defined. Some films even came to be grouped together under the name “New American Comedy” (NAC). And by 2010, the use of this critical shorthand certainly seemed to be justified: there was one producer who seemed to be everywhere (Judd Apatow), a number of filmmakers with similar aesthetic and thematic interests, and a set of comic actors with a very particular kind of charisma. Moreover, it was clear that these directors and actors formed a tight-knit group of friends who all kept up on each other’s work, in many cases even supporting each other’s projects. The directors in this group include the aforemen-

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### THE SURVIVAL OF NAC DEPENDED LESS ON WHO WAS MAKING IT THAN ON HOW IT PERFORMED AT THE BOX OFFICE

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tioned Apatow, Nicholas Stoller, Greg Mottola, John Hamburg, Paul Feig, Adam McKay, Todd Phillips, Jody Hill, Ben Stiller, and Jake Kasdan; among the actors are Seth Rogen, Jason Segel, Danny McBride, Melissa McCarthy, Will Ferrell, Kristen Wiig, Bill Hader, Martin Starr, Jonah Hill, Paul Rudd, and Steve Carell. Most of these artists began their careers in the 1990s.

However, the survival of NAC depended less on who was making it than on how it performed at the box office. In 2012, two examples that could be deemed paradigmatic—*This Is 40* (Judd Apatow) and *The Five-Year Engagement* (Nicholas Stoller)—made it clear that the model was in crisis. The US box office returns for *This Is 40* were less than half those of its prequel, *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, 2007),<sup>1</sup> while *The Five-Year Engagement* would earn slightly more than a

third of the takings for *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (Nicholas Stoller, 2008). As a result of this decline, the group lost the blank cheque it had been given by the industry and some of its most iconic filmmakers were forced to give up their own personal style of comedy: after *This Is 40*, Apatow made *Trainwreck* (2015), whose star and screenwriter, Amy Schumer, completely eclipsed her director; Mottola, after the brilliant films *Superbad* (2007) and *Adventureland* (2009) and the less inspired *Paul* (2011), was relegated to television projects with little room for manoeuvre, like *Clear History* (2013), and would not return to movie theatres until 2016, with *Keeping Up with the Joneses*, which contained no trace of the personal touch he had been acclaimed for; Stoller would not stray too far from NAC with *Neighbors* (2014) or its sequel, despite its obvious attempt to pass on the torch to a new generation of actors; the apparently incorruptible McKay brought an end to a brilliant period for Will Ferrell with *Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues* (2013), the sequel to and practically a remake of the cult film *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (2004), to seek the approval of the Academy with *The Big Short* (2015) and *Vice* (2018), both of which were nominated for the Oscar for best picture; Phillips would finish the *Hangover* trilogy (2009, 2011 and 2013) with an action film that did not repeat either the structure or the spirit of its two predecessors (except in the epilogue) and, like McKay, with *War Dogs* (2016) and *Joker* (2019) he would leave rowdy comedy behind to take on a kind of political satire much more to the taste of institutional film critics; Jody Hill, in part due to being something of an outsider in the group, was able to keep being true to himself on television, and Netflix would later give him a certain degree of freedom<sup>2</sup> to make the rather uneven comedy *The Legacy of a Whitetail Deer Hunter* (2018); Feig, together with Apatow, one of the founding fathers of NAC with his work on the seminal series *Freaks and Geeks* (NBC, 1999-2000), saw his filmmaking career take off a decade later

with *Bridesmaids* (2011), although the real success story of the film was not its director but a supporting actress, Melissa McCarthy, who would go on to star in Feig's next three films, all of which were a long way from the style that characterised NAC; and Kasdan, who directed the pilot episode of *Freaks and Geeks*, after working on the borderline NAC films *Bad Teacher* (2012), *Sex Tape* (2014) and the odd television project, was hired to make *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* (2017), which sought to exploit the success of the original 1990s film.

