Opinion

The Daily Campus

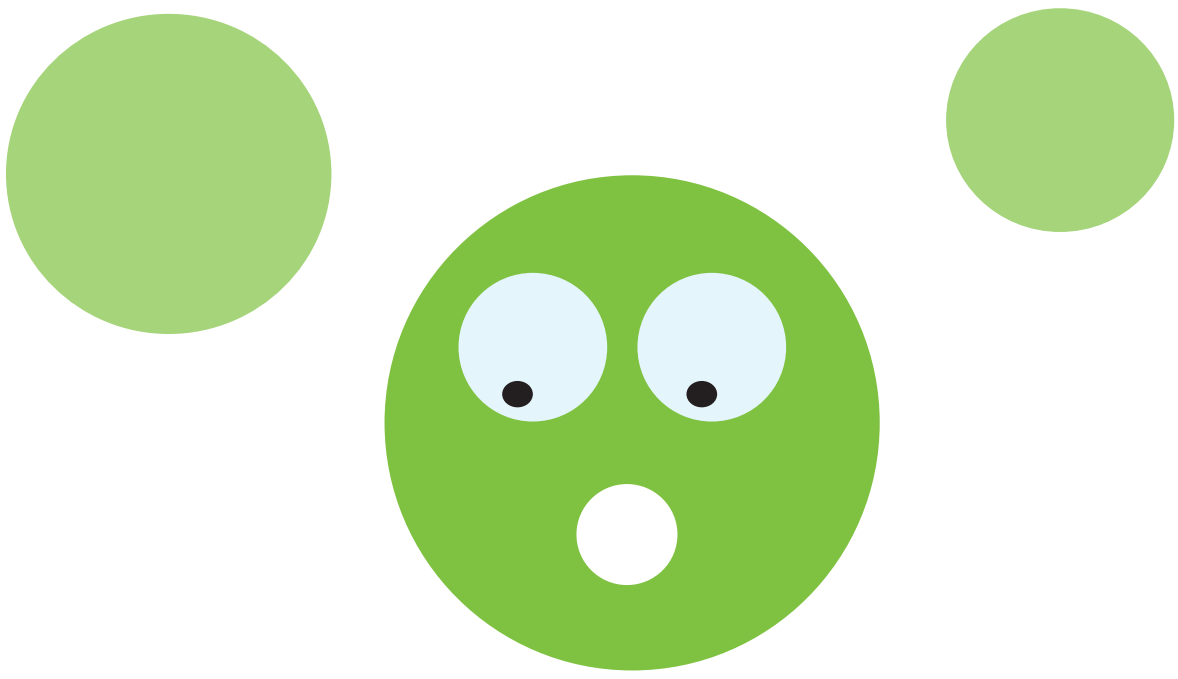
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POINT-COUNTERPOINT

BATTLE OF THE LOSER HIGH SCHOOL COMING OF AGE MOVIES: "SUPERBAD" VS. "BOTTOMS"

by Isaac Grad
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Two close friends near the end of their undergraduate careers at the University of Connecticut decide to write an article about their favorite coming-of-age movies about degenerate high school seniors naively seeking sex. This Point-Counterpoint is their own rite of passage into the adult world, but it also jeopardizes the foundation of their friendship in this transitory phase based on their clashing opinions.

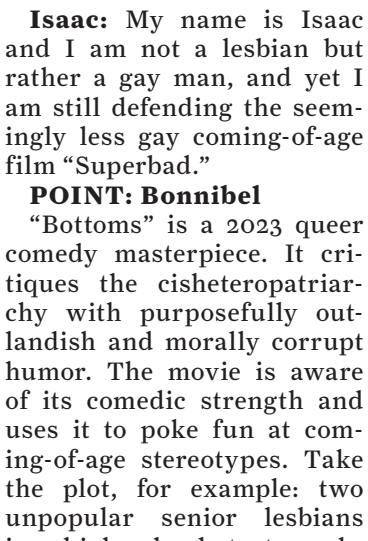
Bonnibel: My name is Bonnibel Lilith Rampertab and I am a sapphic hailing from the metaphorical motherland of Lesbos in pursuit of visibility. In this battle over absurdly painful coming-of-age stories about teenage losers like the high school versions of Isaac and myself, I'm team "Bottoms."