In 2013, the screenwriters of *Superbad*, Evan Goldberg and Seth Rogen, directed their first film together, *This Is the End*, featuring some of the most representative faces of NAC playing themselves at a party at James Franco's house, which is interrupted by the Apocalypse.<sup>3</sup> At one point in the film, Jay Baruchel reproaches Rogen for having "sold out". This is a point that the film pokes fun at, and which Rogen himself accepts, acknowledging that it is an inevitable part of maturing (in the industry). At the same time, Baruchel's comments seem to hint at *The Green Hornet* (Michel Gondry, 2011), a blockbuster also written by Goldberg and Rogen which, continuing some of the ideas of *Pineapple Express* (David Gordon Green, 2008) and *The Other Guys* (Adam McKay, 2010), combines comedy and action. Despite being a flop at the box office (in the US market it failed even to recover costs), the film symbolised the attempt by the industry to get back into step with audiences by shifting its investment in NAC towards action comedies. There are plenty of examples: to the aforementioned *The Hangover, Part III* (Todd Phillips, 2013), we could add *The Interview* (Evan Goldberg and Seth Rogen, 2014), Dwayne Johnson's most recent films, and even some of the pictures churned out by the Marvel factory, to name a few.

In this context, *This Is the End* could be understood as New American Comedy's farewell letter, giving an added meaning to the film's title. And although it ends up turning into an action film, it

is certainly the end, because it is the last film that could strictly be defined as NAC.

Now that the phenomenon has dissolved, the time has come to look back and establish a definition for what I am referring to here as NAC, because although I have spoken of paradigms, New American Comedy is really a kind of umbrella term covering a very diverse range of films, which for a while was mostly just an advertising slogan. When did the concept of NAC first appear, and what does it mean exactly?

## **TOWARDS A STARTING POINT AND A DEFINITION OF NAC**

It is generally difficult to identify a starting point for any film movement. In the case of NAC, which wears its many inspirations on its sleeve, it is perhaps even more complicated.

A few undeniable influences that many studies have identified<sup>4</sup> are *Saturday Night Live* (Lorne Michaels, NBC, 1975-), where many members of the NAC group began their careers, and the Farrelly brothers. Although it is true that some features of NAC can be traced back to these sources, none of what is unique to the movement can be found in them. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the evolution of American comedy cannot be explained without the success of these two sources.

In his article on "the Apatow touch", Jaime Pena (2007: 41) argues that one of the basic features of *Knocked Up* is the clash between the "whiter" romantic comedy and a more irreverent form of comedy. It is undeniable that this combination of theoretically opposed universes is a recurring idea in NAC. However, as Pena himself acknowledges, it is essentially a traditional brand of comedy, a description reinforced by the positive reception enjoyed by the parody films by Zucker, Abrahams

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and Zucker, or Monty Python, which are very important points of reference in the imaginations of the members of the NAC group.

Yet the NAC formula has very little to do with these influences. We need to move ahead in time to *There's Something About Mary* (Peter Farrelly and Bobby Farrelly, 1998) to find something similar.

While Monty Python and Zucker, Abrahams and Zucker took an irreverent approach to the genre parodied, in the Farrelly brothers' film, the romantic story coexists alongside the irreverence. In other words, scatological and sexual jokes were introduced as incidents or identities that interrupt (or hold back) the development of the romantic love story.

A good example of this is the zipper gag at the beginning of *There's Something About Mary*. In a system like the American comedy genre, where the obscene has always had to be regulated, comedy writers were forced to suggest images that could not be shown (especially sexual images), a restriction that can be traced back to the comedies made in the days of the Hays Code, but also to Lenny Bruce's more controlled monologues subjected to restrictions on obscenity. This progressively changed with the transformation of the film industry's censorship system, so that elements that were once exclusive to B movies would begin to be seen in productions with wide distribution networks, like *National Lampoon's Animal House* (John Landis, 1978) or *Porky's* (Bob Clark, 1982), which made use of exhibitionism and obscenity as a comic strategy.<sup>5</sup>

The zipper gag combines both these models: suggestion and exhibitionism. First of all, the characters go to great lengths, with words and gestures, to make it clear what has happened to Ted (Ben Stiller), who has got one of his testicles caught in his zipper; and nearly five minutes later, the Farrelly brothers have the audacity to insert

a shot of this unfortunate accident, which is just as shocking as we had been warned it was. There is a similar gag in *The Heartbreak Kid* (Peter Farrelly and Bobby Farrelly, 2007) with Lila's (Malin Akerman) piercing, and in *Hall Pass* (Peter Farrelly and Bobby Farrelly, 2011) with the "fake chow" scene. This is the key to the sheer irreverence of this pair of filmmakers: to show on screen what at first seems will be limited to verbal description.

And this is not a mere quirk but a general idea that marks their entire filmography. What differentiates them from earlier comic creators is this way of finishing off the situations they posit with a final unexpected twist, as if they are unsatisfied with a scene that is already funny as it is and feel compelled to add a final surprise for viewers.

In the adoption of this approach by NAC there also lies one of its main differences from the Farrelly style. While the Farellys lean towards the extraordinary, NAC filmmakers try to get laughs out of the ordinary. For example, in the opening to *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, Sarah (Kristen Bell) returns from a film shoot to end her relationship with Peter (Jason Segel). When she arrives at the house the couple shares, she finds Peter coming out of the shower with a towel tied around his waist. When he sees her, Peter, who was unaware of the problems in their relationship, reacts by loosening the towel and waving his penis from one side to another (we hear the noise of what sounds like his member banging against his legs) while swaying in what is supposed to be a seductive manner. Sarah then begins trying to tell him she is leaving him. When Peter realizes what is happening, he raises his hands to his face and the towel falls to the floor, and at that moment we have a fleeting glance of his penis.

On first glance, this scene has nothing to do with the zipper gag. However, it plays in a similar way with the spectator's expectations. Firstly, of

course, it relies on the assumption that stars are not shown naked,<sup>6</sup> especially male stars; secondly, given the appearance of the towel and the fact that the movement of his genitals is heard but not seen, we would take it for granted that we are not going to see the actor naked. This makes the full-frontal nudity all the more surprising, because we realise that certain conventions of the genre (romantic comedy) and of Hollywood filmmaking in general are being subverted.

However, in contrast with *There's Something About Mary*, the subversion is not based on an image that goes beyond the story, but on an ordinary event that is rarely seen on screen, arising from a need to abandon the farcical side of romantic comedy for a moment. Why would Peter cover himself up in front of the woman who was his partner until that moment? Why would he start getting dressed when all he wants to do is cry? Or as Alan (Zach Galifianakis) says in *The Hangover* (Todd Phillips, 2009) after finding a tiger in the bathroom and Phil (Bradley Cooper) asks him to put some pants on: "Pants? At a time like this?"

Yet like most NAC films, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* ends up succumbing to the genre it seemed to be trying to subvert, when in the end Rachel (Mila Kunis) enters Peter's changeroom to confirm their reconciliation and finds him completely naked,

and he raises his hands modestly to cover himself. Ultimately, this is a central idea of NAC: maturity brings an end to the rebellion.

Yet this is not an idea that was present in the group's origins in *Freaks and Geeks*. In the end, when everything seems to suggest that Lindsay (Linda Cardellini) has given up and will defer to her parents' wishes and go to college, we see her get off the bus and meet Kim (Busy Philipps), take her green army jacket out of her backpack, mess up her hair and get into a caravan with Kim and a couple of other friends to seek out a life quite different from that of the

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**THIS IS A CENTRAL  
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“good American citizen”. It is a scene reminiscent of the ending to *Dazed and Confused* (Richard Linklater, 1993), when we see some of the protagonists driving to an Aerosmith concert. In Linklater’s film, however, it looks more like one last act of rebellion before settling down, given that the end of the trip will mark the end of their youth, except for Wooderson (Matthew McConaughey), a character who, like Alan in *The Hangover* or Sidney (Jason Segel) in *I Love You, Man* (John Hamburg, 2009), is immune to the passage of time, and who like Chazz (Will Ferrell) in *Wedding Crashers* (David Dobkin, 2005) has acquired a sinister air.

The difference between *Dazed and Confused* and *Freaks and Geeks* is that while the first celebrates the moment (even the initiation pranks are not completely condemned), the second offers a somewhat disenchanted look at this extremely important stage of life for the average American. This critical view has little to do with the perspective of *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995), which uses hyperbole to question the different rites of passage that young Americans are made to go through.