Isaac: My name is Isaac and I am not a lesbian but rather a gay man, and yet I am still defending the seemingly less gay coming-of-age film "Superbad."

POINT: Bonnibel

"Bottoms" is a 2023 queer comedy masterpiece. It critiques the cisheteropatriarchy with purposefully outlandish and morally corrupt humor. The movie is aware of its comedic strength and uses it to poke fun at coming-of-age stereotypes. Take the plot, for example: two unpopular senior lesbians in a high school start a public fight club under the guise of female self-defense when they really want to have sex. It ends with all the fight club women fighting the football team. Anyone can laugh at (or with) "Bottoms" in its sheer stupidity and parody of high school culture, but it also has its intimate and realistic anchors in the form of how some of these relationships work.

This is contrasted by how the predecessor "Superbad" perpetuates misogyny with little active critique. This is achieved with grating and utterly cheapened sex jokes. "Superbad" has no critical exploration of gender roles beyond being a prime example of them in action. It doesn't have much appeal beyond the historical and sociocultural. It is definitely a comedy movie for those with juvenile humor, where sex and the degradation of women equals funny, without much room for the people directly affected.



Poster for the 2023 comedy "Bottoms." Starring Rachel Sennott and Ayo Edebiri, the movie satirizes the high school experience.
PHOTO COURTESY OF @AYOEDEBIRI ON INSTAGRAM

POINT: Isaac

"Superbad" is a coming-of-age comedy masterpiece centered around the importance of close, meaningful friendships over all else, in a world that prioritizes romantic/sexual relationships. The humor is based on realistic (more or less) scenarios, and truly encapsulates how many high schools think, act and speak, while still recognizing how those positions are outlandish and oftentimes inappropriate. Rather than encouraging or glamorizing the actions of the protagonists, the audience is made to understand they are flawed, while also being able to turn that recognition inwards and question where they may be similar. There's a trust in the audience to be able to discern the nuance and recognize where the protagonists are being bad people. "Superbad" in this way utilizes subtlety and realism, whereas "Bottoms" seems to lack faith in the viewer, pushing the ideas to an absurd extreme as though the audience wouldn't be able to pick up on the satire if it weren't shoved down their throat.

Much of the appeal of the humor in "Superbad" is the recognition that at many points we are laughing at the protagonists, again tying back to the faith the filmmakers had in their audience to be able to recognize that. While the characters themselves are certainly ridiculous and misogynistic at many points, it is made abundantly clear that their foci and actions were all wrong. We see that beyond the social norms they seem to fall into; they realize where those norms fail. The film recognizes the place many cis white straight men can find themselves in, and offers a more hopeful perspective, one that doesn't villainize them, thus pushing away the very audience you want to be reflecting. This message of genuine love, care, and friendship is wrapped up in an exterior that uses humor to pull in a target audience who might actually learn something, while also simply enjoying an entertaining and funny movie. "Bottoms" on the other hand, can come off as a circle jerk, oversimplifying all of the characters, villainizing those people don't want to try to understand, and encouraging categorization and separation that isn't conducive to positive change.

COUNTERPOINT: Bonnibel

That's the thing though: "Bottoms" is making fun of those very tropes and formulas in an extremely camp way (similar to fellow sapphic comedy coming-of-age movie "But I'm A Cheerleader"). This "circle jerk" you speak of is a full-on parody of the average coming-of-age story and the movie knows this. In your terms, they have faith that the audience has the critical thinking to see how ridiculous basically everything is in this movie. It's absurdly hilarious in an accessible way — especially those who are in the horrors of high school and feel underrepresented. The entire movie is self-aware and tongue-in-cheek, making fun of toxic masculinity in ways that "Superbad" fails at.