The structure of *Freaks and Geeks* seems to be defined from the very first shot, where the camera pans from an American football training session on the field to the bleachers, where a jock and a cheerleader are expressing their love for each other; then, the camera moves down behind the bleachers to focus on a group of “freaks” who are boasting to each other about their loutish behaviour. A few moments later, we follow the character of Lindsay away from the freaks and come upon a group of “geeks”, who are entertaining each other with their imitations of Bill Murray. Their happiness is interrupted by the arrival of a bully who will end up being chased away by Lindsay, who reappears to protect her geek brother. When everyone is gone, she says aloud to herself: “Man, I hate high school.”

This scene lays the formal foundations for NAC: a shift from the pleasant face of the institu-

tion (high school, university, marriage, friendship, etc.) to its dark side. It is a shift which, rather than inducing laughter (which it rarely does) elicits a wry smile of bitter recognition. It is a reaction that is summed up in the phrase “it’s funny because it’s true.” This formula is something that Apatow (like Jerry Seinfeld) acquired from his work as a stand-up comedian, and which gives much of his work an autobiographical quality.

This stylistic peculiarity of NAC means that some references get repeated in different projects, just as a stand-up comedian will reuse his most successful jokes and go back over his past again and again. This makes *Freaks and Geeks* not only the first example of the NAC form, but also a kind of blueprint for the movement, not only because of the slew of new talent it discovered (Seth Rogen, Jason Segel, James Franco, Martin Starr, etc.), but also because of the many ideas that would subsequently be taken up in the films made by the group. For example, Jason Segel’s character is a music lover<sup>7</sup> with a particular obsession with Rush, whose music he plays on his drums. In *I Love You, Man*, it would be their love for that same rock band that would bring Segel’s and Paul Rudd’s characters together. In another episode of the series, when the protagonists try to obtain a fake ID (like Fogell [Christopher Mintz-Plasse] in *Superbad*), the one responsible for getting it will be the actor who will end up with the same bloodstain on his pants as Seth (Jonah Hill) in *Superbad*. On another occasion, one of the freaks’ parties is infiltrated by the same drunk who will hold up McLovin in *Superbad*. All this may have something to do with the fact that Rogen, at the age of 16,<sup>8</sup> while he was acting in *Freaks and Geeks*, was writing the script for *Superbad* together with Goldberg.

Although *Freaks and Geeks* clearly marks the birth of NAC, as it was the first project to give the group a voice, it cannot be said that the movement actually took off at that time. Apatow would not direct his first film, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*

until 2005; McKay would introduce his strange world only one year earlier with *The Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*; nothing was even expected of Mottola before he made *Superbad*; and Hill would direct his first film, *The Foot Fist Way*, in 2006. The first out of the gate would be Phillips with *Old School* (2003), and he is the only NAC filmmaker outside of Apatow's sphere of influence. Of course, the muted response received by *Undeclared* (Judd Apatow, FOX: 2001-2003) did not help much in establishing the style.

We therefore need to fast-forward to 2007 to find the true beginning of what I refer to here as NAC. That one year saw the release of *Superbad*, *Knocked Up*, *The Heartbreak Kid*, *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (Jake Kasdan) and *The Landlord* (Drew Antzies, Adam McKay). It was also the year that the website and production company Funny or Die was founded by Will Ferrell, Adam McKay, Michael Kvamme, and Chris Henchy. Of these, the success of *Superbad* and *Knocked Up* (which gained the industry's confidence in the group) was especially important, as was the space for experimentation offered by Funny or Die.

Apatow commented in an interview that around 2002 or 2003 he, Rogen, and Goldberg presented the script for *Superbad* to a studio that rejected it because they felt it lacked commercial appeal (quoted in Lerman, 2008: 74). This setback prompted them to write the screenplay for *Pineapple Express*, based on an idea of Apatow's; this script met with the same response from the studio, which considered it even less commercial (quoted in Lerman, 2008: 74). This is why 2007 was so important.

Immediately after the release of *Superbad*, work began on *Pineapple Express*, which would be released in 2008, along with *You Don't Mess*

with the Zohan (Dennis Dugan), *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, *Step Brothers* (Adam McKay), and *Drillbit Taylor* (Steven Brill), all of which were produced by Apatow, as well as *Role Models* (David Wain) and *Tropic Thunder* (Ben Stiller). The year 2009 proved even more impressive, with the release of *The Hangover*, *Adventureland*, *I Love You Man*, *Observe and Report* (Jody Hill), and *Funny People* (Judd Apatow), five emblematic NAC films.

The movement continued until 2013, when, as noted above, the group took a definitive turn away from comedy and towards action.

In other words, strictly speaking NAC was a commercial phenomenon that lasted from 2007 to 2013, characterised by an approach<sup>9</sup> that was

born with *Freaks and Geeks*, and which, in its golden age, would be adopted by practically every filmmaker making comedies in the United States; even two comedy legends like James L. Brooks and Harold Ramis made films under the NAC umbrella in those years: *How Do You Know?* (2010) and *Year One* (2009), respectively. Most of these films were produced by Apatow and featured

actors from *Freaks and Geeks* and/or *Saturday Night Live*.

The most accurate definition of NAC is therefore related not so much to a form as to a period of commonality among filmmakers, audiences, producers and critics. In a sense, the NAC imaginary did not begin to take shape until a significant number of comedies were produced by the group. The development of the imaginary was thus a work in progress; what worked was repeated, and in many cases radicalised, tightening up the joke.

However, although the NAC form was always the result of constant trial and error (similar to how stand-up comedians test out their jokes in small bars), it is clear that Apatow's work has

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nothing to do with McKay's, or Mottola's with Phillips'. This is due to two ways of tackling comedy that characterise the two main tendencies in NAC, which are worth giving some attention.

## **AESTHETICS OF NAC: STAND-UP COMEDIANS AND EDITORS**

For this discussion I will refer to two NAC comedies that probably had the biggest impact: *Superbad* and *The Hangover*. Early on in these two films there are two very similar sequences, in which the protagonists are making a small purchase while discussing their sex lives. While the premise is the same, they are in a sense diametrically opposed, representing two different models of comedy.

In *Superbad*, Seth and Evan (Michael Cera) are buying a couple of drinks while reminiscing and fantasising about their sexual experiences. When they go to pay they do not even interrupt their conversation, barely interacting with the person at the cash register (merely gesturing to indicate the products they are buying), who is not shown, apart from the hand that accepts the cash.<sup>10</sup> In *The Hangover*, Stu (Ed Helms), Doug (Justin Bartha) and Phil stop at a service station and go inside to buy drinks and snacks for their road trip. In addition to talking about Alan, they remind Stu about his relationship with Melissa (Rachael Harris), whom he intends to ask to marry him and who was unfaithful to him on a cruise. Like the opening sequence in *Superbad*, the friends don't hold back on explicit details and never suffer an attack of decorum. The difference from *Superbad* lies in the fact that in *The Hangover* the cashier's look of astonishment is used to reinforce the comic nature of the scene. It is an expression reminiscent of the scene in *50 First Dates* (Peter Segal, 2004) where Henry (Adam Sandler) is in a bar staring in a lovestruck daze at Lucy (Drew Barrymore) and a customer who is seated between them asks whether he is staring at Lucy or at him, because it is starting to freak him out; or Peter's penis in *For-*

*getting Sarah Marshall*. For a brief moment, we are pushed out of the story, seeing everything that is at play in it.

In the first case, we might assume that the structure of the scene is intended to put the focus on the conversation, while in the second case it is the situation that is given all the importance. However, if we consider the motivation behind these decisions more carefully, we might conclude that *Superbad* is geared towards fiction while *The Hangover* is geared towards reality. Because, put simply, the first draws on memories and sensations of adolescence to reconstruct the journey towards maturity, while the second attempts to connect hyperbole with the world of the possible or the everyday; in other words, the humour comes from exaggeration, but especially from interrupting it. This is why in *Superbad* the cashier's face is not shown, because it would pull us out of the fantasy that it wants to immerse us in, that perfectly reconstructed piece of the past that seems to be telling us that memory is nothing more than a story we tell ourselves every night, the seed of a monologue.

Mottola, like Apatow, seeks to make a coming-of-age comedy, where irresponsibility gradually gives way to maturity. They are comedies about loss, where the ending aimed for leads the characters to understand their place in the world and everything they must leave behind. Nothing is forgotten; every decision, every mistake haunts the characters and their only way of surviving in this world is by giving up on what they long for.

*The Hangover*, on the other hand, is a film that seems to have no memory. Actions barely even have consequences, as everything is experienced in the present.