I get how "Superbad" is making fun of and critiquing the things they show and that it pulls in the very people who would benefit from social-emotional education. But it doesn't do enough. Straight men chasing women's sex but then realizing the power of friendship is great and all, believe me. But the movie was solely focused on the men and not the women they harass with sexual comments. The women don't get much representative autonomy, and the movie doesn't seem to take much interest in giving them a voice. Instead, the misogynists realize how misogyny is bad and come around to feeling bad about it. But that's as far as the movie goes. I suppose you could say that the social change is up to the audience to extrapolate, which is fair. Sometimes, however, people want something overt enough to feel outlandish, which is what "Bottoms" provides in spades while still having the messages intact for critical analysis.

"Superbad" could alienate some high school audiences while, admittedly, it's great for people who want to be less misogynistic in a vulnerable time in their lives through artistic example. Other people who can't relate to the main characters (the only fully fleshed out ones) would probably not get much personal value from "Superbad", instead getting filtered out by how insufferable every main character is (a creative decision I respect), but historically it is a great portrayal of how patriarchy is indoctrinated.

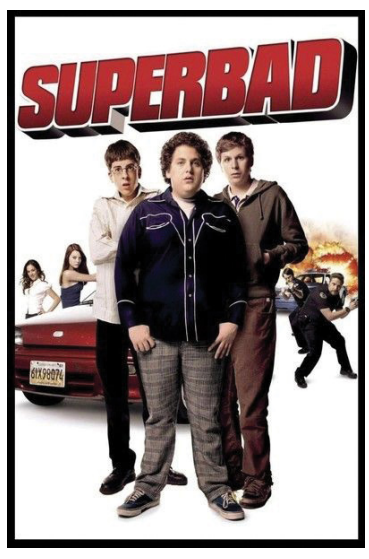
COUNTERPOINT: Isaac

The sexist comments you reference are explicitly satirical. "Superbad" uses its medium and the fact that it's following three high school guys to expose that way of thinking. Along with that, "Superbad" first and foremost is a comedy; it doesn't claim to be doing any social justice lifting. It's simply telling it as it is. The absurdist comedy in "Bottoms" prevents the film from saying anything substantial and leans on the fact that it has representation to get out of making an actually good movie.

Closing Thoughts

Isaac: I can admit I may not be the exact target audience for the film "Bottoms," though I do seek out coming-of-age films that represent an experience closer to my own, which does involve queer representation, so I had been looking forward to the film and was a bit disappointed that it didn't live up to my expectations and hopes for it. The style of humor between the two films is incredibly different, and I am one that can appreciate absurdist humor but didn't find myself laughing once during "Bottoms" as compared to "Superbad" which is almost two hours of constant laughs and underneath that a nice message about growing up, friendship and acceptance.

Bonnibel: Maybe there's something wrong with my sense of humor, but the exact opposite happened to me when watching these movies. When watching "Superbad" for the first time, I genuinely believed that the movie was being unironic with its hypersexual humor and got annoyed. I got how it could be read as a critique on the very things they showed in the movie but I didn't realize that was what the movie was trying to do all along. Isaac's critical analysis of "Superbad" made me appreciate the simple but effective messaging of friendship and the pitfalls of patriarchy. I just think that "Bottoms" is perfect for people disillusioned and utterly done with high school after seeing all of the tropes in real life come to action. Sometimes you need a satirical retelling of the outcast story in high school with lies you wish were there. Sometimes you just want to see the world contort with the power of art to comfort yourself. Perhaps this is all a matter of the media literate's taste.



Movie poster for the 2007 comedy "Superbad." The movie stars Jonah Hill, Michael Cera and Christopher Mintz-Plasse. PHOTO COURTESY OF PINTEREST.