It is highly significant that the night is only reconstructed in pieces, and even more so that it could be filmed over and over again in the knowledge that it would never be the same. Consider *The Hangover, Part II* (Todd Phillips, 2011), which seems more like a remake than a sequel, or even the closing credits for *The Hangover, Part III*, which seem

to deny the apparent farewell in which Kanye West's "Dark Fantasy" weaves together the memory of a trilogy without end.

These are the two main categories of NAC: the stand-up variant (although not all the filmmakers in this category were stand-up comedians) and the editor variant (although none of the filmmakers worked specifically as editors). In the first group are Apatow, Mottola, Stoller, Hamburg, and Feig. In the second are McKay, Phillips, Hill, Still-er, and Kasdan.

In the stand-up variant, the filmmakers mould the reality served as their inspiration according to their interests; this is why Peter would end up covering himself up in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, as the endings to these films repair the beginning, the past. It is also the reason that the kiss the protagonists exchange at their wedding in *The Five-Year Engagement* is linked through a flashback to their first kiss. It also explains the large number of films of this type that end with a reconciliation, nearly always resulting from a kind of epiphany that is highly melodramatic. The stand-up mode thus involves the construction of farces in which everything, as ordinary as it may seem, arises from the intervention of the storyteller.

The group that I have labelled here as the editors might also be referred to as the documentary makers. Of course, it is no accident that Phillips' first two films were actual documentaries or that the mockumentary is a frequently used model in this category. These are films that seem to overflow with images. A good example is the case of McKay, who made an alternative cut of *Anchor-man: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*, titled *Wake Up, Ron Burgundy: The Lost Movie* (2004), with scenes that he had decided not to include in the original version. Another example can be found in the first two instalments of *The Hangover*, which end

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with snapshots from the nights that were left out of the final cut, confirming that they did happen and could have been shown in the film. This leaves their stories slightly open, indicating that what we have seen is only one way of telling the story of what happened.

Although these two categories of NAC point in opposite directions, it is clear that they

have certain things in common. The most obvious of these would be improvisation, which is as important for Apatow as it is for McKay. In the stand-up variant, the rhythm of speech, and the fluidity and naturalness of the dialogue are essential. Such freshness can only be achieved through improvisation. For the editors, it is important to have the largest number of options possible, and of course, not every possibility can be written down. The improvisation that unites the two styles thus also gives rise to two different types of scenes: one type is drawn out, with nothing very important happening, while the other is extremely fast-paced (even the more drawn-out scenes, like the battle in *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*, are longer by accumulation), with shorter shots.

Nevertheless, although the spirit and pacing of the two styles are different, they both share one essential element: the gag. Although one style uses reality as the starting point while the other uses it as an ultimate goal, the punchline is so unexpected that it negates the difference. Some of the best jokes in McKay and Ferrell's zany universe are the ones where one of the characters comments on and questions what is going on. One example is the moment in *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (2006) when Ricky (Will Ferrell) is told by his wife that "baby Jesus" grew up and that he doesn't need to call him "baby" in his prayers. Another can be found in *The Hangover*, with a small twist, when Mike Tyson forgives



the protagonists for stealing his tiger because “we all do dumb shit when we’re fucked up.” Or when Doug’s father-in-law tells him that “what happens in Las Vegas, stays in Las Vegas.” The humour of the most excessive NAC comedies can ultimately be condensed into a simple phrase that deconstructs the spectacle we have just seen or are about to see, i.e., when they stop to think and organise the memories like a stand-up comedian.

In the more verbal films, the ones in the stand-up category, the best gags don’t need words: the reaction to the blood stain on a pair of pants in *Superbad*, Peter’s nakedness in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, the Rush song that doesn’t play properly on Peter’s (Paul Rudd) computer in *I Love You, Man*, Pete’s (Paul Rudd) contortions to get a picture of his haemorrhoid in *This Is 40*, etc. In other words, it is when they edit those memories that served as the starting point, when the seed of the monologue is put into images.

In this sense, the two categories of NAC are constantly exchanging roles.

## **BY WAY OF CONCLUSION**

With the exception of the McKay-Ferrell and Hill-McBride worlds, the period of comedies made between 2007 and 2013, baptised here as NAC, probably represents the least funny period in the history of Hollywood comedy. And definitely the bitterest. This would be the ultimate hallmark of NAC, which at times forgets to make us laugh and takes the story it wants to tell seriously. The two films identified at the beginning of this article as the great paradigms of NAC as a finished form, *This Is 40* and *Five-Year Engagement*, have a lot more drama than comedy.

And although this idea is associated with what I have labelled as the stand-up category of films (a filmography that increasingly forgets to conclude

the situations they present with punchlines), the direction taken by Phillips and McKay into political satire should not be forgotten either. It was comedy that brought the group together, and humour that made them sell, but what made their films different was their approach to realism. At a meeting of friends, one member of the group must have asked aloud, discreetly, what they could contribute to film history. Impersonate all their shared references? No, if those kinds of films were no longer being made, there must be a reason for that. And then perhaps Apatow said: “And why not bring all those movies we so greatly admire closer to our own lives? Why not take the

romantic comedies we love, all the irreverent comedies we’ve watched, and make them real? We’ll take off the ornamentation, the perfection, make it so they aren’t always hilarious, because

nobody ever is, so that the jokes sometimes aren’t timed right... and we’ll fill them with failures, insecurities, normal characters that we know, the characters could even be us; we make them dirty... We fill them with ordinary life.”

This is probably just a fiction and perhaps they were never very clear about what to do, as their films suggest. Nevertheless, looking back, the phenomenon labelled NAC here definitely began as a meeting of friends at William McKinley High School<sup>11</sup> and ended as a party that brought the Backstreet Boys back together to sing “Everybody” just as Jay Baruchel wanted at the end of *This Is the End*. In short, just as their films have foreseen, maturity would put an end to their irresponsibility. And when their new projects were no longer capturing public attention, they knew that the formula had to change, and they barely fought for what we might have believed they would defend tooth and nail. And thus, NAC vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

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## NOTES

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- 1 In reality, although its main characters originally appeared in *Knocked Up*, *This Is 40* is a completely independent story.
- 2 Currently, Netflix seems to be investing in a type of comedy that the major studios are not willing to take a risk on. It is a marketing strategy which, for various reasons, is not really working.
- 3 The main idea for this film had already appeared in *Jay and Seth Versus the Apocalypse* (Jason Stone, 2007), a short film in which Jay Baruchel and Seth Rogen played themselves in an apocalyptic setting.
- 4 For example, Carlos Losilla (2010: 106) identifies that first impulse of rebellion that would characterize NAC in the work of Jim Carrey and the Farrelly brothers. The link with *Saturday Night Live* is discussed extensively in *Very Funny Things*, an anthology of studies by different authors intended to offer a fairly rigorous outline of NAC (the influence of comedians like Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David is also pointed out).
- 5 John Landis in particular is frequently cited as the father of NAC, paving the way for the movement.
- 6 In addition, thanks to *How I Met Your Mother* (Craig Thomas and Carter Bays, CBS, 2005-2014), Jason Segel was already quite a familiar face.
- 7 Like the character, Jason Segel himself is a music lover and a Rush fan.
- 8 In reality, they had already been writing the script for a couple of years at that time (in Apatow, 2016: 420).
- 9 It is an approach that is more a way of working and a friendship (a group of trusted friends) than a defined style.
- 10 If we examine the scene closely, we will occasionally see the cashier in the background, as one of the various extras in the scene.
- 11 The high school that serves as the setting for *Freaks and Geeks*.

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## WHATEVER HAPPENED TO NEW AMERICAN COMEDY?

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### Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the New American Comedy movement, with the intention of identifying when it began and ended. Through a comparison of the movement's different features, I attempt to identify the most characteristic elements that distinguish it from other styles of comedy.

### Key words

Documentary; Gag; Improvisation; Judd Apatow; Editing; New American Comedy; Stand-up Comedy.

### Author

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## ¿QUÉ FUE DE LA NUEVA COMEDIA AMERICANA?

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### Resumen

Este artículo analiza la Nueva Comedia Americana. Con la intención de marcar un punto de inicio y uno de final. Por medio de la comparación entre las distintas tendencias, se tratará de determinar cuáles son las características que diferencian al movimiento del resto de estilos cómicos.

### Palabras clave

Documental; gag; improvisación; Judd Apatow; monólogos; montaje; Nueva Comedia Americana.

### Autor

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